

A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren by John H. Redekop

John Redekop, Professor of Political Science at Wilfred Laurier University (Waterloo, Ontario) is a very active MB layman. He has recently completed tenures both as Moderator of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and as a member of the Board of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (Fresno). He has also served on the National Council of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. Though his book, *A People Apart*, has sparked controversy, he speaks as a responsible "insider" and as one who intends to remain faithful to Anabaptist and Evangelical theology while retaining continuous gratitude for the best of "Mennonite culture."

Redekop begins his book with the statement that MBs face three serious problems: our theology is being diluted, our church polity is eroding and our ethnicity (which can, and once did, sustain and express our faith) now confuses our witness to others, hinders our acceptance of non-ethnics, and exacerbates our polity and doctrinal problems. He focuses his book on the third problem.

The first two chapters introduce the topic and list the "basic questions" and "key assumptions" for his study. On pages 19-20 he lists twelve hypotheses that he believes are validated by the research presented in chapters 3-5. I will organize my review around these Hypotheses-become-Conclusions (hereafter "H/C").

In H/C 1-5 Redekop argues that Mennonites generally and MBs specifically are now (and will continue to be) thought of as an ethno-religious group by those who do not belong to it. The data on this in chapter 3 is derived from nearly 1700 questionnaires that were completed by MBs (ethnic and non-ethnic) as well as by non-MBs and non-Mennonites. He also concludes that the vast majority of MB respondents believe that this constitutes a problem for MB churches.

Redekop claims that the ethnic component of the Mennonite mix appears to be increasingly overshadowing the religious component in the minds of most people. Reasons for this become evident in a lengthy "scrapbook" (chapter 4), revealing the cultural reality that the media presents as "Mennonite." The impressive list of "scraps" range from images of the Amish to relief sales and from museums to a "Mennonite cabaret." The conclusion is that Mennonites are a cultural reality and are seen as such. Chapter 5 presents items and arguments that MBs are also ethnic and are perceived in that way.

For me and, I suspect, for most readers of the *Bulletin*, this scrapbook will be more interesting and persuasive than the survey. Most of us are probably unaware of the extent to which the Mennonites of Canada (especially in Manitoba and Ontario) are a vigorous and proud subculture. Readers here will be surprised—and may be as shocked as is Redekop—that non-religious heirs of the tradition continue to claim it and that at least one "Mennonite writer" speaks "as" a Mennonite and "for" Mennonites though publicly insisting that he isn't any sort of Christian at all.

Readers are therefore prepared to agree with Redekop's H/C 6-8 that this religious and cultural mix is confusing and that naming both these aspects "Mennonite" becomes contradictory. Audiences in the USA and the West Coast will be reminded that such a mix often results in "in-group" attitudes that can freeze out the non-ethnic.

The most provoking part of Redekop's proposals for his intended Canadian audience has been his insistence (H/C 9-10) that an official change of name is necessary in order to sort out the confusions he has described. By not calling our churchly and religious reality "Mennonite," we could work at clarifying the problems we are having with theology, polity and evangelism. He returns to this theme all through the book and especially in chapters 8-9.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Redekop's proposals is summarized in H/C 11-12 (chapters 7-8). Here he argues that a name change could allow MBs to be *more Anabaptist* by explicitly hinging our doctrine of church, discipleship and nonresistance to their biblical sources. At the same time, those born to our ethnicity (and the few who wish to assimilate to it) would be free to be *more Mennonite* in their non-churchly life. This would also free French, Black, Oriental, Hispanic and other MBs to celebrate their own ethnicity in analogous ways. Then in our churches we could together celebrate the common Evangelical and Anabaptist beliefs and worship that would unite us religiously.

Whether his proposals would do what he wants is debatable—as he acknowledges. In calling for a discussion of these issues, I think he has done us all a service. But the fruitfulness of that debate hinges on how we are to think of the relation between "faith" and "life." He comments on this in chapters 6-7. A much more thorough analysis needs to be done, I think, before we can know what to do with his proposals. Precisely these sorts of questions are to be raised at the symposium entitled "Faith and Ethnicity Among the Brethren" to be held November 19-21, 1987 at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California.

