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The Quest for the Mennonite Holy Grail: Reflections on “the Mennonite Experience in America” Project

Paul Toews

I readily confess that for the past fifteen years I have made my pilgrimage to the Mennonite holy places across North America: Harrisonburg, Lancaster, Harleysville, Lansdale, Akron, Goshen, Elkhart, Newton, and Hillsboro. Many of these are out of the way places, off the main roads. Sometimes even natives nearby to these places do not know their location. Airports are located elsewhere. The way to Harrisonburg usually requires a several-hour trip from the Washington, DC airports, Goshen is many fields away from South Bend, and Hillsboro takes an hour from the Wichita airport.

MENNONITE HOLY PLACES

I have not been alone in these wanderings. During parts of the past twenty years Richard MacMaster, Theron Schlabach, and James Juhnke

*At the heart of our grail are affirmations and practices
that offer salvation and renewal to people trapped in a
largely decaying and desperate culture.*

have been fellow pilgrims to these holy places. From Pennsylvania and Virginia in the East to California in the West all of us have been shuffling through archives and historical libraries. The many trips into the archival centers of the Mennonite universe bypassed the bright lights of the nation's metropolitan centers. Imagine a four-volume history of anything in America that misses the National Archives or the Library of

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Congress in Washington, DC, the Widener Library at Harvard in Boston, the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia, or the Henry Huntington Library in Los Angeles.¹

While our colleagues in the respective institutions that we inhabit have been traveling to conventions in these great cities and in other delightful places like New Orleans and Orlando, Florida, we have been in Newton, Elkhart, and Lansdale. They have dined at five-star restaurants where they enjoyed Tuscan and French cuisine and we have settled for veronika and shoefly pie. While the world rushed by we have been at the edges, in the musty and always overcrowded archives, devoted to the cause of Mennonite history.

In 1997 with this conference, we conclude these wanderings and this project that had its beginnings in a meeting in Elkhart, Indiana, in the summer of 1975. How long before that humid August day the notion of writing a comprehensive history of Mennonites in America had been a dream in the minds of John A. Lapp, C. J. Dyck, Robert Kreider, and Theron Schlabach is unknown to me and perhaps by now shrouded in their memories. But from at least 1975 on, there lurked in the minds of some folks this venture that ultimately became The Mennonite Experience in America (MEA) project.

With this conference we also meet to think about this search for the Mennonite holy grail, this quest to write a history across the spectrum of Mennonite bodies, to write a history that, at least in important respects, sought to be more inclusive of the various members of the family than anything written heretofore.

SACRED OBJECTS, PLACES, PEOPLE

The search for the grail is of course a metaphor, one that originated with the twelfth-century Celtic and Breton tales of searching for the cup or vessel in which Christ celebrated the Last Supper and for the first time consecrated the elements of the Eucharist. It was, therefore, a Passover or Sacramental vessel and according to the legend its next use was to receive the blood from the wounds of Christ when His body was taken down from the Cross. The quest for the holy grail, as codified in the Arthurian legends, is one that took place over centuries. It is but one example in the history of many peoples searching for the grail. For many Christians, far beyond the twelfth century, that search has often been for those objects associated with the life and death of Jesus the Christ—the sacred relics.

For others it has involved the search for sacred places. Throughout history the holy has been associated with particular places: the Buddha

reached enlightenment under the Bo Tree, the Immovable Spot near Gaya on the plain of the Ganges. Moses was instructed to take off his shoes so as to respect the holy ground on which he stood before the burning bush on Mount Horeb. Muhammad first heard the reciting voice of the angel Gabriel in the lonely cave on Mount Hira outside of Mecca. The hill Cumorah in Palmyra, New York, is the sacred link for Mormons to an ancient past. Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest still refer to Mount Rainier as Tahoma: the "mountain that was God."

Mennonites, with our anti-iconic sensibility, have a long history of objecting to sacred relics. But with our love of the soil and keen sense of geography we do have a tradition of almost revering sacred places. Too many Mennonite tour groups visit caves in the Swiss mountains, dungeons in the German Palatinate, villages on the northwest corner of Holland, Polish cemeteries, and former Mennonite villages in the Ukraine to suggest that place is not important and not sacred. Those pilgrimages, for many, invoke epiphanic moments. On occasion I too have felt that the grail was present in these distant places. I suspect some contemporary pilgrims to Mennonite cemeteries across North America also feel like they have touched the grail.

