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Author(s): John E. Toews.

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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

John E. Toews

What is happening to the Mennonite Brethren Church theologically? The data suggest that the Mennonite Brethren Church, especially in the United States, is giving up its Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren heritage for popular American evangelicalism.

The Theological Profile of Mennonite Brethren — 1982

Mennonite Brethren are theologically orthodox and conservative. Mennonite Brethren scored higher on the orthodoxy scores than on any other scales. The scores were in the 90 percent range in all categories. The high orthodoxy scores were supported by high fundamentalism scores.

The Mennonite Brethren Church is highly orthodox and fundamentalist in its belief structure. There is no threat of liberalism. The scores between 1972 and 1982 were constant in Canada and higher on some variables in the United States. Traditionally perceived threats to orthodox faith, e.g., city, youth, education and mobility, seemed to be fostering greater orthodoxy in the United States.

Mennonite Brethren piety shows signs of erosion. The religious practice of the orthodox faith signals some danger signs. The conversion score was down slightly. The feeling of closeness with God was constant. Fewer church members experienced the faith negatively in 1982 than in 1972. Both Canadian and United States scores improved, but the Canadian scores were lower than those in the United States in 1982. More people experienced

John E. Toews is academic dean at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno.

the faith positively in 1982 than in 1972. The more positive tone was due to higher scores in United States churches; Canadian churches were down slightly. American pastors scored significantly higher than did Canadian pastors.

Conversions were down slightly, but the “feeling tone” was up, especially in the United States. That is cause for concern for anyone familiar with American evangelicalism. The concern is intensified by data on the more active expressions of piety. Bible knowledge was down. Canadians scored significantly higher than did Americans both in 1972 and 1982. Regular Bible study was up slightly in 1982. Canadian churches again were significantly higher both in 1972 and in 1982, although the United States churches reflected an increase. A check of individual items indicates consistent decline in daily Bible study, daily private/family devotions, family and group worship, and prayer at every meal. The practice of prayer was stable over all.

When we move from the individual and private spiritual disciplines to the more public forms of piety the scores drop. Less than 50 percent of Mennonite Brethren were active in evangelism. The service scores looked better than did evangelism, but the overall score was deceptive. There were alarming declines on some critical variables. The number of people encouraging youth to enter voluntary service has dropped. United States pastors were less service oriented than were lay leaders. The service dynamic of Mennonite Brethren was eroding among the urban, the youth and their parents, the educated, the affluent and United States pastors.

The final barometer of Mennonite Brethren piety in the Profile was stewardship. The overall score was up slightly, but some individual scores tempered the good news. The United States Conference showed improvement, while the Canadian Conference declined slightly. The most troubling data were the declining scores for those elements of stewardship that reflect a theology of corporate accountability, e.g., the church should urge tithing, tithing is a Biblical standard, sacrificial giving is beyond the tithe.

In summary, the “feeling tone” of Mennonite Brethren piety was more positive, but the more objective criteria of authentic piety — conversion, Bible knowledge, evangelism, service — showed clear signs of erosion. Mennonite Brethren piety looks more popularly evangelical — “save me Lord and make me feel good, but ask little from me” — and less Anabaptist-Mennonite

— “empower me Lord to be a disciple-missionary for the Kingdom of God.”

Mennonite Brethren commitment to Anabaptist faith and ethics is weakening. The Profile tested commitment to a series of Anabaptist-Mennonite teachings and practices. The responses indicated a progressive weakening of Mennonite Brethren commitment to Anabaptist-Mennonite faith. Six major indices in the Profile reflected this trend.

