Singing the Christian college song in a Mennonite key.

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Chapter 5

Singing the Christian College Song in a Mennonite Key

Paul Toews

Martin Marty, the University of Chicago historian and Lutheran churchman, in a recent address to a Lutheran hospital in Chicago, reportedly asked the question: "If you were indicted for being a Lutheran hospital would there be sufficient evidence to convict?" A version of that question ought to be asked of all Christian institutions. What is the convictable evidence that makes an institution authentically Christian? The question ought also to be asked of institutions that stand in particular theological or denominational traditions. In what ways do the distinctive elements of a denominational community and theological tradition shape the life and fabric of the institution?

Fresno Pacific College, since its inception in 1944 as Pacific Bible Institute, has existed within the contours of the larger Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and the smaller Mennonite Brethren part of that story. Different conferences of the Mennonite Brethren Church have owned and operated the college. Every mission statement clearly links the college to the Mennonite tradition. But ownership and mission statements, important as they are, can be outward casings hiding a denominationally nondescript interior. For Fresno Pacific College to be Mennonite it must find ways of working out of and embodying essential elements of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story.
THE ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE STORY

The Mennonite story begins with the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century. The Anabaptists were part of the larger Reformation movement seeking change in both the theology and polity of Christendom. Anabaptists stood with Lutherans, Calvinists and other reformers in their rejection of established religious practices. They also shared with these other reformers the fundamental Christian understandings and symbols of the orthodox tradition dating back to the first century and even back to Abraham. Yet they simultaneously called for additional, more radical reforms.

Historians as diverse as Ernest Troeltsch, George H. Williams, Steve Ozment, Roland Bainton, and James Stayer portray Anabaptism as a separate dissenting movement within the Protestant reformist impulse. The most common label used to describe them is the “Radical Wing of the Reformation.” Their fundamental break was with the medieval hope for a Christian society that encompassed everyone, or with what is commonly described as the territorial state church. The Anabaptists argued that a church linked to the coercion of the state would never be free to be the true church. They therefore sought the establishment of a church of voluntary believers, independent of civil control.

The early Anabaptist movement found followers among divergent peoples (Swiss, Dutch and Germanic), among varying social classes (peasant and learned), in diverse locations (urban and rural), and from Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed dissidents. It clearly was a pluralist and heterogeneous movement. Yet underlying this amorphous movement of radicals was a semblance of relatedness growing out of shared ecclesiological understandings.

The distinguishing marks of the separated church were to be primitivism, or the desire to restore a simple biblical pattern of life, a reading of the canon that prioritized the New Testament generally and the Sermon on the Mount particularly, biblical literalism in the interpretation of the Scriptures, adult baptism and voluntary faith in the place of infant baptism and coercive faith, a disciplined communal life, and ethical discernment within the context of the community of the faithful that included rejecting the claims of the state when they violated biblical teachings. They fully recognized that the requirements of biblical faith might not coincide with the requirements of good citizenship.

Anabaptists, troubled by the absence of any moral improvement in the Protestant territorial churches and persuaded that the ethics of
coercion could not achieve that moral reformation, opted to withdraw into separate conventicles. In so choosing, they became, as Stayer wrote, "a minority hermetically separated from the fallen world and the coercion necessary for its preservation." This position, in some ways, made more difficult the penetration of society and culture with religious values but it did make more possible the creation of a more purified Christian community. Furthermore it made missionizing a central activity of the church. The purified community called others to join in a declaration of personal faith and participation in the creation of this new order.

The cost of advancing these radical ideas, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was religious persecution and martyrdom. The seventeenth-century search for religious toleration and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment gave these concepts legitimacy in Western culture. But by then Mennonites and other kindred spirits were dispersed to the corners of European society where toleration was more readily secured.

The Mennonite story from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is largely that of a people on the fringe of various social and political systems. The strong inclination to separate from worldly society and the ethical distinction between the church and the world created a bounded history marked by a high degree of cultural enclavement, political isolation and even spatial segregation.

