



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies in American Mennonite Brethren colleges.

Author(s): Steven Brandt.

Source: *Direction* 23 (1994): 98-106.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/482>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

FAITH AND LEARNING

The Teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies in American Mennonite Brethren Colleges

Steven Brandt

*Four phases...
a role complex
and varied...
a resilience for
three generations*

Mennonite studies have been closely identified historically with two American Mennonite colleges, Goshen and Bethel, the former under the leadership of Harold Bender in 1924 and the latter under Cornelius Krahn in 1944. Each institution has built fine historical libraries and launched journals devoted to furthering interest in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology. Mennonite Brethren have been slower to establish such resources for their own community although the teaching of Anabaptist and Mennonite studies have been part of Mennonite Brethren institutions for the past four generations.

The teaching of Mennonite history in Mennonite Brethren institutions of higher learning in the United States has gone through four phases, roughly reflecting different generations. Each of these phases reflects the larger concerns of the church as it struggled to remain true to its faith in a rapidly changing environment. The first phase began with the founding of Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas in 1908 and continued to the end of World War II. The period of the post-war era until the early 1960s formed the second phase. The third phase extended from 1962 until approximately 1978.

*Direction
Fall, 1994
Vol. 23, No. 2*

Dr. Steven Brandt is Director of Hiebert Library which serves both Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, CA.

Finally, a fourth and present phase, spans the decades of the eighties and nineties.

Phase One: Wedel's Influence Persists

Mennonite History is listed in the Tabor catalogues, in the Bible school department, from 1909 to 1929.¹ During most of this time, it is assumed that the course was taught by D.E. Harder.² Trained at Bethel College between 1898-1900³ by C.H. Wedel, who exercised a life-long influence on the young student, Harder reflected Wedel's understanding of *Gemeindechristentum* (Christian community) as the distinguishing feature of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.⁴ As James Juhnke has pointed out, Wedel adopted some of the ideas which two German historians, Anna Brons and Gottfried Keller, had proposed in the 1880's. Of particular interest to Wedel and Harder was Keller's understanding that Anabaptism stood within a larger tradition of "Old Evangelical" groups.⁵ This view opened Mennonites to a larger intellectual framework: however; because it was expressed in German, Wedel's fell victim to the language transition to English in the next generation. Wedel gave special importance to the *gemeinde* or community as the "carrier of the whole church existence...struggling for independence from civic authority." Anabaptists wanted to "acknowledge as Christians only those true Christians who had joined the congregation out of inner conviction..."⁶

After the reconstitution of Tabor at the height of the Depression in 1932, Mennonite history was taught by several individuals, one of whom was H.W. Lohrenz, former president of the college. Lohrenz had studied at seminaries in Princeton and Louisville. Though his training was not in history, he returned to Tabor as Dean of the Theological School in 1935 and taught the Mennonite History course 1936-37. Interestingly, the course description was changed for the 1935-36 catalogue to include "Anabaptist" for the first time. This description continued in use until the 1942-43 catalog, when the term "Anabaptist" was deleted. We must assume that Lohrenz was responsible for the inclusion. Whether he had acquired an appreciation for "Anabaptism" at Louisville seminary or at Bethel College where he had taught from 1932-34, or from reading such American Mennonite historians as Harold Bender or C. Henry Smith, is unknown.

The first professional church historian to teach in a U.S. Mennonite Brethren college was Cornelius Krahn. A recent Mennonite Brethren immigrant with a doctorate in church history from University of Heidelberg, he came in 1939 to teach German and Historical Theology at Tabor. Krahn taught Mennonite history every year between 1940-44 and continued, albeit in modified fashion, the tradition which reflected Wedel's thought.

Sensing little support for his efforts, and uncomfortable with the direction in which Tabor was moving, he left for Bethel in 1944, where he established the Mennonite Library and Archives, making it a center for Mennonite research. His departure dealt the teaching of Anabaptist history among Mennonite Brethren a heavy blow which took a generation to overcome.

