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# Ethos, Ethoi, and Ethics: The Moralities of the Mennonite Brethren

Delbert Wiens

Ethics has become important. It has even become a separate topic for a conference which focuses on the state of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) soul. On the one hand this seems natural enough. Specific moral issues were cited at the very beginning to help explain the need for a religious awakening in the Mennonite colonies in Russia. Conference resolutions have frequently stipulated that this or that action was enjoined or forbidden. Behavioral distinctives have always been near the center of MB identity. And MBs have typically sought to derive these distinctives from the scriptures.

In this paper I wish to explain why MBs 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. Finally, I would like to suggest what a church must become to be morally healthy. 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. What is needed, I will conclude, is an ethical ethos.

## A. THE MENNONITE BRETHERN AS COMMUNITY

To illustrate what I mean I will sketch an MB 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" name 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 to know 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 *Onkeln* and *Tanten*, 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, and 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 the ethos protected the order within from the chaos without. It was a moral and spiritual dike which kept the outside flood from the cultivated place. 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 the others. The whole vibrated when the slightest thread was plucked or cut. There was 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 lifecycle, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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." The truthful application of these permanently possible truths depends on the larger context. All had learned the proverbs but not all knew how to apply them. The wise understood the 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. And 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 Mennoes 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. A morally healthy ethos tended to produce moral health just as peoples living on rich soil will tend to be healthy whether or not they understand the science of nutrition. 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 it had a form of separateness which allowed its enculturated faith to flourish. For MBs ethics is a discovery as recent as our present, partly unfortunate, need for it.

### Changing pieces of the ethos

There was a story for each Menite. There was also a history for Menno, though Menites were barely aware of it. Legends of its founding were recited; but the

1 Ben Ollenburger, "'Seeing the Truth': Proverbial Wisdom and Christian Ethics," *Direction*, IX.2(April 1980): 23-31.

living ethos of Menno sought to be its history, for the goal of Menno was to become and to be its perfected self. There would be movement toward perfection. But change in the essential structure of Menno was not supposed to happen. The weekly that was printed in Menno was its diary. That its *geist* might also need a biography was not imagined. The appropriate responses which constituted its ethos were meant to be always appropriate. 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.

Few of us remember when it was wrong for Menites to listen to the radio, or to go to bowling alleys, or to buy insurance, or to marry the “English” or even non-immersing Mennonites. Recently the Canadian MBs apologized to the General Conference Mennonites for having excommunicated MBs who had married one of them. It was a dramatic moment; it was also, for many, a shock. Had we really done that? Did we ever make a formal decision to do that? When did we stop doing that? Suddenly the silence has been broken and it is safe to admit officially the change we have tacitly accepted. We are even ashamed for having done it.

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 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”; those who did so were politely 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 “outlandish,” and a new brick could replace the discarded one. Gradual change preserved the dike; the separateness of Menno was assured. And so long as Menno continued to be guided by the older wise ones, the tacit process allowed relatively safe experimentation with new things. 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. It is even possible that during the formation of Menno it was necessary to excommunicate those who married other Mennonites. Perhaps a stricter separation was then needed to preserve a spiritual breakthrough that was both important and fragile until it could be built into an ethos strong enough to preserve it. I do not know this for a fact. But, if true, they could then have understood the need for excommunication. Though painful for individuals, the process need not have been dishonest. In this case, as often, the tacit process took too long. In time, even leaders who explicitly enforced expulsion were tacitly denying its legitimacy. By then it could only do tragic harm.

I have one more question about this tacit process. Have we tacitly abandoned it? Perhaps the calling of a conference is another explicit summons to 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 MBs 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 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, however much one may have rebelled at its ways. 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 beyond Menno; 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. 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 choose as if “outside.” If one did not choose from a position above the ethos, then one apparently could do so from a stance below it and the way to get “down there” was to act out a rejection of the ethos 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 sometimes outrageous behavior.

Those who had “come home” (but not from transcendence) were not genuinely freed from the ethos of Menno; 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 *sub speciae aeternitatis*, 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.

## B. 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 implies 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 morality and 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. It 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 has “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 lessons and 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 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, not even of holiness. 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, who were wrong only when imagining that we could do without the learning.