For the forbearers of the Mennonite Brethren, who in 1944 established Pacific Bible Institute, the subsequent Mennonite story took place in the marshes of northern Germany and Prussia, the steppes of the Russian Ukraine, the North American plains frontier and the east side of California's San Joaquin Valley. These Mennonites became separated from the dominant surrounding cultures by distinctive religious commitments, language, and a distinctive cultural system. In this relative isolation they sought to build their biblical commonwealths. For centuries these Mennonites, while in many respects ideological precursors of modernity, were nourished by the social reality of an earlier time. What they built on the margins of these societies were convictional communities able to mediate a faith increasingly lost in the radical atomization of Western culture.

Ted Regehr, a Canadian Mennonite historian, notes that Mennonite communities around the world cite and reproduce two citations more frequently than any others. They express the center of the Mennonite convictional creed. The first, a favorite of Menno Simons, the Dutch Anabaptist leader after whom Mennonites are named, is
the scripture verse, "For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid through Jesus Christ" (I. Cor. 3:11). The second statement is by Menno himself: "True evangelical faith . . . cannot lie dormant. . . . It clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute; . . . it serves those that harm it; . . . it binds up that which is wounded; . . . it has become all things to all men."  

The frequent juxtaposition of the two statements is not accidental. The foundation once laid in Christ, if it is a true foundation, cannot lie dormant. Things of the spirit are an important part of this foundation. Mennonites are deeply religious and devout people. They cultivate disciplines of personal piety and personal devotion. That piety can easily focus on otherworldly themes. "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through" is easily sung by Mennonites.

Yet Mennonites are also much concerned with the things of this world. The Christian pilgrimage is a way of living in this world. It is a communal experience. It is a pilgrimage bounded by a shared covenant. The notion of an autonomous Christian, living beyond the boundary of the church with its encouragement and discipline, is foreign to Mennonite theologizing. The biblical story, as understood by Mennonites, involves individuals coming to faith in Jesus the Christ, but it is also the story of the creation of a people. It is the community of faith that signals the presence of the Kingdom of God. It does so through individuals living not primarily for themselves but for others. The communal is the context where one can experience the love and forgiveness of God. Within the collectivity of like-minded Christians one can achieve the submission and nurture of the self. Through mutual counsel, mutual discernment, and even mutual discipline the individual in community achieves both an authentic individuality and foretastes the mutuality of humankind with the Divine. The true foundation begins with the personal appropriation of God's grace but then moves on to the objective creation of a Christian community. Correct belief—orthodoxy—is important, but correct action—orthopraxis—is more important. The truth is to be embodied, to be incarnated. The incarnation of Christ—God becoming flesh, taking on human form—is what is to be imitated. Faith is a way of seeing, a way of believing, but more importantly a way of acting.

The corollaries of this understanding of faith are everywhere in Mennonite communities. One is the language of discipleship. The notion of nachfolge, or "following after Jesus," implies that Christians take on the task of literally exemplifying the life of Jesus. His active
service to others, his peacemaking and his passion for justice become common obligations. The "kingdom of God" that he preached, while realizable only partially in this life, is what the church promotes. It is an aggressive program of personal and social reconstruction. Calvin Redekop, a Mennonite sociologist, has appropriately described the "Anabaptist vision" as containing this-worldly utopian expectations.

The witness of the church, done as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) says, "In the Name of Christ," is sharing the good news in word and deed. The history of Mennonite missionizing activity is the story of nearly a million converts around the world. The Mennonite Brethren who founded Fresno Pacific College have always had a particularly strong commitment to world evangelization. People from many tribes, ethnicities and nations have found the Mennonite form of faith a compelling way to witness to the power of the Kingdom of God. Inhabiting differing cultural, intellectual and economic universes, all are drawn precisely because of the transforming power of a faith tradition that takes the incarnation as the starting point for personal and social reconstruction.

The impulse to offer a cup of water to the thirsty, food to the hungry and shelter to the homeless is just as strong. More Mennonites volunteer time and energy for MCC's program of international relief and development activities than for many other church activities. Their auctions and various enterprises to market third-world goods and recycle North American refuse and excess galvanize a deep Mennonite need to identify with the poor and displaced of the world.

