

Mennonite Ethnicity: Medium, Message and Mission

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John H. Redekop raised the ethnicity issue to new heights for Mennonites in his 1987 book, *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren*.¹ The word "Mennonite," he said, "as taken on a double meaning. It refers to ethnic reality as well as to religious reality. The double meaning creates confusion for Mennonites as well as non-Mennonites. Also, the two meanings of 'Mennonite' are contradictory and create specific problems for Mennonite church ministries."² The resolution of this confusion and contradiction required, Redekop argued, the dropping of the Mennonite label to designate a religious identity, as in the names of churches and denominations, allowing thereby the label to continue to refer to an ethnic identity, as in the work of artists and authors.

I do not propose to do another analysis and critique of the Redekop thesis, but rather to use *A People Apart* as the point of departure into a discussion of the relationship between Mennonite faith and culture. Much has been written in response to this book; much has been quite critical.³ I am persuaded, however, that Redekop has raised an important issue for Mennonites and has argued his case quite persuasively. Mennonite ethnicity surely has been, is now and will in the future be a stumbling block for Mennonite evangelism. Yet I'm not sure faith and ethnicity can be separated even if we might want them divided into discrete camps. And I am not sure but that John Redekop, at least sometimes, also agrees with me.⁴ But perhaps we get unnecessarily confused when we focus on ethnicity. For some the category "ethnic" is too negatively loaded to be salvagable for churchly purposes. We might do better to talk in the language of Marshall McLuhan by translating ethnicity and faith to read medium and message, or perhaps simply to speak of faith and culture.

Before we shift language though we need to further set the stage for our conversation with three more references to *A People Apart*. First, lest Swiss Mennonites think that this is only a Dutch-Russian Mennonite issue we should hear Redekop on the *Festival Quarterly* which is published in the Lancaster area. "Of all North American Mennonite periodicals I find the glossy and highly readable *Festival Quarterly*, launched in the Spring of 1974, easily the most effective vehicle for Mennonite faith-ethnicity fusion and Mennonite culture in particular. Itself part of the renaissance of Mennonite culture and ethnic self-awareness, the *FQ*'s bold and constant self-introduction lets readers know its emphasis." "Exploring the art, faith and culture of Mennonite Peoples'. ...A few days spent reading the *FQ* numbers for the past several years gives one the distinct experience that Mennonite art, culture, and ethnicity, in their variegated coloration, are not only alive but healthy and thriving."⁵ The frequently heard suggestion that the ethnicity debate has little relevance to Swiss Mennonites is, at least for Redekop, simply not true.

But there are notable differences between these two Mennonite cultures. Two very different historical-geographical political-cultural crucibles resulted in two different ethnic communities. James Juhnke considers the recognition of the duality as central to the understanding of North American Mennonite history.⁶ The simple fact that the Dutch-Russian stream, especially in Canada, represents a much more recent immigrant community than the Swiss-South German is of basic importance here. Ethnicity, in turn, has served as the primary vehicle to maintain a distinct identity for these Mennonites who are more recent immigrants as it has for so many other immigrant communities.⁷

The argument can also be made that the category "sectarian" may be more appropriate than "ethnic" to designate the Swiss Mennonites. In turn, since the Dutch-Russian Mennonites predominate in Canada and the Swiss Mennonites in the US, Canadian Mennonites may be considered more ethnic and American Mennonites more sectarian.⁸ But this kind of difference should not suggest that the so-called ethnicity problem is not shared by all North American Mennonites.

This ethnic dualism does, however, respond to a second reference to *A People Apart*. Redekop wrote: "In fact, once it is clear that the denomination is no longer formally and officially fused with a particular ethnic heritage, namely, the traditional Mennonite ethnic heritage, then it will be easier for all ethnic heritages, including the largely dominant Mennonite heritage, to flourish in the various congregations and to be used in diverse ways to enhance and to advance Christian ministries."⁹ To place fact alongside fact, since the 1880s the General Conference Mennonite Church has embraced at least the two dominant Mennonite ethnicities, and Edmund Kaufman, long time president of Bethel College, insisted repeatedly and correctly that a wide variety of sub-ethnicities needed to be recognized especially in the Dutch-Russian tradition, including, for example, the Swiss Russians — Swiss

Mennonites who had moved East to greater Russia.¹⁰ Furthermore, neither AMBS, nor Conrad Grebel College nor Rockway Mennonite Collegiate represents one ethnicity; all embrace at least the two major Mennonite ethnicities. And finally the proposed Mennonite Church/General Conference Mennonite Church merger should even more fully meet Redekop's criteria for a denomination "no longer formally and officially fused with a particular ethnic heritage."

