



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The moralities of the Mennonite Brethren.

Author(s): Delbert Wiens.

Source: *Direction* 16 (1987): 29-44.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/475>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

THE MORALITIES OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN

Delbert L. Wiens

(This essay has been condensed from a paper presented to the November 14-15, 1986 symposium, "Dynamics of Faith and Culture in Mennonite Brethren History" organized by the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg, Canada.)

*...we are
inviting in
seven ethoi,
each less
healthy than
the first.*

In the first part of this essay I wish to explain why Mennonite Brethren have seldom bothered about ethics and why, until recently, we have not needed to. I will then give a reason why we are now doing ethics badly. My thesis is that we have moved from ethos to the need for ethics, that ethos and ethics are in conflict, and that one result is the acceptance of multiple ethoi.

The Mennonite Brethren As Community

To illustrate what I mean, I will sketch a Mennonite Brethren community that has never fully existed. It will be what sociologists call an "ideal type." Still, if you were fortunate in your birth and if I am successful in my mythologizing, some of you will insist that you grew up there.

LIVING BY AN ETHOS

Consider, then, a community named "Menno." An obvious feature was that

one could draw a line around it. A few of us may have lived on the other side of the line and some outsiders may have been uncomfortably located inside the boundary, but we could define its territory clearly enough to imagine it as a specific quantity of space.

We must understand that this space possessed a set of qualities; Menno was also a coherent spiritual space. The physical space roughly defined the locus of a kind of character, a personality. More primitive peoples would think of this quality as the spirit or angel of the place and would build a central altar to it. In any case, we must understand that this *Geist* is a real thing. We will let "Menno" stand for this spiritual space as well as the physical place.

On the one hand, this *Geist* was the projection of the interactions and attitudes of that which lived within its boundaries. On the other hand, it was an active power which shaped life in its own image. And so, when we learn that so-and-so comes from Menno, we nod knowingly. A lot about that person now fits our memory of the Menno we have learned about in past encounters.

Growing up in Menno could be measured by the increasing ability to move freely over the entire space of Menno. Menno itself, in the person of all those *Onkles* and *Tantes*, saw to the growing child's well-being. At the same time, the child was learning the entire set of responses which defined appropriate conduct in Menno. These responses encompassed almost the whole of life, a life which included the woods and the land and the streams: these also were presences, living parts of the larger spirit of the whole.

Seen as a whole, these responses were the visible expression of the ethos of Menno. What one ate on Saturday evening, what one wore, how one competed for more land, how one courted a spouse, the shape of worship, were all aspects of this ethos; and, from one point of view, they were all equally important. Just as there was a physical boundary which separated the inside from the outside, so our "dos" and "don'ts" protected the order within from the chaos without. They were a moral and spiritual dike which held back the outside flood. As bricks in this spiritual wall, how one dressed and ate and worked and played were as important as the Ten Commandments. Even the smallest brick was crucial, however trivial it may have seemed from other points of view. If it was pulled out

of the wall the outside flood would find its point of entry, and the entire wall would soon be threatened. Seen from the outside, that protecting wall was forbidding; it was a shield for something secret.

We will need a different metaphor to express the experience of the entire ethos from the inside. It was experienced as a living web. Each strand eventually connected to all other strands and received its tonus and its shape from the pull of all the others. The whole vibrated when the slightest thread was plucked or cut. There was a sympathy of all for each and each for all.

A third metaphor is needed to express the way each member of Menno lived that ethos. For each there was a life-cycle, a series of metamorphoses from birth to death. It was the goal of each to live this cycle in a successful, healthy, and holy way — thus assisting in the building of the common-weal and in maintaining the *Heil* (the health, holiness, and salvation) of Menno's *Geist*. Old age crowned such a life. By then one was to have distilled a wealth of experience into wisdom and insight. It had become one's privilege to pass on what had been learned. And it was one's responsibility to judge hard cases.

