

# The Transformation of Theology in *Mennonites in Canada*, Vol.III

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Mennonites have only recently begun to be engaged in formal theological discourse. During the 1930s, Mennonite theology was expressed in sermons, in the occasional papers at study conferences, at annual ministers' conferences, and in dozens of Bible Schools. The theology was often more assumed than expressed, more informal than formal. There was little engagement with major theological issues of the wider Protestant world. The language from the pulpit as well as in the Bible Schools was German.

By the 1970s most of the Bible Schools had closed, but five Mennonite colleges from Ontario to B.C. had been established. The formative theological discussions had shifted largely from the pulpit to the college classroom. It was here that the critical theological discourse, and the engagement with the theologians of the day, was beginning. By the 1970s, the language had also changed. In the five colleges, as from most Mennonite pulpits, the language had changed from German to English.

Mennonite theology in the later 1930s is characterized by Regehr in two different ways: in a personal reference, and with a historical and systematic overview. In a remarkably candid personal foreword, Regehr reflects on the theology which he encountered as a boy in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Coaldale, Alberta. The theology which he remembers most vividly, and reacted against strongly, was evangelical revivalism. He found this theology intrusive, dualistic, and dishonest. He distanced himself from the Mennonite

church, believing that all Mennonite theology was of the same sort. Later in life he discovered a different theology which in his view was more holistic, integrative, and honest. This was a theology articulated by a group of Mennonites living in Ottawa, and it drew him back into the Mennonite church.

A more historical and systematic characterization of Mennonite theology follows in the first chapter of the study. Regehr traces the influence of pietism upon Mennonites in Russia, and the impact of evangelical-fundamentalism upon Mennonites in North America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He then sketches a general characterization of Canadian Mennonite theology which he intends as a description of all Mennonite groups. For the content of this characterization he draws upon the writings of John C. Wenger and other Swiss Mennonite scholars at Goshen College and Seminary in Indiana. After describing Mennonites as “people of the way,” meaning that what Mennonite theology emphasizes is a holistic, integrative, understanding of discipleship, Regehr lists what he sees as the five key theological characteristics: a high view of scripture, faith as needing to be incarnated into a life of discipleship, an ethic of love and non-resistance, a dualistic view of the relationship of church and state, and a view of the church as “an accountable community of believers.” (10)

Although, this characterization is one with which most Mennonite groups in the 1930s likely would have agreed, and is based on recognized published sources, it has several drawbacks. First, this methodology comes from the very group which Regehr, later in the book, portrays as providing one of the transformative theological impulses in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, some of the characteristics of the conclusion of the theological change are already used to formulate the beginning of the process. Second, because Mennonite church groups are fragmented and numerous, it becomes impossible to characterize each one separately in a comprehensive study like this. What is gained by a general characterization of Mennonite theology is comprehensiveness, but what is lost is specificity. The vibrating, pulsating life of the Church’s theology which one feels in Regehr’s personal agonizing with the theology of his home church in Coaldale, Alberta, unfortunately is lost.

Regehr’s description of the profound theological changes in the decades between 1939 and 1970 identifies various theological movements or trends which caused the changes. The different influences are characterized as causing fragmentation, and at times confusion, (312) with the result that various theologies were competing for allegiance. One of the theologies that Regehr identifies as providing change was the “Anabaptist Vision,” articulated by H.S. Bender and his Goshen College colleagues. Regehr summarizes the central three characteristics of this theology as: “holistic Christian discipleship”; “voluntary church membership, based on true conversion and voluntary commitment to living in accordance with Jesus’ teachings”; and an “ethic of love and non-resistance and an abandonment of all warfare, violence, and taking of human life.”(13) Regehr shows how this theology provided a new

theological vision for much of Canadian Mennonitism. Its more holistic theology of discipleship, peace, and a renewed church transformed much of Canadian Mennonite theology. He notes that it had significant influence in the Bible Colleges, although it was accepted more wholeheartedly by some of the new Mennonite scholars than by others.

Regehr, however, also points out that this theology had several problems. It advocated a separation from society, saw the state as sinful because of its reliance on force, and did not favour an activist peace theology. Regehr notes that by the 1970s some Canadian Mennonites no longer shared these separatist and quietist views. For some, especially the editor the *Canadian Mennonite* and some of its supporters, the issues of the larger society and the world had become the most important concern. (388) They attempted to apply the theology of the Mennonite community to the issues current in Canada and the United States. They became involved in issues such as the opposition to the Vietnam war, poverty, civil rights, and the utility of civil disobedience.

