

# Entrepreneurs, Labourers, Professionals, and Farmers: A Response to *Mennonites in Canada, A People Transformed.*

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My duty at this symposium is to comment on the treatment of some major participants in the transformation of Canadian Mennonite life in the period 1939 to 1970. I would like to say at the outset that the author does a masterful job of describing the changes experienced by each of the Mennonite groups and the way these changes were linked to major trends in Canadian society. It is well known that the long, sustained growth of the Canadian economy in the two decades from 1950 to 1970 has not been equalled before or since. Studies like this are necessary, however, to show how that growth affected particular groups of Canadians. This is, therefore, a significant contribution to an understanding of recent Canadian history as well as that of Mennonites.

In this response I examine more closely the interpretation placed on some of the changes experienced by four major groups of Mennonites. With a few exceptions, as will be noted, there is no reason to quarrel with the facts as presented. However, the interpretation of the facts always invites further scrutiny. My examination has four categories: 1) The decline of rural Mennonites; 2) The treatment of entrepreneurs and workers; 3) The treatment of professionals; 4) Mennonites as passive or active participants in economic change.

## **The Decline of Rural Mennonites**

It is clear that Mennonite rural life was profoundly altered by the social and economic changes described in this book. It is my impression, however, that the extent of the change may be somewhat exaggerated, both in terms of the alleged erosion of the rural base and the different cultural and religious attitudes ascribed to rural and urban Mennonites.

Let us look at the numbers first. They show that between 1941 and 1971 Canada's farm population declined from 3,152,491 to 1,489,565. This is both a drastic absolute and relative decline. The author notes that Canadian Mennonites were part of these statistics. He further suggests that "for them the changes were even more rapid" (126). This last statement, however, is not well supported by the facts. It is clear that there was a substantial decline in the percentage of Mennonites living in rural areas—from 87 percent in 1941 to 53 percent in 1971.<sup>1</sup> However, the absolute number of Mennonites living in rural areas actually increased during that period, from 96,787 to 101,685 (Appendix F). It is true that the number actually living on farms declined, but even in terms of this more narrow category the decline was not as sharp as in the Canadian population as a whole. My point is that the Mennonite community of Canada in 1971 was still substantially rural and Mennonites had clung to their rural base more tenaciously than other Canadians and more than is suggested in the narrative.

The interpretation of cultural and religious differences between rural and urban Mennonites is more difficult to assess. The line of reasoning used by the author, as well as the examples used to support the case, suggest that here too there is a danger of exaggeration. Urbanization undoubtedly has a profound effect on peoples' lives and thoughts, as the book suggests. However, as the author himself observes, people in rural areas were subject to similar forces during this period through greater exposure to world markets, television, more diverse and centralized schools, and to the cities themselves. These Mennonites experienced the "global village" as more than a cliché. At the same time, as the book indicates, Mennonites in the city made concerted efforts to retain their traditional values. In light of this, Mennonite urban and rural culture may not have diverged as much as the sociological literature on urbanization suggests.

Differences in thought and lifestyle are, of course, extremely difficult to measure. One of the major examples the author uses in a section labeled "Rural-Urban Conflict" is the conflict that developed between the Schoenwieser (First) Mennonite Church of Winnipeg and other Mennonite churches in 1945.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis in the telling of this story is on the different religious perceptions of the urban First Mennonite Church and rural Mennonite churches. However, Anna Ens, in a recent examination of this event, finds it difficult to substantiate that this was primarily an urban-rural conflict.<sup>3</sup> Many forces were at work, both in rural and Winnipeg churches. A number of leaders from essentially rural

churches worked hard at reconciliation with First Mennonite Church. Later, in the 1960s, when reconciliation with the Manitoba Conference had almost been achieved, it was delayed for several more years by a “storm of protest” led by a Winnipeg congregation.<sup>4</sup>

Both urban and rural Mennonites underwent significant change during this period, but it is not sufficiently clear that a substantially different ethos developed in the two areas. If, however, one **could** demonstrate a large and growing difference between rural and urban Mennonites, the cause of such difference still requires very careful examination. For example, were Mennonites who moved to the city seduced, almost against their will, as the book sometimes seems to suggest, by a separate force called “urbanization”? Or were those Mennonites who moved to the city actively seeking the opportunities and changes that urbanization offers? In other words, were they already different from some of their rural cousins and could this be the primary explanation for later differences? I will return to the tricky question of causality at the end of this paper.

