

# Preparing for the World: The Modernist Romance Approach in *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*

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My specific task here today is to review Ted Regehr's new book, *A People Transformed*, from the perspective of institutional development. Given that the title of my response "Preparing for the World," was not of my own choosing, I have added the subtitle bearing the words "Modernist Romance." This subtitle was chosen since much of the book concerns Canadian Mennonite accommodation to modernism, and because Ted has so closely tied his own spiritual odyssey to this larger drama of group-identification.<sup>1</sup> My job is also somewhat daunting given that institutional development could include almost all aspects of Ted's book, and consequently I hope that you will excuse me if I narrow my discussion to talk about those aspects of Mennonite institutional development with which I am more familiar.

The most surprising aspect of this book is that, in spite of its title and the tremendous upheaval it describes, the real theme of the book is continuity. And upheaval there was. In 1939 most Mennonites in Canada were a rural people living in isolated communities, they were German-speaking in the main, and worked in self-sufficient farm households. Yet, by 1970 most Mennonites had become urbanized, spoke English, and had moved into the mainstream of

Canadian life. Those who still farmed did so in ways that resembled capitalist business enterprises. The continuity Regehr sees amidst all this change is that Canadian Mennonites retained a distinct group identity. A minority of Mennonites, Regehr argues, clung to the ideal of separation from the world, and a minority of Mennonites were assimilated into mainstream society to become an indistinguishable part of the dominant culture. Most Mennonites, however, adjusted to the modern world by accommodating as a group while still retaining their own identity, values, and traditions.

Institutional development is important to the argument for continuity; social theorists like Raymond Breton, for example, have argued that in order for groups to actively resist assimilation and maintain their group identity, they must develop their own institutions apart from those of the dominant culture. Immigrants coming to a new country need to rebuild a network of personal affiliations. This reconstruction is accomplished in making a living, learning a new language, participating in social life, and going to church. To satisfy these needs they use a certain institutional setup. Whether they adapt within the networks of their own group or those of the dominant community, will depend on the degree of "institutional completeness" of their own group.<sup>2</sup>

This concept of institutional completeness is therefore crucial to Regehr's argument that Mennonite accommodation to Canadian society preserved a clear sense of a Mennonite identity. The development of separate institutions and formal organizations ensured that Mennonite immigrants would keep their social relations within their ethnic boundaries. The Mennonites who came to Manitoba from Russia after 1870 successfully reproduced their community and institutions and thereby controlled their ethnic boundaries in the new country. They reestablished not only the church congregations, but also private German-language schools, local village governments, and cooperative relief agencies such as the "Brandverordnung" and "Waisenamts."<sup>3</sup> These institutions, for the most part, survived into the 1930s. What happened to these institutions in the period after 1939?

According to Regehr, most of the institutions organized by the pioneering generation did not survive long in the period after 1939. For example, in Manitoba, mutual aid organizations such as the church administered Waisenamt, established to aid orphans and act as a lending institution, were gone by 1939, destroyed by the depression. More secular, but still Mennonite-controlled organizations that appeared in the 1930s, such as credit unions and cooperative societies, were not recognizably "Mennonite" by the 1940s and 1950s. The Mennonite church-controlled private school system in Manitoba was destroyed by the 1920s, and the small community controlled public school system that replaced it was undermined by consolidation in the 1940s through to the 1960s. The number of Mennonite Bible schools, which proliferated after the 1920s in part to train church leaders and workers, but also to help preserve a distinct Mennonite society, had plummeted from 56 to 9 by 1970.

The passing of these institutions as well as the loss of the German language, however, is not considered by Regehr to be crucial to a continued sense of a Mennonite identity. Bible schools, he argues, "if they dealt at all with distinctive Anabaptist-Mennonite History and doctrines they tended to emphasize aspects that most Canadian Mennonites were abandoning—the German language, nonconformist dress, separatist rules for personal behaviour and a rural and agricultural life." (240) He goes on to say that for many of the teachers in these Bible schools "being a Mennonite had... to do with rigid codes of conduct, personal behaviour, and distinctive cultural or ethnic practices." (238) According to Regehr, urbanization and modernity were part of fundamental societal changes which transformed the social arrangements and the collective consciousness of Mennonite society, and these changes necessitated different emphases and different institutions. For Regehr the crucial integrating ideals that provided both, continuity with the past and the basis for a strong Mennonite identity, were the ideals revealed in Anabaptist history and theology.

The natural home for these ideals was the city. Urbanization, according to Regehr, did not weaken a Mennonite identity but strengthened it, albeit in a modified form. While urban Mennonites abandoned sectarian doctrines, they were more strongly committed to other distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite doctrines. Following closely the work of Leo Driedger, Regehr suggests that urban Mennonites were more tolerant and open, less individualistic, more open to racial and gender equality, and more inclined to maintaining a strong Anabaptist tradition (192-93).