Thirdly, much of Redekop's critique focuses on so-called Mennonite art and letters. Patrick Friesen becomes the prize villain. "... What's especially significant for our purposes," Redekop writes, "is that Patrick Friesen says, that 'As an artist I happen to be Mennonite,' on October 9, 1985, that he is a Mennonite but 'not a Christian'. I heard him say it. Here we have, as I understand it, an excellent example of a prominent and fascinating secular Mennonite."¹¹ Here we have the ultimate proof that ethnicity is a problem for Mennonites, according to Redekop.

Perhaps the Mennonite ethnicity issue is best examined by focusing on Mennonite authors and artists such as Patrick Friesen. Hildegard Froese Tiessen, of Conrad Grebel College, defines Mennonite literature and art thus: "work which has been produced by individuals who were nurtured within a Mennonite community, who — especially during their formative years — had access to the inside of the *Gemeinschaft*. Whether they chose later to withdraw in part or whole from the Mennonites is...irrelevant, as is the question of whether the subject matter of their work can be immediately identified as peculiarly reflective of Mennonite individual or corporate experience (even though, in most cases, it can be)."¹² On another occasion, when explaining why Mennonites viewed fiction writers as liars and rascals, she similarly defined what made an author a Mennonite writer: "Although some have long ago abandoned the beliefs and conventions of their forebears, all write out of the Mennonite ethos in which they were nurtured."¹³ In turn she found many Mennonite authors she embraced as such in her definition, having "deliberately adopted the stance of an outsider" in that they were not religiously Mennonite. Only a few authors such as Rudy Wiebe and David Waltner-Toews write as insiders, says Tiessen.¹⁴

A question immediately arises: to what extent is creativity nurtured by this kind of marginality — not quite in and not quite out? If so, the Mennonite experience of living somewhat precariously in but supposedly not of the world should be most productive of literary imagination; perhaps even more so than being in but not completely of the Mennonites. Currently *of* but not *in* the Mennonite community seems to be the more fecund literarily.

A tension frequently cited as characteristic of Mennonite literature is the all too common individual artist versus a repressive or rejecting community. Perhaps this is just another version of the marginalization already noted. Jeff Gundy of Bluffton College recently challenged this tension as neither particularly creative nor true to Mennonite theology.¹⁵ Emphasizing humility, he believes, is central to Mennonite identity and should, in turn, characterize

Mennonite literature. He finds this theme to be rare among Mennonite authors and, when expressed, humility tends for Gundy to mean anti-revivalism. This obviously indicates Gundy's antipathy to revivalism but revivalism is here also a symbol for individualism versus the more communal symbol of humility. Gundy, like John Ruth before him, longs for Mennonite literature where the artist is not seeking freedom from an authoritarian community but where the community provides release for the alienating individualism characteristic of North America.¹⁶

The opposite to his humility aesthetic, Gundy claims, is Tiessen's reading of what makes good Mennonite literature. Tiessen makes too much of the "worldly" success of the authors she champions, and thus falls victim to the charge of pride. Swiss Mennonite humility here seems at odds with some other Dutch-Russian Mennonite normativity, Shirley Hershey Showalter of Goshen College suggested in response to Gundy.¹⁷ But for our purposes what distinguishes Tiessen's and Gundy's analyses of Mennonite literature is of less importance than their commonalities. Gundy does not challenge Tiessen's definition of the Mennonite artist. In fact, they both appreciate similar writers including Redekop's infamous Patrick Friesen. More importantly, for both the context which produces the author is of critical importance. Gundy adopts a social constructionist view of reality in which "the community is the prime location of *all* meaning and knowledge."¹⁸ Similarly it is being raised in the Mennonite community that determines if someone is or is not a Mennonite writer, according to Tiessen. A writer may leave the Mennonite community but the Mennonite community will never leave the writer. Hence she or he is a Mennonite writer whether they like it or not.

Mennonite authors are thus defined by their ethnicity, by the community in which they were socialized. Some of the authors also own the faith and thus become "insiders," to use Tiessen's term, or become potential recruits to Gundy's call for Mennonite writers to speak more clearly the language of humility. Converts to the Mennonite community accordingly will not immediately be able to write with a Mennonite voice. They will need the resocializing necessary in order for this community to also shape their "meaning and language."