Even so, none of the authors of these four volumes would begin by suggesting that the Mennonite grail was bounded by the geographical places of North America that we visited. Our theology, rooted in discipleship, rooted in a sometimes radical, if simplistic obedience to the ways of Jesus the Christ, would rather find the grail in the lives of individuals. We are drawn to the story and inspiration of the martyrs.

Yet even there we are careful not to canonize. We retell with reverence, and with devotion, the stories of the sixteenth century martyrs. We reproduce the images of their heroic deaths. We relive through dramatic readings and stage productions the story of Dirk Willems. We have perhaps been tempted with elevating him to sainthood but have stopped short. While we cherish the *Martyrs Mirror*, the book of sixteenth-century martyrs, we have failed to chronicle the martyr stories of more recent times. Thousands of Mennonites lost their lives in Russia and the Ukraine between 1914 and 1945. All of those were not religious martyrs, but some were. Their stories and those of martyrs of our tradition out of Latin America, Africa, and Asia also remain marginal to our consciousness.

MENNONITES IN AMERICA

The American story has few such heroic moments. There are few

martyrs that we can point to in these four volumes. While there are references to the *Martyrs Mirror*, there are few references to martyrdom or martyrology. So while sixteenth century Anabaptist history has been organized around the martyr theme, the history of our people in North America has traditionally been organized differently.

In the world of American historiography writ large, the Mennonite grail is hardly visible. This project to write four volumes about the grail in American society is an audacious effort. In the great sweep of the American story that textbooks seek to chronicle, we occasionally merit inclusion as one of the German sectarian groups that gravitated, in the late 1600s, to William Penn's haven for religious dissenters. After that fleeting reference we disappear from the historical record. We are a blip, so to speak, on the screen, an almost imperceptible image that immediately fades.

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORIOGRAPHY

American religious historiography has done only slightly better. Here Mennonites usually surface, but again, almost exclusively in colonial Pennsylvania. The standard nineteenth-century American religious history texts by Robert Baird, Philip Schaff, Daniel Dorchester, and Leonard Bacon all omit any reference to Mennonites. Only H. K. Carroll, in a study based on the 1890 census, included a section on Mennonites.²

The twentieth-century texts are too numerous to catalog and it would serve no useful purpose to repeat the litany of exclusion. The scholars, in what is sometimes referred to as the University of Chicago school of American religious history—Shirley Case Jackson, William Warren Sweet, Winthrop Hudson, Sydney Mead, Jerald Brauer and Martin Marty—have in many ways dominated the field. One of them—Winthrop Hudson—who carved out a large career as a preeminent Baptist historian, published several surveys of American Christianity. His 1953 book, entitled *The Great Tradition of the American Churches*,³ was organized around the principles of disestablishment and religious voluntarism. If ever Mennonites might have gotten good press it should have been in a volume on those themes. After all, historians of the sixteenth-century have long described the Anabaptists, and other parties of the Left Wing of the Reformation, as the originators of the principle of religious voluntarism.

But Mennonites are nowhere to be found in Hudson's interpretive schema. It is the Left Wing Puritans, those who migrated to Massachusetts, who get the credit. That they may have learned it from the

Mennonites, or that Mennonites and English Puritans had multiple contacts before the great Puritan migration of 1630, is not part of the story. Other Baptist historians have recognized the role of Anabaptism in shaping English Puritanism and even go so far as to suggest that the Baptists in America, the real progenitors of disestablishment and voluntarism, emerged out of English Puritanism flavored by Continental Anabaptism.⁴

Hudson's more mature and comprehensive *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (1965) did little more. Mennonites appear here for one line as "earnest people, deeply devout, who rejected infant baptism and sought to practice full obedience to the commands of Christ, refusing among other things to take oaths, hold public office or bear arms."⁵

A SLIGHT IMPROVEMENT

We fared better, but only slightly, in the late Sydney Ahlstrom's magisterial volume, *A Religious History of the American People*. This eleven hundred-page narrative remains the most comprehensive text on American religious history. Ahlstrom rejected the provincialism of earlier works and declared in the preface that "constant attention must be given to the radical diversity of American religious movements." He thought that for too long the mainstream groups had exercised a hegemony over the field of American religious history. The time had come to observe the "varying responses of groups outside the 'quasi-establishment.'"⁶

Many reviewers hailed *A Religious History of the American People*, winner of the 1973 National Book Award, for its inclusive treatment of American religions. But historiographical generosity also has its limits. Mennonites remained too marginal for much more attention than the previous texts. To be sure they surface in Ahlstrom as part of the Pennsylvania story. Following that minimal appearance there are additional references: Martin Boehm's influence in the formation of the United Brethren in Christ denomination and as part of the immigrant influx of the late nineteenth century. But in this reference the Russian immigrants are mistakenly settled westward from Indiana to Kansas.