Another corollary is the rejection of the ethics of violence. The way of discipleship includes the way of the cross. All human relationships are to be patterned after the suffering Christ who turned the other cheek rather than use the sword. The boundaries of the peaceable kingdom are to include relationships between the selves, the family, the state and all others. The way of the cross is not only the avoidance of violence but the promotion of the biblical vision of shalom. The restoration of wholeness characterized by justice, truth, respect and even love is the goal of this active peacemaking.

The practice of these corollaries of Mennonite faith often turned Mennonites into outsiders and sharpened a sense of Christian distinctiveness. It is a story of dissent, a story that stands against the standardized, conformed, established ways of the dominant culture. Heroic religious commitments have sometimes been required to maintain the tradition. Martyrology has a sacred place in Mennonite
reflection. The *Martyr's Mirror*, next to the Bible, is the indispensable artifact of faith.\(^6\) It contains the stories of some six thousand sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs.

But the Mennonite story is not only a heroic one. Mennonite history, like all histories, is also the story of compromise and failure. The Anabaptists and their Mennonite successors were fallible just like other Christians. If there is a perfectionist streak in Mennonite ideation, so there is also a compromised reality in Mennonite history. John Howard Yoder, the premier Mennonite social ethicist, more than twenty years ago referred to it as the gap between the “Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality.”\(^7\) Whereas he called for an adjustment of reality to fit the vision, the more realistic course is to recognize the inevitable and even necessary tension or dialectic between vision and reality. It is only with an appreciation of the dialectic that institutions like Fresno Pacific College can attempt to embody the idealism of the tradition.

**THE RELEVANCE OF THE MENNONITE STORY FOR A MENNONITE COLLEGE**

The predominantly young intellectuals who in the mid-1960s fashioned the Fresno Pacific Idea thought they had found in the Anabaptist-Mennonite story the elements to build a distinctive college. While the Idea was shaped by various intellectual currents, it was deeply indebted to a recovery of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story. The faculties that gathered in the early 1960s, at both the college and the adjacent Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, were a new generation with a historical consciousness markedly stronger than the generation that dominated both institutions during the 1950s. They were part of a larger Mennonite Brethren recovery of its Anabaptist roots.\(^8\) That recovery provided the primary prism through which the Idea was shaped.

The question of what in the story might be useable for the fashioning of an educational culture was not an idle one for the creators of the Idea statement. It was part of an effort to understand their own theological and historical inheritance. From the separated past it has been easy for some Mennonite institutions to emphasize that their distinctives are related to demographics. Only with a majority of Mennonite students and faculty could a distinctive Mennonite ethos be preserved.\(^9\) The Fresno Pacific Idea explicitly rejected such boundaries and defined the Mennonite quality by reference to ideation. That did not, however, create the luxury of only etherial-
izing about a Mennonite college. Much like the Anabaptist commitment to orthopraxis, the idea statement set in motion a search for the appropriate institutional outworking of the idea. In the decade following its articulation there were sustained attempts to translate the Idea into participatory styles of institutional governance, the practice of Christian community, creating service projects as integral to the campus life and even as a component in the academic program, and searching for the appropriate relationships between the church and its institutions and the larger culture. Those outworkings are the themes of several other essays in this volume.

Beyond the Mennonite-derived emphases covered in these other essays there are other additional academic qualities that might provide convictable evidence that Fresno Pacific is indeed an Anabaptist-Mennonite college: an intellectual disposition, an ethic and a curriculum. The disposition is the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” the ethic is “transformationist,” the curriculum is “reconciling.”

The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

The nonconformist intellectual tradition begins with the hermeneutic of suspicion. It harbors a skepticism about reigning assumptions and practices. That is part of the generic academic enterprise. Academics are the professional demystifiers and the professional critics in any society. What Paul Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutic of suspicion” is deeply ingrained in the academic community. The task of the Christian college is not only to do that for all disciplines, but to also turn that suspicion on religious assumptions and traditions. Precisely what makes Anabaptism so attractive to many people today is the growing recognition of the cultural captivity of too much of the religious community.