At a point such as this it is surely tempting to seek simplification of the term "Mennonite." Why not use "Mennonite" to indicate those once born, and evangelical or Evangelical Anabaptist for those twice born, to use the psychological categories of William James? Two reasons will need to suffice. For one, the term "evangelical" will not get us out of the dilemma. Secondly, we do better to embrace a dialectic than to seek simplification.

The category "evangelical" is surely more embracing and porous than is "Mennonite" or for that matter than "fundamentalist" which most Evangelicals rejected as being too restrictive. Evangelical, however, has since World War II come to denote a particular community with clearly identifiable schools and presses, heroes and authorities. Evangelicals formulate clear and distinct "we/they" markers around the borders of the Evangelical subculture.

For someone not born an Evangelical, who has not gone to the right schools or learned the appropriate in-group language, it is very difficult to break into the centres of Evangelical power. You can attend their churches but you will always remain somewhat an outsider. Similarly, someone socialized as an Evangelical, in a profound sense will always remain an Evangelical. An organization called Fundamentalists Anonymous tries to help break that socialization for Fundamentalists. How many so-called Evangelicals are using its services, I do not know.

A literature of "second generation" Evangelicals is already beginning to appear which is questioning the ethnocentrism of the Evangelical community. Evangelical sociologist Jon Johnston, for one, charges his community for being not merely ethnic but ethnocentric. "As we emphasize in-group unity, brotherhood and oneness, we increasingly reject those unlike our kind," writes Johnston. "As a result our walls are built taller and thicker, our righteousness is increasingly paraded, and this causes even greater rejection of outsiders.... Must outsiders continue to face de facto rejection when they seek to be one of us, simply because they cannot instantly become acquainted with our peculiar jargon, history, power structure, and customs."¹⁹ Evangelicalism has voices similar to that of Redekop's in the Mennonite community.

Might an identifiably Evangelical art and letters also emerge, perhaps from marginalized Evangelicals or at least self-critical "insiders"? In 1976 Martin E. Marty wrote: "Despite all the efforts...it must be said that the larger public takes no notice of the artifacts, paintings, sculptures, poems, dramas, or novels of the Evangelical subculture. The extent of the attention paid the convert C. S. Lewis, favoured by Evangelicals, suggests the general poverty in the camp beyond Lewis."²⁰ This poverty may well result from the relative youth of the Evangelical ethnos. But when with time Marty's analysis proves dated, will those artists raised as Evangelicals but who no longer believe as Evangelicals still be regarded as Evangelicals? Surely not by everyone! But they will also surely never be able to escape their Evangelicalism. At least ethnically they will remain Evangelicals.

Socialization into a particular sub-culture is what creates ethnics.²¹ Children born within these sub-cultures are socialized towards those remaining committed to this culture rather than opting for the "world" outside. In the Mennonite sub-culture these children are neither "saved" nor "damned," they are neither Christian nor non-Christian prior to the age of accountability. Nevertheless Mennonite children are socialized to think and act like Christians. Emphasis upon the Christian family and Christian nurture encourages a more inclusive definition of Mennonite than the strong emphasis on adult voluntarism might imply. While it is clear that one becomes a Mennonite upon baptism into a Mennonite church as an adult, the children born into Mennonite homes tend also to be considered Mennonite until they are baptized and frequently also thereafter even though they might not

choose to be baptized. This “second generation” phenomenon is as true for Evangelicals as for Mennonites. Voluntarism is necessarily redefined for the second generation even as nurture replaces evangelism and as socialization into a sub-culture or community of faith replaces conversion out of the dominant culture or “world.”

Casting this dynamic into different language may now prove helpful. The essence of Hebrew-Christian faith is incarnational. It is not a set of ideas or beliefs abstracted out of history and culture. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The incarnation occurred within time and place and culture. Jesus was a Jew; he lived and taught and died as a Jew in first century Palestine. True, the Gentiles did not need to become Jews to become followers of Jesus. Nevertheless they were called upon to enflesh the Word in their own social and cultural contexts. Christianity requires such ongoing incarnationalism. Incarnation always assumes a culture, a specific culture and the artifacts of that culture. Incarnationalism, in turn, always embraces the scandal of particularism and parochialism. Short of this scandalous situation the Word remains abstracted and does not become flesh and does not dwell among us.