Part of the reason that Mennonites only make such a brief appearance in these texts surely has to do with the absence of heroic leaders. Without a Count Zinzendorf who gave the Moravians status, or a Christopher Sauer who gave the Dunkers historical significance, or a more exotic figure like Conrad Biessel of Ephrata Society fame, it was easy to shunt Mennonites off onto the side rail and focus on other Ger-

man sectarians, even though some of these groups had less staying power than the Mennonites.

MENNONITE HISTORIOGRAPHY

If the larger historical fraternity has had trouble finding the Mennonite grail in the American story, where have the Mennonite historians found it? Earlier generations frequently focused it around denominations, conferences and churchly institutions. In fact, the round of history that just preceded this one utilized the church as the organizing principle: John C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Church in America* (1966); Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, *Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (1975); and John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (1975).⁷ Given our ecclesiology, that was surely an appropriate place to search for the grail. We have always had a high doctrine of the church as the visible body of Christ in the world. And yet we look in vain for the word church in the titles or subtitles of the four MEA volumes.

Clearly something has changed. Even the series itself evokes something different: the Mennonite Experience in America. It was not too long ago that we thought that the essential Mennonite experience ought to take place separated from America. In our two kingdom theology, loyalty to the kingdom usually meant separation from the surrounding society. And now four Mennonites write our history without calling it church history or focusing around the theme of separation. Perhaps it was that the authors of this series were more profane—trained in history rather than in theology, graduates of universities rather than divinity schools. True, but even so, “profaneness” is hardly an appropriate descriptor of these volumes.

I think there was something else at stake in the conceptualization of this series. Were we to write the story of the church or of Mennonite people; of ethos, ethnicity and culture, or doctrine and creeds; of theology or of economics and sociology? Is the grail to be found in the official pronouncements of conferences and synods or in the fashioning of families, institutions, and communities? Is the grail to be found in the Sunday corporate worship service and in the highly articulated sermons of seminary educated ministers, or in the fields, in the building of a business, in the testifying to congressional committees, or even in the cleaning of latrines while doing Alternative Service? Are we to understand social and economic contexts as only the stage on which church history takes place, or are they part of the story of God’s people?

THE GRAIL IS IN THE ORDINARY

I think the MEA series says the grail is embedded in the ordinary, the commonplace. God's providence is surely in the miraculous, but it is also in the mundane; it is in the inventive but also in the sustaining. Religious history needs to incorporate all of those dimensions of spirituality into the human text.

These four volumes certainly include idealized Mennonite visions, but they also move us toward the cultural embodiments of those aspirations. In so doing I am confident that they will help us gain a richer sense of what it means for Mennonite theology and Mennonite experiences to live in American culture. We should welcome—for one of the starting points of our theology has always been the incarnation—the Word dwelling among us, taking on human form, even social form.

Perhaps the titles and sub-titles of the volumes in the series give us hints as to where the grail may be found: land, piety, peoplehood, peace, faith, nation, vision, doctrine, war, identity, organization, community, persistence. These are all descriptors of rather human behavior, human creations and human aspirations. Perhaps the grail is more protean and viscous than we sometimes care to admit.

IRONY AND INCONGRUITY

These sub-titles, by pointing us toward this protean grail, also lead us to a grail that is frequently found in paradox, in incongruity, and even in irony. All societies or sub-societies establish purposes. They act from those purposes. But because neither ideas nor actions, as Gene Wise, a historian of American ideas says, "travel down straight and narrow lines," the actions have unforeseen consequences. In actuality actions frequently contradict the expressed intention. When we assess cultures, institutions and individuals on the plane of intentionality and consequence, we frequently note the discrepancy. That discrepancy may be simply an incongruity, a disparity between intention and consequence.