Dilemmas did arise. Greed and jealousy and lust and laziness and pride and sheer accidents created situations for which there were no easy solutions. But the wise worked out a way to restore harmony through processes of punishment and forgiveness. They did not work by written law or abstract justice or by applying rationally worked out ethical principles. They knew the *Heil* of the whole and they divined its restoration. However naturally their wisdom had grown, its flowering was a gift; and the community knew those who had received it.

Of course, Menites had a way to express the general truths of the way things were. (1) The community had a rich store of proverbs to repeat whenever appropriate. Like the tonus of the web that the ethos shaped, these sayings constructed the shape of expressed wisdom in the image of experienced reality by existing in tension with each other. "Haste makes waste" is true only when held in tension with "He who hesitates is lost." "Out of sight, out of mind" may be the sad truth to be given to one while "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" may be the happy truth for another when cherished friends depart. Although "It is better to be safe than sorry," "The devil takes

the hindmost." All had learned the proverbs, but not all knew how to apply them. The wise understood the larger context and intuited the right answer. Fools had the "gift" of landing regularly on the wrong decision which they justified by quoting an inappropriate truth.

The young knew those who were admired and they tried to grow up in their image by imitating them. The ethos trained them in what was right and it presented them with living models of the good. Stories which summarized the essential shape of these life patterns were told and retold until their plot became internalized as the essential frame for the biography of each.

Of course some of our Mennos were more healthy than others. And some individual Menites were better than others. But even the most moral may be said to have lived in accordance with an ethic which they did not themselves understand. They could recognize and seek the good, but they could not explain the principles which lay behind it. That is one reason why they could not pass it on when the ethos changed.

To sum up, Menno did not possess what we understand to be the "science" of ethics. It did not need it. It had something stronger. It had ethos. And its morally healthy ethos tended to produce moral health just as peoples living on rich soil tend to be healthy whether or not they understand the science of nutrition. It also had a form of separateness which allowed its enculturated faith to flourish. For Mennonite Brethren, ethics is a discovery as recent as our present, partly unfortunate, need for it.

CHANGING PIECES OF THE ETHOS

In Menno, change was not supposed to happen. It was a self-evident truth that the way to do anything was to do it the way it had "always" been done. Nonetheless, Menno could not survive unless it changed. Its larger environment was always changing and it had to respond to those changes. Worse yet, its own progress led to its own metamorphosis. Therefore Menno did change. "Bricks" were even removed when another brick could take its place or the surrounding clay could be thinned into a makeshift barrier.

What was needed was for change to come slowly, so slowly that one was hardly aware that change was happening. This meant that the acceptance of something new had to emerge

silently. The new had to be accepted tacitly before it could be acknowledged openly.

I think the process of change generally went through the following stages. When something (some "x") began to seem desirable and even acceptable, much energy was put into defending the prohibition of that "x," ranging from quasi-ethical arguments to biblical exegeses to "What will people think?" (It has taken me a long time to realize that "what people will think" was a legitimate response within the context of a generally accepted ethos.) There were times when the prohibition of "x" was vindicated; but if the defense of the prohibition was not convincing, more and more Menites decided that it might be a good thing to do "x," even though many of these did not yet go on to do it. Then there followed a period when sensible Menites ceased to speak about "x" as either good or bad, at least "in public." If forced to declare themselves, they would probably have repeated the prohibition; but they granted tacit permission to do "x" so long as it was done quietly. During this phase it became bad manners to attack "x," and those who did so were ignored. Finally, there was a moment when almost everyone realized that doing "x" had become part of the ethos of Menno, that one could freely admit that this was so, and that those who respected the ethos for its own sake might now also begin to do "x."

A defense can be made of this process from open prohibition through tacit acceptance to open acceptance. Because it moved slowly, Menno was protected from sudden capitulation to "the ways of the world." By the time Menno had incorporated some previously outside element into its ethos, its neighbors could be expected to have adopted something even more "out-landish," and a new brick could replace the discarded one. Gradual change preserved the dike, and the separateness of Menno was assured. The "progressives" could be allowed to test new ways. If they proved good, the elders could allow tacit consent to become explicit. If not, consent could be withdrawn.