When the Word takes on the specifics of a culture all areas of that culture become suffused by the Word. Children born and raised in this kind of culture are nourished in an environment where little distinction is made between Word and culture. Even the word of the “world” beyond is known by its alien or worldly culture. Over the generations, accordingly, subcultures or ethnicities result which are self-consciously premised on the quest to give flesh and blood to the Word. Incarnationalism resulting in separation from the world produces ethno-religious communities.

Or in other words, to say that Jesus *is* the Word is to say that the medium is the message. *How* the Word is communicated is *what* is communicated. In the words of Paul Tillich: “Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the substance of religion.” Religion and culture simply do not want to part company, especially for incarnational communities like the Mennonites and the Evangelicals.

But the issue is not this simple! Religion and culture cannot simply be collapsed into one. Even though faith and culture, medium and message cannot readily be separated, the prophets still must be heard. Incarnationalism is after all a scandal, a necessary scandal but a scandal nonetheless. The particular always wants to become self-satisfied and self-indulgent—to become idolatrous. Ethnicity tends almost inevitably to become ethnocentricity. The Gospel however is universal, for all peoples, in all places, at all times. It shatters all barriers to create a new people, a new ethnos. Universality challenges particularity; mission challenges separation. Yet this new people and this mission again become real only in the culturally concrete, and before long it once again moves towards an ethnocentrism that requires of us to hear the prophetic voice.

History from the Old Testament to the present suggests that this kind of rise and fall is endemic to the Christian church. Episodic reform and renewal movements indicate this dynamic most forcefully. Yet we do not all agree as to what is reform and when renewal has truly happened, for with gains there always seem to be losses. The reason for this is obvious. Christianity requires a both/and, not an either/or, — both universality and particularity, both mission and separation. Tilting one way or the other always results in as much loss as gain.

Mennonites dare not attempt to abandon culture, for to do so would result in a disembodied faith. There is no message without a medium. Yet for Christians every medium is also judged by the message, for the medium is always a relative expression of the absolute message of Jesus Christ. Only in him are the relative and the absolute one. A tension or paradox or perhaps a dialectic is central to each and every faithful Christian community. Particularism and universality, separation and mission must remain in tension. To resolve the tension in one way or another results in serious distortion. Ethnicity, in turn, is always a major problem for Mennonites, and ethnicity is always a major strength of the Mennonites — be they German, Swiss, Black American, Latin or what have you. It is both/and, not either/or.

But again the issue is not this simple! Thus far we have talked primarily in terms of dualities or diads, yet reality insists that we add at least a third dimension. The dominant culture of any society from which sub-cultures separate, to which they minister, towards which they are drawn by acculturative forces, this is the third dimension. Historically Mennonites labelled the dominant culture and society the “world” yet with time the “world” became much less an evil monolith. Differentiation indicated that parts of the “world” could be embraced, other parts should be rejected, while still others were redeemable. A growing recognition of the social, cultural and religious pluralism which characterizes the so-called dominant culture joined forces with this process of differentiation to create great confusion as to Mennonite identity. What is the “they” which defines the “we”? If Mennonite identity is a “both/and” matter, both faith and culture, the question increasingly has become: which culture? Do we not best abandon a unique sub-culture in favour of some version of the homogenizing mass culture? Or do we still have, can we still have, ought we still to have a separate culture, a separate ethnicity?

Differentiation and pluralism tend to result in relativism. A relativism which recognizes that all human incarnational cultures are always only relative expressions of the absolute is imperative. It allows us to laugh at and embrace our ethnicity simultaneously; it encourages both critique and commitment. This may well be the voice of the artistic insiders. Yet a relativism which relativizes all in the name of the absence of any and all absolutes or, much more likely, in the name of an unidentified absolute, contradicts the perspective of a Mennonite “believer.” Critique then abounds without any identified commitment. This may well be the voice of some but need not characterize all Mennonite “outsiders.”

The “outsider” and the “insider” alike may also embrace an ethnic romanticism to salvage an identity in the face of pluralism and relativism. One small corner of the North American ethnic mosaic, called Mennonite, then can be nurtured to provide individual or corporate location without concern for the contradictions Redekop identifies nor the tension or paradox we have tried to sketch. Such may be the way to make peace with the dominant cultural currents of the day while still harbouring a unique identity.

