THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO ETHNICITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

Delbert Wiens

Introduction: Ethnicity...Again!

It seems to me that a consensus is beginning to emerge in this conference. We live in the tensions between Ethnocentrism and Universality, between Identity and Growth, between Unity and Diversity, and between Community and Mission. Though uncomfortable, these tensions can be handled creatively. In fact, to solve them, in any final sense, would be worst of all; we might then wholly dissolve. But I do not think that this statement, even if true, is appropriate for us, at least not yet; and I must register my dissatisfaction with the way the problem has so far been defined. Most of us do not live in the kind of Mennonite and MB world from which John Redekop shapes his proposals. I experience very little of the kind of "secularized" Mennonite culture which distresses him. I often wish I did, because I sometimes think that there may be more hope for that world than there is for mine. I would like, therefore, to "rename the enemy" which I think that I and many others, confront.

Delbert Wiens teaches Philosophy, Humanities, and History at Fresno Pacific College, Fresno, California.
Cultural Pluralism. Since Babel, there has always been cultural pluralism. But, it seems to me, our Mennonite ancestors faced it in a purer form than do most of us. When they lived in Mennonite villages, they were always aware that there were villages and cities not very far away with a different ethos. We, on the other hand, mingle with people from all parts of the world — perhaps daily. But we do so on the basis of a shared North American culture. That is, in our public life we share an ethos with others who, like us, then retreat to private lives as different sorts of ethnics.

Our elders were not ethnics. They were simply a people among other peoples. Indeed, they often saw themselves as the people. But then, most of the other peoples also saw themselves that way. Like other traditional cultures, they formed a concrete community with a web of expected responses and patterns of behavior that defined their particular way of life. This ethos was exhibited in their daily routines. And so the growing children could imitate and experiment their way into its shapes and also become Mennonites. So could others. Alan Peters has documented that there were times when significant numbers of non-Mennonites joined our communities. Many names which we think are old "MB names" were not "Mennonite" names at all. No doubt most early adherents were already German speaking, but it is unsettling, perhaps, to realize that we could have been attractive to others, and fully integrate them, when we were much more separated and monocultural than we are now. (See Alan Peters, "The Impact of the Family in Mennonite History," Direction, July 1972, pp. 74-81.)

In addition to being able to absorb outsiders, there were more central ways in which traditional Mennonites worked to build the Kingdom of God. Life was not radically separated into sacred and secular spheres. The entire community was nestled under a "sacred canopy" which symbolized God's ownership of the whole. To be a steward of the land and of their society was to be in mission, for everything could reveal itself as sacrament. It could also be mission to create colonies away from the home turf when there was too little land for all their children. Later, they could even support missionaries who
would create holy communities like theirs in other parts of the world.

It is often said that cultural pluralism is one of the problems created by the rise of modernity. I think not. What creates a problem is the loss of the sacred canopy or, at least, its decreasing scope. Important aspects of life have been freed from its control and no longer retain their sacramental significance. Then one is tempted by the suspicion that no particular way of life is better than any other (cultural relativism). Or one might even become convinced that some other way of life is better than one's own. Miriam Warner has argued that some contemporary MBs are ambivalent about the worth of their inherited ethos. On the one hand, they denigrate "ethnicity"; on the other hand, they remain tied to it as one of the grounds of their sense of identity. She suggests that they could be more free of it (in their public spheres?), if they could be more assured of its worth (in their private lives?). The difficulty is that many MBs (especially in the USA?) perceive themselves as having come from inferior (at least, rejected) Mennonite stock. In effect, they have added modern doubts about cultural particularity to older memories that what existed under the old canopy had been oppressive for them. I think that she is right. But this does not yet explain how we now experience what is left of that traditional culture, whether or not we are proud of it. To deal with that requires another category.

Structural pluralism. Under the conditions of modern life we no longer live mostly within the frame of a traditional ethos as defined by a primary concrete community. Our lives are segmented into functionally separate spheres. And these separated aspects of our lives — our work life, political life, esthetic associations, education — even many of our recreation and religious activities — fall outside the sphere of the sacred canopy. To be precise, very much of our waking life has been secularized. Each day we move into and out of a series of efficient, functionally rationalized secondary societies dedicated to the production of one sort of product or service or activity.