—Delbert Wiens

Historical Sources In Polish Archives and Libraries

For more than four centuries, Mennonites formed part of the cultural and religious landscape in regions along the Vistula River in Poland. It is therefore not surprising to find that archives and libraries in centers such as Gdansk (formerly Danzig), Malbork (once Marienburg) and Torun hold extensive collections of documents reflecting the life of the Mennonite community.

The library of the Academy of Sciences in Gdansk has a remarkable collection of manuscripts from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. One manuscript tells about the building of the first Mennonite church in Montau in 1586, well before this was permitted in most other parts of Poland. Another document records the action taken by King John Casimir to protect Mennonites from being forced to accept the quartering of troops in their homes.

Several documents describe meetings between Mennonite "Vermahner" and leaders of the established churches (Lutheran, Catholic or Calvinist). Although many of their views were similar, a number of distinct emphases became evident. When the Mennonites were asked about original sin, and whether children were born condemned, they replied that they did not recognize original sin. When they

You Are Invited to Attend:

Faith and Ethnicity Among the Brethren:

A Symposium Exploring the Religious and Ethnic Elements in the Mennonite Brethren Church

PURPOSES

1. Bring further clarity to the current discussion about Mennonite Brethren ethnicity. Seek to identify the assumptions of the varying positions in the discussion.
2. Address the issue of Mennonite ethnicity from informed Biblical, Theological, Missiological and Social Science reflection.
3. Respond directly to issues raised by John Redekop, *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* (Kindred Press, 1987)

PROGRAM

Thursday, November 19, 1987

7:30 pm **Overview**

Chair: Paul Toews

“Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren: Issues and Responses”

—John H. Redekop, Professor of Political Science, Wilfred Laurier University

Friday, November 20, 1987

9:00 am **Social Science Perspectives on Mennonite Brethren Ethnicity**

Chair: Ted Nickel

“Social Science Theory and ‘A People Apart’; Some Considerations”

—Miriam Warner, Professor of Anthropology, San Jose State University

“‘The MB Profile;’ Ethnicity Among North American and Japanese Mennonite Brethren: Some Comparisons”

—Robert Enns, Professor of Sociology, Fresno Pacific College

—Alvin Dueck, Professor of Pastoral Counseling, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

1:30 pm **Biblical Perspectives on Ethnicity**

Chair: John E. Toews

“Differing Biblical Perspectives for Understanding the Relationship Between Faith and Ethnicity”

—Elmer Martens, Professor of Old Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

—Allen Guenther, Professor of Old Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

—John E. Toews, Professor of New Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

—Tim Geddert, Professor of New Testament, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

6:30 pm **Missiological Perspectives on Ethnicity**

Chair: Henry J. Schmidt

Dinner for Conference Participants in the BC Lounge

“Doing Missions with a Universal Gospel and Cultural Distinctives: How Does It Work?”

—Paul Hiebert, Professor of World Missions, Fuller Theological Seminary

—Fran Hiebert, member, Board of Missions and Services, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

Saturday, November 21, 1987

9:00 am **Theological Responses to Ethnicity in the Modern World**

Chair: Howard J. Loewen

Respondents:

—James McClendon, Jr., Professor of Theology, Graduate Theological Union Seminary

—Delbert Wiens, Professor of History and Humanities, Fresno Pacific College

Open Discussion

SPONSORS: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies (Fresno) and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
All of the symposium sessions will take place in the Chapel on the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary campus.
For registration and lodging information contact the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, (209) 453-2225.

were asked if they taught that the pope was antichrist, as Luther had stated, they responded negatively, noting that they believed that many Catholics are children of God, and would be among the “blessed.”

Another question that often arose was the status of Mennonites who married persons of another faith. The city council of Danzig, for example, issued a decree that children born of such a marriage should be baptized as Lutherans. When Mennonites refused, various legal complications arose. Similarly, when a Mennonite acquired land from a Lutheran or Catholic, some local authorities insisted that Mennonites should be required to pay the church dues that had earlier been collected from the previous owner. Such

matters led to lengthy negotiations, and sometimes to litigation, as numerous documents demonstrate.