## **Entrepreneurs and Workers**

Chapter seven, “New Economic Opportunities”, describes in detail, with numerous personal examples, “a remarkable flowering of Canadian Mennonite entrepreneurship” in the postwar period. It is especially interesting to observe how the numerous urban businesses created by the new entrepreneurs emerged from simpler rural operations and how they relied on a core of versatile employees whose work ethic was forged in the Mennonite community. A few questions, however, suggest themselves. Why is entrepreneurship generally understood as an urban phenomenon—in this study as well as in most others with which I am acquainted? In the chapter prior to this one there was a separate discussion of “farmers as businessmen”; I fail to see why farm business men or women cannot be recognized explicitly as entrepreneurs.

Another question is whether Mennonite entrepreneurial ventures by virtue of their ethnic base are inherently limited in the scope of their operation? For example, are Mennonite business leaders represented as strongly in the ranks of Canadian leaders as the Mennonite proportion of the Canadian population suggest they should be? My impression is that they are not. There is a literature which probes the impact of ethnicity on business size and it would have been interesting to utilize it in this study.<sup>5</sup> It might, for example, illuminate the contention made several times in the study that some Mennonite values conflict with entrepreneurial attitudes. It is suggested, for example, that “self-denial, humility, obedience, meekness, lowliness, and forbearance were the esteemed virtues of the Mennonite personality.... Modern culture championed individual achievement, personal fulfilment, self-esteem, and individual rights above virtually all other values” (172).

The treatment of Mennonite workers, including their relations with Mennonite employers, is also interesting. It was inevitable, of course, that many of

those migrating to towns and cities would enter the ranks of the urban working class. A study of Winnipeg in the early 1980s shows that about one third of all working Mennonites in that city were labourers or sales workers, and another 13 percent were clerical workers.<sup>6</sup> Early on, as Regehr shows, Mennonite leaders were concerned about the "proletarianization" of Mennonite workers. They feared the formation of a pool of persons with limited autonomy, influenced by non-Mennonite employers with different values. They also worried that many of these workers would be required to join labour unions.

How are the large numbers of workers who found work with Mennonite employers treated in this study? The author has some rather ambiguous things to say about the relationship between these two groups. He observes that "workplace relations were certainly not equal....Employers...contributed to changes in power relations that were typical of modern industrialized societies" (158-159). Nevertheless, he jumps from such observations to the somewhat surprising conclusion that Mennonite employers "were not capitalists in a Marxist 'class' sense and almost never thought of themselves in terms of 'class'" (159). It is true that the factory working conditions which Marx envisaged as most conducive to class relations were not present in most of these businesses, but the working relationship between employer and employee shows all the signs of a fundamental class division. I do not know how one would prove that employers did not think of themselves as a separate class, but even if they did not, this in itself would be no proof that basic class divisions did not and do not exist.

The author cites the founder of one company who in his early years spent a large part of most days working with his employees in the shop. When times were difficult he apparently paid himself less than his workers. The author concludes, "Employees were treated more as members of a community, rather than as mere hirelings" (158). This is a rather dangerous generalization. I was a minister in this employer's church in the early 1960s and numerous workers, members of the same congregation, complained to me personally about the treatment they received. Several had been fired after years of service, following meetings with a labour union representative. This employer was an extremely engaging person but his relationship to his workers could only, with great charity, be described as highly paternalistic. There was no evidence of a sense of community between himself and his employees.

Evidence about employers sharing a weekly worship service with their employees can also lead to divergent conclusions. Were these services evidence of employer-worker solidarity, as the author suggests? Or does the cartoon drawn by a worker at one Mennonite business, depicting the employer praying in front of his workers with his folded hands clasped tightly around the neck of a worker, convey a more accurate truth?

Most instructive are the author's observations, which seem at odds with others, that "while Mennonite employers might be concerned about the motivation and spiritual welfare of their employees, they rarely had any

sympathy with labour unions or collective bargaining of any kind. They were the bosses.... Concepts of employees' rights and particularly any right to disrupt work were vehemently rejected" (157).