For those of us who live after the collapse of ethos, it is 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 also 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. This is not the place to repeat criticisms I have made of the way we have (and, mostly, have not) done this job.<sup>2</sup> Nor, as already stated, is this the place to engage in ethical analyses. It is, however, appropriate to offer a possible reason for our failure to do them.

### **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 becoming 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”? In all likelihood three sorts of things come quickly to mind: entertainments (movies, card playing, television,

2 The following articles are relevant to themes in this essay. “New Wineskins for Old Wine: A Study of the Mennonite Brethren Church,” *The Christian Leader*, October 12, 1965. “The Old Wine—Will It Sour: One Man’s View of the Future of the Mennonite Church,” *The Canadian Mennonite*, April 18, 1967, pp. 6-7. “From the Village to the City,” *Direction*, October 1973 and January 1974, pp. 98-149. “Mores, Morals, Morale and Hard Cases: or Whatever Happened To Consensus,” *Direction* IX.2(April 1980): 3-17. “Cultural Change” (Response to the Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982), *Direction* XIV.2(Fall 1985): 43-49.

dancing), mood-altering substances (smoking, drinking, “drugs”), and sexual activities (petting, pre and extramarital coitus, homosexuality).

There have been many entertainments which Menites once strictly forbade. It is difficult now to think of some of these as having any immoral content *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.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many good Menites do dance—and not only our “worldlier” members. Others allow and even encourage their children to dance.

It seems to me that the tacit process for changing the ethos no longer works. 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.

Therefore 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.

3 A few years ago a pastor wrote his District Board of Reference and Counsel asking whether his youth group could hold a dance. The board was indignant. He should have known better than to ask, the brief return missive implied. As individuals most of the members of that board would have recognized the pastor’s dilemma and would have admitted that guidance was needed. But, meeting as official guardians of the ethos, they simply retorted that we do not do that “x”. In fact, the pastor had committed a breach of the ethos by asking. We are “supposed” now to be in the silent phase during which we do not admit to ourselves that this “no” is becoming “yes.” No one was willing to make an ethical defense of non-dancing. But they could not admit this. Perhaps the pastor was actually satisfied with the rebuff. It presumably made it unnecessary for him to defend what he might no longer wish to defend.

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.

Our inability to deal with issues in ethically nuanced ways also affects the way we deal with mood-altering substances. We have had a great deal of success with agreeing that Menites do not smoke. I suppose that even the few who do smoke wish that they did not. Meanwhile we say very little about caffeinated softdrinks, coffee, and tea.

We have consistently, and rightly, warned of the dangers which accompany the abuse of alcoholic beverages. Here again our inability to discriminate is betraying us. Nearly a majority assumes that certain amounts on some occasions are not abuses. Many of us grant permission for that, while those who wish to insist on a total “no” have fallen back on the plaintive, “We have agreed that Menites don’t do that sort of thing.” But those who do not belong to the old sort of ethos can only understand this as the failure to give a *reason*.

Unfortunately for those who wish to reason, the attempt to understand why people partake at all would raise profoundly unsettling issues. Wine, for example, was once a part of our ethos. It was used in church for the eucharist and it enhanced the joy of family and community celebrations. Even the scriptures approve of this. But those without hope drank to numb their misery while the rebellious drank to flaunt their anger. For these it was both a sin and the result of a deeper spiritual failure. There is now evidence that some can never safely drink, for they have genes which quickly make it a terrible disease. Perhaps, for their sake, the rest of us should agree not to use it either. But even then the deeper issue would remain: How can we celebrate? What is there to celebrate? Why, even among us, are so many without hope? Until we have answers to these questions we will be unable to limit the use of prescribed mood-altering drugs—or even of stronger, illegal ones—to say nothing of alcohol.

The waning of the sexual taboos which characterized our ethos presents another set of issues. Obviously we have never intended to say “no” to sex, though some people thought their elders wished to do so. How strict were we? I have even wondered whether our elders deliberately permitted a few vigorous nay-sayers in order to heighten the adventurous quality of reasonably innocent encounters. How can romance thrive where there are no obstacles to be surmounted in order to meet—and perchance to touch? Even if I am giving them too much credit, it remains true that the sexual mores of Menno have always been nuanced. But they remained tacit since there was a taboo about being explicit.