Those of us who still retain the memory and some of the patterns of an older traditional culture with its sense of the coherence and, for us, the potential sacredness of one's whole existence now emerge as a new sort of thing — as ethnics! An Ethnic Group is made up of a large enough number of largely
secularized moderns who meet sufficiently often to keep alive the memory of their common heritage. This is, of course, a radically different sort of life than was that lived by their forebears. But is does preserve the idea of something that was and is terribly important. And it may be essential to keep it alive, if only as a carrier of meanings which must be retained for the creation of some larger coherence.

The sphere of the sacred now shrinks mostly to the sphere of the private, the home. The nuclear family now must take on almost the whole job of spiritual and character formation that once was shared by the entire community. But individual families cannot keep alive the memory of sacred concreteness by themselves. For ethnics, persisting clan and tribal linkages continue to perform some of the functions of the older community. They support the nuclear family and give it a larger meaning. The other context which remains for the sacred canopy is the church. And so meetings of an ethnic church become emotively intense. Both clan and church occasions must deliver the meaning formerly carried by all one's interactions in the life of a community. However brief our meetings with those who share the traditions, the bell rings and, like Pavlov's dogs, we begin to salivate. Outsiders who visit such churches sense that real juices are flowing, and they are often attracted. But time is now too short and the church occasions are too truncated to fully enact the ethos which is evoked. It can only be signaled with symbols and gestures which remain opaque to outsiders, and perhaps even to the children of the insiders. There are still real effects, but their sources are hidden. In short, "Where's the beef?" The memory of a sacred community cannot nourish — or even long inspire — those who do not get the chance to live it.

The meaning of most of one's waking activities also changes. One can leave the family and the church to enter the secular public spheres with a missionary motive, consciously "letting our lights shine;" but these contexts for our activities are no longer consecrated vessels which have been designed to hold a divine treasure. Most of our waking hours are spent in these secular spheres. And even the church, as the locus for the spiritual, seems more and more to take on the character of the public and the rational. It too becomes a mission field, looking less and less like concretely organized primary communities at worship and looking more and more like a special-
ized secondary society which exists to gather new members as its product and to support each other's psyches as its service. Miriam Warner noted that MBs are nostalgic for rural life and are ambivalent about — even fear — the city. I think that we can be more specific. The city stands for the dissolution of the concrete and the sacred which we still remember and cherish.

Another result is the fossilization of the remaining symbols of the older sacredness. An ethos remains dynamic and adaptable when it is fully enacted in the rounds of life. In that setting, thinking seriously about the common life is "theology"; and such thinking, whatever its forms, can both clarify and affect behavior. But now that much of our religious and interpersonal life is separated from those challenges of life which are experienced at the public "cutting edges," our talk about such issues ceases to be theological. Nor is church the place for serious thinking about such matters. It, and the family and the tribe, are refuges from the often inhumane, mostly secular, rationally constructed, and competitively driven public spheres. And we now react angrily when uncertainties and tensions from the secular spheres emerge also in the home and the church. Therefore the would-be prophets who see the need to re-extend the sacred canopy and who dare to theologize about the secular aspects of existence are actually perceived to be threatening the shrunken forms of the old canopy which still exist.

The concern to keep this churchly form inviolate would help to account for Miriam Warner’s observation that the religious message at Lakewood Church has not changed in forty years. I would argue that the function of this message has changed, even if the form has not. In any case, she could point to the data in the MB Profile which shows that doctrinal beliefs remain high and astonishingly persistent. But then, one could expect stated beliefs that do not impact on life to be held unchanged. Fossils are not supposed to change.

Enns and Dueck were also surprised at the persistence of distinctive beliefs. Some of the other discrepancies between predictions and findings which they note in their reworking of data from the MB Profile may be explicable in the light of the distinction between the private and the public. For example, they are puzzled that although political participation is growing, MBs are less tolerant of the discussion of such issues in the church. I would take this to be reluctance to mix the secular
public spheres with the sacred and private ones. We do not know how to reweave a sacred canopy to cover the secularized parts of our lives, and it would destroy our sense of the older canopy to try to crowd such public activities under it.