Phase Two: A Tilt to Fundamentalism

The second World War proved to be a watershed in Mennonite Brethren life in the United States. J.B. Toews notes that "prior to the Second World War the Mennonite Brethren Church existed in a protected subculture where religious and social controls aided their efforts to be 'people in the world, but not of the world! Life, theology, and ethics were relatively fixed.'" The changing environment after the war was reflected in the way Mennonites understood and used their history. During this period, the Mennonite Brethren felt an express need to minimize their differences with conservative Protestant culture in the United States, a part of which was an openness to Fundamentalism- a movement which had profoundly transformed American Protestantism during the previous generation. Fundamentalism was a diverse theological and cultural movement which emerged from within American evangelicalism, displaying influences from Pietist, revivalist, millenarianism, nineteenth-century Princeton theology, and holiness traditions. Although it emerged out of established Protestantism, it exhibited a profound ambivalence to the dominant culture. This ambivalence mirrored the experience of Mennonite Brethren as they began to move into the larger culture after the second World War.

Although the influence of Fundamentalism was felt earlier, its full impact began to be felt at Tabor with the naming of P.E. Schellenberg as President in 1943.⁸ The conflict over the whether Tabor College should explicitly reflect Fundamentalist views was to play a role in the departure of Krahn for Bethel College in 1944. While Mennonite history continued to be taught at Tabor during the next decade, it was offered irregularly and was not identified with any professor in particular. C.F. Plett taught "History of Mennonites" in 1945-46, followed by I.G. Neufeld who began a Mennonite Historical Library and who taught Mennonite history in 1946-47.⁹ F.C. Peters, who was President of Tabor between 1954-1956, had completed a thesis on Menno Simons at Toronto the previous year,¹⁰ had limited influence on the Mennonite Brethren in the United States, but he did teach Mennonite history to several individuals who became future church leaders.

One consequence of the growing influence of Fundamentalism in Mennonite Brethren circles was the birth of a new institution of higher learning named Pacific Bible Institute (PBI) in 1944. The theological orientation of the new college reflected Fundamentalist concerns as can be seen from the theological statement in the catalogs.¹¹ Mennonite history was nonetheless listed as a requirement in its first catalogue.¹² During the first two years, apparently J.J. Toews came from his pastorate in Shafter to teach the course in the spring of each year.¹³

One of the early faculty members to become a leader at PBI was G.W. Peters. He had taught church history at Tabor in 1945-46, but not Mennonite history. Peters joined the Pacific faculty in the fall of 1947, having recently completed a doctorate at the Kennedy School of Missions in Hartford, Connecticut. He taught at least one course in Mennonite Brethren history at PBI from the year of his arrival until he left to join the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1959.¹⁴ Peters also taught Mennonite history at the newly established Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary from 1955 until 1959.¹⁵ Peters represents this second period of Mennonite Brethren teaching of its history, as he gave focus to the growing missions thrust of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Few other voices in the United States supplemented Peters; since Mennonite history was not taught at Tabor during this period.

Phase Three: Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" Carries the Day

A major change in the way Mennonite history was conceived and taught began to occur in the early 1960s. This represents the beginning of the third phase of Mennonite Brethren historical consciousness in the twentieth century. Peter Klassen came to Pacific College in 1962 having just completed a dissertation on the "Economics of Anabaptism" at the University of Southern California. This work had been done with the close cooperation of Harold Bender, whose "Anabaptist Vision" was to shape the thinking of two generations of Mennonite Brethren leaders.¹⁶ As a Canadian, Klassen was in contact with the emergence of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" which was known to have influenced some Canadian Mennonite Brethren since J.A. Toews and F.C. Peters had come into contact with the "Goshen school" in the 1940s. The "Anabaptist Vision" saw the essence of sixteenth-century Anabaptism as stressing discipleship, issuing in a new conception of the church as a brotherhood, and expressing an ethic of love and nonresistance.

