

# A People Apart or Pulling Apart a People

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John H. Redekop, *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), Paperback, 210 pages, \$8.00.

This is surely the most sustained discussion of ethnicity among the Mennonite Brethren (MB) in Canada. The only other substantial North American work on this topic is Miriam Warner's study of a California MB congregation, which is quoted rather freely in this study. The two are the first extended treatments of Mennonite Brethren ethnicity. The older way of discussing the issue was under the topic of "faith and culture." That rubric permitted a more general discussion than what is particularized in "Mennonite ethnicity." As such Redekop's study makes a contribution. We need to more self-consciously reflect on the relationship between the ethno and religious dimensions of MB peoplehood. We have not sufficiently understood the interplay of this double quality. It is important for self-understanding to be realistic about the intersection between the ethnic and religious elements.

The task of Redekop's book, as I understand it, is threefold: 1) to prove that Mennonites (particularly in Canada) are an ethnic group as well as a religious denomination. To invoke the term "Mennonite" is to imply both a cultural tradition and distinctive people as well as a religious denomination; 2) to indicate the problems that emerge out of this intertwining of the two; and 3) to suggest a possible remedy by unhinging the denominational name from the ethnic Mennonite reality. Some amplification of these three points follow:

1) The proof that Mennonites are ethnic is easy enough to establish. Redekop does so largely through (a) an examination of the repeated references in the Mennonite press to Mennonite culture, art, music, literature, ethnic festivities, food, etc.; (b) the Canadian government which under the policy of multiculturalism categorizes Mennonites as an ethnic group; (c) the perception of outsiders who assume Mennonites are ethnics (primarily the poll of selected university students); and (d) the

frequent scholarly use of ethnic categories and analysis to describe Mennonites.

2) The problems that Redekop identifies are primarily two: (a) Mennonites themselves become confused as to what is religious and what is ethnic. It becomes easy for Mennonites to discard parts of the religious tradition by typing them as ethnic (e.g. nonresistance can be neutralized as an ethnic rather than biblical understanding). It can also impute religious meanings to cultural phenomenon. (b) The reality and the perception of ethnicity inhibits church growth and evangelism. Others presume that one need be born into MB faith. People who do come in find it difficult to gain entrance into the inner associations and networks that comes easily to those familiar with the ethnic cues and carrying the ethnic relationships.

3) The confusions that presently exists between the ethnic and religious can largely be eliminated by a change of the denominational name to "Conference of Evangelical Anabaptist Churches." That name would reflect the theological traditions in which MBs stand — evangelical and anabaptist — without carrying the historic baggage of Mennonitism. It in turn would free MBs to appropriately celebrate Mennonitism (a Dutch-Germanic-Russian ethnicity as modulated by more recent national experiences). They both remain, but now segregated. This proposal is offered as a way to insure and even revitalize both Mennonite ethnicity and Anabaptist theology. The proposal is quite different from other name-change suggestions in that they frequently implied an indifference towards Mennonite theology or ethnicity. Redekop repeatedly identifies with both.

The intention to find ways of preserving both Mennonite ethnicity and Anabaptist theology strikes a responsive chord. Whether the dichotomous strategy achieves the revitalization of either is the issue that needs further discernment.

The grounds by which one makes the case that Mennonites are ethnic make all the difference in the world. Redekop uses the contemporary press, academic discussion, governmental policy and contemporary perception to "document the ethnicity" of the Brethren. All of those do not shape Mennonite ethnicity. They merely reflect what is. Ethno-religiosity is not fundamentally a category of analysis, a public policy or a mode of academic discussion. Changing the public policy, altering the public perceptions or even taking a new name will not substantially diminish the ethnic reality of the church. Ethnicity emerges out of a people's experience. It is a historic category. It cannot be understood without a careful examination of the way in which ethnicity and religion become fused. The proof of the existence of Mennonite ethnicity is the story. Historical experiences are not easily erased or changed like analytical categories or policies. Historical categories emerge because they

are powerful preservatives and powerful catalysts. They survive over long periods of time because they are carriers of meaning. It is precisely the enduring quality of many ethno-religious traditions that offers some clue to their significance. Our commitment to building a future different from the past can change the history. At issue is whether the name change is essential or even desirable to building a different future (presuming that is desirable). Proof enough that it will probably make little difference is the evidence that Redekop himself suggests. There are now 72 MB churches in Canada not using the term Mennonite in their name. Has it made a substantial difference? Is the character of those churches substantially different (or better) than those who carry the name Mennonite Brethren? (It should be parenthetically noted that there are an accumulation of stories about how people in communities are not fooled by those name changes and still recognize the churches for what they are — Mennonite.)

The book suffers from a theory of Mennonite exceptionality. Virtually all comparative statements juxtapose Mennonites to religious groups that presumably are not ethno-religious. Other religious communions appear with a kind of purity in contrast to our mixed quality. They are religious; we are religious and ethnic. Such reflections exclude the counter evidence. There is a large body of literature that looks at the relationship of religion and ethnicity, which notes the mixture in so many religious traditions. It never gets cited in this study. (It is easier for me to draw on the American experience because I work with that. Others can suggest the parallel for Canada). Everyone knows that there are substantial differences between Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics and Mexican Catholics. Slavic Orthodox, Turkish Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox are all ethno-religious communities. The American Lutheran Church and Missouri Synod Lutheran are divided along ethnic as well as theological lines. The Covenant Church, Nazarenes, Plymouth Brethren, North American Baptist Conference, Baptist General Conference and many other smaller Protestant groups are ethno-religious groups. The new literature of American evangelicalism, that is impressed by evangelical pluralism also understands that pluralism as partially hinged to cultural particularity.