First, the original Kauffman-Harder (1975) study identified eight teachings as distinctive of Anabaptism. Seven of these were tested in the Profile. 1) Only 42 percent of Mennonite Brethren believed Jesus was normative for daily living. 2) Seventy-five percent of Mennonite Brethren in both 1972 and 1982 expected criticism and persecution from the larger society. 3) Eighty-four percent rejected infant or child baptism. 4) Seventy-four percent believed in the practice of church discipline for wayward members. 5) Sixty percent rejected the swearing of the oath when required by the government. 6) Only 54 percent of Mennonite Brethren in 1972 and 1982 rejected participation in war. The scores for actively promoting peace were down, as were the scores for requesting alternative service if drafted. 7) Thirty-five percent believed it was wrong to sue fellow believers in court. The scores related to theology of church were constant. But the normativity of Jesus, a central teaching in Anabaptism, and the Biblical teaching on peace and non-suits in court were minority positions for Mennonite Brethren in 1982.

Secondly, the scores on the separation of church and world disclosed danger signals for historic Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren understandings. Only slightly over half of the respondents affirmed Mennonite Brethren teaching on the separation of church and state, although the Canadian churches scored higher both years. The discipleship scores regarding the confession that Jesus was Lord and that Christians were called to obedience were stable. Again, the Canadian churches scored significantly higher. Mennonite Brethren scored moderately on the reconciliation and peace-related scales and again the Canadian churches scored higher both years. Furthermore, the Canadian Conference grew stronger over the decade, while the United States churches grew weaker in their commitment to the peace position. A clue to the source of the Canadian/United States divergence on the peace position is found in the leadership responses. In both Conferences the pastors scored lower than lay leaders and non-leaders.

A third major indicator of Anabaptist faith is related to morality. From the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement, Mennonites have sought to live out in their daily lives "the resurrected life of Christ." Even opponents testified to the high moral standards and integrity of the groups. The Profile suggests a gradual relaxation of moral vigor among Mennonite Brethren. Generally, heterosexual morality was more rigorous, but on questions of remarriage after divorce, individual sex, drinking, dancing and movies, morality was held less rigorously.

Social ethics and concern is a fourth index of Anabaptist teaching. The data here were mixed. The scores on race relations were up; the Canadian churches scored higher both years, but the United States scores improved. The affirmations of racial equality were consistently stronger. The scores on most variables were up except for United States pastors, where they dropped. Lay leaders scored higher than pastors in Canada and in the United States.

The degree of "political action" involvement is approaching the 50 percent level, although the 1982 scores are down slightly. The United States members were much more involved than the Canadian members. The overall decline between 1972 and 1982 relates to questions of church involvement in political activity, e.g., churches studying issues and candidates or encouraging members to vote. The scores on individual participation were up.

A fifth component of Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren teaching is the multiple ministry of the church. The scores were up in 1982. More people believed all Christians should share in the ministry. The scores for the Canadian churches were up significantly. Pastors in Canada and the United States scored higher than lay leaders and non-leaders on this item.

The sixth index of Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren theology is the overall view of the Christian faith. Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren historically have been sectarian. That is, they have preached a whole gospel, emphasized the corporate nature of Christian community, and called for rigorous private and public discipleship. That understanding of the Christian faith is eroding. Spiritualistic Christianity, which focuses on private and subjective Christian experience, far outscores sectarian and commonwealth Christianity. A slight shift from spiritualistic to sectarian Christianity occurred during the decade among the urban, young, educated and mobile respondents.

The current Mennonite Brethren commitment to Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren heritage and theology appears to be weakening. Some of the central Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren teachings are minority beliefs and practices: normativity of Jesus (42 percent), peace (54 percent), suits of fellow believers (35 percent), and refusal of oaths (60 percent). The doctrine of the separation of church and state is under serious challenge. The teachings of the separation of church and state, discipleship, and reconciliation are on the way to becoming minority positions with some critical variables reflecting serious hemorrhage. The overall scores on morality suggest strength, but erosion of commitment on critical variables indicates a weakening ethical foundation. Social concern is clearly a minority conviction, and the idea of the multiple ministry is supported by only half of the church members. Political involvement is moving from historic non-participation to majority participation. The sectarian understanding of the faith that used to characterize Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren people is a distinctly minority conviction, and has been replaced by a very American evangelical version of protestantism.

