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From Generation To Generation?

Faith and Culture In One Russian Mennonite Immigrant Family (Part 1)

Robert Enns

In 1884 my great grandfather, Dietrich T. Enns, and his wife, Margareta, migrated from Buragan, a Mennonite village on the Crimean Peninsula in southern Russia, to the United States. They brought with them six children (including my grandfather, Dietrich M. Enns). They also brought with them strong Russian Mennonite cultural traditions and deep commitments to the Mennonite Brethren Church. They were part of a Russian Mennonite “ethno-religious” community that shared both cultural patterns and religious convictions. The Enns family lived and farmed in the Buhler area in central Kansas for about twenty years before they migrated again in 1904, this time to Reedley, California, where several members of the extended Enns family became charter members in the newly formed Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church. Dietrich T. Enns served as the first lay leader of the congregation.

Most [respondents] seem to be content as passive consumers rather than actively contributing as producers or sustainers of Mennonite cultural practices and institutions.

In 2000–2001, Dr. John Tinker (Professor of Sociology, California State University, Fresno) and I conducted a survey of the 455 living, adult (born in 1980 or earlier) descendants of Dietrich T. and Margareta Enns. Following is Part One of a two-part summary of our findings. We were curious to know what happens to the descendants of “ethno-religious” Mennonite immigrants from Russia. How many remain “Anabaptists four centuries later” (Kauffman and Harder)? How many continue to contribute to a great “Mennonite mosaic” (Kauffman and Driedger)? How many are like the “one hundred flowers blooming” in a scattered Mennonite ethnic

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and religious diaspora (Kreider)? How many migrate, from generation to generation, from the cultural and social “margins” toward the “center” of American culture and society (Toews)? How many have forgotten or abandoned their Mennonite cultural roots and/or “defected” from their Anabaptist religious heritage? And when ex-Mennonites do “defect” from the faith of their fathers and mothers, to what do they “convert”?

Students of things Anabaptist and Mennonite have bemoaned the paucity of scholarly attention that has been given to people who have moved away from their Mennonite cultural and religious heritage (e.g. Kauffman and Driedger, 270). Perhaps we lack specific data on Mennonite “drop-outs,” but the social science literature on acculturation and assimilation of white ethnic groups in America would lead us to expect that many Mennonites, like other European immigrant communities, have found their way from ethnic marginality toward the American social and cultural mainstream (e.g. Gordon). To cite but one recent sociologist:

White ethnicity has become increasingly nebulous and largely voluntary. . . . The descendants of the European immigrants feel vaguely connected to their ancestors and to the ‘old country,’ but this part of their identity does not affect their lifestyles, circle of friends and neighbors, job prospects eating habits, or other everyday routines. . . . For the descendants of the European immigrants today, ethnicity is an increasingly minor part of their identities that is expressed only occasionally or sporadically. . . . In fact, white ethnicity has become so ephemeral that it may be on the verge of disappearing altogether. (Healy, 499)

More specifically, what about the descendants of the huge waves of “German” immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during the later part of the nineteenth century of which the Enns family was a very small part? Bergquist concludes that: “At the end of the twentieth century, one had to search hard in the United States to find much evidence of a separate German ethnic culture, despite the fact that more Americans identify German in their ancestry than that of any other single ethnic group” (236).

But perhaps ethno-religious communities such as the Mennonites do not fit the normal patterns of acculturation, social assimilation, and religious mobility. At least Derren Sherkat, using General Social Survey data, concluded that ethnic bonds reinforce religious continuity:

Quasi-ethnic religious denominations have high rates of loyalty, and members who switched tend to leave religion alto-

gether. Since social ties in ethnic communities make religion one of many common traits and ties shared by members, social pressures to retain affiliation will be high—and becoming nonreligious will be a less stressful option than taking up an affiliation alien to the community (1486).