The dominant religious traditions of American society seemingly have little to say to the needs of our world. While pluralism has fractured the religious groupings of the United States into innumerable entities, there clearly has been a historic liberal mainstream and a newer evangelical mainstream that have shaped much of the public dialogue on religious issues. The liberals who have held religious power for most of the twentieth century are now on the run. They are so implicated in the history of the twentieth century that they share responsibility for the dilemma in which we find ourselves. They have been edged out of power and the more reflective know they had it coming. Ostensibly evangelical presidents have occupied the White House from 1976 to 1988 and again since
1992. They have little more to show for their stewardship of the state than did the religious liberals, and their panting after power promises a seduction not much different from the liberals.

The nonconformists have historically understood that the mind is darkened and seduced by too much involvement in the existing order. One is free to hear the voice of God only when other loyalties are not strong. To hear the voice of God one must travel lightly, to be a pilgrim on the road. It is hard not to be deflected when assuming the responsibilities of Christendom and willingly take charge of society. Long before Macauley coined his famous epigram that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” the religious nonconformists had learned the insight. In the quest for remaining free to follow the divine imperatives Mennonites have practiced a social critique.

Only as far as Mennonite colleges continue the prophetic and innovative freedom that comes from the hermeneutic of suspicion will they continue to prosper. They will never have access to the money and facilities that allow them to compete with the conventional and established. It is precisely in questioning and pioneering that they offer promise both to themselves and to the larger academic culture. That critique, however, cannot lead to the crippling nihilism that the hermeneutic of suspicion has engendered in parts of American academe. It must be directed toward reconstruction and transformation.

A Transformationist Ethic

Long ago, G. K. Chesterton, the British observer of America, noted that America is a nation with the soul of a church. But then he added that America also has churches with the soul of a nation. What Chesterton and others suggest is that the vaunted separation of church and state, in this culture, did not sunder the Constantinian tradition. Paradoxically it created a neo-Constantinian arrangement that while more providing a kind of institutional religious freedom may have created a more damaging theological bondage.10

At the heart of the neo-Constantinian tradition was the project that Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe as “seeking to make the gospel credible to the modern world.”11 It is that quest that has made the church’s theology, for centuries, predominantly apologetic. Faced with what the German philosopher Lessing called the “ugly wide ditch” of history that separated the ancient faith from modern science, the church has been trying to develop a modern
world view, trying to escape its pre-scientific world view. Schleiermacher's hope of making the faith credible to Christianity's "cultural despisers" has been much of the agenda of this apologetic tradition. And so theology has been concerned to translate the ancient faith into the categories of existentialism, Whiteheadian process theology, psychoanalysis, or Marxist analysis to render it believable.

The degree to which American evangelicals have wedded themselves to enlightenment science is well documented by many observers. Mark Noll, the Wheaton historian, terms it the "scandal of the Evangelical mind." Both knowingly and unknowingly evangelicals in their search for cultural relevance sought to translate their ideas into forms acceptable to enlightenment understandings. Because of this process the explicit task of theologizing and the implicit role of the church in the society became largely acculturated to the dominant cultural values.\textsuperscript{12}

From the stance of the Radical Reformation this entire venture is misguided. The theology of translation assumes that there is some "kernel of real Christianity, some abstract essence" that can be preserved and integrated into changing scientific world views. The Mennonite approach to faith begins at a different place. As Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon write, "in Jesus we meet not a presentation of basic ideas about God, the world and humanity, but an invitation to join up, to become part of the movement," to become part of the new people. Our witness is the earthly imitation of the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{13}

The theological enterprise of integration or accommodation runs through both liberal and evangelical theologizing. Christian colleges have been preoccupied with this theological apologetical tradition. Much of the concern for the integration of faith, culture, and learning has been part of this apologetic tradition. By finding the points of congruence they entertained the hope that we might be able to Christianize the culture. Integration is a limited and perhaps even an inadequate metaphor for Mennonites to use. Transformationist language is a more adequate descriptor of the intended relationship of faith to knowledge, of faith to culture. Integration has become too closely identified with the Constantinian tradition. Like so much of that tradition it has meant the absorption of faith into the cultural system.