I would like to argue that their silence regarding sex discreetly cloaked their awe of its power to evoke transcendence. I have no “evidence” to cite, but taboos do not develop arbitrarily; no one talks freely about those places where one is most vulnerable and where identity is most tender. Perhaps we now talk more freely because sex is ceasing to be a vehicle for one’s profoundest identity. (If there is something to this argument, then Rody Wiebe, again, is revealed as profoundly MB, except for his zealous talking about it.) Is healthy passion retreating from sex insofar as it is becoming casual and therefore “cool?” If so, contemporary sensuality is robbing “normal” sex of the power to be an occasion for profundity and therefore also for profound sinning. If that is true, a growing inability to “sin” with “mere” sex could turn out to be the greater sin. For then passion may retreat to the pornographic while the limits of personal identity come to be explored through the sadomasochistic.

Again, I am in danger of giving our elders too much credit. Still, it is unlikely that we are doing a better job of safeguarding the good while avoiding its dangers. Allow me to assume that our older ethos could contain both the sublime and the practical—and that where the sublime was not achieved the community could hold together even those who detested each other. It also did more. It provided a whole web of relationships. No man or woman had to be the only “meaningful relationship” for each other.

In any case, one need not be especially astute to realize that illicit passions are stimulated by the pressures of a “walled” community and that they can do terrible damage to the web that was Menno. The natural passions of the youth were also feared. Many parents, I suspect, were less upset by the sinfulness of the act that made a hasty marriage necessary than of the risk that youthful passions might link them and their property to the “wrong” family. (One reader said this was too cynical. Another, stating that “what people would think” was the stronger fear, implied that I wasn’t cynical enough.)

Why should we now abstain from varieties of the sensual “x”?” If Menno is no longer the web that defines and protects a greater good, then a whole class of very practical reasons for containing passion ceases to be compelling. To the extent that we cease to be a primary community, sex becomes an individual’s affair, and so is the tragedy that it may still cause. And to that extent old taboos still increasingly look like—mere taboos. We are tacitly recognizing

this shift by ceasing to require public confession for what has become a “private affair.” And if the ethos and its web of support and its greater good disappears, then there will be no publicly compelling justification for insisting that the mismatched must nonetheless work out a decent coexistence. Again, on all these issues our ethos now blocks the clear-headed honesty that seems required.

In this section I have selected “x’s” of entertainment, mood-altering substances, and sexuality to argue that our older ethos, however good it has been, can no longer secure our moral health. In fact, its remaining power prevents us from becoming ethical. From one point of view, my examples have 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 not’s” 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; 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 16th century organized

churches around competing theologies while theologians and philosophers developed alternative systems for justifying the principles of appropriate conduct.

So long as philosophy mattered only for philosophers and so long as communities united around the theology of the ruler, the older communal web continued to shape the behavior of almost everyone. But, as Anabaptists pointed out, if faith and life depend upon authentic individual commitment, then it cannot automatically be linked to the commitment of one's prince. In the end the inherently secularizing and pluralizing logic of the Reformation, as of modernity generally, has prevailed. Ironically, we heirs of the Anabaptists are among the last to experience the abstraction of faith and ethics from an older ethos.

In any case, the logic of specialized commitments 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 segments. In the end the church tends to be reduced to the aesthetics 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 on how to claim the lordship of Christ over the whole. And then, perhaps because these institutions are too abstracted from the churches, they seem to belong more to the world than to the church.

I know that this is not a complete description of any church or any denomination. I am only claiming that our contemporary pluralisms have been making this description more true. 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 “lifestyle.” 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 worldview. 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?

In fact, neither character nor ethics can be nurtured outside an ethos. If Menno and other smaller primary communities are disappearing, what other social entities now divide the responsibilities for defining conduct and shaping character?

The greatest part of the task has devolved upon the nuclear family, and much of our moral fervor now goes into saving our society by strengthening these basic units. Parents are supposed to be the most important carriers of our religious and cultural values. We are largely unaware, however, that the internal dynamics of the family are different than they were in Menno. The nuclear family is now both more important and more troubled.

Every generation has included those who were angry with their parents. In the past the personal aspects of that anger were inextricably mixed with the attempt to come to terms with the larger ethos which the parents represented. And so the rage and bitterness against parents was often very great. However, that anger could largely be resolved along with a person’s reacceptance of the ethos, especially since “coming home” often coincided with the communal acceptance of the youths’ maturity. As a ritual passage into adulthood, it made the son and daughter into the “brother” and “sister” of all the other adults, and even of their own parents.

