

Balancing the Denominations: A Perspective on *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970:* *A People Transformed*

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Ted Regehr's analysis of Canadian Mennonite experience between 1939 and 1970 brings the *Mennonites in Canada* series up-to-date in a manner that is at once solid and substantive while also being eminently accessible to the general reader. Reading *A People Transformed* with the theme "Balancing the Denominations" as focus highlights some important features of how Regehr approached his sometimes sensitive subject matter. Such a reading helps to disclose what Regehr has said, and not said, about the tension Canadian Mennonites exhibit between singularity and diversity.

It is perhaps inevitable that what Frank Epp called "denominationalism" in the first two volumes of this series would again be raised in a discussion of Regehr's book.¹ It is more than probable that at least some adherents of one branch of the Mennonite family or another already will have skimmed through their newly-bought volume to answer the question, "Well, how did *we* fare in volume three?"—and the "we" in question is not Mennonites *en masse*, but the "MBs" or the "GCs" or the "EMMCs". The reasons for such sensitivity were

well-documented by Epp in his two volumes as he repeatedly, and sometimes at length, addressed the propensity of Mennonites to fragment, and their concomitant reluctance to build bridges of cooperation amongst themselves.

In his epilogue to Volume II of *Mennonites in Canada* Frank Epp sounds several notes.² One is the prospect of a generation of transition, the theme that Regehr takes up so ably. Another matter Epp felt constrained to address is the “kaleidoscopic” nature of Mennonite action and identity. He raised the possible suggestion that “the Mennonite religious minority was actually many religious minorities engaged in many struggles.” Epp concluded his discussion of the “ambiguities” and “contradictions” he has uncovered by reiterating Mennonite commonalities: a common theological heritage, a common history, and a common social orientation tending toward some degree of separation.³ Epp’s faith in Mennonite peoplehood remained unshaken.

It is not accidental that both Epp and Regehr refer to Mennonites as a people. Regehr takes up where Epp left off, introducing a “scattered and fragmented people” (11) treading a common way (7). In his ensuing analysis, however, it becomes evident that Regehr is choosing to “balance the denominations” in his own way. Regehr seems more concerned to impart a sense of balance to his treatment of his data than he is to balance what some call the Mennonite denominations. While the individuals and institutions Regehr must deal with necessarily come clothed in the garb of Mennonite diversity, his handling of these elements has the effect of casting over them a common cloak of Mennonite peoplehood. As for “denominations,” Regehr makes little use of this category in any critical or analytical sense. There is no doubt that Regehr is well aware of the sometimes painful sensitivities and hurtful history at work in the matrix of Mennonite diversity. He chooses, however, not to dignify this diversity with the degree of separation and particularity worthy of distinct denominations. Having chosen to set his sights on a high view of Mennonite peoplehood, Regehr must still maintain his own sense of balance in dealing with a people that persists in presenting itself as profoundly diversified. He does so in a variety of ways.

The characters of Regehr’s narratives and anecdotes are Canadian Mennonites first. Wherever possible, especially when dealing with so-called “ordinary” Mennonites who do not hold responsible positions, he declines to identify people by their conference affiliation. This is not to say that Regehr does not know, or care, about their sub-group identity. On the contrary, he is careful in any particular context to draw his several stories from a variety of groupings to demonstrate that the individual reality of Mennonites from a variety of affiliations can be broadly representative of Mennonite experience as a whole. Thus, in beginning chapter two, he quite rightly refuses to pander to the reader who wishes to sort out the eight men and their varied responses to World War II by their conference affiliation (36-7). The cumulative effect of his approach is to communicate a fundamental feature Regehr believes to be characteristic of Canadian Mennonites, at least by 1970. There is no clear and

definitive taxonomy of distinctives whereby the various Mennonite conferences and groupings can be neatly delineated one from another.