Other faculty at Pacific came into contact with Anabaptist studies through the graduate student seminars which were being offered in the 1960s. These occasions exposed these faculty to the writings of the "Concern" generation, a group of young American service workers in

post-war Europe who began meeting in Amsterdam for critical discussions on the state of the Mennonite (largely "Old Mennonite") church.¹⁷ It was their refashioned vision which caught the imagination of these Pacific faculty a decade later. Especially influential was the charismatic figure of John Howard Yoder.¹⁸ It was partly through these contacts and lively internal discussion, that the original "Pacific College Idea," a philosophical-theological declaration on the nature of the college, was produced. Pacific defined itself as a Christian college, a community, a liberal-arts college, an experimental college, an Anabaptist-Mennonite college, a non-sectarian college, and finally a prophetic college. This vision fired the imagination of many college faculty through the 1960s and 1970s, and has been seen as one of the most explicit institutional reflections of Anabaptist-inspired thinking.¹⁹

While writing a dissertation on Anabaptism in sixteenth-century Strasbourg, Henry Krahn came to teach at Pacific College in 1967. He continued the emphasis on Anabaptist studies at the college. This interest generated a course in the Radical Reformation, which was offered from 1968 until his departure for Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Winnipeg, Canada in 1974. A number of Mennonite Brethren scholars taught Anabaptist Theology at the college over the next fifteen years, including Peter Klassen and Abe Friesen, both professors of history in California's public universities. However, with the departure of Krahn, no member of the Fresno Pacific College faculty was particularly responsible for or professionally engaged in Anabaptist studies.

After G.W. Peters left Fresno, Waldo Hiebert taught the Mennonite Brethren Church course at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary from 1960 to 1967. The seminary catalogue had been changed in 1962-63, there the "Anabaptist Theology" course was dropped.²⁰ From an analysis of course schedules it is striking to note that it was apparently never taught until A.J. Klassen arrived in 1966.²¹ Klassen was completing a doctorate in theology at the Claremont School of Theology. He, like his brother Peter, had worked in Goshen and reflected this close relationship with the Bender school. Now both Fresno Pacific and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno reflected the impact of the "Anabaptist Vision."²²

Tabor simultaneously experienced a renaissance in the teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. After the departure of F.C. Peters, little attention was given to teaching in this area. Clarence Hiebert came to teach at Tabor, also in 1962, after spending two years teaching at the European Mennonite Bible School. His interest in the field was demonstrated by the two theses he had produced on Mennonite history during the previous decade.²³ Hiebert's arrival was to signal the most continuous attention to the teaching of Mennonite history at Tabor since the departure of Cornelius

Krahn, and the most sustained effort since D.E. Harder to inform a generation concerning their historical and theological roots.

Phase Four: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Resulting Shifts of Interest

The decade of the seventies began to produce a crisis in the larger Mennonite world. Hans-Jürgen Goertz reflected on the previous decade as follows: “[the] cognitive center ... dissolved and created a vacuum into which other, nontraditional viewpoints have flooded struggling with one another to become the determiner of a new center. The old has dissolved and the new is not yet in sight.”²⁴ It was during this period that the Mennonite Brethren began to have ever-increasing contacts with the larger Mennonite world, agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Economic Development Association, and Mennonite World Conference.

Part of this dissolution was the demise of the Bender vision of normative Anabaptism.²⁵ Although the process had manifested itself, primarily in Europe, even before Bender’s death, it became obvious when three historians challenged the Bender-inspired historiography in a 1975 essay, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins.”²⁶ Revisionism in Anabaptist studies reflected the larger trend in the study of the Reformation which had moved from a methodology based on theology to one of social history. Mennonite scholars were particularly affected by this demise of “normative Anabaptism”, as it had served as a central tool in their attempt to reshape the theological focus of the tradition.