And so I agree with Redekop that our ethnicity is often an obstacle for "non-ethnics" who would like to join us (= "choice"). Warner agrees that there are two levels of membership in the congregation she studied and that it is extremely difficult for choice members to enter fully into the ethnic social circle. Yet the MB Profile data shows that choice members are more active in the congregation than ethnic members (hold more church offices, for example). Enns and Dueck conclude that, on the whole, choice members are fully integrated into our churches. I would like to argue that everyone is right, up to a point. Two churches meet whenever an MB congregation gathers. One of those churches is the remembered sacred community at worship. The second one is a public, or quasi-public, secondary association which looks more and more like all the other functional associations we know in modern life. It is fitting that choice members should take a full part in the kind of organizational rationality which that second church has learned from dominant secular organizations. Some of us belong to both churches. Choice members belong only to one of them.

For many choice members, almost the only sacred sphere beyond that of the family would be the congregation. This is not so for the ethnic members, whose clan and tribal connections are, in part, both an alternate church and an extension of it. Paradoxically, activity in the local congregation may be less important for the ethnic while, on the other hand, "ownership" of the church, as a crucial part of the old but shrunken sacred canopy, may be very important. What the Profile data does not tell us is the level of offices held by choice members or whether this officeholding translates into real power. We also do not know whether a representative number of choice officeholders were chosen to participate in the survey. But we are free to suspect that a significant number of choice members are hurt by their inability to enter the ascribed level of membership shared by the ethnic members despite their full participation in the beliefs, mission, and management of the "public" congregation.

This only emphasizes the very great significance of the
Mennonite ethos. What if the “ethnic” juices that flow there are more significant — even religiously — than those which issue from full participation in the “public” church? What if most of us really want to live under a sacred canopy? What if ethnic memory and practice is the last place where something like it still exists? What if the sense that this is possible and is actually present is what attracted others in the first place? If that is the case, then Redekop’s proposal to partially detach and subordinate the ethnic sphere from the churchly might speed the ongoing process of delivering our churches over the spirits of this modern world.

All of this raises the issue of what it means to be a Christian in the modern — or any — world. Redekop argues that a common belief structure should establish the meaning of the church. Warner argues that the ethnos is the carrier of even the religious meaning. To address this requires the introduction of yet another category needed to define the conditions of modernity.

*Functional rationality.* I have used the word “concrete” to specify one of the qualities of the traditional community. What is meant by this word is “all grown together.” The word derives from an older organic metaphor. Modernity, however, “abstracts.” That is, it “pulls out” (ab-stracts) some part of the former concreteness for separate consideration or treatment. Thus the separated spheres for work, play, and even worship were pulled out of what, for traditional peoples, was the all-mixed-together reality of daily activities. Now individuals are pulled out of their small primary communities to enter secondary associations, all of which are *rationally* organized to do efficiently and secularly whatever it is that they do. Then it becomes possible to describe their activities in blueprints and manuals and to “pull out” the “scientific principles” which underlie it all. Finally, schools are abstracted to teach all these abstractions from abstractions — in their own abstract way.

In the traditional community it was possible to learn what needed to be learned by living within it. One was able to mature into an “organic” sense of how it all fitted together and what it took to secure the greater “health.” The goal of life was to become a sage whose wisdom guided the community. But the holiness and healthiness and moderate wealthiness which defined the good became less important in a world that was becoming organized in increasingly functional ways. Now
deliberately acquired expertise and technological “progress” (making or doing more things faster and more efficiently) defined the good that was aimed at. To ambitious youth, the traditional ethos and its wisdom looked obsolete. Even their reluctant elders were forced to submit to the fact that functional rationality had more immediate power than old traditions.

Ironically, the Anabaptist demand for a “believers church,” looks very much like the definition of a secondary association. Like other such associations, one chooses to enter it “away from” the taken-for-granted loyalties of one’s primary group; it appears to specialize in the spiritual aspects of a complete life; and it is based upon a set of axioms and principles which are more or less specific to its character and activities (doctrines). Apparently our sixteenth century forebears were more modern than anyone else at the time, despite their belief that they were reconstituting the early church!