This conviction does not blind Regehr to the disparate responses of various conferences to particular situations, or tempt him to shy away from discussing episodes of confrontation and tension. In pursuing this critical task, however, he still attempts to impart a sense of balance. For example, both General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren are implicated by Regehr as imposing an unwelcome intrusion upon Old Colony Mennonites in northern Alberta in the late 1940s (129-131). In another setting, Regehr touches controversial and sensitive subjects such as the employment of evangelistic campaigns and revival meetings in Mennonite circles (207ff.), and missionary methodologies among Natives in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario (332ff.). In doing so, Regehr uses multiple examples drawn from across conference lines and attempts to approach the issues from varying perspectives without blunting his own critical stance. This stance results in Regehr including controversial and even uncomplimentary episodes which some might wish were given less prominence. Again, however, Regehr is careful to document such subject matter meticulously and, even in this regard, a sense of equilibrium emerges. Thus, while the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren find themselves in turmoil over a performance of the *Messiah* (302ff.), the General Conference Mennonites of Rosemary, Alberta become embroiled in a welter of congregational and interpersonal politics and manipulation (306ff.), and the Swiss-descended Mennonites of First Mennonite Church in Kitchener painfully struggle with issues of nonconformity and leadership (309ff.). Regehr wants to avoid drawing caricatures of individual groups or exploiting controversy unfairly in pursuit of his argument.

While it seems that Regehr is not especially interested in addressing matters of conference particularity, he cannot do justice to his story by painting the various Mennonite groups with the same brush. He does wish to exercise some care in how various groups are characterized. Sorting out Mennonite groups as liberal or conservative, for example, is specifically rejected (20). Such labels are fraught with too many contradictions to be useful within the Mennonite community, and in any case, notes Regehr, the 1975 Kaufman Harder study places all Mennonites, regardless of their sub-group affiliation, well over on the conservative end of the continuum when compared with other religious groups (412). Regehr is to be commended for his success in avoiding the conservative/liberal dichotomy. For example, he provides an extended and detailed treatment of the Schoenwieser affair, a theological dispute over universalism, played out between rural and urban Manitoba Mennonites, without designating either of the disputing sides liberal or conservative (178-183).

Despite his rejection of explicit conservative versus liberal categories, Regehr does use other characterizations which to some readers may amount to the same thing. For example, he introduces the categories "traditional" and "modern" in the context of modernization and urbanization. In the ensuing

analysis, then, some Mennonites end up being traditional, rural, and even sectarian, while others do not. Consistent with his basic approach, however, Regehr nowhere provides anything resembling a taxonomy of Mennonite groups and conferences built on such characterizations. Regehr would rather represent Mennonite diversity in ways which are not conference-specific. Typical of this approach is his delineation of differing Mennonite responses to the challenge of nurturing and training youth in a time of rapid change. Regehr suggests that some remained with their rural and sectarian ways. Some borrowed from pietist and evangelical Christianity. Still others reaffirmed their Anabaptist heritage, while a fourth segment was assimilated to mainstream North American Christianity (198). Again, if one searches, specific conferences or congregations can be found as examples of these four options, but nowhere does Regehr sort out conferences as whole according to this, or any other, scale of Mennonite diversity.

Regehr would rather write of Mennonite solidarity, and this touches upon his primary thesis. Regehr sets out to demonstrate that Canadian Mennonites, or at least the majority of them, were transformed in the period leading up to 1970. Still, he must identify a range of Mennonite response—some assimilated, some remained separatist, but most accommodated. That is, most Canadian Mennonites engaged in “major adjustment and change while still retaining [their] own identity, values and traditions” (2-3). Regehr couches his discussion of accommodation in the context of sociologists J. Winfield Fretz and E. K. Francis, and especially the latter, who supplied an analysis of Mennonite life drawn from southern Manitoba in the period at the beginning of Regehr’s study. Francis argued that it was group solidarity that enabled Mennonite individuals to negotiate successfully the stress of adjustment and accommodation in a period of cultural change.⁴ Regehr acknowledges that Canadian Mennonites experienced the “internal dynamics of change” at the scale of “communities, congregations and families.” He further suggests that the success of Mennonites in confronting transformation was due to “leaders of Mennonite factions and groups [who] retained sufficient influence and control” to manage such transformation and ameliorate its debilitating effects upon Mennonite women and men (3).

This notion of Mennonite transformation being facilitated by the protective social buffer of a group is an important nuance to Regehr’s thesis, a nuance that deserves some further development in his analysis. For Francis, the protective shell is the ethnic solidarity of the southern Manitoba Mennonite community. For Regehr, the protective shell must be found elsewhere because the trajectory of transformation runs directly away from what he calls the rural, sectarian, traditional Mennonite community to the differentiated, rationalized, individualized non-community of modernity and the city (182). What, then, was the womb that nurtured this Mennonite transformation traced by Regehr? It is at this point that the differentiation of the Mennonite peoplehood into constituent groups and conferences becomes relevant.