The crisis engendered by the new understanding of Anabaptist history came at a time when the Mennonite Brethren were beginning to become interested in their own denomination’s history. Thus begins the fourth and present phase of our treatment. J.A. Toews’ *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* was published in the same year as the essay “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis.”²⁷ It signalled the beginning of a focus upon Mennonite Brethren history, especially in its Russian context. Coincidentally, the Historical Commission was also established by the General Conference at the same time. (In addition, Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies were established at Fresno, Hillsboro, and Winnipeg.) The first effort of the commission was the translation of the scholarly masterpiece of the Russian experience, P.M. Friesen’s *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*.²⁸ Scholarly monographs and numerous articles have appeared during the last twenty years through the support of this body.

Teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies also changed during the mid-1970s. Much of the energy which had gone into teaching sixteenth-century Anabaptist history before 1975 was replaced by Mennonite history, which had not been taught at the college for a decade. Mennonite History, focusing upon nineteenth and twentieth-century history, became a popular course during the next two decades. The course was taught at FPC by John B. Toews and Paul Toews, both of whom are prolific writers on Russian and American Mennonite history, respectively. In some sense the full significance of the demise of the Bender vision did not impact Mennonite Brethren as deeply as other Mennonites because of the shift in Mennonite Brethren interests away from Anabaptist to Mennonite history.

In the last two decades, the study of Anabaptism has been reintegrated into Reformation studies. With the larger decline of dogmatic approaches to the sixteenth century, the kind of sectarian understanding exemplified by Bender, no longer seems necessary or in keeping with ecumenical discussions going on in other circles.²⁹ Perhaps the newer, integrationist model of Reformation studies provides a model for Anabaptist studies within the Mennonite tradition (returning, albeit in revised fashion, to the older, Keller-Wedel tradition which Bender replaced).³⁰ Just as Anabaptist historical research can no longer be done in isolation from other traditions, so questions of Mennonite identity will not be addressed apart from dialogue with other groups who share some, but surely not all, similar experiences.

Furthermore, with the decline of normative understanding of Anabaptist origins, we are allowed to forego the early heroic history.³¹ The ability of second-generation Anabaptists to overcome Anabaptism's rancorous beginnings may provide models for resolving the deep divisions which afflict the late-20th century Mennonite church.

If historians have criticized the rightness of Bender's understanding of the origins of Anabaptism, their concerns have had little impact upon the larger Mennonite community. Rather it was a theological-pastoral concern which produced the most recent crisis in Mennonite circles. In the spring of 1992, Stephen Dintaman, a theologian at Eastern Mennonite College, published an article entitled the "Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision"³² While theologians had been attempting to create a new paradigm in the absence of a normative understanding of Anabaptism, Dintaman challenged their concentration upon an "orthopraxis" which has been the essential tenet of contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite theologizing. Dintaman posited that this focus on orthopraxis did not adequately address late 20th-century Mennonite questions of sin and grace. His short essay has brought forth a flood of controversy, both public and private, as many feel that Dintaman is attacking the entire Anabaptist

tradition. What the long-term consequences of Dintaman's critique will be remains to be seen. He has certainly articulated a concern which a new generation feels deeply.

The role that the teaching of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies has played in the faith and life of the Mennonite Brethren Church, especially in the United States, has been complex and varied. At times the study of Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology has been a way of addressing our relationship to the larger church, while at other times it has been a means of maintaining our separation from perceived dangers in society. The fact that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has been used to serve divergent, even contradictory purposes during a century of American Mennonite Brethren teaching in higher education may not be a sign of its weakness, but instead a measure of its resilience. May the church continue to draw upon this rich resource as it moves into a new millennium.

ENDNOTES

¹ Historical analysis of this early period of Mennonite Brethren educational institutions is an area which needs attention. Beyond superficial findings from catalogs and class lists, a review of the background of those who taught these classes is the only information available.

² Class schedules earlier than 1927 are no longer extant. The author wishes to express his thanks to Peggy Goertzen, Director of the Center for Mennonite Studies at Tabor College, for checking class schedules.