Many Mennonite scholars also present various explanations for continuity in Mennonite identity. I will cite only two examples. In the closing paragraphs of his *Mennonite Society* (1989), sociologist Calvin Redekop includes the following:

The maintenance of a 'peoplehood tradition' has become the bottom line; for a self-conscious history, once created, tends to nurture itself and want to survive. . . . Death comes hard to a utopian ideal, an image, and a symbol system. 'Mennonitism cannot and must not die' is the powerful self-consciousness which has emerged in the collective memory of the biological and proselytized descendants . . . of the many ancestors who willingly marched to the stake for their beliefs. (326)

And Paul Toews, in his history of the Mennonites in the U.S. from 1930 to 1970, argued that (1) religious ideology ("The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision"), (2) Mennonite social and economic institutions, and (3) inter-Mennonite organizations combined to account for an exceptional degree of Mennonite communal continuity. "The twentieth century Mennonite story offers an excellent example of how communities with their own special cultures and convictions can endure in Modern America even under pressures to conform to larger national patterns" (335). Do Mennonite cultural practices and Anabaptist faith really reinforce one another?

DETAILS OF THE STUDY

In order to provide data concerning these issues, Dr. Tinker and I profiled the descendants of one multi-generational Mennonite family. Large national databases such as the General Social Survey do not provide us with specific information about numerically small communities like the Mennonites, and denominational profiles do not provide us with information about persons who are no longer members of Mennonite churches. Attempts by other researchers to locate former members of congregations have not proven to be very successful. So we decided to attempt to contact and survey the descendants of a single Mennonite immigrant family as a way of gathering information about cultural and religious continuity and

change. We wanted to profile both those who maintain Mennonite culture and faith and those who have moved away. We selected as our target population the descendants of my great-grandparents, D.T. and Margareta Enns, expecting that an appeal to Enns family attachments might improve the rate of response.

We began with the names and other information on the Enns family provided in GRANDMA (Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry, 1997), which, at that time, included 267,864 German-Russian Mennonites. We then contacted representatives of each of the eight branches of the D.T. Enns family for updated information and addresses. By the year 2000, when we distributed our questionnaires, we had obtained the names of 455 living, adult (twenty years of age or older) descendants of the eight children of D.T. Enns who survived into adulthood. In spite of repeated inquiries and requests, we were unable to obtain valid addresses for 53 of the 455 adult members of the extended Enns family. We received information that three persons would be unable to respond because of disabilities, so we mailed questionnaires to 399 persons. After sending four written and other indirect appeals for responses during a thirteen-month period (February 2000–March 2001), we decided to be content with the 274 completed questionnaires that we had received, a response rate of 68% of the mailed questionnaires (60% of the 455 descendants). Five other persons sent notes saying that they would not participate. Of course we can speculate that the non-respondents might be less attached to their Mennonite heritage than those who did choose to participate in our project, but we can, in fact report nothing at all about the 53 persons for whom we could not obtain valid addresses, nor can we offer any information about the 120 Enns descendants to whom we mailed questionnaires but received no response. We can report responses from 274 descendants of one Mennonite Brethren family who migrated from Russia to the U.S. in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Our oldest respondents were seventeen grandchildren of D.T. Enns, third-generation immigrants, generally born during the years 1908–1920. The youngest respondents were twenty-eight great-great-great grandchildren of D.T. Enns, sixth generation descendants, born during the 1970s. Approximately one half of our respondents (144) were members of the fifth generation, generally born during the decades 1950–1960. Seventy-six percent of our respondents resided in California at the time of our survey.

Our long questionnaire (161 items) was designed to yield information about both cultural and religious variables. We structured our questions about culture around the eight dimensions of ethnicity suggested by Hutchinson and Smith. Ethnicity involves (1) a shared language; (2) a

shared culture (foods, festivals, artifacts); (3) a shared historical memory; (4) attachment to a historical homeland; (5) a network of social institutions; (6) a group name; (7) a sense of boundaries around group membership; and (8) the belief that members share distinctive personality traits. We organized our questions about religion around the four dimensions (the “four C’s”) identified by Catherine Albanese: (1) Creed (beliefs and theology), (2) Code (norms, morals, ethics), (3) Cult (ritual practices), and (4) Community (membership and organization). Most of the items in our questionnaire were taken from previously published studies (most from Mennonite church member profiles) but some were developed specifically to measure variables unique to our interests (e.g. “Have you ever eaten zwiebach?” “In what country are the city and river of Enns located?”).