Read from these pluralist and rationalist perspectives, John Redekop’s proposals make a good deal of sense. Cultural Mennonitism blurs the ideals of a believers church. To the extent that ethnicism fossilizes religious content that once authentically expressed the Lordship of Christ, it is actually idolatrous. Since the modern “religious” sphere now mostly means worship, psycho-spiritual therapy, and mission, anything that hinders soul-care and the acceptance of others into our congregations becomes the great sin. Indeed, since the church sphere must be balanced over against other spheres, even the older insistence that Christianity must affect the whole of one’s life becomes suspect, except as rhetoric. Now to be “open” does not mean that one demands seriousness and progress toward excellence; it requires that we love everyone “just as they are.” And it becomes important to stress the particular axioms and principles which are the supposed foundations upon which the “spiritual” sphere is built. Since acknowledging these is the way one legitimately enters into this association, we must now become clear on our “Anabaptist” and “Evangelical” doctrines. From this perspective it seems legitimate to demand that ethnicity be subordinated within the church and, many will say (though Redekop does not), excluded from it to disappear entirely or to find its own sphere — where it could be considered a good thing, albeit a secular good thing. Frances Hiebert pointed out that the Zeit-
geist now affirms ethnicity. Of course it does. Such a separated ethnicity is its product.

No doubt such a position can be made to look desirable. It is certainly modern. It is not, however, Mennonite. Mennonites did not insist on adult baptism because they intended to create a secondary association. They wanted the right to create an entire way of life that would embody the rule of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. To be genuine disciples it was also necessary for each individual to meet Jesus “outside” the holy community. But the Christian then “returned” with the intention to incarnate godliness in the whole of life and to help to build that godliness into every aspect of the geography and ethos that was enclosed under the sacred canopy. Good Mennonites did not pay much attention to something so abstract as dogma, though they were not likely to deny the truthfulness of such statements. They were more interested in whether their lives were the truth.

This Mennonite perspective is definitely not modern. From its point of view, the previous perspective is a complete capitulation to “the spirit of this age.” To the extent that ethnicism represents a refusal to lose the ideal of this way of obeying Jesus, it is very much a threat to the advance of the kingdoms of this world. Just as there are two kinds of “church” present in MB meetinghouses, so there are two kinds of ethnicity present in our soul and in our clan and tribal celebrations. To separate this second kind from our church life is to abandon our most basic spiritual heritage. Redekop, and many of us, are dubious about something so seemingly frivolous as a “Mennonite cabaret.” I am equally dubious about a modern “Anabaptist Evangelical church.” I would not be willing to judge whether either of these belong either to the tares or the wheat. Perhaps that depends on the basic intentions of those who participate in those places.

On the basis of similar distinctions, I am also ambivalent about the label “Evangelical.” That word also is used to name radically different sorts of things. Insofar as it represents the faith and life of those other peoples (even Bible Belt anglos) who insist that God exists and acts and who have also tried to embody God’s rule in their own communities, then it names our brothers and sisters in the faith and also names us. Perhaps that is what it means in Canada. But more and more it seems to denote a way of accommodating to the structural pluralisms
and functional rationalities of modernity. With the demise of communal concreteness, "conservatives" struggle to be Christianly relevant within and through a plethora of rationally structured secondary associations, each of which picks up some single aspect of the shattered wholeness. As a result, para-church and media ministries increasingly define the Evangelical vision. Like secularized ethnicism, these also are the products of modernity and perpetuate its rationalized structures and its alienating rationalisms. If the dissolution of the former wholeness is the cause of the ills which call forth these ministries, then the creation of ever more of these agencies simply contributes to the problem for which they are supposed to be the cure. Of course, evangelicals have insisted on orthodox doctrines. But their collections of propositions seem to me to function more like the axioms and postulates which make abstract functions intelligible than like the classic creedal ascriptions of faith which marked off what could and could not be comprehended under the rule of God. And so these collections have become minimalist (only five fundamentals?) (I do not intend this description to apply to those, like conservative Calvinists, who work within traditional communities and theologies.) Modernizing evangelicals are presently more concerned to justify the Bible as a legitimate source of such foundational truths than to agree on what they might mean. There is also evidence that adherence to such principles is eroding. To support this claim, I refer you to the books of James Davison Hunter (American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity and Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation). They are the source for the categories (as in the three headings above) which I have been applying in this response.