But incongruity can also be transmuted into irony if the actors redouble their objective to achieve the intention even though the consequences are plainly different. Irony frequently comes from our overzealous pursuit, our fervent dedication to something that is not attainable. The individuals and cultures or sub-cultures most prone to irony are those whose identity is closely tied to highly rationalized purposes or those who tend to understand themselves and examine their actions in essentially moral or theological terms.⁸

Only James Juhnke has formally used the concept of irony in these four volumes. The last chapter of *Vision, Doctrine, War* is entitled

"Ironies of Acculturation and Achievements of an Emerging Denomination." But that concept, or variations thereof, runs through the four volumes.

OLD ORDERS

Surely there is irony in the story of those people that we have come to call the Old Order: Amish, Old Order Mennonites, and perhaps Hutterites. They are the people who have preserved forms of worship, patterns of church life, modes of dress, styles of authority, ownership of property, uses of technology, or other practices that would insure their separateness from American society. More consciously than most people in American society, they sought to fence themselves off from the larger culture.

But their story is stranger than fiction. In a culture organized around the future they preserve the past. In a society infatuated with modernisms they are our most successful anti-modernists. In a society that celebrates individualism, even radical individualism, they choose conformity and community. In a society where fashions glitter, their plain dress stands out in stark contrast. And yet they have become cultural heroes. Hollywood and TV documentaries now pay attention to the Amish and the Hutterites. Their plain attire now attracts the attention of fashion designers. Their quilts, made from stitching pieces of unused cloth together with a frugality uncommon in a culture of abundance, have become an art form with examples hanging in prestigious museums from New York to San Francisco. Those in the Mennonite-related family most wanting to be invisible have become the most visible. They have achieved, paradoxically or perhaps ironically, the national attention that many of their progressive cousins yearn to acquire.

SEPARATISM

The story of Mennonite separatism certainly harbors incongruity if not irony. Separatism was not part of the beginning of the American story. MacMaster's original Mennonites are half-Quaker, migrating with Reformed folks from Crefeld, Germany, settling alongside, inter-marrying and in many ways acting as one folk. The early story is very much that of feeling at home, even being one with other kindred spirits. MacMaster tells us of Dutch Reformed ministers conducting Mennonite marriages, of Reformed, Quakers, and Mennonites intermarrying.⁹

That ease of intermingling is surely partly because they came neither as a distinct people nor for distinct reasons. While some in the first quarter of the eighteenth century came because of religious discrimination in

Switzerland and land restrictions in the Palatinate, they were also part of a much larger transfer of Swiss and German speaking persons to Pennsylvania. By 1726 some twenty thousand persons of German or German-Swiss descent lived in Pennsylvania. They were only part of the influx of these same peoples into other New World colonies from Nova Scotia down to Georgia. Mennonites were indeed part of a much larger pattern of German migration. MacMaster observes the similarity between Mennonite and other German migrations by saying,

although some of the difficulties of staying in Europe came from special legislation and discrimination against Mennonites, many more came from economic conditions, wars, and other circumstances that troubled Mennonites' nonpacifist "church" neighbors about as much as it troubled Mennonites and other pacifists.¹⁰

INSTITUTION BUILDING

Or there is the paradox that Schlabach has long noted of Mennonites seeking to maintain their separateness through the use of thoroughly American techniques.¹¹ The flurry of institutional building that began in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth—the building of academies, colleges, publishing houses, the beginning of Mennonite periodicals and separate mission agencies—has continued. It is hard to imagine another group of people with so many organizations for everything. We surely have more mission boards, more periodicals, more institutions of higher learning, more publishing houses, more denominations, more inter-denominational associations, more foundations, more professional societies, than most groups of 270,000.

One indication of the profusion of Mennonite institutions and agencies is the recent research by Martin Marty, the chronicler of all things religious in this country. Several years ago he catalogued by denomination and then weighed the press releases that he had received during the course of a year. Mennonites took first place—we had more pounds per member than any other denomination. That, of course, raises a side issue. Most press releases hint at success rather than at failure. Mennonite humility, pound for pound, seems to be heavy rather than light.

Partly this multiplication of agencies and organizations expressed a new missional activism. Partly they were designed to fence Mennonites off from the larger culture. Mennonites attending their own schools and reading their own literature would be less susceptible to foreign or outside influences. Yet schools and periodicals are mediating structures. They mediate outside influences but they surely are carriers of those

influences. This institutional network, by the dawn of the twentieth century, was frequently staffed by people whose capabilities to run them was honed by the larger society.