In Part One of our report, we focus primarily on the “ethnic” (cultural) dimension of Mennonite ethno-religiosity. In Part Two to follow, our focus will be on religious continuity and change. We present only selected items and we summarize responses only in percentages. A much longer version of this report, which includes a few comparisons with Mennonite Church Member Profiles, and some tests for correlations between both individual items and items that have been combined into scales, may be found at <http://fresno.edu/sharedmedia/library/enns.pdf>.

Sociological concepts that seem to us to be very helpful in accounting for the patterns that we see in our data are Gans’s notions of “symbolic ethnicity” and “symbolic religiosity.” Gans defined “symbolic ethnicity” as “The consumption and other use of ethnic symbols intended mainly for the purpose of feeling or being identified with a particular ethnicity, but without either participating in an existing ethnic organization (formal or informal) or practicing an ongoing ethnic culture.” Symbolic ethnicity is an optional, leisure-time activity which “some people use as a way to express their individuality or a special communal allegiance that does not conflict with other identities, while for many it is little more than a label they recall when asked the right interview question” (578–79). Gans defines “symbolic religiosity” as “the consumption of religious symbols, apart from regular participation in a religious culture and in religious affiliations. . . . it involves the consumption of religious symbols in such a way as to create no complications or barriers for dominant secular lifestyles” (585). In Part One of our report, we will present data that indicate that many of our respondents express appreciation for their Mennonite cultural heritage, but few actively contribute to the perpetuation of those cultural traditions. Culturally, they seem to be “symbolic ethnics.” In Part Two, we will present data that indicate that many express appreciation for their Mennonite religious heritage but few of the descendants of D.T. and Margareta Enns are well informed about or maintain the radical convictions of their Anabaptist

ancestors. Religiously, they seem to be “symbolic Mennonites.”

PATTERNS OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Since the 1960's sociologists have recognized a series of “stages” through which white ethnic communities (the experiences of non-white ethnic communities have been differently shaped by stronger and more enduring racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination) have typically moved from minority marginality toward the center of American culture and society. Milton Gordon (1964) distinguished between an initial stage of “acculturation,” by which he meant adoption of the language, foods, clothing, and many of the norms and values of the majority host society, and a second stage of social “assimilation,” by which he meant entrance into the formal and informal social institutions of the host society. Social “assimilation,” it seems, is typically possible only after some degree of “acculturation” has occurred and it happens in two steps. The first step is entrance into the schools, businesses, government agencies, churches and other “secondary” social institutions of the dominant society. Contacts in these formal, “secondary” settings lead to the next stage, which is acceptance into “informal” social relationships such as friendships, and, finally, intermarriage. What remains at the end of the process is an ethnic identity that is “symbolic,” or, even, no particular sense of ethnic identity at all except “white American.” We will present data that indicate the extent to which the descendants of one Mennonite immigrant family from Russia have followed this typical trajectory from the margins to the center of American culture and society.

- A. Ethnicity involves a shared language.** Though some form of German was the language of home and church for most of the first three generations of Mennonite immigrants from Russia, only 9% of our respondents report that they can converse or are fluent in German. Only one of the 54 persons in the youngest quintile (the youngest 20% of our respondents) claims the ability to converse in the German language. Still, 66% of our respondents report that they know at least a few German words or phrases. Familiarity with these few German words or phrases, we suggest, provides one marker of a residual “symbolic” ethnic identity.
- B. Ethnicity involves a shared culture.** We can report information about two types of material culture (foods and artifacts) and rates of participation in a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Auction and Sale for Relief, probably the closest thing Mennonites have to an “ethnic festival.”
1. *Ethnic Foods.* Nearly all (90%) of our respondents report that

they have eaten *zwiebach* (a two-tiered yeast roll) at least a few times. Seventy percent have eaten *verenika* (hoop cheese wrapped in thin dough and baked or fried). Sixty percent have eaten *plumamose* (thickened dried fruit compote). Possession of Mennonite cookbooks notwithstanding, substantially fewer respondents report that they or their spouses know how to make these traditional foods (36%, 30%, and 16%, respectively). Only 11% of the youngest quintile report that they or their spouses know how to make *verenika*.