Whether one uses the word "class" or not, there were extremely deep divisions between most Mennonite employers and workers, and acts of spiritual concern and charity, no matter how sincere, did little to bridge the chasm. The fact remains that Mennonite employers have, by and large, failed to share decision-making rights with their workers even to the extent that is found in most modern workplaces. The teaching of the "priesthood of all believers", to which the author alludes in his discussion, has apparently had little impact on relations between workers and employers in most Mennonite firms. As the author notes, even the profit-sharing plans which some firms have instituted have, with a few exceptions, left control in the hands of the founding family. Few give voting rights to ordinary workers.

### **Professionals**

The growth of professionalism in the Mennonite community is described rather briefly in this work and deserves, in my opinion, further interpretation. With 40 percent of urban Mennonites active in one of the professions one is justified in seeing this, to quote Leo Driedger, as an "urban revolution." From the examples of "professionals" cited in the text it appears that a broad definition of the professions is being used. This presumably includes social workers, school and hospital administrators, nurses, ministers, technologists, engineers, artists and teachers, in addition to lawyers, doctors, and accountants who belong to self-governing societies.

To appreciate the revolutionary character of the Mennonite movement into the professions requires, in my opinion, a few additional facts and tools of interpretation. For example, how do the Mennonite numbers compare with other groups? A study of Winnipeg in the early 1980s, outside the purview of Regehr's book, indicated that 32 percent of employed Mennonites belonged to the professions, compared to 13.8 percent of all employed persons in the city.<sup>7</sup> The 1975 Kauffman-Harder survey of five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in the United States found that of employed church members, 26.7 percent were listed in the professions in 1970, compared to only 13.5 percent of employed white American males. The difference for females was even greater: 38.4 percent of employed Mennonite females were in the professions, compared to 14.8 percent of white employed American females.<sup>8</sup>

Regehr lists several plausible reasons for this phenomenon: the long-standing commitment of Mennonites to such service-oriented professions as teaching and health care, and wartime experiences in voluntary service (167). There is, however, a literature in this field which probes much more deeply into the "professional" phenomenon, and it seems to apply with particular force to

Mennonite beliefs and Mennonite vocational choice. In their 1973 study, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb documented extremely well the class struggle that exists in most urban cultures.<sup>9</sup> Workers, they found, perceive the arena in which they operate as a dehumanizing one, where people are forced to push each other around in order to get ahead. They place their employers into the same category: an executive is someone who knew where to push and how to push harder. On the other hand, they envy professionals, who seem to be most in control of their lives and seem least subject to the command-and-obey culture of modern business. "Educated men," in the words of a worker interviewed by Sennett and Cobb, "can control themselves and stand out from the mass of people ruled by passions at the bottom of society".<sup>10</sup> The professional, in other words, is the modern counterpart of the priest. He or she interprets mysteries which affect the lives of those who do not understand them. The professional manages to a much greater degree than others to separate himself or herself from the dehumanizing class struggle of the urban world. Seen in this light, professionalism is in essence a form of withdrawal from important aspects of the urban world. From this unique position of withdrawal, and because of the special knowledge and privilege extended to the professional, the professional becomes an interpreter and judge of society. He or she is able to play the role of priest and prophet, being "in the world but not of the world."

Can one imagine, from this description, anything that would appeal more to Mennonites with their high religious ideals and their openness to education? This is, after all, the opportunity to achieve a position from which the highest ideals can be espoused, but which seldom involves the person in the compromising, confrontational life of most workers and managers?

The professions have enabled a large number of Mennonites to adopt an old Mennonite practice of withdrawing from the seamier sides of the world. But from this position of relative withdrawal they can, as Regehr's study shows, espouse Anabaptist ideals more consistently than other Mennonite groups. At the same time they can afford to become more "liberal" and seemingly outer-directed in their approach to the world, developing more nuanced responses to such troubling phenomena as family break-ups, homosexuality and abortion.

