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From Generation to Generation?

Faith and Culture in One Russian Mennonite Immigrant Family (Part 2)

Robert Enns

In some ways it seems to be true that “An apple does not fall far from the tree.” We all understand that DNA is a powerful carrier of physical traits. (I have, for example, been told by strangers who know my family that I “look like an Enns.”) Of course we know that we cannot rely on DNA to transmit faith or culture from generation to generation, though in some conservative Mennonite communities religious continuity is so strong that it seems that faith is being carried in the DNA. In a recent edition of the *Mennonite Weekly Review* (November 18, 2008, p. 4), for example, letter writer Paul Shrock reported that “All of (sisters) Esta’s and Eunice’s 160 children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren except three of the adopted/foster ones relate to a conservative Mennonite group.” But how effectively are faith and culture passed from generation to generation in a more progressive group like the Mennonite Brethren (MB) who are more highly assimilated into mainstream American culture and society?

Though the descendants of Dietrich T. Enns do tend to be evangelical, few have entirely forgotten or “defected” from their Mennonite heritage

This is Part Two of a two-part report on a survey of cultural and religious continuity and change in one MB immigrant family from Russia. In 2001 Dr. John Tinker (California State University, Fresno) and I attempted to contact all 455 living, adult descendants of my great-grandparents, Dietrich T. and Margareta Enns, who arrived in the United States from southern Russia in 1884. In addition to their Mennonite Brethren religious beliefs

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and practices, the family also brought with them many of the Dutch and German norms, values, and cultural traditions that their ancestors had developed during sojourns in Prussia and then in the Mennonite colonies in southern Russia. Mennonites in Russia and the early generations in America were an “ethno-religious” community in which faith and culture were interrelated and mutually reinforcing. But how much cultural and religious continuity do we see in the descendants of this immigrant family? And when later generations do depart from the faith and culture of their forebears, where do they find their new spiritual and cultural identities?

In Part One of this report (*Direction* 38, no.1 [2009]: 79–91), we noted that a remarkable eighty-four percent of the 274 descendants of Dietrich T. Enns who responded to our questionnaire continue to express appreciation for their Mennonite religious and/or cultural heritage. But we also concluded that much of the cultural continuity that we observed is more “symbolic” than substantive or institutional. (See Part One of our report for information concerning our methodology, data on cultural continuity and change, and conclusions concerning “symbolic ethnicity.”)

But what about the *faith* dimension of ethno-religious continuity among the descendants of Dietrich T. Enns? How many are members of an MB church? How many continue the radical Anabaptist convictions and practices of Menno Simons and others of their sixteenth-century spiritual ancestors? When people do abandon their Anabaptist religious heritage, do they become irreligious, as Sherkat predicted? Do they become “exiles” who have left the flock and lost their love for the Anabaptist faith? Are they “ethnic bystanders” who affirm the culture but not the faith of their birth-right community? Are they “closet” Anabaptists who have joined mainline denominations but quietly retain their Anabaptist convictions? (Kraybill and Hostetter suggested this typology.) Have they moved toward “New Age Spirituality” or the Charismatic Movement? As we shall see, many of the descendants of D.T. Enns express a “symbolic” appreciation for their Mennonite religious heritage but few are well informed about or hold to the radical convictions and practices of their Anabaptist forbears. The summary of data concerning religious beliefs and practices which follows is organized around the “Four C’s” in Catherine Albanese’s definition of religion: Creed (beliefs), Community (organization), Cultus (rituals), and Code (norms).

RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

A. Creed. Religions provide explanations about the meaning of life

1. Orthodox Beliefs. Few of our respondents have abandoned the Christian faith or become irreligious. Fully 94% agreed that they think of themselves as Christians and 93% agree that they have “no doubts” about the

existence of God. Very few expressed agreement with several statements of beliefs which are outside the boundaries of traditional Christian orthodoxy, such as astrology (3%), reincarnation (6%), contact with the dead (6%), and the belief that "the life experienced through our senses is all there is" (6%). Few (15%) agreed that "All of the great religions of the world are equally good and true."

