On the dangers of greed and excess
Mennonites in the Dutch Golden Age

Karl Koop

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch economy could support extravagance. The Netherlands had become an economic superpower, and Mennonites were among those who benefited from early capitalism and an emerging global economy. To be sure, some people came to church dressed in humble clothing, but most Mennonites maintained an average standard of living, and a sizeable number could be counted among the Dutch elite, dominating the whale and herring fisheries, excelling in weaving and textile industries, and thriving in agriculture. Some would even succeed in the arena of shipbuilding and foreign trade.

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Economic success of this magnitude was exhilarating, but how was it to be assessed in theological terms? In the past Mennonites had felt uneasy about material excesses. Their tradition had underlined the importance of discipleship, simplicity, and following Christ through suffering and even in martyrdom. Now, in times of toleration and plenty, these theological virtues were seemingly being set aside. This was at least one of the points that Thieleman J. van Braght (1625–64) tried to bring across in his *Martyrs Mirror* of 1660, which was intended to prick the consciences of the wealthy.[1] Other Mennonite leaders, such as Hans de Ries (1553–1638) and Galenus Abrahamsz (1622–1706), joined in this prophetic critique, with Galenus suggesting that the devil had found a new devious scheme for leading Mennonites astray: he had brought their persecution to an end and had succeeded in interesting them in material things.[2] In December of 1651, the Amsterdam preacher Jacob Cornelisz felt compelled to preach three sermons on excessive ostentation that he

observed in Mennonite houses, celebrations, and clothing, which he perceived to be in direct conflict with simplicity, a core virtue of Mennonite faith.[3]

Perhaps the most sustained critic of emerging Dutch Mennonite capitalism was the Waterlander Mennonite preacher from De Rijp and Zaandam, Pieter Pietersz (1574–1651). For a time Pietersz was a carpenter and builder of windmills, but eventually he became known for his devotional books, tracts, and sermons, especially his popular work *Way to the City of Peace*.[4] Another significant essay—this one addressing economic matters and the temptation of avarice—was his *Mirror of Greed* (*Spiegel der Gierigheydt)*, first published in 1638. The *Mirror* was included in the author's "complete works," his *Opera,* published in 1651 and printed in several subsequent editions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was translated and published in the German language. Christian Neff and Nanne van der Zijpp note that Pietersz's works were not only eagerly read by Mennonites and non-Mennonites in the Netherlands, but they were also popular among Mennonites living in the Palatinate, Prussia, southern Russia, and North America. Especially the Kleine Gemeinde, a break-away group that had formed a separate community of churches in Russia and had settled in Manitoba in the 1870s, was fond of Pietersz's writings.[5]

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Economic views among early Anabaptists

When Pieter Pietersz took aim at the economic evils in his day, he was not introducing something new. His apprehension about the dangers of superabundance resonated with Christian tradition broadly and with his own tradition in particular. Sixteenth-century Anabaptist views on economics underlined sufficiency in life, not surplus. The earliest Anabaptist economic pattern attempted to put into practice the apostolic examples as described in Acts 2, 4, and 5, although there was no consensus among Anabaptists about whether the sharing of possessions should be voluntary or legislated.[6] The Hutterites in Moravia and the Münsterites of northern Europe

preferred to legislate the practice of community of goods, while the Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists that prevailed over time preferred the practice of voluntary sharing and mutual aid. Menno Simons observed that since Christians were members of one body through their baptism and through participation in the breaking of bread, it was expected that Christians would care for one another.[7] True evangelical faith could not lie dormant but would inevitably manifest itself in works of love, within the Christian community and beyond, by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, sheltering the destitute, and "becoming all things to all men."[8] The vast majority of Anabaptists followed this line of thinking. True Christianity avoids the accumulation of capital and demonstrates concern for those in need regardless of whether they are in the church or outside it.[9]

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When times improved and when there were more opportunities to acquire wealth, Anabaptists continued to be generally suspicious of trade and commerce. The Swiss and South German branch of the movement tended to believe that Christians should only participate in agricultural work and in the crafting of household goods. Menno Simons also preferred agrarian work but admitted that it is possible for Christians to be merchants. Nevertheless he wrote to warn people in commerce, lest they be overcome by avarice.[10] And, along with virtually all other Christians of the time, Catholic and Protestant, he rejected the practice of charging interest on loans. Such practice was understood as usury —a form of theft.[11]

