Rightly remembering a martyr heritage

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For North American Mennonites today, memories of the Anabaptist martyr tradition are a significant source of group identity. The martyrs tell us we own a faith worth dying for. They prepare us for the possibility of persecution and marginalization in our own time—especially when our pacifist convictions become unpopular in wartime. But martyr memories are not without problems. Is it appropriate for affluent Christians who live in tolerant democratic societies to focus on the theme of Anabaptist martyrdom? How relevant to modern life are the more recent stories, remembered vividly in families of Canadian Mennonites, of suffering under communism and worldwide warfare?

If Mennonite remembering is to be both fully honest and convincingly hopeful, we will not forget the martyrs. But neither will we allow them an exclusive role in our historical imagination.

The original *Martyrs Mirror* of 1660 by Thieleman van Braght breathed an extremely hostile anti-Catholic spirit that reflected Dutch Protestant resistance to Spanish Catholic colonial rule.[1] Three and a half centuries later, these stories can affect our relationships with Catholics. In the spring of 2007, Lois Harder, co-pastor of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, Kansas, taught a catechism class that included a young woman raised as a Catholic. Harder confessed that she found it difficult to tell the Anabaptist martyr stories in ways that would not embarrass or offend the Catholic class member.

Melvin Goering, a former Mennonite mental hospital administrator, has argued that the martyr stories are dysfunctional for modern Mennonites.[2] Martyr stories, Goering wrote, foster arrogance, superiority, and moral smugness. These stories, according to Goering, cannot "provide guidance for a people immersed in culture," "for a people in need of a positive vision of authority and institutional ethics."

Right remembering: Confront the evil in the other and forgive

How can we rightly remember the martyrs? One option is silence—a time-honored Mennonite strategy for dealing with conflict. By setting aside the martyr stories, we can avoid complicating relationships with spiritual descendants of our sixteenth-century persecutors. But the price of silence can be great. We need to confront the evil in our past—the evil of our persecutors and our own evil. Forgiveness, wrote Desmond Tutu, "involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them."[3]

The popular Mennonite history book by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Through Fire and Water,* paints an initially favorable portrait of Martin Luther. But this good person eventually did bad things to Anabaptists.[4] Loewen and Nolt say that Luther believed there was a connection between the Peasants Revolt and Anabaptism and became convinced "that even the peaceful Anabaptists were devils in disguise." Luther indiscriminately condemned the Anabaptists, in part because he feared that people would blame *him* for the Peasants Revolt. We need to understand the complexity of Luther's situation, including his motives, both benevolent and selfish.

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Right remembering of a martyr heritage is no easy task. If the stories are to be honest about what happened in the past, and if they are to result in forgiveness and reconciliation, we must tell accurately the extent of the persecution and suffering. And we must do all we can to understand and embrace the situation and character of those who perpetrated the persecution. The forgiveness of honest confrontation and embrace is more profound than the forgiveness of silence and forgetting.

Right remembering: Confront the evil in ourselves and repent

A great hazard of martyr memories is self-righteousness. We who would rightly remember our martyr ancestors must learn how to see them not only as victims but also as flawed people who were part of a flawed movement. Remembering our flaws has not been easy for Mennonites, in part because for the better part of the

twentieth century our historical agenda was to revise the centuries-long establishment-orthodox view of Anabaptists as antinomian radicals whose true character was revealed in the violent apocalyptic kingdom at Muenster of 1534–35. The Goshen (Indiana) school of Anabaptist historiography, led by Harold Bender, John Horsch, and scholarly publications in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* undertook a rehabilitation of the reputation of Anabaptism. Bender used a theological typology to classify Reformation groups and to argue that mainstream Anabaptism, or "Anabaptism proper," was a peaceable movement different and separate from the violent Muensterites; thus the Mennonites were not culpable for the Muenster debacle.

The Goshen school's revisionist views were influential, but the impulse to see the Kingdom of Muenster as definitive of the Anabaptist movement remains very much alive. Anthony Arthur's book, *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster,* was prompted by the author's quest for a historical parallel to David Koresh and the Branch Davidians who were destroyed at Waco, Texas, in April 1993.[5] Arthur seemed to be aware that most Anabaptists were peaceable people with a peaceable theology. Like most religious folk of their time, Anabaptists expected the imminent return of Christ. A great majority of Anabaptists did not set an exact time and place for Christ's return, nor did most of those who did so expect to engage personally in a violent end-time fulfillment. Nevertheless, Arthur's book—and his repeated naming of the "Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster"—conveys the impression that the Muenster episode was *the* definitive Anabaptist event. This characterization may be analogous to holding the terror at Waco in 1993 as definitive of Seventh Day Adventism because David Koresh's group was an offshoot of the Adventists. It falls short of right remembering.

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Historians of Anabaptism in recent years have revised the Bender school's normative Anabaptist vision. The new revisionists have shifted somewhat from theological history to social history, and have narrowed the conceptual difference between the

Muensterite radicals and the wider Anabaptist movement. They have insisted on an acknowledgment of the facts of historical genesis: Muenster did arise in part out of Anabaptism. Mennonites should acknowledge the connections between the Anabaptist movement and its violent fringe. Not least of the reasons for doing so is to confess that our attitudes toward our enemies, or those who are most unlike us, are in continual need of repair. Even as we Mennonites rightly distinguish ourselves from the violent Kingdom of Muenster, we do well to see something of ourselves in the radical fringe as we confess our own potential for anger, hatred, and revenge.

Right remembering and right living

From an Anabaptist perspective, right remembering is a part of Christian discipleship and mission. Our ways of remembering should be conducive to our walk as disciples of Christ. Our remembering should influence our behavior. Even if we find ways to honor our ancestors while acknowledging their failings, and if we find ways to more fully engage and understand those who persecuted our ancestors, we will gain little if we do not repent of our own sins in our own time, and learn to love and forgive our neighbors. Nor should we forget that our worldwide community of faith includes believers who still suffer persecution.

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Part of right remembering and right living has to do with our relationships to dispossessed and disadvantaged people in our own society and overseas. The stories of the martyrs find immediate resonance among Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America who have vivid memories and current fears about the oppression of "cultural revolutions" or incidents of terror directed against believers. Historian Robert Kreider has suggested that extensive Mennonite Central Committee and mission involvements overseas have helped Mennonites identify with the plight of the hurting. Those people are remarkably eager to have the Anabaptist martyr stories translated into their own languages.

Right remembering should also help us envision a future of greater wholeness and fulfillment. Martha Minow, in her book on memories of recent mass violence, warns against the wrong remembering that happens "when the truth attends to a past without affording a bridge to the future."[6] If Mennonite remembering is to be both fully honest and convincingly hopeful, we will not forget the martyrs. But neither will we allow them an exclusive role in our historical imagination. For our relationships with others, and for energy in kingdom work in societies democratic or dictatorial, we must nurture a balanced and positive understanding of our past as a people of God.

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Notes

[1] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians,* 5th English ed., ed. and trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).
[2] Melvin Goering, "Dying to Be Pure: The Martyr Story," *Mennonite Life* 47 (December 1992): 9–15. Goering, "A One-Sided Diet: Martyrdom and Warriors," www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2006Dec/goering.php.
[3] Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), 271.
[4] Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 63.
[5] Anthony Arthur, *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Muenster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 198–99.
[6] Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 62.

About the author

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