2. Evangelical Convictions. Most of our respondents (83%) agree that the miracles that are reported in the Bible "were supernatural acts of God which actually happened just as the Bible says they did." A respectable 82% agree that they have tried to lead someone to Christ. A "born again" experience was reported by 77%. Almost as many (76%) agree that "The Bible is the inspired, authoritative word of God, without error not only in matters of faith, but also in historical, geographic, and other secular matters." At 70%, somewhat fewer agree that "All persons who die not having accepted Christ as their redeemer and savior will spend eternity in a place of punishment and misery." Slightly over half (55%) agree that "God created the earth and all living things in six 24-hour days." But 67% agree that "When I think about my own faith, I think of myself as an Evangelical." Approximately three quarters of the descendants of Dietrich Enns, then, appear to share beliefs that are typical of American evangelicals.

3. Anabaptist Emphases. We asked our respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with five items on the "Anabaptism Scale" utilized in previous Mennonite Church Member Profiles (Kauffman and Harder, Kauffman and Driedger) with the following results:

- "Baptism is neither proper nor necessary for infants and small children." — 65% agree.
- "If Christian believers proclaim the Lordship of Christ and truly follow Him in all of life they can expect to incur severe criticism and frequent persecution from the larger society." — 57% agree.
- "Churches should practice a thorough church discipline so that faltering or unfaithful members can be built up and restored, or in exceptional cases, excluded." — 55% agree.
- "Jesus expects Christians today to follow the pattern which He set in His own life and ministry, including such things as putting evangelism above earning a living and deeds of mercy above family security." — 49% agree.
- "Anabaptist teachings more accurately reflect the Word of God than the teachings of other denominations." — 28% agree.

Almost all of the members of this extended family, then, profess belief in God and think of themselves as Christians. Fewer than 10% have become "irreligious" as predicted by Sherkat. Approximately three quarters of our respondents appear to have found their spiritual home in American

Evangelicalism, despite the fact that just over one half of our respondents express agreement with four of the five items taken from the “Anabaptism Scale.”

B. Community. Religions are organized communities of persons who are bound together by shared creed, code, and cultus

1. Membership. Two thirds (67%) of our respondents report current membership in a congregation. Thirty-two percent are members of an MB congregation. Almost as many (28%) are members of Baptist (13%), or other church groups (e.g. Evangelical Free, Covenant, “Interdenominational”) which are generally associated with evangelicalism. Very few (7%) report membership in one of the “Mainline” denominations (e.g. Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational) and small numbers (5%) report membership in some other type of congregation (including Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, “Christian”). One quarter report that they do not presently hold membership in any church; 6% did not respond to this item. We might note that the rate of continuity in membership in Mennonite congregations among Enns descendants is far less than what Shrock reported concerning his conservative Mennonite relatives and is approximately one half the rate that Loewen (using data from Driedger) found in the Winnipeg area, where 30.8% of residents with ethnic Mennonite names were *not* affiliated with a Mennonite congregation (Loewen 2006, 296-97).

2. Attendance and Participation. Two thirds (67%) report that they attend church at least once a week. Two thirds also report that they have participated in a church-related small group within the last year. Two thirds report that they have held some leadership position (including teaching Sunday School and singing in the choir) in their congregations. Sixty percent agree that “A proper view of congregation organization and leadership is that all members are ministers and should share, as they are able, in the ministerial functions of the congregation.”

3. Religious Self-Identification. In response to the statement “When I think about my own faith, I think of my self as a/an _____,” 94% agreed that they think of themselves as Christian; 79% agree that they think of themselves as Protestant; 67% agree that they think of themselves as evangelicals; 63% agree (32%) or strongly agree (31%) that they think of themselves as Mennonites; 42% agree that they think of themselves as Anabaptists; and 25% think of themselves as fundamentalists. (Note that it was possible to agree with more than one item.)