These views on capital and commerce would re-emerge in subsequent years in Anabaptist confessional statements. Anabaptists near Cologne, for example, were explicitly critical of greedy preachers who craved high salaries.[12] In their faith statement the Swiss Brethren in Hesse, while allowing for the possibility that Christians could own private property, nevertheless stressed the importance of caring for the poor, avoiding "useless merchant enterprises," and keeping away from the practice of usury.[13] The practice of usury and the attitude of greed were also condemned

in future confessions of faith including the Concept of Cologne of 1591[14] and the Thirty-Three Articles of 1617.[15] And some of these themes would re-emerge in future confessional statements such as the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 and the Prussian Confession of 1660.[16]

Overall, we can observe a fairly consistent position among first-, second-, and third-generation Anabaptists. They assumed that regenerated Christians, born from above, who take seriously the teachings of Christ and have separated themselves from the world to become members of the true body of Christ, will pursue honest work, avoid the practice of usury, and demonstrate works of love—including providing for those in need. Wealth was not condemned outright, but Anabaptists believed that sufficiency, not surplus, is the goal of honest work. Christians might hold material possessions, but ultimately these belong to God and should be shared with others.

When we move forward to the seventeenth century, to the Dutch Golden Age, we observe Pieter Pietersz in his *Mirror of Greed* articulating similar views.

An assault on greed

In several of his writings, Pietersz used the didactic device of dialogue to bring his ideas across. The conversation partners in the *Mirror* are Gerhard, a greedy man who sought only wealth and worldly honours, and Friedrich, a pious Christian brother whose primary aim was to seek "the kingdom of God and its righteousness." By the end of the conversation Gerhard sees the errors of his ways and experiences a conversion that realigns his economic priorities in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament.

In his preface, Pieter Pietersz stated that his primary objective was to bring to readers' attention the destructive root of greed so they can avoid divine condemnation. Given that he had been a builder of windmills, Pietersz would likely have had access to surplus capital, yet he resisted developing a theology that justified or legitimized the accumulation of wealth. He noted that money is not inherently evil and suggested that acquiring much is not the same as being in the state of greed. However, he insisted that being tied to wealth, so that one is unable to part with it, should be viewed as sin. The basis of Pietersz's argument was the New

Testament, especially the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul.[17]

A significant dimension of the *Mirror* is a series of counter-arguments against those who might try to make a case for accumulating capital. For instance, Pietersz considered the common-sense realist position and noted that while it may be a natural human inclination to cling to temporal goods, Christianity is first and foremost about seeking the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Citizens of heaven should seek the heavenly, not the earthly. One cannot serve two masters by simultaneously desiring both the riches of the world and the riches of heaven. In the spirit of the Anabaptist tradition, Pietersz argued that true knowledge of Christ amounts to acknowledging God's promises, embracing Christ's teaching, and taking his ethical directives seriously.[18]

Pietersz also countered the view that Christianity is first and foremost about the interior life. He noted that the ethical imperatives and commands of Christ encompass the whole of life and must be followed literally. It would do no good for a Christian to follow just the inward impulse that concentrates solely on the well-being of the soul. True Christianity should involve attending to all areas of life. It is important to resist the temptation of spiritualizing the ethical directives of scripture. These could not remain a part of the interior life without manifesting themselves in outward, tangible ways. The commands of Christ as they are outlined in the New Testament are to be followed literally, even when the rest of society is unwilling to do so.

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Pietersz also considered practical issues, such as the importance of managing one's own household and investments, and the question of leaving a sizeable inheritance to one's descendants. He seemed to be aware of the wider social consequences that arise when parents do not adequately plan for the well-being of the next generation. He was cognizant of the fact that children left in poverty might well become welfare recipients and a burden to society. He concluded, nevertheless, that showering wealth on

children would inevitably produce negative consequences and would ultimately bring some form of evil on them. Pietersz insisted that rather than leaving wealth to posterity, Christians must think in the first place of the hungry and the naked. Echoing the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, Pietersz noted that when they feed the hungry and clothe the naked, Christians also do these things unto Christ.[19]

Pietersz acknowledged that the accumulation of capital was a central preoccupation of society. He noted that all efforts and all calculation appeared to be focussed on the accumulation of wealth, as people invested in the money markets with the hope of making yearly gains. He also observed that people everywhere seemed to be willing to take great risks and expend enormous amounts of mental energy in order to achieve their economic goals. He noted that the world's interest in accumulating capital was so intense in his day that it seemed possible that one could chase a person through fire merely in order to get a handful of money.[20] Pietersz reminded his readers, however, that true Christians are to share radically different objectives. They should deny themselves the things the world desires, with an acute awareness that their ultimate destiny is the heavenly Jerusalem.[21]