At least, my ideal construction allows for this, and I think it is wise to hypothesize that our older ethos was more "rational" than we are now disposed to believe. In any case, we have now tacitly abandoned this tacit process. At least, I think we must admit that the ethos no longer works. It no longer shapes our lives — unless we are above a certain age or come from the

diminishing number of our physically separated Mennos. And perhaps it is not even working there.

TRANSCENDING THE ETHOS

One problem with an "ideal" type like the one I have sketched is that it may be the most misleading if it is essentially true. Life is richer and messier than ideal constructions and such abstractions may prevent us from understanding Menno's complex concreteness. Like those who isolated a proverb from other proverbs, attention to a limited number of truths invites us to join Menno's fools in the making of false applications. For the purposes of this essay, I must insist on one more feature.

At their best, Mennonite Brethren have insisted that each individual should transcend even the healthiest ethos. They did not want ethos-produced clones. They even had a proverb for one who had grown up as an inauthentic product of someone or something else: "Like a stinkweed growing under a bushel basket." There is a paradox here; the ethos tried to guarantee a breakthrough beyond the ethos.

This was one of the functions of the experience of conversion. The older testimonies of the individual search for "peace" often included an increasingly desperate attempt to remember and to confess every fault committed against others and against Menno. It was terribly important to "make right," to restore one's harmony with the whole. But Menno could not resolve the crisis that it had helped to create. It could not grant the individual's authenticity by offering pardon. Ultimately the crisis that was conversion led to a confrontation with God, for what was sought was "peace with God." In that encounter one was lifted above Menno, and there the condition was created which allowed the individual to choose freely to be the Menite one had been trained up to be. The identity at which the ethos aimed was available only from a larger space, from a *Geist* that was infinitely more than the *Geist* of Menno. In fact, one could be a sage taking responsibility for the *Heil* of Menno only because one had become more than that over which one was now the guardian.

There was a delicate balance there. Menno's power to create the conditions which led to authentic transcendence could become a force which compelled conformity. For later generations, when Menno's will to produce conformity was

stronger than its will to point beyond itself, then even conversion could be made fully a part of the ethos. It could be a ritual for choosing Menno before one had transcended it. Then even the rebelliousness of those who resented its coercion could become part of the larger ritual, for one must still choose as if "outside." If one did not choose from a position above the ethos, then one apparently could do so from below by first "sinking deep in sin" so that one could heed the revivalist's call to "come home." The returning rebels were not changing their beliefs or achieving a new level of understanding. Self-assertion against the ethos had received much of its meaning from the transgressors' knowledge that what they were doing was wrong. They were, in fact, reverse hypocrites-pretending to be worse than they really were. Their rebellion did not fundamentally challenge the ethos, and the other Menites could afford to be relatively tolerant of their deliberately outrageous behavior.

Those who had "come home" (but not from transcendence) were not genuinely freed from the ethos of Menno; and, ironically, the most overtly rebellious often turned into a particularly rancid kind of conservative. They could not envision the *Heil* of Menno — they could only will the preservation of what they had "always" known — and they could only imitate piety. Of course, this does not deny the ways by which "transcendence" might later come.

There were also those who sought independence by moving away from the ethos (in imagination if not physically) rather than by moving above or below it. And they might "return" with the desire to import the ways of some other ethos without knowing in the least whether these would serve the *Heil* of Menno.

Only those who could authentically commit themselves to Menno having seen it "from above" were free to accept or reject what belonged to their own or to any other ethos. And they could grow toward godliness. In the end, those were the saving salt. Whatever beauty Menno had was the graciousness that came through them. Often the inauthentic prevailed and it could then seem necessary to walk away from Menno — even for God's sake. To walk away, for whatever reason, was the only action which Menno could recognize to be a final rejection of itself.

The Mennonite Brethren As A Denomination

In part three of this section I will describe denomination as another “ideal type.” Parts one and two are needed first so that it can be understood why I do not like this way of being church.