Theologies which seemingly strengthen separatism frequently also break down barriers to resistance. Mennonite proponents of American fundamentalism surely thought of themselves as using the militancy of the movement to guard against the seductions of the larger culture. Mennonite fundamentalists thought of themselves as purging the Mennonite world of alien ideologies that had crept in through modernism. Perhaps fundamentalism was a means of resistance, but it surely also accelerated the integration of Mennonites into the larger society. By heightening doctrinal understandings that Mennonites held in common with others, it encouraged alliances that challenged beliefs and practices that Mennonites held separate from others. It was surely a form of cultural accommodation as much as it was a means of cultural resistance.

WARS

Then there is the incongruity of wars. That Mennonites would experience difficulty in wartime is axiomatic. Patriotic fervor has frequently called into question those less willing to engage in the rituals of wartime militarism. But even for Mennonites, America's wars, like Gene Wise's ideas, have "not travelled down straight and narrow lines." James Juhnke long ago taught us the double impact of wars on American Mennonites. They both accelerate and brake the drift of Mennonites into American culture. They sharpen the sense of civic responsibility, but also the sense of civic alienation. They focus and diffuse Mennonite identity. They fragment and revitalize Mennonites.¹²

The Revolutionary War

The Revolutionary War was not only about separating from British rule, but it was also the primary mechanism by which this new American people would be formed, by which their identity would be fashioned. Most Mennonites and Amish sought to remain neutral in the conflict between the patriot's cause and the British crown. That posture, however, became increasingly difficult. The patriots made numerous demands: volunteers for the local and state militias were pressed by local officials; taxes for support of the war effort were required; in Pennsylvania a pledge of allegiance to the patriot cause was required with double taxes assessed to those not willing to make the pledge. With the exception of payment of taxes, most Mennonites were reluctant to aid the patriots. A majority, it seems, favored the British cause. However, a revolutionary setting creates uncertainty as to which party is the duly constituted

authority ordained by God to govern. That problem, in addition to the harassment, meant that it became increasingly difficult to participate in the political process.

In 1782, just as the Revolutionary War was coming to a successful conclusion, Crèvecoeur asked his famous question, "What then is the American, this new man?" The emerging answer increasingly shunted Mennonites to the side roads. This new American nation had space for many different kinds of people, but less room for those who opposed a nationalism forged through militarism. So Mennonites became more "a people apart" to use MacMaster's phrase, than they had been during the colonial period. That rich label of being the "quiet in the land," which we have so long used as an honorific badge of self-description, is an apt phrase only after the Revolutionary War era. The posture of withdrawal, which we frequently think derives from our theology, was in fact substantially engendered by the alienation of the Revolutionary War experience. It is reasonable to suggest that American Mennonite two-kingdom theology, while forged out of a hermeneutical tradition, was certainly also nourished by the cultural dualism of various eras and places, including the United States following the American Revolution.

The Civil War

Mennonites in the Civil War had no conflicted loyalty as during the Revolutionary War. Schlabach tells us that they were almost uniformly Unionists. For many Americans the Civil War was the most wrenching of the American wars. That is the nature of civil wars that pit families against each other. The legacy of bitterness and animosity lingers even today and continues to poison the body politic. It left no such fracture in the Mennonite psyche. It did not fracture Mennonites into Northern and Southern groups as happened to other denominations. That perhaps is one of the reasons the Civil War was not a turning point as the Revolutionary War had been. Wars have frequently called Mennonites to reconsider their relationship to the state and to participation in political life. If the Civil War did so it was a hesitation quickly resolved in the coming decades.¹³

World War I

The agony of World War I was not so quickly resolved. In the decades following, the indignities, harassment, abuse, and martyr death of two Hutterite sons were remembered in Mennonite homes and congregations. The Great War, to such keen observers as C. Henry Smith and Guy F. Hershberger, had permanently altered the relationship between the nonresistant peoples and the militaristic state of the twentieth century. They feared that the American state was not far behind the

totalitarian states—that emerged on the heels of the war—in making the state the supreme object of loyalty and worship. And yet Juhnke tells us that “in paradoxical ways, the war was the health of this nonresistant religious subculture.”¹⁴

It was that because the war moved Mennonites to a more activist witness to their doctrines of peace and nonresistance. That activism surely drew from understandings long present in the Mennonite-Amish subcultures. It was also energized by the new psychic needs of the nonresistant peoples. Here was a way to re-establish themselves as good citizens in the face of their nonparticipation in the war effort.