The desire to store up treasures on earth is a great temptation that would lead to folly. As Pietersz noted from the sayings of Jesus, "It is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God'" (see Matt. 19:24).[22] Of course the road of self-denial that leads to the heavenly Jerusalem would not be easy either, but Pietersz insisted that Christians could trust God to empower his true followers to follow through in giving up their attachment to possessions. In fact, for those who have experienced a change in heart, the Christian life is a matter not of giving in to divine coercion but rather of experiencing the genuine joy, consolation, and comfort that flow from inner conviction.[23] It is a natural response to the work and blessings of God within the individual.

In a Calvinist worldview, wealth was often seen as a sign of God's blessings. The patriarchs of ancient Israel were showered with material abundance as a reward for their faithfulness to the divine covenant. Pietersz acknowledged that the scriptures included people who were wealthy and were blessed by God; the

patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were all blessed with abundant material possessions. Yet he did not link material wealth with covenantal faithfulness. Blessings that came from God, he noted, were spiritual. In his view it would be delusional to associate wealth with blessing, even though many Christians were being mislead by this kind of reasoning. The rich congratulated themselves in this way, but they were simply disguising their greed.[24] Wealth may have been present among the patriarchs, but Pietersz saw them as part of the old dispensation, governed by Mosaic law, which Jesus had put to an end. The end of the law was Christ, and the new community was the church. In the present age the people of God experienced not wealth and power but suffering and death.[25] There could be no marriage between the Christian and the mainstream. In contrast to Calvinist views and those of the republic, Pietersz's position held that the Christian life should have a decidedly countercultural character.

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According to Pietersz, this is the essence of true Christianity: believers become one bread and one body. As fat and thin kernels of grain are brought together with water and then baked through fire, without distinction, so also true Christendom consists in the unity of Christians formed to become one bread. That being the case, it is no longer possible for rich Christians and poor Christians to live alongside one another, where social and economic discrepancies and injustices are blatantly obvious. When such situations arise, true followers of Christ will change their ways, deny themselves of their material possessions, and prepare themselves to carry the cross of Christ.[26]

Such countercultural positioning did not mean that Christians would be entirely removed from the affairs of this world. Pietersz recognized that even true Christians would participate in commercial endeavours, such as fisheries and mercantile industries.[27] Nowhere, however, did he suggest that riches gained through commerce might be a sign of blessing or an outcome of a positive covenantal relationship with God. Christians might receive wealth through their economic endeavours, but this state of affairs

does not give license to bask in the riches and comforts of life. On the contrary, acquiring surplus becomes the occasion for helping the other. For an employer, it means an opportunity to pay workers fair wages.[28] For a parent it means trusting that God would take care of the next generation, who, in turn, would avoid unnecessary luxuries, expensive clothing, and excess in food and drink. Even wedding ceremonies would be simplified.[29]As pilgrims in this world, Christians are mere guests; their ultimate destiny is the heavenly Jerusalem, the kingdom of heaven.

An invitation to believers today?

What influence did Pieter Pietersz's *Mirror of Greed* have on those around him? We know that during the Dutch Golden Age, wealthy Mennonites took care of the poor in their midst and that they also concerned themselves with their Swiss Anabaptist counterparts who were experiencing political and economic hardship. Whether the Dutch concern for social and economic justice was a direct result of Pietersz's work is unclear. Moreover, the question of the extent to which Pietersz's exhortations may have shaped and influenced readers in places such as Prussia or southern Russia, or even North America in the last two centuries, is not well established and would benefit from further historical investigation.

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The *Mirror of Greed* is a centuries-old document that comes to most of us from a foreign land and in a language that does not communicate easily in our contemporary setting. Pietersz's exegetical work seems wooden and uncompromising; his rhetorical style brings a level of discomfort. Nevertheless, the *Mirror* may still have something to say to believers. What benefits might derive from a willingness on the part of those of us who enjoy prosperity in North America in the twenty-first century to engage with Pietersz's warnings about accumulation, to question our assimilation into a cultural and economic mainstream characterized by greed and excess? How might it profit us to contemplate his invitation to a deeper integration of inner and outer life, of the spiritual and the material

dimensions of discipleship, of ourselves and our fellow believers, of ourselves and our neighbors who are in need?