Martin E. Marty is surely right when he speaks thus of North American Evangelicals: “Their success, in a sense, lies in their ability to offer prospective converts and members the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they provide meaning, belonging, and identity apparently *over against* other Americans while on the other hand they are taught to *fit in with the other Americans* to be the real and true citizens. The Evangelicals address near majorities and then give them a sense of clear minority status.”²² Perhaps for some Mennonites the opposite could be said: they address clear minorities and then give them a sense of near majority status, if not majority status then at least a sense of comfort or of self-righteousness in their particular minority status. But for most the relationship between their minority identity and their place in the larger culture remains more ambiguous than it does for Evangelicals. A restlessness rightly remains. The relative simplicity of the Evangelical position as described by Marty may well draw many Mennonites to that definition of the situation, but simplicity is not necessarily the best option.

My proposal by way of conclusion would be to seek to clarify the issues but not to seek to find a simple solution. Mennonites live with and among, for and over against a great variety of individual and corporate identity options. Communities and traditions of word and deed need to be nurtured in the midst of this pluralistic situation with which first, second, and twentieth generation Mennonites can identify. Call these ethnic communities if you will. Yet these will, because of acculturation and mission, increasingly be ethnicities of intention rather than of historical default. New Mennonite ethnicities will emerge as the older ones are acculturated into oblivion.

Incarnationalism requires of us to become a people in which medium and message seek to become one. This people, or ethnos, must however learn to live and carry forth its mission in a constant tension — at least a three dimensional tension — between Jesus, in whom word and deed are completely one; the particular community in which faith seeks its cultural incarnation, however incongruently; and the larger culture, with its own subtle and not so subtle nexus between medium and message. This is the context in which the ethnicity issue needs to be confronted, even though hopefully never solved.

Notes

¹Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kindred Press, 1987, distributed by Herald Press.

²Ibid., 1,9.

³See esp. "A Symposium on Faith and Ethnicity Among the Mennonite Brethren: Summary and Findings Statement," *Journal of Mennonites Studies* Vol. 6, 1988, 51-59.

⁴See, for example, Redekop, p. vi, 8 and 20.

⁵Redekop, 61.

⁶James C. Juhnke, "Mennonite History and Self-Understanding: North American Mennonitism as a Bipolar Mosaic," *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Calvin Redekop, ed. (Waterloo, Ont.: Institute of Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, 1988) 83-100.

⁷See: Harry S. Stout, "Ethnicity: The Vital Center of Religion in America," *Ethnicity* 2 (1975), 204-224; and Martin E. Marty, "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of religion in America," *Church History* 41 (March, 1972), 5-21.

⁸For elaboration see: Rodney J. Sawatsky, "Ten Things American Mennonites Should Understand About Canadian Mennonites," *Festival Quarterly* (Winter/Spring 1989), 18-23, 66.

⁹Redekop, p. 20. Emphases are mine.

¹⁰E. G. Kaufman, "The General Conference Mennonite Church of North America," *Mennonite Life* II (July 1947), 37-43.

¹¹Redekop, 73-74.

¹²Hildegard Froese Tiessen, "The Role of Arts and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," in *Mennonite Identity*, 237.

¹³Hildi Froese Tiessen, ed. *Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories*. Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Press, 1989, xiii.

¹⁴"The Role of Art and Literature..." 246.

¹⁵Jeff Gundy, "Humility in Mennonite Literature," *MQR* LXIII (Jan. 1989), 5-21.

¹⁶John Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 62-69.

¹⁷Shirley Hershey Showalter, "Bringing the Muse into our Country: A response to Jeff Gundy's 'Humility in Mennonite Literature,'" *MQR* LXIII (Jan. 1989), 24.

¹⁸Gundy, 11.

¹⁹Jon Johnston, *Will Evangelicalism Survive Its Own Popularity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 71.

²⁰Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Believers* (Chicago, Ill: The Chicago University Press, 1976) 101.

²¹I am using two complementary definitions of "ethnic." Milton M. Gordon *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), refers to "a group with a shared feeling of peoplehood as an ethnic group," 24 and "any group which if defined or set off by race, religion, or national origin, or some combination of these categories" is an ethnic group, 27. Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Col. Ltd., 1973), defines an ethnic group thus: "It is a group with historical memory, real or imaginary. One belongs to an ethnic group in part involuntarily, in part by choice. Given a grandparent or two, one chooses to shape one's consciousness by one history rather than another. Ethnic memory is not a set of events remembered, but rather a set of instincts, feelings, intimacies, expectations, pattern of emotion and behaviour; a sense of reality; a set of stories for individuals — and for the people as a whole — to live out," 56.

²²Marty, 105.