The non-professional, who may be an employee or employer, is not able to withdraw from some of the more difficult struggles of urban life, and is inclined to retreat into a more inner-directed and more dogmatic form of religion. Sennett and Cobb found that when asked what means most to them in life, both workers and lower-level managers were apt to refer to their private life at home, where they were not involved in competition with each other and where they felt that they had some freedom to control their destinies. While non-professionals tended to envy professionals, and ascribed more prestige to the professions than to their own spheres of work, they also indicated that they lacked respect for the essence of the professional's power. They felt that most

professionals are divorced from the real and risky world of industry. Professionals are observed assuming positions of leadership in churches and in many of society's basic institutions while they, the non-professionals, are doing the real hard work of society.

Regardless how accurate some of these observations are, they seem pervasive and important enough to require utilization in any attempt to understand not only the position and attitudes of professionals in groups like the Mennonites but the tensions that exist between various groups in Mennonite society.

### **Mennonites as Passive or Active Participants in Economic Change**

A final question of interpretation I would like to deal with is that of causation. At various junctures in the book certain developments outside of the Mennonite community seem to be understood almost as a *deus ex machina*, as autonomous forces luring and seducing reluctant Mennonites into strange thoughts and activities. Thus, Mennonite farmers faced "the tyranny of commodity markets" (146). They were "forced" by modern methods to pay more attention to the dictates of the market "than to family, church, or community concerns" (146). Again, we are told that "Canadian Mennonites wanted separation from the influences of the outside world, but most embraced the automobile with remarkable enthusiasm" (160). Chapter Eight is entitled "The Lure of the Cities" —the city as Delilah, tempting innocent Mennonites to do things they were not inclined to do otherwise. This is followed by the suggestive term, "suburban captivity" (189). We are told more explicitly that "in the cities, a new, different, and potentially dangerous substance held societies together" (171). The city as a drug? Actually, this substance was called "rationalization, and involved secular attempts to control, plan, 'strategize', predict, and calculate...." (171).

This picture of Mennonites as passive participants in their own transformation seems to derive at least partly from a certain "mythology" which still informs some of the scholarship in our community: *viz*, that Mennonites are traditionally communal and non-aggressive in their social and economic life. Thus, the rationalization of urban society was seductive because "it seemed contrary to traditional Mennonite attitudes of *Gelassenheit* and discipleship - of trusting abandonment and yielding to the will of God...." (171).

Royden Loewen's study of the Blumenort community, James Urry's examination of Mennonite ambitions and practices in Russia, and other recent studies have forced us to reconsider this image of traditional Mennonitism. There are groups of Mennonites in North America who have resisted some of the inroads of modernity, but most Mennonites in Canada have proven for a long time to be singularly aggressive in their pursuit of economic success, and not especially thwarted by community taboos. Regehr acknowledges this at

several points. For example, he observes at the conclusion of Chapter Seven on "New Economic Opportunities" that "Mennonites participated enthusiastically and gained significantly" (168) from economic change in Canada. However, at the core of the interpretation there is a disturbing tendency to view Mennonites primarily as passive participants subject to the wiles of a strange and hostile world around them.

## Conclusion

Some of the suggestions made in this paper obviously belong to the "if only the book could have been bigger" category. Others represent an attempt to explore paths of interpretation that the book itself suggests. However, at numerous points the research and writing of this well-written and researched work also remind us of a number of ways in which our understanding of Mennonite life still needs to be challenged and deepened.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The figure for 1971 should probably be 56 percent. See Appendix F. The figure of 53 percent seems to apply to Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> The dating of these events is somewhat uncertain. The author on p. 179 dates the meeting at which Rev. J.H. Enns delivered his controversial paper as May, 1945. Anna Ens gives a date of September 16, 1944 for what appears to be the same meeting. Anna Ens, *In Search of Unity: Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College Publications, 1996), 80.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Evelyn Kallen and Merrijoy Kelner, *Ethnicity, Opportunity and Successful Entrepreneurship in Canada, Ethnic Research Programme* (Toronto: York U. Institute for Behaviourial Research, 1983), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Elfrieda Rempel, "An Examination of Where and How Winnipeg Mennonites Earn Their Living," *Mennonite Mirror*, (March-May, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1975), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Random House, 1973). See also Roy Vogt, "The Impact of Economic and Social Class on Mennonite Theology," *Mennonite Images*, ed., Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), 137-148.

<sup>10</sup> Sennet and Cobb, *Hidden Injuries*, 78.