Two thirds (67%) of the members of this extended family report that they are members of a congregation and attend church at least weekly. Most of these active church people report membership in a Mennonite (32%) or other evangelical congregation (28%). About the same number

think of themselves as Mennonite (63%) as think of themselves as evangelicals (67%) Note that approximately twice as many self-identify as religiously Mennonite (63%) as hold membership in a Mennonite congregation (32%). About one quarter report no current church membership.

C. *Cultus. Religious faiths are expressed in rituals that act out the insights expressed in creeds and codes*

1. Baptism. Eighty-nine percent of our respondents report that they have received baptism, 54% during their teen years and 15% were baptized between ages two and eleven. Only 9% were baptized as adults (twenty years of age or older). A few (8%) received baptism as infants. We have seen that 65% agree that baptism is not appropriate for infants—but in actual practice “adult” baptism is rare.

2. Footwashing. Anabaptists share with many other evangelicals non-sacramental convictions concerning baptism and communion but the traditional observance of the “ordinance” of footwashing sets Mennonites somewhat apart. Thirty-seven percent of our respondents report that they have experienced footwashing at least once, but only 11% believe that a Christian congregation should practice footwashing.

3. Personal Piety. Many of our respondents observe a series of acts of personal piety that are widely encouraged in both Mennonite and other evangelical communities. Seventy-three percent report that they pray privately to God (besides at mealtime) at least daily. Approximately the same number (72%) “Study the Bible privately, seeking to understand it and letting it speak to you” at least once a week (53%) or “occasionally (19%).” Few (9%) report that they have had an experience of “speaking in tongues,” a response that is consistent with the fact that only 4% report membership in a denomination that is associated with Pentecostalism. The Charismatic Movement seems to provide a spiritual home for only a few of the members of this extended family.

D. *Code. Religions are expressed in sets of rules (formal and informal) that govern everyday life*

1. Pacifism. Eighteen percent of respondents agree (14%) or strongly agree (4%) that “Christians should take no part in war or any war-promoting activity.” If confronted with a military draft, 34% indicate that they would enter regular military service; 22% would choose noncombatant military service; 21% would choose alternative service; and 4% would refuse to register or refuse induction into the military. Eleven percent responded that they are “quite uncertain” and 8% did not respond to this item. Approximately one respondent in five, then, believes that a Christian should not contribute to a war effort and about the same number would choose the response to a military draft (alternative service) that has historically been advocated by Mennonite leadership. One in five would select noncomba-

tant military service, a choice that has long been popular among Mennonite Brethren. But we should also note that only one person in three would choose to enter regular military service, a rate that seems to be low given the evangelical religious and political conservatism of our respondents. It seems that few of our respondents are radical pacifists, but a residual sensitivity to their pacifist heritage appears to remain.

2. Political Conservatism. Eighty-six percent report that they vote in all or almost all national elections and respondents are overwhelmingly conservative in their political preferences: 81% report that the political position with which they feel most comfortable is very (31%) or moderately (50%) conservative. Only 12% are comfortable with moderately (7%) or very (5%) liberal politics. Only 12% disagree with the statement that "I think it is appropriate for a Christian church to display the American flag in the sanctuary," an indication, perhaps, that most are comfortable with American "civil religion."

3. Family Values. Few (13%) of our respondents are separated, divorced, or divorced and remarried. Almost all (98%) express a strong commitment to the permanence of marriage, 62% agreeing that marriage is "a lifelong commitment never to be broken except by death" and another 36% that marriage "may be broken only if every attempt to reconcile disharmony has failed." Fifty-five percent agree and 38% disagree that "Some equality in marriage is a good thing but by and large the husband ought to have the main say-so in family matters." Forty-five percent agree and 39% disagree with the statement that "Women may be ordained and serve in pastoral leadership in the same way that men do." Marital stability, then, is widely valued but there appears to be disagreement concerning gender equality.