The Profile raises profound questions about the Anabaptist-Mennonite identity of the Mennonite Brethren Church, especially in the United States. The data suggest a denomination at a fork in the road, with the Canadian churches holding more firmly to Anabaptist-Mennonite convictions and the United States churches moving more in American evangelical directions. The leaders in the shift from Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren identity to a popular American evangelical identity in the United States appear to be the pastors. They record declining scores on a sense of God's presence, evangelism, Bible knowledge, service, stewardship, separation of church and state, discipleship, reconciliation-peace, and racial equality.

The Meaning of the Mennonite Brethren Profile

The Profile pictures an ethno-religious group losing its historic religious identity as it is assimilated into American cultural religion. A high orthodoxy-fundamentalism belief structure built on an eroding piety and Anabaptist-Mennonite self-understanding suggests a form of North American evangelicalism that is fully integrated into the culture but is powerless to effect profound change in people and society. Note that the contrast is with popular American evangelicalism, not historic evangelical-

ism. The Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren movements always have been evangelical in the classic meaning of the term.

This assessment makes the Mennonite Brethren a text-book case of ethno-religious acculturation into the dominant culture. Such ethno-religious transformation moves through four stages. The first stage is old world transformation. A new ethno-religious reality and community emerges through religious revival. The religious revitalization galvanizes a distinct sense of peoplehood with clearly defined boundaries of group identity and moral ideals (Smith, 1978).

Stage two is the immigrant phase (Stout, 1975). The center of the ethno-religious immigrant group in North America is the church. The church provides the cohesion and insularity to maintain a distinct peoplehood in a new environment. The church at this stage exists primarily to preserve the ethnic solidarity of the group, not to spread the gospel to other people. The church is a network of primary relationships whose central function is to mold members into a united community with strong ethnic identity. This ethnic character of the immigrant faith is evident in its relations to "outsiders" and to subsequent waves of immigrants from the same ethnic group. The immigrant group fails to evangelize surrounding people because it cannot transcend its ethnic boundaries. Groups from the same churchly and national origin who arrive later in North America are treated with suspicion and domination because the earlier group fears the "newcomers" will threaten the established ethno-religious solidarity.

The third stage of acculturation involves a shift from boundary maintenance of group identity to boundary extension of group identity. The ethno-religious community begins to look outward and to develop systemic linkages with like-minded people, e.g., religious, farm, business and professional organizations. Allegiance is no longer centered in the ethno-religious group, but expands to embrace various groups. Many members of the ethno-religious community begin to abandon the group. As this process proceeds people replace the belief and behaviors of the ethno-religious group with alternative norms borrowed from the surrounding culture.

Stage four of the acculturation process involves assimilation into American cultural religion. This civil religion is characterized by a) pragmatism, the cult of religious practicality, in which the dignity of the individual and self-improvement become the

supreme values; b) materialism, the passion for personal and financial advancement; c) faith in progress through technique; and d) nationalism, the subservience of religious faith to national loyalties and values. Stout (1975:216) argues that as “churches reconcile themselves to the American Way, they lose their voice and position as the dynamic center of the group. Church and religious associations are no longer communities sharing primary ties but are associations and passive audiences.” The communal involvement and primary relationships of stages two and three progressively decline. Any sense of group identity disintegrates so that the individual loses all reference points in relation to modern mass society. American cultural religion is religion, but it is not transcendent, Christian, churchly or prophetic.

Popular American evangelicalism is one form of American cultural religion. It is preoccupied with a rational orthodox form of creedalism that is unhooked from Biblical discipleship and ethics. The values of American cultural religion dominate the ethos of mainstream American evangelicalism, e.g., pragmatism, self-improvement, gospel of health and wealth, progress through technique (from evangelism to sex), and unqualified support for American nationalism and militarism. Critiques of this pseudo-pagan, evangelical mainstream from within the larger evangelical movement are labeled heretical and unpatriotic.

