

Response to William Klassen's Paper Mennonite Studies as a Part of Religious Studies

Waldemar Janzen *Canadian Mennonite Bible College*

Toward the end of his paper William Klassen makes the frightening observation:

I find few teachers in the humanities who really believe in what they are doing and who can communicate a basic enthusiasm for their discipline or for life itself to their students.

Unlike Elijah, Dr. Klassen is not given to sitting under the juniper tree (or whatever it was) in despair asking the Lord to take his life from him, but is ready to stand up with the faithful remnant and be counted. In fact, his paper is a sincere plea for more Mennonites to join him on the university campus. For the sake of the university and all of us I fervently wish that, like Elijah, Dr. Klassen may have miscounted and underestimated the number of those university teachers that have not bowed their knee to the Baal of apathy and aimlessness! As always, I value Dr. Klassen's energetic and enthusiastic pursuit of his cause.

Dr. Klassen's paper contains a descriptive and an evaluative dimension. As far as the descriptive side is concerned, I have only little to say. Dr. Klassen himself has pointed to the rather narrow definition which he has given to his topic. He has chosen to focus on the Canadian situation only. Further, he has limited himself to the area of Mennonite Studies taught on university campuses, acknowledging the need for separate treatment of such studies as carried on within Mennonite institutions. While I do wish that attention would have been given to this in the context of the conference, I must accept Dr. Klassen's understanding of his task.

At some points the lines drawn in this paper between Mennonite

Studies on university campuses and similar studies in Mennonite institutions seem less clear to me than to Dr. Klassen. Conrad Grebel College in particular appears to me to represent a middle ground, rather than an unequivocal parallel to, let us say, the Religion Department of the University of Manitoba.

Also, I am not sure whether the term Mennonite Studies is taken by Dr. Klassen to mean religious studies with specifically Mennonite subject matter (such as Anabaptist history), or any course in religious studies (be it Hebrew Prophets or Religious Issues in Marxism) taught by a Mennonite. The latter understanding seems highly questionable to me, just as a course in German Classical Literature taught by a Mennonite would hardly make it Mennonite Literature, even if it should take pains to point out Jung-Stilling's influence on both Goethe and the Mennonites.

However, my more urgent questions are directed at the evaluative components in Dr. Klassen's paper. I shall turn to these now. Dr. Klassen claims that the teaching of Mennonite Studies in universities, although sparsely represented, constitutes something rather new and unique. Without contesting this, I would like to ask wherein this uniqueness lies. a) Surely not in the greater academic thoroughness and integrity of such studies, as compared to similar endeavors in Mennonite institutions, although I might grant — with a quotation from Walter Klaassen — that a pluralistic context may help to keep a teacher of religion "on his toes". Mennonite colleges and seminaries have, by and large, accepted scientific methodologies in their teaching and, I submit, Mennonite Studies courses taught in Mennonite institutions and those taught in university settings would ordinarily not differ more from each other than would such courses offered in Mennonite institutions or in university settings, respectively. b) Is the uniquely new dimension, then, to be found in the student clientele to which Religious Studies courses address themselves? But that is a difference of degree, rather than of kind. A Mennonite college like Bluffton has, I am told, a significant number of non-Mennonite students, while Walter Klaassen's Radical Reformation course, referred to in the paper, in the university had an impressive Mennonite contingent of nine students out of 26. c) At one point Dr. Klassen writes:

The most important witness we leave on a university campus is the integrity of our dealing with colleagues, the caliber of our research and the way in which we have honored the trust which our administrators have placed in us.

I most heartily agree, but this surely applies also to professors in Mennonite institutions on the one hand, and to Mennonite professors in disciplines other than religion on the other. Therefore it can hardly constitute the uniqueness of Mennonite Studies on university campuses.

As Dr. Klassen's paper was refreshingly autobiographical, I may also

be permitted to interject my experience and perspective here. While my fulltime appointment has been at CMBC for most of my teaching career, I hold an adjunct professor's appointment in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba, have supervised theses there and have taught many courses, both in Religion and in German, on the campuses of the two universities in Winnipeg. I have, further, done much reflecting on the nature of university and church school teaching in the process of hammering out a relationship of accreditation between CMBC and the U of M.

In the context of this, it has become increasingly my conviction that the differences between church college and university teaching lie not in the parts, but in the whole; i.e. not in the courses taught, methodologies employed, textbooks used, etc., but rather in the institution's comprehensive understanding of the aim towards which it is helping to direct and move its student.

The ultimate aim of religious/theological studies in a Mennonite institution is the search for, and the structuring of, a personal and communal faith in God as revealed in His world and His Word. In a university religion department, according to my understanding, religious studies (including Mennonite Studies) are a part of the total endeavor to broaden the student's horizon of humanistic understanding of the world in which we live.

To use an analogy: Mennonite institutions and universities use the same building bricks when they teach religion, but they use them towards the construction of different buildings. A Mennonite teacher of religion has to ask himself or herself what kind of building he/she wants to build with the bricks provided by his/her training and personal resources. It is precisely this point, however, which Dr. Klassen does not lift out in his paper as the point of uniqueness of Mennonite Studies on the university campus. On the contrary, he employs repeatedly the words "witness" and "ministry" to describe the special challenge of teaching religion in the university, and he spells out these functions as strengthening the student's religious faith in the context of many onslaughts on it, and in terms of fulfilling a quasi-ministerial function towards students with respect to their personal problems. That sounds "great" from a churchly perspective; almost one better than CMBC (!). And I have no doubt that Dr. Klassen himself and many other committed Christian religious studies teachers in universities do just that.

But, I ask, is this the role of the religion teacher which the wider university community would accept as legitimate? Or does such "witness" and "ministry" become possible only "between the cracks", so to speak, of an often ambiguous university philosophy of education? To ask the question in a way suggested to me in conversation by Dr. Klassen

himself, could he have read his paper before the University of Manitoba senate without blushing, or without a storm of protest and outcries against what would be perceived as a churchman's abuse of his academic appointment towards sectarian ends?

Let me close on a personal note. I have often wondered whether, after many years at CMBC, I should not look about for a teaching position in a university. If my role there could be that witness and ministry which Dr. Klassen describes, I would find the prospect tempting indeed. As it is, I have the strong feeling that the wings of my Christian-Mennonite witness would be seriously clipped in terms of the goals of the student's program to which I would commit myself. Or, to continue my earlier analogy, I would be required to use the bricks of my training and personal resources to build a house rather different from the one for the building of which I have free scope at CMBC, in spite of its denominational, financial, and other limitations.

Please don't misunderstand me; this is not a value judgment. I am supportive of the task of teaching religious studies (including Mennonite Studies) as a discipline in the humanities, in pluralistic university contexts. I see it as parallel to the teaching of Psychology, English, or Physics. I am merely wondering whether that task is not more fundamentally different (in its total aim, not in its component parts) from the task of teaching religion in a church institution at a point which Dr. Klassen does not identify in his paper.

Against my own contention, I will grant that "religious studies" is not a monolithic and well-defined discipline, and that there may well be educational philosophies and university policies within which Dr. Klassen's version of a religion teacher's Christian witness and ministry may be quite accepted and legitimate. Please help me gain clarity. I would actually be happy to find that such possibilities exist, and that my suggested division of goals and tasks may be too stringent, if not wrong altogether.