Now, however, the parents neither represent nor are supported by a concrete Menno. As almost the only specific focus for anger, rebellion becomes “only” a personal and family tragedy. It is only apparently paradoxical that, on the whole, parents and their children may be better friends than before. Both sides sense the increased fragility of the family in a world without concrete Menno to support it. The family is too precious to risk fundamentally disrupting it,

and it is too impotent to justify overt rebellion. The modern solution is to restrict familial interactions to those aspects of life which can be conducted with reasonable amiability and even tenderness. The tensions are defused by diffusing critical aspects of character formation to other ethoi. Both the parents and their adolescent children live by ethoi they do not share with each other. The “they” over against which identity is forged becomes increasingly amorphous—as does the target for rage—which may well end by being focused upon the only concrete target which remains: oneself.<sup>4</sup>

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,

4 The larger society tacitly accepts the fact that the family is as much the problem as it is a solution and now demands that the schools be the larger socializing units which are to take up the task of character formation. No doubt the schools can do some things well, but their age-graded structure and the rationalist style of their methodologies and contents—to say nothing of their role in producing occupational specialists for specializations—actually reinforces the pluralism which is the underlying problem.

Since the schools also are at least tacitly perceived to be part of the problem, the society as a whole increasingly takes responsibility for shaping character. But the only way the nation can act is through rationally structured agencies which create yet more subgroups which try to solve problems by abstracting yet more aspects of our former concreteness for yet more specialized attention. In the end, all the ways a modern society can address the issue actually strengthens the behavior-shaping power of peer groups, be they the junior high gang or the professional association. Lacking the power to apprehend the *heil* of a whole, the *geist* that is a nation tries to create a common ethos out of fear of its own dissolutions. And so it mounts crusades against enemies without and within. But having raised the specter, it soon discovers that it can do nothing significant against it and hides its impotence by periodically shifting to new specters. For many, it really is too bad the atom bomb has increased the horror of war. For what is left of their *moral* sensibilites now inches them toward war as the final solution to the creation of a focused ethos for the whole.

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. There are still some academic enclaves and some groups dedicated to "high culture," which intend the achievement of excellence, at least in their own domains. And there are sequestered groups which offer graduated disciplines and the promise of transcendence. All these are, of course, elitist. And that is not bad. What is discouraging is that they are virtually unknown (and incomprehensible when known) to the modern masses. The "elite" have ceased to be heroes. Moreover, since a group of the likeminded can only celebrate the style it has already attained, there is little vision for the heroic. "Groupies" applaud the celebrities whose task it is to reflect back to their admirers an already achieved cultural level. In turn, the admirers reward them with the fame and wealth which testifies to the value of that level of being. Many 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" seriatim 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. Even if we know the good, we cannot do it.

### C. THE MENNONITE BRETHERN AS PEOPLE

Solutions are not the task of this essay. And I recognize that more adequate analyses will be required for forums which are created to consider what our future shape might be. Nevertheless, I would like to offer the following ideas for consideration at such a time.

#### Creating an ethical ethos

(a) To try to abstract “faith” from “culture” condemns us to both ancient heresy and contemporary rootlessness. Of course faith always needs to be distinguished from elements of a particular culture, but if I had to choose between abstracted MB spirituality and ethnic Mennoism, I would be strongly tempted to choose the latter—not because there is salvation in it but because (like “prostitutes and tax-collectors”) it might sooner remember that incarnation requires embodiment and that embodiments point to transcendence. Besides, that would allow me to tell stories of those who had once known *Heil*—and a *Heiland* (a *Heil* restorer).

(b) To try to reunite faith and culture by recreating Menno is hopelessly atavistic and religiously idolatrous. Jesus did not come to destroy “the law and the prophets”; the new thing he created fulfilled the stories and structures and intentions of his past. We cannot return to an older sort of cultural pluralism which was based on geographic boundaries and on a web which defined a simplistic set of behavioral responses. We cannot now practice separation by becoming isolated. As one of the papers and some of the responses at a recent study conference stated, we will have to move from bounded set to centered set thinking on these issues.<sup>5</sup>

5 Edmund Janzen, “The Mennonite Brethren Church: A Covenanting People.” Note section IV of his paper presented to the Study Conference of the General Conference of MB Churches, October 15-17, 1986, Fresno, California.