And so, despite my affirmation of what the label has often meant and my agreements with much of what is said by many who still accept the name, I can no longer consider myself an "Evangelical." Sometimes I even wonder whether I can accept the label "Anabaptist." But I am sure of one thing. Whatever more, and sometimes less, that I might wish to be, I can begin by affirming that I am a Mennonite. Whatever sort of community or church the Anabaptists would have produced can only be conjectured. But we know that what emerged after persecutions were Mennonites. I belong to that tradition.

The idea that the "Anabaptist Vision" represents what is
distinctive about our “creed” has led to confusion. I think that what makes Mennonites Mennonite is not so much what is affirmed as it is the way in which we work together to embody in our individual lives and communities what it means to be disciples of Jesus. That is, in fact, what many of our self-descriptions attempt to depict. But others of these descriptions derive from a different spirit. They are attempts to make Mennonites look modern. “Prophetic” Mennonites have even offered the ways by which we have sought to be faithful to God in our communities as truths by which the larger world can be directly reformed. When this is done, something strange happens to our self-descriptions. They become abstracted principles that are assumed to be applicable to an abstracted world.

But can I even claim the label “Mennonite”? We no longer live as Die Stillen im Lande in isolated enclaves. Surely the simple two-kingdom view of reality which put us under God’s canopy and most of the rest of the world under Satan’s is no longer persuasive. (But how many traditional Mennonites were this simple?) Nor do I wish to deny the benefits of modern abstractedness. Though “All truths are God’s truths” may have functioned to “baptize” secularity, there is surely something true about even that cliche. We must go beyond a traditional Mennonitentum. But I do not think that there is much reason for us to exist except as a people which continues to build concrete godliness into both our individual lives and into a coherent community. We must understand that what is done under any particular canopy is done “in part” and includes sin as well as grace. For me, however, this incarnating of “wholiness” is what “Mennonite” names, and it is why I claim the name. Of course, we must also learn how to live in the awareness that God’s canopy encompasses the entire earth.

Beyond Tribalism

I think that many MBs who decry ethnicism have, in fact, confused it with a tribalism which they have outgrown. These are both real things; but, though related, they need to be distinguished. So far we have spoken as if ethnicism is a set of qualities. Now I should like to argue that we must deal with the category of its quantities. All of us began to experience Mennonite reality, or some other, at its least numerous stage — the
family. Beyond that, most of us also learned that there were one or more extensive clans which claimed us. It has been very important to me that through my mother I am part of the Kleinsasser clan of South Dakota and California and many other places. The churches of this Hutter branch of the KMBs were, most basically, constituted by inter-related clans. Church politics was clan politics. The first chapter of Joseph A. Kleinsasser's *A History of Bethel Mennonite Brethren Church: Yale, South Dakota, 1902-1979*, has a subheading, "The Kleinsasser Years." For the second chapter, it is "The Tschetter Years." When these Hutters outgrew their clan identity, their way to a larger tribal identity was blocked and they moved, as individuals, to a larger evangelical identity. The result was that their evangelistic efforts, which were great, did nothing to increase their own churches. For a long time, the only effective way to enter their clan churches was to marry in. Finally the KMBs joined the MBs, which had earlier achieved sufficient numbers to support a tribal identity. I think that we MBs now face a similar crisis. Unless we move to a larger peoplehood, we too, I think, will stagnate.

Quantity and quality are related, as the scripture attests. The Bible scholars yesterday pointed to many helpful texts. But I think that they have missed the forest for the trees. The whole shape of the history of the people of the Bible was presented as a growth from the family of Abraham to the tribes of Israel to the Jewish people. In Acts 1:8 the spread of the Christians was sketched as a movement from their Jerusalem home out to the related "tribes" of Judea and Samaria and then to "the ends of the earth." None of the intermediate stages were abandoned in that growth. Family and tribal linkages remained essential even when peoplehood was reached. St. Paul was proud to be a Benjaminite. Nor could he have been a Roman citizen unless he had also been enrolled in one of Rome's thirty-five tribes.