Notes

[1] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, 5th ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).
[2] Cornelius J. Dyck, *Introduction to Mennonite History,* 3rd ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 131.
[3] Mary Susan Sprunger, "Rich Mennonites, Poor Mennonites: Economics and Theology in the Amsterdam Waterlander Congregation during the Dutch Golden Age" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1993), 82.
[4] For an English translation, see "The Way to the City of Peace," in *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 231–83.
[5] See Christian Neff and Nanne van der Zijpp, "Pietersz, Pieter (1574–1651)," in *The Mennonite Encylopedia*, vol. 4 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 175; online at http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pietersz,_Pieter_(1574-1651)&oldid=96046.
[6] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 227.
[7] Ibid., 245.
[8] Leonard Verduin, trans., and J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA, and Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1956, 1984), 307, 1034.
[9] Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 247.
[10] Sprunger, "Rich Mennonites, Poor Mennonites, 46–47.
[11] Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 248.
[12] See article 4 of the Kempen Confession, 1545, in *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660*, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 100–105.
[13] See articles 32–35 in the Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse, 1578, in ibid., 84–89.
[14] See "Concept of Cologne" in ibid., 121–22.
[15] See article 24 in "Thirty-Three Articles," in ibid., 235.
[16] See article 9 of "Dordrecht Confession," in ibid., 300–302, and article 6 of the Prussian Confession in ibid., 318–19.
[17] Peter Peters, "Spiegel der Gierigkeit," in *Ausgewählten Schriften* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonitischen Verlagshandlung, 1901), 125–28.
[18] Ibid., 130–32.
[19] Ibid., 130–33, 145–47.
[20] Ibid., 134.
[21] Ibid., 134–35.
[22] Ibid., 138.
[23] Ibid., 136.
[24] Ibid., 174.
[25] Ibid., 140–43.
[26] Ibid., 166.
[27] Ibid., 144.
[28] Ibid., 169.
[29] Ibid., 145.

About the author

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For further reading on economics in Anabaptist-Mennonite history

James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), argues that early Swiss documents were already suggesting the practice of having all things in common, and that this emphasis emerged especially from the peasants; he admits that no consensus developed among Swiss Anabaptists about how this ideal might be practiced. The confessional tradition of Swiss Mennonites confirms this emphasis. The Congregational Order of 1526 (years before the Hutterites came on the scene) states in its article 5 that "none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund . . ." In the 1578 Swiss confessional statement there are explicit articles on private property, the poor, work, usury, and food (articles 32–36). See Karl Koop, *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 22, 84–89.

Three essays on "historical case studies" on mutual aid can be found in *Building Communities of Compassion: Mennonite Mutual Aid in Theory and Practice* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998): "Changing Patterns of Mutual Aid in Ontario, 1864–1994," by E. Reginald Good; "Mutual Aid among the Swiss Brethren, 1550–1750," by John D. Roth; "Mutual Aid among Dutch Waterlander Mennonites, 1605–1668," by Mary S. Sprunger. The volume also includes a select bibliography on Mennonite mutual aid.

The 2009 issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (vol. 27) includes many presentations originally delivered at the conference sponsored by the chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, October 9–10, 2008, on the theme "Mennonites and Money: Wealth and Poverty in the Past and Present." In addition to the article by Karl Koop adapted in this issue of *Vision*, the issue includes the following essays: "Wealth and Poverty in the Mennonite Experience: Dilemmas and Opportunities," by James Urry; "Why the Rich Got Mennonite: Church Membership, Status and Wealth in Golden Age Amsterdam," by Mary S. Sprunger; "Between Frugality and Civility: Dutch Mennonites and Their Taste for the 'World of Art' in the Eighteenth Century," by Yme Kuiper and Harm Nijboer; "Wealth and Power in the Vistula River Mennonite Community, 1772–1914," by Mark Jantzen; "Johann Cornies, Money-Lending, and Modernization in the Molochna Mennonite Settlement, 1820s–1840s," by John Staples; "'We Are Aware of Our Contradictions': Russländer Mennonite Narratives of Loss and the Reconstruction of Peoplehood, 1914–1923," by Reina C. Neufeldt; "Church and Business in Paraguay: An Ecclesiological Paradigm and a Business Company," by Werner Franz; "Rich Mennonites in an Age of Mammon: Is a Messianic Political Economy Possible?" by Travis Kroeker.