FROM ETHOS TO ETHICS

The ethos of Menno has steadily been weakening. Among the symptoms that we might imagine, or even remember, would be the following conversation.

“Why can’t I do ‘x’?”

“Don’t talk like that. It is sin to even think like that.”

“Lots of kids do ‘x,’ and many of them are as good Christians as we are.”

“We Menites don’t do ‘x.’”

“That’s no reason. Why don’t Menites do ‘x’?”

It is possible that the troubled parent in this exchange had frequently done “x” when younger. It is even possible that no one would have been very upset if the youth had deliberately done “x” as a ritualized part of “sowing one’s wild oats” as a prelude to “coming home.” In fact, doing “x” is not the issue. The profoundly subversive element here is the “innocent” question, “Why can’t I do ‘x’?” It remains subversive even if the youth decides not to do “x.” To have formulated the question is something like walking away and not being able to return.

The act of thinking the question implied that the asker is already standing outside the ethos and is demanding that its elements be judged from standards which are also outside it. If the answers are unsatisfactory, the asker may now legitimately “write off” the ethos without at all needing to feel like a sinner. The youth may even decide that it is essential to reject the ethos in order to make an authentic decision to seek righteousness. The dike has become irrelevant. The area outside the dike has now ceased to be chaos, though it remains relatively dangerous. What the youth wants now is a map for Menno and beyond, not a plea for the rightness of the web. Nor was the right answer expected to be a spiritual insight made possible by a grasp of the *Heil* of the *Geist* of Menno. The answer was expected to be a deduction from ethical principles which apply universally to all communities and even to the spaces

between them. The question implied that ethics had replaced ethos as the guide for life. It was no longer enough to show how something had "always" been done; now it was important to do it the *right* way and for the *right* reason.

Ethics, in this sense, is a systematic procedure for the rational discovery, ordering, and application of moral principles. This also implied a different way to read the Bible. Our elders had read it as the story of a holy community which provided models for our own communities. Now the Bible was to be read as the sourcebook of theological and moral principles which could be reordered for systematic theology and apologetics and for rational applications to daily life. Suddenly it had become necessary to give our youth *books* in answer to their questions on what to believe and how to behave — books that were rather like the manuals that now told us how to farm. And that seemed appropriate, for even the Christian life was being described in terms of production. Right doing and effective witnessing defined how Christians were to live. But while we were being urged to become "Christian workers" we were forgetting the stories which taught us how to metamorphose into spiritual sages. In fact, the traditional wisdom of our elders was being systematically denied, and so we could no longer think of them as models for anything. Knowledge became so important that we forgot how different it is from wisdom. With those losses, we lost also the sense of the appropriateness of personal authority. "The more learned, the more perverted" was quoted by the older Menites, and they were not entirely wrong — though we could no longer do without the learning.

For those of us who live after the collapse of ethos, it seems essential to seek the aid of ethics in order to "find ourselves" and to be "authentic." It is also needed by those who are trying to help the ones in our churches who are unclear about what is right. It is especially important for those who wish to nurture the young. Really now, why are they, and we, not to do "x"? Almost any "x"? One would assume that by now we would have become serious about ethics. In fact, our efforts have been half-hearted and ineffective (2).

ETHOS VERSUS ETHICS

My thesis here is that the residual power of our old ethos is a barrier to doing ethics. No doubt there are other reasons for the actual moral vacuum which many sense, but I am becom-

ing convinced that this one has been a major block to speaking openly and intelligently to moral issues.

"Why can't I do 'x'?" "Well, what is 'x'?" Among the "x's" which spring to mind are many entertainments which Menites once strictly forbade. It is difficult now to think of some of these as being immoral *per se*. They were, however, important parts of the ethos that defined the *Geist* and the separateness of Menno, and so they were given a moral function. In time, the tacit process of "baptizing" many of these has made them legitimate for Menites.