The second major theological influence which Regehr discusses as bringing about change among Canadian Mennonites was the evangelical movement in North America, introduced to many Canadian Mennonites by George Brunk and the Janz Team, and by big-name evangelists like Billy Graham. This new evangelicalism, emphasizing personal conversion, spiritual renewal, missions, and personal evangelism received the support of many Canadian Mennonites because of its seeming continuity with the pietist theology many had encountered in Russia, or with its similarity to earlier North American evangelicalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Some Mennonites, Regehr points out, found this new evangelicalism inadequate. They felt it focused too much on issues of personal and inner spiritual life, and did not apply faith to real-life issues faced by people. Some saw it as associated with “capitalism, the Western and American way of life, American nationalism, U.S. military policies, aggressive anti-communism, and missionary work that ignored social and economic problems.” (389) Others, however, found evangelicalism’s influence upon their personal lives positive, and experienced it as providing an exciting new vision for being Christian, a vision consistent with their Mennonite earlier theological identity.

Within the Russian Mennonite communities, this evangelical theology also provided a new theological vocabulary. The evangelistic campaigns of Brunk and Janz, with their new hymnody and more animated preaching, occurred at the time when many Russian Mennonite churches were changing their language of worship from German to English. This new evangelicalism thus provided many churches with a new English-language theology, which in turn reshaped their identity. Some Mennonite churches changed their name to include the adjectives “evangelical” or “mission” or both. Church programs were developed to express their renewed interest in missions and evangelism.

A third theological position which Regehr discusses is that held by the Old Order groups. Old Order Mennonites and Amish are characterized as having a

theology which on the one hand had an inner consistency that shaped their whole life (including church, agriculture, and transportation), and on the other, articulated a sharp separation between church and society. It is clear from Regehr's discussion, that for most Mennonites this theology was not the preferred option.

Of the three major theological directions—the new evangelicalism, the Anabaptist Vision, and the approach of the Old Orders—Regehr argues the first two exercised the most influence. The first was based on North American evangelicalism being reinterpreted into a Mennonite context. The other, a much more recent theological movement, was shaped by scholars who had dedicated themselves to discovering a theological orientation in their heritage. For some Mennonites these two theological traditions complemented each other, while for others they were in tension with each other, emphasizing different theologies, and competing for the loyalty of Mennonites. In any case, the overall view presented by Regehr is that theological conviction was a significant force in shaping Mennonite identity. This is in contrast to ethnic studies and social histories, which tend to de-emphasize theological motivation and see primary causation in economic or social issues.

The shaping effect of theological conviction is especially evident in the section discussing Mennonite responses to the Second World War. When the Canadian government required military service, Mennonite leaders were unanimous in their insistence that they could not support war and military service. Mennonite leaders of all the various groups—from Old Orders and conservatives to Mennonite Brethren and General Conference—were agreed on this issue. What they disagreed on was how to respond to this challenge. Some groups wanted complete exemption from all military requirements, others were willing to do alternative service, while still others offered to provide non-combatant military service. All groups, however, believed that acceptance of military service was contrary to their theology of peace.

Their objection to military service shaped government policy. The Canadian government responded to the Mennonite delegations by providing options for alternative service for those Mennonite men who did not accept military service. The study provides documentation that approximately 62 % of Canadian Mennonite men who were drafted chose some form of alternative service.

The influencing role of theology is less evident when Regehr moves to other issues. In the discussion of urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s, in which tens of thousands of Mennonites moved from farm to city, theological motivation appears much less prominently. According to Regehr, the groups which asked significant theological questions about urbanization were the conservatives and Old Orders. Some of the conservative Russian Mennonite groups tried to retain their rural base by emigrating to Latin American countries or to remote Canadian regions where they anticipated freedom from government control. The Old Orders responded to the pressures of the urban

world by consciously rejecting much of the modern technology and then selectively accepting some of it, adapting it to their farming community's priorities. However, the response of the majority of Mennonites, according to Regehr, was an adjustment to the new economic and agricultural ways. Few raised serious theological questions about the changes.

Regehr notes, for example, that an earlier Mennonite suspicion of business was overcome, and that Mennonites readily developed businesses of varying sizes. He sees theological conviction playing a role only in such issues as employer-employee relationships and the personal ethics of businessmen. The fundamental question of engaging in business was not debated. In this area, as in urbanization, it was the conservatives and the Old Orders who raised questions about the impact on the quality of their community life.

This review, therefore, concludes that Ted Regehr considers Mennonite theology as having been significantly transformed in a variety of ways. In the 1930s, Mennonite theology was used to defend the Mennonite community from change, and to protect its identity. The mode was defensive. By the 1970s theology's role had changed. To some extent the role of theology had diminished, and many decisions were made on the basis of social forces. There were fewer areas in which theological conviction was shaping major decisions. Where it was, the influence was more on personal than on community issues. Only for a minority, primarily for the conservatives and Old Orders, did theological conviction still shape community life and priorities.

For the majority of Mennonites, many of whom had become involved in the larger society, theology took on the role of helping them to express their Christian faith within their jobs, professions, and businesses. Mennonite identity no longer was shaped by defensiveness and separation, but by both the theological convictions nurtured in the church, and by the society within which many felt increasingly comfortable.