One can understand Regehr's apparent concern to minimize those elements of his analysis that might reinforce, or worse yet, fuel further Mennonite group or conference particularity. Hopefully, his strategy of accentuating Canadian Mennonite solidarity and peoplehood will have demonstrated that conferences have more in common than some suppose. Perhaps, however, his approach has left unexplored an important factor in the course of the transformation described in the book. What was the role of the constituent Mennonite conference bodies in facilitating and buffering, as well as impeding and exacerbating, Mennonite transformation? Much as Regehr would like to regard individuals as Mennonite first and conference-affiliated second, Mennonites themselves, in the throes of profound social change probably were more conscious of their conference institutions, their conference-identified congregations, and their conference-defined social networks as the context within which they embraced or resisted change. Despite Regehr's decision not to identify conferences as separatist, accommodationist, or assimilationist, Mennonites confronted these issues first of all in the context of their conference connections.

From the every-Sunday vantage point of the Mennonite in the pew, Mennonite peoplehood is too removed to carry the sense of identity, values and traditions that Regehr says are essential to successful accommodationist transformation. If this suggestion has any validity, then at least one important question pertaining to Mennonite transformation in the post-war period remains unanswered. That is, to what extent did Mennonites from across lines of conference affiliation have a common and shared sense of being a people in the process of transformation? Or did rank and file individuals see themselves confronting the challenges of Canadian modernity more as discrete conferences or congregations than as a Mennonite peoplehood?

It appears that Regehr's decision not to employ conference structures more critically as a category of analysis leaves unanswered some important questions about how Mennonites tended to confront their fragmentation between 1939 and 1970. For example, were Mennonites more, or less, divided in 1970? What was the record of inter-Mennonite initiatives and their relative success or failure? Were inter-Mennonite barriers to mutual trust and cooperation higher or lower in 1970? How did the lowering of barriers between Mennonite society and Canadian society affect the barriers which still existed between Mennonite groups? These are questions that seem to grow naturally out of volumes one and two of *Mennonites in Canada*. Furthermore, such questions continue to be relevant issues for Canadian Mennonite society from our vantage point.

At the same time, one should recognize that my questions about *A People Transformed* arise from the historian's prerogative to interpret the past. As Regehr himself warns his readers, "there is, inevitably, much selection, evaluation, arranging and explaining to be done" (xiii). The choices Regehr has made have enriched Volume III with a texture of social analysis and holistic perspective representative of current trends in Canadian religious

historiography. In the introduction to the recent *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, Terrence Murphy declares a purpose that could have served for *A People Transformed*. He seeks to tell the story of Canadian Christianity within the context of "social realities such as gender, ethnicity and class," and even more significant for the present context, to seek a "high level level of generalization by emphasizing the common experience of the churches...[because] the elements of religious consensus and historical points of convergence stand out even more clearly than they did two decades ago; for even in the midst of rivalry and conflict, the churches have agreed more with each other than any of them could agree with the increasingly secular assumptions of contemporary Canadian culture."⁵ If Regehr's Mennonite readers can say "Amen!" to Terrence Murphy, and they can, then Ted Regehr has made his point.

Nevertheless, when one steps back from Regehr's Volume III to observe the entire *Mennonites in Canada* series, and when one contemplates the possibility of a single volume encompassing the most significant developments since 1786, the questions raised toward the end of this discussion remain significant. Too many Canadian Mennonites identify with their own particular denominations for such a comprehensive book to avoid discursive treatment of Mennonite diversity. Conversely, too many contemporary Canadian Mennonites are ready to embrace the promising trajectory set by Regehr in Volume III, to remain silent about the hope for a Mennonite peoplehood that embraces the everyday *mentalité* of Canadian Mennonites, whatever their surname may be.

Notes

¹ Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillian, 1982), 395ff.

² *Ibid.*, 593ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 598.

⁴ E.K. Franics, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona, MB: Friesen's, 1955), 6; 278.

⁵ Terrence Murphy, ed., Introduction, *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford U Press, 1996), ix; xi.