4. Sexual Relationships and Abortion. Most respondents agree that extramarital (92%), same-sex (84%), and premarital (70%) sexual relationships are "always wrong." As regards abortion, 62% agree that a woman should have access to the procedure if her health is seriously endangered, but only 15% agree that a woman should be able to obtain an abortion simply because she does not want the child.

5. Consumption of Alcohol. Only 24% of our respondents report that they "never" drink beer, wine, or other alcoholic beverages, indicating, perhaps, a breakdown in the prohibition against drinking alcohol that for a time was part of the code of Mennonites in America.

6. Swearing of Oaths. Seventeen percent agree that "It is against the will of God for a Christian to swear the oath demanded by the civil government on occasion."

As reported above, approximately two thirds of our respondents report that they think of their religious identity as Mennonite. But, as we

have seen in our discussion of Shared Historical Memory (in Part One of this report), few seem to be well informed about the Anabaptist and Mennonite stories (only 7% recognized *The Martyrs' Mirror* as an important Anabaptist text). About one third are presently members of a Mennonite congregation, but only 7% responded "Yes definitely" to the question "Do you believe that Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings more accurately reflect the Word of God than the teachings of other denominations?" Fewer than one in five indicate commitment to pacifism or object to swearing of oaths. Only 4% "strongly" agree that a Christian should not contribute to a war effort. Only 11% agree that churches should observe footwashing. As we have seen, rates of agreement with the beliefs and practices of American evangelicalism are much higher. These and other findings seem to be consistent with our conclusion that the Mennonite religious identity (like the Mennonite ethnic identity) of our respondents is more a matter of "symbolic" self-identification than substantive conviction or institutional participation.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

As noted in Part One of this report, Gans defined "symbolic ethnicity" as the maintenance of an ethnic identity that is detached from active participation in cultural traditions and social institutions. It is a form of ethnic identity that does not interfere with other social identities. "Symbolic religiosity" is, similarly, "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" (Gans, 585). Our general conclusion is that the Mennonite religious identity (like the Mennonite ethnic continuity) that we observe in the extended Enns family is more "symbolic" than institutional. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Royden Loewen who used terms such as "residual" and "near-Mennonites" to describe urbanized evangelical Mennonites who maintained a "symbolic" continuity with their ethno-religious heritage (Loewen 2006, 220, 226).

Of course the distinction between culture and religion in an ethno-religious community such as the Mennonite Brethren is an artificial construct. The German language, for example, might be considered to be merely a value-neutral part of our cultural heritage. But in Russia and the early immigrant Mennonite communities, the German language was, in fact, attributed so much religious significance that many could not conceive of Mennonite beliefs and practices apart from the German language. The result was the establishment of MB Conference committees and schools in both Canada and the U.S. that were dedicated to the preservation of German as

the language of church and family. The transition from German to English in MB churches was not completed until the period of World War II in the U.S. and even later in Canada (Loewen 1986). In this report we have treated the Mennonite Central Committee Relief Sale as a cultural "ethnic festival," but it, too, clearly serves important "spiritual" functions. Especially in a religious tradition such as Anabaptism that rejects the sacred-secular dichotomy and insists that orthopraxis (right behavior) is as important as orthodoxy (right belief), culture and faith cannot really be separated from one another, except for purposes such as this exercise in social scientific analysis.

Concerning what we have categorized as the "religious" dimension, contrary to the expectations of Sherkat, very few (perhaps 5%) of our respondents have become explicitly "secular" or "irreligious." The great majority are not really "dropouts," "defectors" or "apostate" from either the Christian faith or from their Mennonite heritage. Most (about two thirds) continue to identify themselves culturally and religiously as Mennonites even though few are well-informed about or actively contribute to the perpetuation of the cultural traditions and practices of their Mennonite ancestors and few have maintained continuity with the radical components of their Anabaptist heritage. Most (about three quarters) profess commitment to the beliefs and practices of American evangelicalism, which appears to provide a means for maintaining religious continuity while avoiding the "complications and barriers" of radical Anabaptist beliefs and practices. They may have selectively "redefined," "reconstructed," or "reconfigured" their ethnic and religious identity but few have really "defected" or rejected entirely their Mennonite cultural or religious heritage.