If the interpretation of the Profile proposed in this paper is correct — high orthodoxy/fundamentalism married to an improved pious feeling tone but increasingly divorced from authentic piety and Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren historic faith — then the Mennonite Brethren movement has traveled the road of most ethno-religious groups in North America. The Mennonite Brethren have acculturated into American cultural religion in the guise of American evangelicalism.

This reading of the Profile must be qualified in two ways. First, the Canadian churches must be distinguished in part from the United States churches. The erosion in Canada is less advanced, and the signs of stronger commitment to authentic piety and Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren theological heritage greater. This may be a function of 50 years less exposure to the forces of acculturation. Furthermore, the original immigration of the 1920's has been re-enforced by continued waves of immigrants, all of which strengthen normal ethnic group resistance to acculturation. But perhaps an even more important factor is the different cultural reality in Canada. Canadian Mennonite Brethren are

more numerous, more urban, and more politically and culturally sophisticated. They have a stronger sense of Mennonite Brethren identity and are simultaneously more indigenously Canadian. They are affirmed as Mennonites in the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. They have a stronger voice in the larger Mennonite Church in Canada as well as in the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada than do United States Mennonite Brethren, and they have a higher and more positive profile in provincial and national affairs (Sawatzky, 1978). Mennonite Brethren in Canada have a critical mass in a more affirmative ecumenical and national setting that nurtures ethno-religious pluralism generally and encourages Anabaptist-Mennonite contributions to evangelical and national life.

The second qualification is the revival of ethno-religious consciousness in North America as a response to the bankruptcy of American cultural religion. Renewal of religious particularity does not mean a return to the narrow ethnicity of stage 2 in the acculturation process, but the creation of a new peoplehood that is genuinely integrative of diverse persons and focused in its theological vision and identity. Such renewal is suddenly being encouraged in the United States, a status it has always enjoyed in Canada. The "melting-pot" theory is being critiqued in favor of religious pluralism. All peoples and denominations are being recognized as bounded in some sense and called upon to live their heritage with clarity and integrity so that the multi-colored coat of God's people may be seen in its full diversity and beauty.

The thesis of this article is that the Profile must be read in the light of patterns of religious acculturation. The Mennonite Brethren Church was born in Russia as a particular religious movement that generated the power to form a new church and to emigrate to North America. In the new world the Mennonite Brethren became an ethnically isolated community preoccupied with boundary maintenance. With World War II, Mennonite Brethren shifted from boundary maintenance to boundary extension. The forces of religious group acculturation progressively pulled Mennonite Brethren into popular American evangelicalism. Mennonite Brethren acculturation has meant a shift from a discipleship centered understanding of the faith to a belief centered understanding of Christian faith. Consequently the profile revealed high orthodoxy/fundamentalism scores and eroding piety/Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren scale scores.

The Profile suggests the Mennonite Brethren Church is at a critical moment in history. The trends identified in the Profile point toward the loss of a particular theological identity in popular American cultural religion. The alternative is renewal as an Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren people. The continued loss of identity will lead to the complete disintegration of the Mennonite Brethren in the United States, and, perhaps, in Canada, although the scores suggest greater coherence of identity and mission in Canada. Renewal as an Anabaptist-Mennonite people promises the revitalization of the Mennonite Brethren Church, a revitalization at precisely the time in North American religious history when the renewal of religious particularity is affirmed as one of the few hopes for the church in modern mass society. The best way to be American and evangelical is to be authentically Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren rather than to be assimilated into someone else's religiosity. The hope for the Mennonite Brethren Church is to become more Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren. The Profile further suggests that for such renewal to occur the United States and Canadian Mennonite Brethren must experience the renewal of the church's leadership.