Patriotism and philanthropy could become bedfellows as Mennonites joined others in meeting the need of wartime sufferers. While the Mennonite form of that was largely to assist coreligionists in Russia, and done under the auspices of the newly established Mennonite Central Committee, it was done in concert with the American Relief Administration headed by Herbert S. Hoover, soon to be President.

It was not only Mennonites in the Ukraine who profited from what some have called this search for the Mennonite moral equivalent of war. Many existing denominational institutions prospered from the wartime generosity and wartime generated profits. The architectural grandeur of the Tabor College administration building, with its Grecian facade and glorious stained-glass windows, is one legacy of that generosity. The paradox is whether we shall understand that legacy as rooted in the demands of faith or in the requirements of citizenship.

World War II

In recent decades various observers have come to refer to the Second World War as the “Good War.” For many in American society it seemed to be a good war. It brought an end to the Great Depression. It set in motion the most sustained of all economic growth periods in the nation’s history. It left the United States as the undisputed leader and power in the world. It created a new mood of self-confidence and expectancy. The optimism of the post-war period was summed up by Henry Luce, the publisher of *Life* magazine, who so gloriously termed the coming century the “American Century.”

While the notion of a “Good War” is hardly tenable under any circumstances, it is even less tenable for a pacifist people. Yet, in many ways, World War II was a good war for American Mennonites. It was so because it was the crucible that fashioned the articulation of a new ideological system that became increasingly the carrier of Mennonite identity. Both Harold S. Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision” address and Guy F. Hershberger’s book *War, Peace and Nonresistance* were at least partly

products of wartime distress. Bender's historical theology and Hershberger's political theology provided new categories for traditional understandings. Their ideas had bipolar qualities. They moved Mennonites inward toward the creation of a Christian social order but simultaneously gave Mennonite communities pragmatic relevance. They gave Mennonites a common program of action and a standard for self-criticism. By revitalizing a historical and theological particularity, they empowered Mennonites to move into forms of activity previously threatening.

The decades following the War witnessed an activism that vastly enlarged the scope of Mennonite missions, service, and benevolence. This is the activism represented in Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Voluntary Service, the Mennonite Mental Health movement, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, and other similar agencies. Mennonites, with the aid of these new agencies, literally reached out to engulf the world. The war, through birthing new thought and new institutions, paradoxically created the updraft on which this new Mennonite *Zeitgeist* could spread its wings and fly.

RELATIONSHIP OF LAND, WEALTH, AND COMMUNITY

The practice of Christian community in American Mennonite history also raises interesting issues. The concept of Christian community is, of course, central to Mennonite theologizing. It is the church gathered, the church taking on social form, the church banded together as a community with mutual expectations and mutual discipline that provides the visible, if partial, witness to the Kingdom of God. And surely Mennonites in America sought to establish Christian communities. These volumes raise questions about the degree to which the Mennonite practice (and theology) of Christian community was rooted in Mennonite wealth and the ability to purchase land.

Those first Mennonites who made the Atlantic crossing, whether Dutch or German, may have come to escape religious persecution, but they also came for new opportunities and economic well-being. While Mennonites in Switzerland, who outnumbered those coming to the new world, were still suffering for their faith, those establishing the beachhead in the new world were as much in search of abundant opportunities as religious tolerance. Because of the mutual aid of the Dutch they came not as indentured servants but as free citizens with opportunities that many immigrants did not have.

The Russian Mennonite immigrants of the late nineteenth century, aided by the support of the Swiss-American Mennonites, also came with advantages that other late nineteenth immigrants did not have. Most of

the Eastern European immigrants, who entered the country at the same time, also came with aspirations to farm. But unlike the Russian Mennonites they were unable to do so. The difference was that the Russian Mennonites had a network of associates who put up the money for passage, and bargained with land agents and railroad representatives for desirable settlement patterns from Minnesota south to Kansas.