2. *Ethnic Artifacts in Homes.* Possession in their household of a Mennonite cookbook was one of eight items of material culture that we thought might reflect a continuing attachment to the Mennonite cultural heritage. The eight traditional Mennonite items we listed were as follows: cookbook (54%), antique (48%), quilt (47%), genealogy (38%), hymnal (30%), and a book about Mennonite history (28%). Few report possession of a Mennonite painting (11%) or "Family Bible" (8%). Twenty-three percent report that they have none of these eight items in their households.
3. *Ethnic Festivals.* Fifty-seven percent report that they have attended at least one MCC Sale for Relief. But 34% indicate that they do not know what an MCC Sale is. (Forty-two percent could not select a correct definition of MCC.) Seventeen percent have served as a volunteer at an MCC Sale but only 2% have served as a member of a Sale committee. We might conclude that even the attendees among our respondents are more like "symbolic" consumers than active producers of this aspect of ethnic culture.

- C. **Ethnicity involves a shared historical memory.** Two thirds (66%) of our respondents state that it is important to them that their children learn about their "Mennonite background" but only 61% know that their Enns ancestors migrated to the U.S. from Russia and even fewer (44%) know that the river and city of Enns are located in Austria. Just over one half (54%) selected Menno Simons (other names listed were Jacob Amman, Pilgram Marpeck, and Ulrich Zwingli) as "a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who converted, married, and became a leader of peaceful Anabaptists." Just over one third (37%) selected (from a list of four options) "baptized a second time" as the meaning of "Anabaptist." Only 7% selected *The Martyrs' Mirror* as "Next to the Bible, the book which probably had the greatest influence on Mennonite thinking" (other options were *Imitation of Christ*, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,

Pilgrim's Progress, and I do not know). If Bellah ("Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory,' one that does not forget its past," 153) and Kraybill ("The hallmark of Mennonite identity today is first and foremost historical, with the primary emphasis on the European Anabaptist experience. . . . Mennonites are bonded together not because their present practices are similar or distinctly Mennonite, but because they emotionally identify with a common history," 166, 167) are correct, then few of our respondents have sufficient historical knowledge to be either substantially "Mennonite" or a real "community of memory," though, as we shall see, many do continue to value their Mennonite heritage and define themselves as in some "symbolic" sense, at least, as "Mennonite."

- D. Ethnicity involves an attachment to a historical homeland.** Fifty-three percent of our respondents report that they would "very much like to visit ('historical Mennonite sites in Europe, Russia, or Ukraine') if I had the opportunity" but only 5% have, in fact, already visited such sites. But 42% have "no particular interest in such a visit." As we have just seen (in C. above), just over 60% know that the Enns family migrated to the U.S. from Russia and 44% can identify the country in which the river and city of Enns are located. So, we might conclude, approximately one half of our respondents have at least a "symbolic" interest in a "historical homeland."
- E. Ethnicity involves a network of social institutions.** During their sojourn in southern Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mennonites created a remarkable "commonwealth," an extensive network of formal and informal social institutions. In North America, too, newly immigrated Mennonites from Russia established a series of institutions—schools and colleges, homes for the elderly, camps, publications, mutual aid and insurance programs, social service programs, etc. (Toews). Thirty-five percent of our respondents attended a Mennonite high school (most likely Immanuel, in Reedley, California). Twenty-two percent attended a Mennonite College (probably Pacific Bible Institute, founded in 1944, which became Pacific College, and, most recently, Fresno Pacific University, or the other Mennonite Brethren College in the U.S., Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas, founded in 1908). Twenty-one percent report that they participate in a Mennonite insurance program (e.g. Mennonite Mutual Aid). Only 11% report that

they read a Mennonite periodical once a month or more often, 19% read a Mennonite periodical a few times a year, 29% have read a Mennonite periodical, but do so less than once a year. Thirty-eight percent report that they have never read a Mennonite periodical.