Two important general articles suffice to make the point. Martin Marty (a Missouri Synod scholar) in "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America," *Church History* 41 (March 1972) makes the point that it is impossible to understand the pattern of American religious pluralism without understanding the linkages to ethnicity. Timothy Smith (a Nazarene scholar) in "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review* 83 (December 1978) notes "that religion and ethnicity are intertwined in modern urban and industrial societies is obvious." He connects the linkage to the impact of modernization and argues that "the

intertwining of religious feelings and ethnic interests and identities gave both to faith and to the sense of peoplehood . . . [a] quality that was more future-oriented than backward looking."

Part of the issue is whether Mennonites ought to think of themselves as being a denomination or a people. What is it that we wish to become? When we describe the Mennonite Brethren is it a church or a peoplehood? The book might be thought of as a search for precision in social and religious categories. Redekop obviously values both the cultural and religious heritage of our past, but wishes to separate them into something that is distinguishable rather than interlinked. This is the search for a precision in labels and in identities. He wants to be both culturally Mennonite and theologically Anabaptist, but separately. This precisioning of social and religious categories implicitly contains a denial of complexity and ambiguity. There are analysts (John Higham, Robert Lifton and others) who contend that part of the twentieth century involves a moving away from rigid and absolute definitions of roles and identities into an era of more pluralistic and relativistic social (and one might add religious) identities. The argument can be made that modernity carried with it a tendency towards precisioning of these categories and that the postmodern is returning to a more richly elaborated system in which people live in a hierarchy of multiple, overlapping and indistinct categories. Our social identities are more hybrid rather than pure, equivocal rather than direct and clear. This proposal for distinguishing and separating probably reflects some peculiarly time-bound impulses. It is of course easy to invoke the language of purity to argue that religious groupings need to be more single-minded than is the case with other social entities. However appealing that is, it obviates the essential nature of religious communities. Whatever else the Redekop book does, it suggests the hybrid quality of the MB church. Ethnicity may have made the MBs a people apart. But pulling apart the ethnic and religious elements that is suggested by this proposal contravenes all of the research data which points to the social reality of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

The presumption that the name change will result in the reinvigoration of church growth and a new period of expansiveness is highly debatable. That position can be sustained only if it can be proved that the "ethnic quality" of the church is the essential blockage to church growth. The book directly links the perception of ethnicity by outsiders to slowed church expansion. The specific question asked of people outside of the MB church was whether they presumed that one is born into an MB church or whether people make voluntary decisions to join. Since outsiders to a significant degree assumed birth, Redekop concludes that it is difficult to bring them in. But that interpretation is ideologically flawed. If one were to ask the same question about Presbyterians, Anglicans and Catholics, the responses would be much the same. The majority of all church memberships are those of family tradition.

If ethnicity is the barrier to evangelization and church growth, then presumably the same truth would apply to other denominations tainted by the Mennonite name and ethnicity. In point of fact the Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference Mennonites (GC) have been more successful than MBs in church planting and church growth. (I am again working with US data). The comparative statistics on church planting between the various Mennonite groups (which Henry Schmidt, Don Schafer and others have compiled) all point to the considerable success among the GCs and MCs. Much of that success is in what is usually referred to as "ethnic evangelism."

Mennonites need to seriously reflect about the nature of church growth. The Mennonite Brethren do need to get at the barriers that have frustrated the greater achievement of this cherished goal. I am confident that an open study would reveal that there are many barriers. I am equally confident that the name change would not be the essential one identified for correction.

Other Mennonite groups are finding that the "Mennonite" identification is an aid to evangelism. "Mennonite" currently has a lot of theological capital and recognition. There are many people drawn precisely to the theological and ethical emphases of our faith. It is a tradition that speaks to the pervasive culture of violence (from familial violence to international nuclear terror). It takes a long time to build identification with something. We have an instant and honorable identity as a "peace church."

The book does point to the need for a serious theology of ethnicity. The treatment given is hardly sufficient. To my knowledge no Mennonite theologian has done sustained work on the question. Others who have, see no necessary conflict between the biblical word and the perpetuation of cultural distinctives. The kingdom in its universality clearly embraces all peoples and traditions. Whether each smaller partial representation of the kingdom can or should is open to discussion. We who begin with incarnational theology know that faith always takes on particular forms. Faith is not something that floats above culture. The Jesus word was certainly hinged to Jewish culture. The Church Growth people at Fuller Seminary, whom some Mennonites are fond of quoting on the "imperative of evangelism," also argue that churches are culture bound and that "our kind of people," to use the Peter C. Wagner phrase, is theologically kosher (or should I say evangelical so as not to be ethnic).

These caveats notwithstanding, this is an important book. It places on center stage a long overdue discussion of MB faith, ethnicity and identity. It has broader applicability. The ethno-religious quality of the MBs is shared by other groups in the Mennonite family. They too might profit from following this MB discussion.