With the late-eighteenth-century opening of the trans-Appalachian frontier, Swiss Mennonites quickly spread over a vast geographical territory from Pennsylvania westward to Illinois and even beyond. By the mid-nineteenth century, Bishop John Brenneman of Elida, Ohio, complained that Mennonites were becoming too thinly spread. The lure of economic gain in the West was irresistible. Mennonites with wealth purchased land for speculative purposes and Mennonites with little went west to acquire their own land holdings. The Bishop likened them to Lot of the Old Testament in that they pursued land without regard to the proximity of Sodoms and Gomorrah.¹⁵

The story that Schlabach recounts of one named Christian Reeser, if not typical, is also not isolated. Born in Europe in 1819, Reeser left for the New World in 1838 or 1839. Traveling as a stowaway he disembarked at New Orleans, then traveled to Butler county in Ohio, and then successively lived in Delaware County in east-central Indiana, Woodford County in Illinois, and finally purchased land in Arkansas only to have his plans to move there thwarted by his wife, Barbara, who apparently thought four different locations were enough.¹⁶

The subsequent scattering of Russian Mennonites, within decades of their arrival, to Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, and then pushing on to California, Oregon, and Washington is a similar story of the hunger for usable land. The story of both Swiss and Russian Mennonites fanning out across the west is the story of many false starts and many failed communities. It is clear that concentration of Mennonite capital available to purchase contiguous lands distinguished those communities and congregations that survived and those that faded. Does our theology of community need to take into account the role of capitalist speculation, Mennonite wealth possibly disproportionate to the general population, and even the role of the ubiquitous figures in American history—the land agents and the railroad agents?¹⁷

RESPECT FOR THOSE ON THE MARGINS

Unlike some other historians of American religion, R. Laurence Moore has genuinely sought to understand the religious marginals of American society. In a book entitled *Religious Outsiders and the Making*

of Americans, he surveyed various marginal groups, excluding Mennonites, and observed that

. . . American religious dissent has rarely been theologically sophisticated. It has only intermittently provided the smug, self-assured enclaves of American power with the criticism they deserved. And yet over the years sectarian dissent has provided an extraordinary number of people with strategies of success when others were lacking.¹⁸

Moore's comment about the absence of theological sophistication is surely right for most of the American Mennonite story. We have frequently nurtured a distrust of the formal theological enterprise. That distrust reflected a past in which persecution at the hands of both Catholics and Protestants was justified by theology; a suspicion that theology could easily degenerate into sophistry that enabled an escape from the hard teachings of Scripture; and a commitment to a practical discipleship that emphasized ethics, communal relationships, and simple virtues over systematic or abstract theologies. Consequently, doctorates in theology are comparatively recent. My father, one of the earliest Mennonite Brethren in North America to work towards a doctorate in theology and remain in the church, delighted in describing Mennonites as naive bibliocists. That statement was not just the provincialism of the Mennonite Brethren. Many in the Mennonite family have gladly claimed that description.

More important is Moore's observation that sectarian strategies have often been successful. Perhaps the greatest irony is that today Mennonites and other marginals are looked to for providing answers to perplexing problems. As Moore suggests, Mennonites have been able to develop strategies of success when others were lacking those strategies.

It is easy for those of us inside the Mennonite family to bemoan the clutter that hides the grail, the partialities that dim its luster, and the confusions that fragment its center. Surely those criticisms are fair, particularly in a tradition tinged with perfectionist expectations. But this Mennonite grail, despite its history of incongruity and irony, still holds great promise.

While we should practice humility in imputing biblical likeness to the American Mennonite story, it is fair to suggest that irony seems to be a central motif in God's sense of history. Only with an appreciation for irony can the Christ child be born out of wedlock, can the meek inherit the earth, can the cross be a symbol of victory, and can death lead to life.

God's history seemingly has a way of playing tricks. The discarded becomes again fashionable; old ways gain new relevance. In the past the logic of our ways led us to the margins of most social systems. Our val-

ues made us a hidden people. We were the pariahs of the sixteenth century. Now we are being embraced because the dominant ways have been recognized as being bankrupt. Our time has come and often we do not know it. We are being embraced as carriers of a timely word for a desperate world.

TWO STORIES IN CONCLUSION

Two stories, of recent vintage, point to the witness and power of the Mennonite grail—this grail of incongruity, paradox, and even irony. These are stories from the outside, from folks who can sometimes see things that remain veiled to insiders.

Several years ago another Mennonite scholar and I had a conversation with the chief editor of Eerdmans, the largest of the evangelical publishers in the country. We were proposing a book that would look at the relationship of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism. The editor listened carefully and after we had made our proposal, responded by saying,

You have an interesting proposal. But I was hoping you were coming with a different proposal. At Eerdmans we frequently talk about the “new world order” in American religion [obviously a phrase picked up from George Bush’s hope for an international “new world order”]. Our sense is that the old world order—that is the split between the liberals and the evangelicals—has run its course.