The important institutions for promoting these values were the Mennonite High Schools and Colleges, among others. Mennonite High Schools, Regehr argues, "rendered their greatest service by encouraging new and more critical methods of inquiry while reconciling these with the basic tenets of Mennonite faith and doctrine." (259) These schools along with Mennonite Bible Colleges, according to Regehr, helped to define Canadian Mennonite accommodations to modernity. They set a course that complemented, but was also different from, that provided by the public institutions. They became agents of accommodation, but not of assimilation. (271)

While I have not dealt with all of the institutions Regehr discusses, including newspapers, radio stations, and of course the various church congregations themselves, the general tenor of Regehr's argument should be clear. Have these institutions been sufficient to prevent the structural, social, and cultural assimilation of most Mennonites? I am not convinced. Partly, I think Regehr's test of assimilation, which is defined as becoming "an indistinguishable part of the dominant culture," is too stringent. In today's "multicultural" society it is very difficult to define a "dominant culture" as such, and even assimilated Mennonites do not regard themselves as indistinguishable. From the evidence presented in the book it would seem that urban Mennonites live in a world structured and defined by the institutions of the larger society. As well,

individual and group identity is much more fluid and unstable than Regehr acknowledges. Individuals can and do identify themselves with different groups at different points in their lives, crossing and recrossing group boundaries. The question of whether Mennonites have been assimilated, however, does not interest me as much as other questions that revolve around the issue of identity and ethnicity.

The two issues raised by *A People Transformed* that particularly interest me are conflict and continuity. Ted Regehr acknowledges that changes in institutions and leadership were sometimes very difficult and often involved far more than an orderly succession of one generation by another (300), however he tends to underplay this conflict or at least that side of the conflict which tried to resist modernity. Identities are always contested and while the cultural conservatives lost that battle in the 1940s and 1950s, their story needs a fuller and fairer treatment if only to throw into relief the rupture with the past and tradition that these older leaders perceived in the trends that Regehr so ably describes. To describe the urban dangers these leaders perceived as "petty, if not downright silly," and to attribute their concerns to ill-informed suspicions "expressed in simplistic and unsophisticated language" (170) is condescending and it trivializes this conflict.

The very institutions that Regehr argues helped define Canadian Mennonite accommodation to modernity—Mennonite High schools and Bible Colleges—were often founded in order to preserve the German language and conserve the older cultural traditions. The contest for control of these institutions in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s was often "white hot." More attention to these internal conflicts between cultural conservatives and modernists would have more clearly illuminated the ways in which the Canadian Mennonite identity was consciously being invented in this period. It would raise the question of how "Mennoniteness" has been defined, and by whom, over time. Identity, in other words, is not a fixed set of attributes into which one is born; rather, it has multiple and contradictory aspects which change. The Canadian Mennonite identity in this view is not the realization of an essence, but is the story of an ongoing political contestation. Framed in this way, it is discontinuity, not continuity, that becomes the critical variable.

To be fair, many of these issues regarding identity are raised, if only implicitly, in *A People Transformed*. That they are not explicitly analysed, I think, stems from Ted's close identification with the changes he describes. *A People Transformed*, I would argue, is itself part of the project of the invention of ethnicity or a Modernist Mennonite identity. It is an example, albeit very subtle and nuanced, of history being used to legitimate action and cement group cohesion. This is not a criticism of the book, merely an observation. All historians are engaged in the process in that they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past.<sup>4</sup>

If a fourth volume of the "Mennonites in Canada" series is planned, the themes of "invented traditions" and "symbolic ethnicity" should form one of

the conceptual bases for the volume—that is, to look at how the Canadian Mennonite identity has been invented and imagined from 1786 to the present.<sup>5</sup> Some work has already been done in this field by Royden Loewen who has examined how the Mennonites of the R.M. of Hanover recreated a sense of peoplehood around the physical vestiges of a glorified past as their world was being transformed in the 1940s and 1950s. According to Loewen, as Hanover Mennonites shed their closed and more separatist cultural traditions and institutions to adopt the values of urban, middle-class society, they increasingly sought to objectify and celebrate the past in a way that would link the old world to the new. The message was that the wider society was no longer hostile and that to be a Mennonite was to be a respectable member of middle-class Canada. The artifacts of this symbolic ethnicity include the Mennonite Village Museum, celebratory histories, family genealogies and gatherings.<sup>6</sup> Like Regehr, however, Loewen sees this as evidence of cultural continuity—a respectable way to link past to present. I would argue that these themes, that is, invented traditions and symbolic ethnicity, are analytically better suited to analyse discontinuity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1996), xiii-xxi.

<sup>2</sup> See: Raymond Breton, "Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities and the Personal Relations of Immigrants," *American Journal of Sociology* 70 (1964), 193-205; John C. Lehr and Yossi Katz, "Crown, Corporation and Church: The Role of Institutions in the Stability of Pioneer Settlements in the Canadian West, 1870-1914," *Journal of Historical Geography* 21 (1995), 413-429.

<sup>3</sup> See Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana: U. Illinois Press, 1993), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed., Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of "symbolic ethnicity" see Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed., Herbert J. Gans, et.al. (Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 193-220

<sup>6</sup> Royden Loewen, "Rurality, Ethnicity, and Gender: Patterns of Cultural Continuity During the 'Great Disjuncture' in the R.M. of Hanover, 1945-1961," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 4 (1993), 161-182