Thus dancing has been an important "no, no" which has helped us to differentiate our community from that of others. For many of us, its ethos-defining function is still so strong that we cannot imagine Menites who dance. Yet the quiet process for accepting it has been underway for years. In fact, many good Menites do dance, and not only our "worldlier" members. Others allow and even encourage their children to dance.

But the tacit process for changing this (or any) part of the ethos is no longer working well. Many of us, and especially the young, no longer experience or understand the ethos which their elders still honor. They cannot fathom the ethos-driven reasons for not dancing. They do not understand the older methods by which the ethos could be induced to change, nor would they be willing to wait if they did understand. I think that they would respect coherent theological and ethical reasons for not dancing, but such an analysis violates the modes by which our older ethos moved to discern what must remain outside our dike and what could be allowed to emerge within it.

There would-be ethicists are silenced. How can a pastor speak ethically to the issue when it would shock people to hear such speech? The ethicist would have to begin by analyzing the very different functions of different kinds of dancing and the potential pluses and minuses of each. But this will appear to be "weaseling" by those who understand only its ethos-preserving function. How could an ethos accept the conclusion that this or that sort of dancing is appropriate under specified conditions for those Christians whose maturity has reached such and such a level? The problem is especially poignant for youth workers and for teachers at our academies and colleges. The ethos tells them to say a flat "no," as does the threat of withheld donations from guardians of the

ethos. Their vocation tells them to help the youth think through these issues. Too often, perhaps without saying so out loud, we "beg" the students to go dance privately so that we can observe the niceties of a temporary period of tacit permission.

In other words, we are unable even to be honest, much less ethical. And so we forfeit our chance to help each other to move to moral reflection and practice. We have known how to say "no." We have even known how to change a "no" to a "yes." We have not learned to discover under which conditions and for whom a more or less qualified "yes" or "no" is the moral response. When radio, or movies, or television moved from a "no" to a "yes" our ethos simply stretched to include another "x" within it. But that process largely forfeited the right to insist that a very great deal of what comes over radio or movies or television should seldom be attended to by anyone; or that some of the rest should only be heard and seen by some people; or that training in hearing and watching might bring some of us to such maturity that anything (no matter how gross) might sometimes be legitimate; or even that a strategic "no" to all of these sorts of things (at least for a time) might be a powerful aid to godliness. In other words, our rejections and acceptances have resulted in a profound inability to discriminate the bad in what we have accepted or the good in what we have rejected.

From one point of view, my example (as others I could have used) has been relatively trivial, as some of the sixties generation tried to tell us. So long as Menno had a coherent existence, it was the goal of its members to serve its total *Heil*, to perfect its economic and moral health and to increase its holiness. When its gospel included the whole of life, its "thou shalt nots" made sense as "border" issues around that mission. Of course Menno is now too small a "whole" for us. But in moving beyond Menno we are losing the sense of what any wholeness entails. We have been thrown into a larger world where we cannot agree how the gospel applies to the whole of life. And so we are too much losing the sense of the weightier issues of justice and mercy which were central parts of the culture of Menno. What we retain are "the mint, rue, and cummin" — our explicit "x's" — and an abstracted spirituality which encourages us to think that it is good to be a "denomination" or even a mere "faith."

FROM ETHOS TO ETHOI

The rise of “ethics” and “denominations” in the modern world are linked just as both were linked when they were invented in classical Greece. Then, as now for primary communities whose traditional ethos is fragmenting, the sense of the concreteness of life began to be lost. Each aspect of the former whole sought its own foundational principles and its own rational methodologies. And each specialty developed its own — more abstracted — *Geists*. The community increasingly became a nexus of sub-communities organized with and over-against each other within its now rationally constructed constitution.

Meanwhile, philosophers and theologians inherited from the older sages the task of understanding the *Heil* of the whole, and they attempted to build systematic structures for all the sets of foundational principles, balancing apparently opposed sets of rationalities in grand metaphysical “webs” applying to the entire universe, much as proverbs had balanced each other in the smaller webs of simpler times.