With decreasing social isolation in Mennonite communities (58% have never lived in a “traditional Mennonite community such as Hillsboro, Corn, Reedley, Dinuba, or Shafter”) and secondary institutions, we might also expect to find declining primary group relationships. Still, 58% report that at least one of their five closest friends shares a Mennonite background. Fifty percent of the oldest but only 13% of the youngest quintile report that three or more of their five closest friends have a Mennonite background. Decreasing social isolation is likely to lead to less emphasis on endogamy (marriage within a group). Thirty-two percent report that at least one of their spouses’ grandparents had a Mennonite background—one indicator of Mennonite ethnic endogamy. Fifty-one percent of the oldest but only 14% of the youngest quintiles report that it is important to them that their children or grandchildren marry a person with a Mennonite background.

With relatively low rates of attendance in Mennonite schools, low readership of Mennonite periodicals, declining rates of in-group friendships, and decreasing value placed on ethnic Mennonite endogamy, it is easy to wonder about the future transmission of traditional Mennonite culture.

- F. Ethnicity involves a sense of boundaries around group membership.** More than a majority (55%) of respondents agree (43%) or strongly agree (12%) that: “When I meet another person who has a Mennonite background, I feel more comfortable than I do with other people.” Smaller numbers report that they have been “the victim of prejudice or discrimination” because of their Mennonite background (13%) and 14% report experiences where “non-Mennonite people thought more positively of you because of your Mennonite background.” A majority, then, report a special sense of comfort in relationships with persons inside the boundaries of the ethno-religious community, but few report that Mennonite identity makes much difference in relationships with persons outside the boundaries of the group.
- G. Ethnicity involves the perception that there are personality or character traits that are typical of members of the ethnic community.** Twenty-seven percent of respondents agree that there are typical Mennonite personality or character traits. Only 13% of the members of the oldest generation but 48% of the youngest agree

that there is a typical Mennonite personality or character, indicating, perhaps, that persons more removed from ethnic communities are more likely to carry stereotypes of the community.

H. Ethnicity involves a sense of attachment to a group name. We can report a series of items that indicate the extent to which respondents think of themselves as “Mennonite” and value their Mennonite cultural heritage.

1. In response to the open-ended question, “What answer are you most likely to give when people ask you about your ancestry or ethnic background? I usually say that I am a(n) _____”, only 8% responded with the single word, “Mennonite,” but another 24% listed “Mennonite” in combination with some other ethnicity, such as “German” (16%) or “Dutch” (4%), so about one third of respondents listed or included “Mennonite” as part of their ethnic identity. Twice as many (64%) listed “German” as their ethnicity. 15% wrote “Dutch.” 4% mentioned “Russian,” 8% “white,” and 4% “American” or “U.S.A.”
2. In response to our request “Please mark the response which most closely approximates your feelings about your Mennonite heritage,” more than a majority (55%) selected “I value both Mennonite faith and my Mennonite cultural heritage. Both are important to me.” Eighteen percent indicated that “Mennonite cultural traditions are important to me but I have no particular interest in Mennonite faith.” Another 7% responded with “Mennonite faith is important to me but I have no particular interest in Mennonite cultural traditions.” A remarkable 84%, then, report that they value their Mennonite cultural and/or faith heritage. Only 16% indicate that they “value neither Mennonite faith nor the Mennonite cultural heritage. Neither is important to me.”
3. We can report other indicators that few of our respondents express negative feelings about their Mennonite heritage. Nineteen percent report that it is not important to them that their children and/or grandchildren marry persons who have a Mennonite background. (Three percent prefer that their children NOT marry a person with a Mennonite background!) And only 6% report that they would definitely not attend a reunion of the extended Enns family (but only 4% indicated that they would be willing to help organize such a reunion. Thirty-three percent would “definitely” attend, and 54% indicated that their attendance would “depend on the circumstances.”)