(c) To try to be a denomination (in the sense I have defined) is to flee cultural pluralism (our ethnicism with and over against other ethnicism) at the price of embracing a structural pluralism which carves each person's life into functions and then delivers the different roles we play in life to the multiple ethoi of our age. That kind of separation is an illness, not the gospel.

(d) We must become a people of God who live among other peoples without succumbing to the *geists* which dominate our world. I do not know how to do that, though I can recognize that attempts to do this are being made; and the early church, at least, is testimony that it has been done. The gospel as good news for our age implies a new kind of separateness which expresses a way of life by embodying it. And that is what will be required to be a witness.

(e) 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.

### **Sustaining an ethical ethos**

(f) A people must agree on the center which unites them; a people of God will therefore be radically separated from peoples whose center is in themselves or some earthly good. But there will be no contiguous boundary which segregates them from those other people. This is a question of faith, not a question of rules. The strong in the faith are not to flaunt their freedom to do what the weak may not do. And the weak must not be allowed to insist that the strong obey the compunctions which the weak may temporarily need. The often failing who intend the center need to be embraced in the community while the strong who begin to halt in their progress may need to be disciplined, however near to maturity they may be. So far as entertainments and media are concerned, the best may be permitted the most. To the pure all things are pure.

(g) A people of God will be hilarious. They will celebrate because they already taste their joyful destiny. They will fear no one, for though they can be killed they cannot be harmed. This courage instils a question of hope, not a question of Stoic fortitude or Epicurean delights. They may find it appropriate to share their joy around a "common cup," though the physically normal will not need to depend on "substances" to control their moods.

(h) A people of God for our times will coinhere with others. They will overcome their incompleteness through each other. They will affirm their sexuality as that which permits them to become with another the image of God. And there will be mutual joy in the giftedness of those who coinhere though

celibate. This is a question of love, not a question of sensual excitements.

(Faith, hope, and love, but greater than all of these is the one who bestows them. When that One comes first, then rules, fortitude, and delights may happily follow. And even agape may be allowed its appropriate share of eros.)

### Transcending even an ethical ethos

(i) There is no salvation outside the church—the called out to be the people of God. It is the boat that carries disciples across the sea; it is the vessel that contains the treasure; it is the enfleshed presence of the Word; it is the gift which seals a covenant to life; and it is the sheepfold which the shepherd provides, though one must add Jesus' word, "I have other sheep."

(j) There is no salvation within the church—not even with the called out to be the people of God. The boat does not leave the sea; the pot is not itself the treasure; not even the word is the Word; the sheep do not graze in the sheepfold; and the point of the gift is to incite delight in the Giver. The people of God live out an ethos which strengthens them—and entices them—to transcend it. There is not even a "temple" in "heaven."

## CONCLUSION

In rereading what I have written in earlier essays on *MB* ethos and ethics, I have become embarrassed by their ending paragraphs. However radically I permitted myself to think, in the end—like a pious *MB*—I fell back on "altar calls." And I have become aware that they seem to me to be increasingly melodramatic, and phony. I believed then, and still believe, in the truth of what I typically said. But I think I have gradually ceased to believe that there was any point in making them. I do not really have faith or hope in the survival of what we are now becoming. I still love us, though I might prefer a mercifully instantaneous euthanasia to our becoming a "faith" or a "denomination."

But this also sounds melodramatic and phony. So I shall end neither as an evangelist nor as a prophet, but as an historian. That is to say, as a chastened sceptic about our power to see what the King is doing. Creation (with its faiths and hopes and loves) is always stronger than destruction (with its cynicisms and despairs and hates). Without creation and growth there would be nothing to distort. But the processes of germination and of growth are mostly hidden; they are so quiet and slow that we are often unable to notice them. As someone has noted: we do not see the forest growing, but all the media make certain that "we are there" when it burns down. Destruction better fits the time frames of our attentiveness. We should periodically quit watching TV and reading the papers—or even listening to prophets and evangelists—so that we can hear the forests grow. And then we will not be surprised when there are transcending

leaps forward and that they come when we least expect them, precisely because we have become entirely captured by the smell of burning. Christians—and even historians—should remember that new creations which fulfilled old ones have happened before. For me, for now, that remembering is almost enough.