But those who attempt “to think the thoughts of God” turn out to be less than God. Different aspects of the cosmic concreteness appealed to different thinkers as the “key” to the understanding of the whole. The secondary “fellowships” which formed around these rival belief systems (these “denominations”) were called *haereses*. So also theologians in the sixteenth century organized churches around competing theologies, while theologians and philosophers developed alternative systems for justifying the principles of appropriate conduct.

This logic of specialized commitments has now expanded to so many areas that it now rules our lives. There are separate logics and separate quasi-communities for both my wife’s and my own professions. Our children go to separate schools and speak of significant people whom we have never met. Hobbies, the arts, clubs, and civic and charitable organizations can add still more circles through which one moves. Each has its own principles, its own organization, and its own ethos. And then the church becomes yet one more place and one more group and one more *Geist* to “meet the needs” of one more abstracted aspect of our lives. Denominations, as I define them for the purposes of this essay, are more or less ideologically

limited and bureaucratically linked quasi-communities (congregations) made up of those people with whom one chooses to meet on Sunday to participate together in that abstraction from a lost concreteness that we call our "spiritual" life. And it too has its own special ethos. Yet this segmented quasi-community sometimes remembers to claim the right to speak to how we think and live in all the other abstracted contexts through which we move during the week. But, in fact, it becomes increasingly difficult to listen when it does so speak. It is one aspect of many and knows less and less of what it means to live in those other "secular" segments. In the end, the church tends to be reduced to the esthetics of "holiness" (worship), to offering "moral support" for our fragmented psyches (counseling and fellowship), and to sponsoring special forays beyond its boundaries (mission). Except in the churches' colleges and seminaries, there is little sustained teaching how to claim the Lordship of Christ over the whole. And then, perhaps because these institutions are also "abstractions", they seem to belong more to the world than to the church.

I know that this is not yet a complete description of any church or any denomination. Few of us live in the kind of communities which weave a larger ethos over the scattered sets of actions and thoughts of our lives. There is no single web to bind together the many roles we play so that, with single eye, we can submit them to the Lordship of Christ. We now, even we Mennonite Brethren, are vigorously sweeping our older ethos out of our house. And then, seeing that it is mostly empty, we are inviting in seven ethoi, each less healthy than the first.

Ethics, like other sciences, has its own methods and principles. Unlike them, as Socrates also pointed out, it has no field of its own. It presumes to speak to how human beings are and do in all the aspects of their lives. Like "denominational" churches it deals with principles which are supposed to inform everything else; and, also like them, its power to do so wanes. In fact, the word itself is being replaced. We seldom claim to live by ethics and its principles. Instead we defend our chosen "values" over against other peoples' values. And values are like "tastes," for which there can be no accounting. Then we seek to express the sum of our preferred tastes and values in a "life style." It takes an effort to remember that it could ever

have been true that things were to be done the way they had *always* been done. Moderns who live the present pluralism reject out of hand that there can be a single *right* way to do things. What is left is the defiant (or wistful) claim to have done it "*my way*".

What kind of transcendence is possible if there is no coherence to be transcended? Without transcendence, what kind of vision is possible? And without vision neither philosophy nor theology can long survive as world-view. And especially not as normative ethics. What rules us then are the many *Geists* of our actual ethoi. That is, we are enslaved again to the "elemental" spirits of our time. How, then, is it possible to speak of pilgrimage or discipleship? Out of what context can a word like character be understood? Or fostered?