³ M.S. Harder, "My Father", in *Mennonite Life* (July, 1946)

⁴ cf. James C. Junke, "Gemeindechristentum and Bible Doctrine," in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (July, 1983), 206-221.

⁵ *Ibid.* 211.

⁶ Junhke, "Gemeindechristentum", 211.

⁷ J.B. Toews, *Pilgrimage of Faith* (Hillsboro: Kindred, 1993), 205.

⁸ Paul Toews, "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: A Response to Cultural Traditions?" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (July, 1983), 254-255.

⁹ See appropriate catalogs.

¹⁰ Frank C. Peters, *The ban in the writings and life of Menno Simons*. Th.M. thesis. (Toronto Graduate School of Theology, 1950).

¹¹ "Theological Orientation of the College" appeared in each college catalog from 1945 until the present.

¹² Pacific Bible Institute catalog, 1944.

¹³ Course schedules, 1944-45 and 1945-46.

¹⁴ From the 1947-48 to the 1949-50 PBI catalogues, two courses were listed; "Mennonite History" and "Mennonite Brethren History." The former was dropped from the catalogue in 1950-51 and two years later "Mennonite Brethren History" was changed to "M.B. Church and Missions," in 1954-55. A slight change in title to the "History of M.B. Church and Missions" was made in 1955-56, although the course description remained unchanged.

- ¹⁵ Here two courses were listed in the catalogue, "Anabaptist Theology" and "Mennonite Brethren Church." The "Anabaptist Theology" course states that it will focus upon Conrad Grebel, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Menno Simons.
- ¹⁶ Presidential address, American Society of Church History, December, 1943. Harold S. Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* vol. 13 (March, 1944), 3-24 and *Mennonite Quarterly Review* vol. 18 (April, 1944), 67-88.
- ¹⁷ Paul Toews, "The Concern Movement: Its Origins and Early History," in *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring, 1990), 109-126.
- ¹⁸ See particularly his "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, A.J. Klassen, ed. (Fresno: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 1-46.
- ¹⁹ Paul Toews, "From Pietism to Secularism via Anabaptism: An informal history of the changing ideals and relationships between Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Church," Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California. Unpublished manuscript.
- ²⁰ Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary catalog, 1962-63.
- ²¹ Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary course schedules, 1955-1963.
- ²² During this time the Mennonite Brethren Church course was changed from two units to three, and then again to four units in 1964.
- ²³ Clarence Ray Hiebert, "The history of the ordinance of feet-washing in the Mennonite churches. With a survey of the pre-reformation evidences of this practice." (Biblical Seminary of New York: M.Div. thesis, 1954) and "Ethical emphasis of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America," (Phillips University: M.A. thesis, 1959).
- ²⁴ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "The Confessional Heritage in its New Mold: What is Mennonite Self-Understanding Today?" in *Mennonite Identity*, Calvin Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner, eds. (Landam: University Press of America, 1988), 5
- ²⁵ James Stayer, "The Easy Demise of a Normative Vision of Anabaptism," in *Mennonite Identity*, 109-116.
- ²⁶ Klaus Deppermann, Werner Packull, and James Stayer, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1975), 83-121.
- ²⁷ J.A. Toews, *The History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro: M.B. Publishing House, 1975).
- ²⁸ P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, translated by J.B. Toews, Peter Klassen, and Abe Friesen. (Hillsboro: Board of Christian Literature, 1978).
- ²⁹ I am thinking particularly of discussions with Reformed, Baptist, and European "Free-church" traditions.
- ³⁰ See the recently published work by Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (vol. 7 in "Cornelius H. Wedel Historical Series) (North Newton: Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, 1994).
- ³¹ Werner O. Packull, "Between Paradigms: Anabaptist Studies at the Crossroads," in *Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter, 1990), 1-22.
- ³² Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," in *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring, 1992), 205-208.