The liberals are on the run these days and the evangelicals will soon also be on the run. That is because they are falling into the same trap as the liberals did. They have become so enmeshed in the public order that they are increasingly being held responsible for the mess in which society finds itself. Like the liberals, they have sold their soul and no longer have a prophetic word to offer the culture.

The liberals thought that by engaging in social compassion they could save the public order. They forgot the necessity of personal conversion and personal faith. The evangelicals made the reverse error. They thought that by saving souls they could save society. The liberals lost sight of the personal dimensions of faith, the evangelicals lost sight of the social dimensions of the redeemed community.

Only the Mennonites have held those elements together. They have insisted on the necessity of personal faith, but also that personal faith translate into compassion and social reconciliation. If you were proposing a book that would

articulate how the Mennonites have held those things together, we would jump at the chance to publish it. In fact, we think it is an obligation of Mennonites to point the way to the "new world order" in American religion.

The second story comes from a distant land. In 1991, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) opened up an office in Hanoi, Vietnam. Following the 1975 conclusion of the Vietnam War, no American NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) had been permitted to work in Vietnam. But in 1989 the MCC office at Akron, Pennsylvania, received a letter from the Vietnam ambassador to the United Nations indicating that he would like to come to Akron. MCC responded affirmatively. When the ambassador came, he said, "I am authorized by my government to invite MCC to send a delegation to Vietnam to discuss the possibility of MCC opening an office in Hanoi."

So the delegation went. One of the questions that the MCC folks asked was, "Why us? Why are you inviting us to become the first American NGO to come to Vietnam? Why not the larger agencies with many more resources than we have?" The answer was "We remember . . ."

We remember that in 1975, when the Americans fled from Vietnam, you stayed. It seemingly did not make any difference to you what government was in control. You seemed to be interested in helping regardless of the political ideology. So since you were the last to leave Vietnam, we want you to be the first to return.¹⁹

Earl Martin, James Klassen, and Max Ediger were the three MCC personnel that stayed in Vietnam. They stayed because human need is human need. When Mennonites give aid "In the name of Christ," as the MCC motto says, we do not discriminate on the basis of ideology, nationality or religion. In the name of Christ, we give to those in need.

The politicians of Vietnam are inviting us to places where others are not welcome. The editors at Eerdmans are asking us to speak more loudly. Other people understand that at the heart of our grail are affirmations and practices that offer salvation and renewal to people trapped in a largely decaying and desperate culture. I hope that whatever else this series does, it might nudge all of us toward a deeper appreciation for the richness of the Mennonite experience in America. ❄

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NOTES

1. The four-volume history referred to is the Mennonite Experience in America series: Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*. The Mennonite Experience in America vol. 1 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985); Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America*. The Mennonite Experience in America vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988); James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930*. The Mennonite Experience in America vol. 3 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989); Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*. The Mennonite Experience in America vol. 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1996).
2. See Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (1844); Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character* (1855); Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (1888); H. K. Carroll, *The Religious Forces of the United States: Enumerated, Classified and Described on the Basis of the Government Census of 1890* (1893); Leonard Woolsey Bacon, *A History of American Christianity* (1897).
3. Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).
4. See William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), particularly chapter 9; idem, *Religious Liberty: Heritage and Responsibility*. Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series vol. 3 (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1988).
5. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 52.
6. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University, 1972), xiv.
7. J. C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Church in America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1966); Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, *Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1975); John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975).

8. Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1973), 300-301.
9. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood*, 48.
10. Ibid., 61.
11. While the paradox runs through Schlabach's volume in the series, it is more sharply focused in his article "Paradoxes of Mennonite Separatism," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 2 (January 1979): 12-17.
12. James Juhnke has made this point repeatedly in articles and books dating back to 1970, e.g., in "Mennonite Revitalization in the Wake of World War I," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (Jan 1986): 15-30.
13. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*, 154, 158.
14. Juhnke, "Mennonite Revitalization," 17.
15. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*, 36.
16. Ibid., 42-43.
17. MacMaster (*Land, Piety, Peoplehood*, 80) raises interesting questions about the role of the land agent in the colonial era.
18. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University, 1986), 46.
19. I have treated the words attributed to various persons in these stories as quotations even though the Eerdmans story is a reconstruction and the Vietnam story was reported to me by one member of the delegation that visited Hanoi.