Our remaining Mennos are at different stages of this movement from ethos to ethoi. But I think that conversion as "coming home" was already impossible for most of my generation. Rebellion was becoming too dangerous. At the same time, it was losing much of its point. The community and the eternal rightness of its ethos was less secure. It was one thing "to kick against the pricks" that one believed to be everlastingly fixed. It was entirely another thing to kick at a tottering structure that one hoped nevertheless to make one's home. Besides, it was becoming easier to leave; one could do so in respectable ways. With the land filled up, we were even being kicked out. And all this was signaled by a shift to yet another meaning for conversion. It could neither be a lonely search for transcendence nor a revivalistically inspired "coming home." The question now was whether we had been "saved," "once and always." And the age for this was moved to childhood, before we were exposed to the shaping of the rival ethoi that awaited us in and beyond our adolescence. And it began to happen away from Menno in united crusades and summer camps as well as at home and in Sunday School. It was even becoming part of our ethos that the religious aspect of our ethos was somehow inferior to that of other groups of people. If it is true that our ethos now blocks ethics, then it is also likely to be true that the ways we have insisted on conversion have undercut our understanding of Christianity as a journey toward transcendence.

In fact, it has become almost impossible to rebel against our Mennoness, at least where I come from. That ethos is

neither important enough nor constrictive enough to excite rage. In my experience, the sixties generation was the last to take the way of Menno seriously enough to imagine that rebellion against it was worth the effort. Much of the energy of that protest was dedicated to the ethical reformation of that ethos and to the dream that that ethos could be given a significant future. I am haunted by the strong possibility that both the moral losers and the ethically serious segments of that generation simply walked away from us.

One may argue that it makes little immediate difference to one's moral authenticity whether one is shaped by a traditional ethos or a series of modern ones. There are, however, at least two large differences.

In the first place, there are few significant contemporary peer groups which encourage levels of increasing maturity and there are almost none which intend transcendence. Even congregations have become versions of such peer groups; and many Christians can no longer tell the difference between heroes of the faith and "Christian" celebrities. That the Christian life may be a series of stages in a pilgrimage toward godliness is scarcely comprehended. Those who do seek it may mark their "growth" by the groups they have successively joined and abandoned. Or perhaps they are only moving laterally, "meeting their needs" one at a time with groups which specialize in that need.

In the second place, unlike older Mennos, the modern ethoi do not honor the wisdom which is the result of much experience and a long memory. The absence of respect for tradition and of levels of maturity deliver the modern peer group to fads whose destructiveness is real, though not immediately apparent.

The result, for many, is a fractured identity and endemic hopelessness. And when what is left of a traditional ethos compounds the dilemma by blindly defending the piety and the political and social and economic patterns which once expressed its earlier spiritual and moral vision, then the loss of faith in any significant future is compounded.

And then why not do "x"? Almost any "x." Even those which numb the awareness of futility! If this is their experience, then to warn people that excitements and sensuality and drugs and violence are self-destructive is actually to recommend them. For self-destruction is what is sought.

I have already argued that the conservation of the old ethos is a barrier to doing the ethics we need. It now turns out that "new" ethics is no more effective, in itself, than an out-of-date ethos at the task of forming moral and godly lives. The Greek writers of the first books on morals may have been right in their claim that it can not directly help the young. They said studying it would only increase their scepticism. Certainly the Apostle Paul had a point: knowing the good does not automatically translate into doing it.

The Mennonite Brethren As People

(*In his concluding section Wiens argued that though we cannot return to an ethos based on "dikes," we also must not be satisfied with the ethoi [the structural pluralism] embodied in "denominations." Christians must become a people. But even the most moral way of being a people of God must lead individuals to transcend it.*)

A living people of God will develop an ethos and even a language, or at least a "dialect." At some future time that may again become a problem and be decried as yet another "mere culture." But that will be our descendants' problem. Meanwhile, a faithful people will evolve an ethos which both expresses God's rule in our present space and time and which is a training in that way of being the Kingdom for the young and the young in the faith. Like the "Law," it will be both a cherished gift and a "schoolmaster." Ethics is that reflective tradition which helps the wise and the good to think out some of the ways in which that ethos must be shaped so that it can shape well-being.

ENDNOTE

1. Ben Ollenburger, "Seeing the Truth": Proverbial Wisdom and Christian Ethics." *Direction*, IX.2 (April 1980), pp. 23-31.
2. See my "Mores, Morals, Morale and Hard Cases or Whatever Happened to Consensus." *Direction*, IX.2 (April 1980), pp. 3-17.