CONCLUSIONS

For most of these respondents, then, at least some dimensions of Mennonite ethnic identity remain important. Even though they are many years and several generations removed from their immigrant progenitors, 84% of our respondents continue to profess appreciation for at least some aspects of their "Mennonite heritage." But most of our respondents also appear to be well "acculturated" and "assimilated" into the majority American culture and society. What remain are indicators of a "symbolic" Mennonite ethnic identity. Most seem to be content as passive consumers rather than actively contributing as producers or sustainers of Mennonite cultural practices and institutions.

Many things could be said about relationships between culture and faith in an ethno-religious tradition such as the Mennonites from Russia but I will conclude with three observations. First, it is undoubtedly true that their shared culture was once a major source of cohesion for the Mennonite Brethren. "Their common culture and language often isolated them from their neighbors. Their simple Biblicism helped them to resolve issues of faith and life. No systematic grid for reading the Bible was needed because of their shared culture" (Jost, 46). But a shared Russian Mennonite culture can clearly no longer be taken for granted by Mennonite Brethren. The Mennonite Brethren have become very ethnically diverse. The U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren includes African American and Latin American Conferences in North Carolina and Texas, respectively. Thirty-five Slavic, thirty-five Hispanic, nine Ethiopian and seven Korean congregations are also part of the U.S. Mennonite Brethren Conference. Twenty-two Chinese congregations belong to the British Columbia MB Conference in Canada (*Mennonite Weekly Review*, 20 October 2008, 1, 10). Many current members of Mennonite Brethren churches, especially in urban areas, share no ethnic Mennonite background at all. ("Englische," these "outsiders" were once called.) From a global perspective, persons who share a common Russian Mennonite ethnic heritage are but a very small minority of the members of the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) that presently includes eighteen Mennonite Brethren conferences in fifteen different countries. The vast majority of current members of Mennonite Brethren churches, then, know nothing of "zweibach," Low German, or shared experiences in Mennonite communities, schools, and other institutions. Whether a shared Confession of Faith can provide an adequate substitute for a common ethnicity as the "glue" that holds the Mennonite Brethren together remains to be seen.

Second, James Juhnke concluded that by the 1930's one of the "ironies" of the history of Mennonite immigrants to America was that the very

reason for their departure from Russia had been subverted by American individualism. "Their hope had been to make secure in America something which the Russian Empire had offered for a century and then begun to take away. That something was the opportunity to be in charge of their own communities, their community institutions, and their religious life and institutions. . . . But American 'freedom' severely eroded this separate Christendom . . . American toleration and affluence were always enticing. Children of the immigrants began to think of freedom as individualism rather than as autonomy for their communities" (314–15). Unlike their more determinedly separatist spiritual kin such as the Old Order Amish, conservative "Old Mennonites," and the Hutterites, Mennonite immigrants from Russia moved within a few generations toward acceptance of the individualism, activism, and personal freedoms of the American cultural and social mainstream.

Finally, after reviewing some of the attempts that various groups of "progressive" Mennonites made during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s to preserve a specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite communal identity in the pluralistic and changing American environment (e.g. the "Concerns" and "Mennonite Community" movements), Paul Toews noted that the focus shifted from the larger community to the family. "That change surely suggested that a transformation was at work in American and Mennonite life. With increasing diffusion, the family—not the community—became the focus for carrying the values of the past into the future" (197). It seems apparent from our data that the nuclear family has not proved to be an effective carrier or transmitter of the cultural patterns of the immigrant ancestors. In Part Two of this report we will summarize data concerning the extent to which Mennonite religious patterns have been successfully passed from generation to generation in the extended Enns family.

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