A Mennonite college should be concerned that students appropriate high culture (the works of natural science, philosophy, theology, music, painting, poetry, architecture and all the rest that comprises a liberal arts curriculum) as enriching for faith. But it also must have
another calling. That is to utilize knowledge and commitment in the fashioning of alternative Christian communities. That task does not discount the importance of learning, but it does redirect it.

A Reconciling Curriculum

The central theme of the gospels is the reconciling of humankind to God. But in becoming reconciled to God, we are also to become reconciled to each other, to nature, to the neighbor, to the stranger, and even to the enemy.

Whatever the twentieth century is, it is not the century apt to win the Nobel Peace Prize. It has been an era of accelerating violence: person against person, person against family, tribe against tribe, ideology against ideology, nation against nation, and religion against religion. Overriding the many localized conflicts has been an unparalleled nuclear arms race and the threat of global suicide.

A Mennonite college true to its heritage will direct learning toward themes of reconciliation. It will make active peacemaking, conflict resolution and reconciliation a centerpiece of the curriculum. Colleges in the Mennonite tradition ought to excel at unmasking the structures of injustice, the dispositions and values that generate destructive violence. Learning the techniques of conflict resolution and peacemaking should be central to every student's experience. One of our tasks is to provide a pacifist alternative to this fundamental crisis of our times.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a philosopher of the Reformed tradition, has argued that Christian colleges in the latter part of the twentieth century must respond to the needs of a suffering humanity. Acquiring the requisite piety, skills of evangelism and insight into the high culture have been noble commitments that organized Christian colleges in the past. But with a world in need of “re-formation,” new tasks of active intervention are waiting. The task of simply imparting a Christian world view is a luxury of the past. Christian education, Wolterstorff argues, needs to “equip and motivate students for a Christian way of being and acting in the world.”14 What a Mennonite college imparts should be a way of acting and being that includes compassion, justice and reconciliation.

THE MENNONITE DIALECTIC AT FRESNO PACIFIC COLLEGE

The fifty years of Fresno Pacific's history coincide with a period of unusual stress and change for the Mennonite Brethren people. Still
largely encased in the 1940s in their small rural communities, they perpetuated distinctive cultural and theological understandings. They were what sociologists call an "ethno-religious" group—a cross between a religious community and an ethnic group.

Today the Mennonite Brethren can hardly be thought of as outsiders. The story of persecution and isolation is increasingly a foreign past. The Mennonite Brethren are now the most educated and urbanized among all of the Mennonite groups. They freely participate in the central institutions of American society. In many ways they have sociologically made their peace with modernity. They feel at home in American society. There is very little sense of "over-againstness" among the Mennonite Brethren. They mix freely in Rotary clubs, at local Chamber of Commerce functions, at Republican fund-raisers, and in the National Association of Evangelicals. While they continue to nurture the distinctive elements of the Anabaptist inheritance they are also among some of the most ecumenical Mennonites. A long history of cooperation with Baptists (particularly German Baptists and their descendants), the Christian and Missionary Alliance and other conservative protestant bodies indicates a willingness to make common cause with other evangelical groups.

The Mennonite Brethren ease of associating with different traditions goes back to the 1860 beginnings of the movement in south Russia. Present at the Mennonite Brethren birth was a theological pluralism that included Pietism, European Evangelicalism and Anabaptism. The result has been a tradition containing within itself diverse—and perhaps even contradictory—currents. Differing parts of the Mennonite Brethren world have accentuated and diminished various elements of the inheritance. Among the United States Mennonite Brethren generally, and particularly among those on the West Coast, time and social movement had dimmed the Anabaptist part of their religious inheritance. During the last fifty years the pressures for assimilation into American ways, the increasing desire not to be different and the entry into the broader American middle class pruned away many of the distinguishing qualities of earlier Mennonite Brethren. In the transition it has been easy to confuse the ethnic and the religious. After all, other Christians did not hold dear the same things, so those distinctive elements could easily be put into the category of cultural trappings or ethnic remnants.