Some of the fascinating records preserved in the Gdansk archives reflect everyday life among the Mennonites. The diary of Hendrik Donner, elder in the Orloffelfelde congregation, describes life in a Mennonite community during the last three decades of the eighteenth century—the time when this area was taken from Poland by Prussia. Danzig, however, remained free of Prussian rule, so that the researcher is able to detect differences between churches that retained Polish allegiance, and those that were brought under a Prussian government. It is interesting to note that some Mennonite leaders in Danzig expressed strong preference for re-

maining under Polish rule.

One of the issues that became heated and protracted after the partitions of Poland was the question of military service. For more than a century Mennonites in Prussia discussed this problem, and tried to make various arrangements with the government. Archival documents provide detailed evidence of this complex development. No doubt many participants would have echoed these sentiments of a Mennonite minister:

Mein Gott, bewahr in Gnaden
fuer allem Fall und Schaden
Mich und der gantzen Heerd
Lass uns durch Jesu Liebe
Und deines Geistes Triebe
Vor dir sein hold und werd
Ach seegne diene Lehre
Das sich dadurch vermehre
In uns Gottseligkeit
Damit wenn wir eins sterben
Wir als die Himmelserben
Gehn ein zur Seligkeit.

—Peter J. Klassen

Wahrheitsfreund Index Now Available

On July 28, 1915 the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Publishing House in Chicago, Illinois published the first issue of *Der Wahrheitsfreund*, the official voice of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church (KMB). For the next thirty-two years this paper would provide news and inspirational material for the German-speaking members of the KMB Church.

The choice of Chicago as publication site for *Der Wahrheitsfreund* seems an odd one, since the nearest KMB congregations to that city were in South Dakota. The decision was made to locate the publishing house there when city missionaries David M. Hofer and Joseph W. Tschetter offered to pay for a building at 2812 Lincoln Avenue and the necessary publishing equipment if they in turn could use part of the building for their mission efforts. The conference agreed to this offer and in 1914 the publishing house was established at that location. In 1933, the site of publication was moved to Hillsboro, Kansas, and moved again one year later to Inman, Kansas.

M.B. Fast, later a member of Zion KMB Church in Dinuba, California, was the first editor of *Der Wahrheitsfreund*. He held that position from 1915 to 1917. He was succeeded by D.M. Hofer (1918-1933), J.G. Barkman (1933-1935), J.H. Klassen (1935-1945) and W.W. Harms (1945-1947).

Originally a German language periodical, *Der Wahrheitsfreund* began to include some English language children's features as early as its second year of publication. The number of English features was increased until by 1940 half of each issue was in English. Despite these changes, the number of subscribers had dwindled considerably by the 1940s and in 1947 the conference decided to discontinue *Der Wahrheitsfreund*. The English language KMB paper *Christian Witness*, founded in 1941, was enlarged at that time to take the place of *Der Wahrheitsfreund*.

Without a doubt, *Der Wahrheitsfreund* is one of the most valuable sources of information on KMB history. Unfortunately, this information has not been readily available to researchers, due to the lack of an index. This problem has

Eating Stones

*for my aunts who died in the Ukrainian
famine-genocide which numbered at least
seven million in the 1930's*

Hunger with its open face,
its open mouth. Simple
as a life-line. I love
the old man's story—
the miracle in the Ukraine—
how that loaf of bread slid off
the military wagon into the snow
and saved his whole family.
Survival and escape from
the unspeakable desert.

One loaf.

When the tramp sat on my
childhood backsteps, hunger
seemed to rub its rags
against the edges of adventure.
The small dramas of
the Depression, my mother
exclaiming and clapping
her hands as we opened
the huge round of government
cheese. All of us unaware,
the mute murders so far away.

I want
history to veer in their behalf,
not that wilderness of stones
with its refusals. Susie
and Marie, orphaned, young,
and beautiful, emaciated
on the pitiful bedding,
their mouths bloody with the effort.
I want for them the transformation
into loaves. And then, those
other necessities we live by:
a hand on their foreheads,
someone calling them by name.

—Jean Janzen

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now been solved with the recent publication of *Der Wahrheitsfreund Index* by the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren Church. No longer is it necessary for the researcher to spend hours searching through endless pages for a particular elusive article. Indexes of authors, subjects, scripture texts, obituaries, weddings and congregational reports make it possible to quickly determine the exact location of any item printed in *Der Wahrheitsfreund*.

The index, along with a complete set of *Der Wahrheitsfreund*, is available in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.