In this reconstruction of their religious identity, our respondents appear to have selectively combined materials from their Mennonite past with what was available in their new American environment. Lynn Jost and many others have pointed out that from the beginning of the MB movement in Russia in 1860, the (1) Anabaptism of "our beloved Menno," the (2) Lutheran pietism of Pastor Eduard Wuest and others, and the (3) evangelicalism of German Baptists (and the dispensationalism of the Bible School in Blankenberg, Germany) constituted a theological "three-legged stool" upon which the church was based. In the history of the Mennonite Brethren, these three "legs" sometimes reinforced one another but they were also frequently in conflict with one another. Until recently it was the "glue" of a shared ethnicity that held the three theological "legs" together. We might hypothesize that as the offspring of these Russian Mennonite immigrants acculturated and assimilated into the American social, cultural, and religious "mainstream," they gravitated toward the theological beliefs and pious practices associated with American evangelicalism because this

appeared to provide more continuity with their own religious heritage than alternatives such as irreligious “secularism,” the “liberalism” of many “mainline” Protestant groups, the emotional intensity of Pentecostalism, or the “spirituality” of “New Age” movements. In the process of identifying with American evangelicalism, the more radical and costly elements of the Anabaptist “leg” of the MB theological “stool” were largely forgotten or abandoned, perhaps because pacifism and other ethical, ritual, and communal peculiarities were “complications and barriers” that were too costly to maintain as the descendants of the immigrants settled into their new American homeland.

Members of the Enns family are not the only Mennonites who were attracted to American evangelicalism. Paul Toews (1996) describes how fundamentalism and evangelicalism found their way into each of the major Mennonite communities in America. MB historian J.A. Toews argued that fundamentalism and dispensationalism were the two major theological “outside influences” upon the Mennonite Brethren from 1925 to 1950 (375–79). In the Pacific District Conference of MB churches, many of the leaders received their training in the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIO-LA) and Baptist seminaries (Paul Toews, 1987, 65) where they became convinced dispensationalists. Many of the pastors of the MB congregations in Reedley and Shafter, the two congregations with which Dietrich T. Enns and many of his descendants were associated, were men with dispensationalist educations and convictions. The schools that helped to shape the beliefs and practices of the Enns family and many others in the Pacific District Conference were established in affiliation with fundamentalist associations. The evangelicalism that we see in the extended Enns family, then, reflects the dominant theological orientation of the congregations and institutions in the Pacific District Conference of which they were a part.

Though the descendants of Dietrich T. Enns do tend to be evangelical, few have entirely forgotten or “defected” from their Mennonite heritage. Few are really “dropouts” or “ex-Mennonites.” The vast majority continue to think of themselves as being, in some sense, at least, “Mennonite” and express appreciation for their Mennonite cultural and religious heritage. For many of our respondents, being a Mennonite is one way to be an evangelical, and being an evangelical is one way to be a good American—but an American evangelical who on occasion happens to eat *zwiebach* and *verenika*, values extended family and communal ties, and has some hesitancy about entering the military. Maintaining a complex and changing configuration of identities, “symbolic” and otherwise, is, surely, one aspect of what it means to be a “postmodern” person.