This is a very bad time in history to try to move to a larger peoplehood. Modern abstractions have so eroded coherence that many people sense that the most important thing we can do now is to rebuild the canopy over the family and, at the next level, the congregation. For nuclear families the modern congregation is what is left of the old clan and tribal networks. And so it is harder to maintain appreciation and support for the larger brotherhood and its causes (e.g., missions, schools). The
nondenominational community church is becoming the ideal. And this church strives to become a "super-church" — to be a complex large enough to provide structures for more of the aspects of life. These churches seem to be trying to reinvent the tribe. Surely, something that can do the job the tribe (or agricultural village) did must be recreated.

There are two problems. The first is that this inward-turning emphasis is stultifying to those whose imagination and abilities fit them to move to larger wholes. It is the role of each level to deliver us "whole-somely" to the next larger level. The turn inward, therefore, alienates the very people who are our "successes." Ethnic MBs and others who have been nurtured by our clans and congregations and tribes become ready to participate in some sort of larger "Mennonite nation." And so they move naturally toward inter-Mennonite endeavors. But instead of understanding that this can be an affirmation and extension of MBness, some think of it as a rejection of authentic religiousness, for the officially sacred has shrunk. And when the church refuses to allow that these endeavors can be incarnational, they may indeed become more secular. Others of those whom we have nurtured will move outward to more abstracted "nations" — Evangelicalism or peace and justice movements. But they will do so as individuals; and while MB churches may be proud of these expatriates, they will not profit from them. To the extent that we lose appreciation for larger concreteness, the best among us will move out and away, in many directions.

The second problem is that our vision will shrink. MBs represent a very small section of the people of God, and we will have lost much of our reason to be if what was distinctively true of us ceases to be our gift to God's larger Kingdom. For our life to expand, some things must die. To remain healthy and relevant, our denominational structures must move to the larger unities which permit us to encompass those spheres through which we are opened out to national and international interactions.

I would like to close by arguing that our gift for godly concreteness is still alive. There also remains a gift for service which can counter worldly abstractness if we can fully "rebaptize" it into the realm of the sacred. While official "denominational" structures have acceded to the shrinking of the sacred canopy and to localisms, many of our laity have stubbornly
gone about inventing ways to bring their sense of Christian vocation to bear on the spheres the church has seemed to abandon to secularity. In doing so they have necessarily reached beyond tribalism. Mennonite Mutual Aid translates deaconly care through the application of actuarial and other tables. Mennonite Disaster Service is a way to give personal aid when trouble strikes wholesale. Mennonite Economic Development Associates extends business acumen into mission. Relief sales extend individual and group creativity into peoplehood celebrations. "Ethnic" celebrations remind us that God's people laugh and play together. And museums remind us to innovate for our time as our elders did for theirs. There are a host of other organizations which bring together Mennonite interest groups and professionals of all sorts to think how to bring grace to tasks and occupations which others pursue in entirely secular ways. All of these pay virtually no attention to present denominational divisions.

Of course, all of these inter-Mennonite associations are also the products of our times. Like other para-church agencies, they are abstracted secondary associations called forth by the challenges created by an abstracting modernity. But the urge which brought them forth comes from an older vision. We must now rethink our world-view in order to understand how all the aspects of our lives fit under God's universal canopy. To do this will mean that we think as hard about Mennonite vision and theology as we have thought about Anabaptist ones. And this means that we must continue to fulfill the meanings of our clans and tribes by becoming a larger but still concretely realized people of God. Nothing less will allow us to continue to build healthy local communities in forms that counter the spirits of our age.

As both the smaller communities and the larger one form, we will discover that ethnicity will gradually cease to be a problem, since we will be creating a people. When we work together to build the Kingdom in a way that increasingly encompasses the parts of our lives, we will constantly be exhibiting the patterns that we discover to be health-bringing. Then irrelevant old patterns will be honored and replaced with new ones. And because a dynamic ethos will be lived and not just evoked, all those who are willing to follow Jesus as we do will have no difficulty knowing how to enter with us into the common task of making real the presence of God. The time
could come when another transition point would tempt our descendants to freeze their still imperfect heritage in the forms of another ethnicity. But that will be their problem, and God's. And then they will need another John Redekop to stir them up to rethink their calling.