Thus, when an Anabaptist renaissance occurred during the 1960s at both the college and the adjacent Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, it could be understood by some Mennonite Brethren not
as the recovery of a partially lost tradition but as a foreign import. Furthermore, coming just when some Mennonite Brethren were pleased with the loss of the cultural boundaries that had fenced them off from American society, here was a young faculty offering a new set of ideological boundaries to again impede an easy association with American culture. While the revival of Mennonite history might bring nostalgic memories, the revival of Anabaptist theology challenged the acculturation process with its embrace of the American order. To some parts of the church, this neo-Anabaptism seemed like the resurfacing of older sectarian curbs.

Others in the church found this neo-Anabaptism unacceptable because it seemed like a disguised secularity. Its categories were too political. The mystical Jesus of Pietism was replaced by a more political Jesus. For Mennonite Brethren influenced by Pietism, ethics had been thought of almost exclusively in personal terms. Corporate ethics, in the sense that there are collective signs of the kingdom that organize the political and social behavior of God’s people, were a casualty of this kind of ethical Pietism. When the young college faculty called on itself and the church to be transformationist and prophetic it could easily sound to some like the political and cultural critique of the 1960s. The hermeneutic of suspicion is not advantageous to a people entering the dominant culture, and a transformationist gospel is not suited to settling in and being peaceable people in a militaristic society.

That a Mennonite Brethren college would feel in a particular way the tensions of the Mennonite Brethren story is altogether appropriate. Colleges, when they do their task, always stand on the margins between religious peoples and the larger world. That is particularly so for colleges of religious peoples with a definable cultural tradition. They historically face both inward toward the small Mennonite village and outward toward the larger society. Mediating the dialectic of acceptance and suspicion, of embrace and distancing between the smaller religious community and the larger world is part of the task of a denominational college in the Anabaptist tradition.

History has a way of playing tricks. For over 470 years people have been singing the Mennonite song. For most of those years it has been sung on the margins of Christendom. For many the song has sounded like a dissonant chord. But the story of God’s people, like the biblical logic, is an ironic one: the hidden becomes visible, the last become first, and the meek inherit the earth. So also it is for the Mennonite story: the marginal becomes central, the minor chords become major, the dissonant becomes harmonic.
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One need not look very far today to witness the embrace of Mennonites. In ecumenical discussions the eye drift is increasingly to the Mennonite participants. Rankings of small colleges regularly include Mennonite colleges, including Fresno Pacific, as among the best in the nation. Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mental Health services are regularly ranked as among the best providers in their respective fields. The Anabaptist-Mennonite story is that of a small and marginal people. But Anabaptist-Mennonite ideation is open to all who embrace it. It contains the possibilities for shaping a college that is biblically faithful, intellectually critical and expansive, culturally pluralistic, ethically transformative and morally distinctive. A Christian college singing in the Mennonite key can indeed offer a distinctive melody to American higher education.

NOTES

1. See Walter Klaassen, "The Quest for Anabaptist Identity," in Anabaptist-Mennonite Identities in Ferment, Leo Driedger and Leland Harder eds., Occasional Papers, number 14 (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1990), 16-17, for a discussion of the importance of Mennonites understanding their history and inheritance dating back to the beginnings of the Judaic-Christian story instead of looking only to the sixteenth century.


6. Tieleman Jansz van Braght, an elder in the Mennonite congregation of Dordrecht, The Netherlands, published in 1660 a work in Dutch that in English is usually called the \textit{ Martyr's Mirror}. Since its original publication it has been reproduced countless times in Dutch, German and English translations and editions.


9. Among the Mennonite liberal arts colleges, Fresno Pacific College and Bluffton College have traditionally had the smallest percentage of Mennonite student bodies. For some years in both schools less than twenty-five percent have been Mennonite. The other institutions—Bethel, Tabor, Goshen, Eastern Mennonite and Hesston—have had a considerably higher percentage of Mennonite students. The schools under the Mennonite Church’s Board of Higher Education—Goshen, Eastern Mennonite and Hesston—have for decades operated under guidelines that required Mennonite students to be a majority of the student body.