Of course we cannot know to what extent the patterns that we have observed in the Enns family are representative of families in other ethno-

religious communities (such as Russian Jews, Irish Catholics, or Japanese Buddhists) or in quasi-ethnic denominations (such as the Mormons), or even in other parts of the larger Mennonite world. As we have seen, patterns appear to be different in families (such as the Shrocks) whose roots are imbedded in the "critical mass" of the much older, larger, and more conservative Swiss and South German "Pennsylvania German" subculture; or the more "institutionally complete" "Deutschtum and Mennonitentum" cultural and religious constructions of the "Russian Mennonites" who settled on the American Great Plains; or in the idealism of the "Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision" and the institutions which arose from that vision. (This typology is from Steve Nolt.) Mennonites who migrated to the American West are more isolated and detached from the supporting cultures and institutions of their co-religionists in the older, larger Mennonite communities farther east. We have heard anecdotal evidence that suggests that the descendants of Dietrich T. and Margareta Enns might in fact demonstrate a higher degree of Mennonite, Christian, and evangelical commitments than the lineages of other Russian Mennonite immigrants. But until comparative studies are done, we cannot know to what extent the Enns family is representative of larger patterns.

IMPLICATIONS

Since this report is appearing in an MB publication, perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude by suggesting some possible implications of our findings and conclusions for us as a denomination. During the 1970s and 1980s, many books and articles were published and symposia were convened that dealt with a "crisis" in "Mennonite identity." One major focus in these conversations was the relationship between Anabaptist faith and Mennonite ethnicity. Examinations of relationships between faith and ethnicity among the MBs reached their apex in 1987 with the publication of John H. Redekop's *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren* and a follow-up "Symposium on Faith and Ethnicity among Mennonite Brethren" convened in the fall of that same year. (Papers read at the symposium were published in *Direction* in the spring of 1988.) One concise statement of Redekop's thesis appears in his foreword (p. vi): He was calling his fellow Mennonite Brethren to

a greater emphasis on Biblical Anabaptism while at the same time suggesting that in the church we place less emphasis on Mennonite ethnicity and culture. Such an approach recognizes the powerful and positive role that ethnicity can play as a sustainer and vehicle of faith traditions... Mennonite ethnicity should be consciously affirmed in our churches provided that the ethnic identity of sisters and brothers with

other heritages also be affirmed.

While many of the respondents to Redekop's work welcomed his general call to *both* a stronger commitment to "Biblical Anabaptism" *and* to a continuing celebration of "Mennonite ethnicity," his more specific suggestion that the name of our churches and conferences be changed from "Mennonite Brethren" to "Evangelical Anabaptist" was not so well received. Now, in 2009, some twenty-two years later our conferences are still "Mennonite Brethren" (though many congregations no longer use this designation), and while our recently revised (1999) *Confession of Faith* and some of our institutional leaders, pastors, congregations, and individual members do reflect the kind of commitment to Anabaptism that Redekop and others called for, many pastors and members appear to be much more closely identified with American evangelicalism than with "Biblical Anabaptism." Redekop's call for a strengthening of the Anabaptist leg of the MB "three-legged stool" appears not to have been realized. It is hard to imagine any kind of "recovery of an Anabaptist vision" among the descendants of D.T. Enns or other MBs unless there is a clear recommitment to the faith tradition of "our beloved Menno" on the part of MB conference and congregational leadership. Such a recommitment is not inconceivable in view of the fact that appreciation for Anabaptism is growing in places as diverse as Fuller Theological Seminary and Notre Dame University and the "emerging" and "missional" church movements. The positive sentiments toward things Anabaptist and Mennonite that were expressed by our respondents might be primarily "symbolic," but these positive sentiments might yet translate into support for the kind of re-balancing of the MB theological "stool" that Redekop and others have called for.

It is clear that we can no longer rely upon "the powerful and positive role that ethnicity can play as a sustainer and vehicle of faith traditions." Our conferences, our congregations, and many of our families, like the surrounding society, have become quite ethnically diverse. And within that diversity, Healy's observations that "white ethnicity" in the U.S. has become largely "symbolic," "nebulous," "so ephemeral that it may be on the verge of disappearing" (499) seem to apply to the German-Russian ethnic identity of the descendants of Dietrich T. Enns, and, probably, to the descendants of many other Mennonite immigrants from Russia. We will have to devise vehicles other than Russian Mennonite cultural traditions if we expect to preserve and transmit the Anabaptist and Mennonite dimensions of our faith heritage.

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