

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Commemorating Anabaptism's 500 years

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Editorial

Karl Koop

In 2025, Anabaptist communities around the world will have an opportunity to commemorate Anabaptism's 500 years of existence. There is much to ponder about commemorating, given the evolving nature of the tradition and its geographical reach. The Anabaptist movement began in Europe but eventually also found footing in the Americas and the Global South. Like many religious traditions, Anabaptism cannot easily be defined by clearly marked boundaries and characteristics. Over the centuries, the tradition has become more like a multi-coloured tapestry shaped by fluid and overlapping religious cultures. Commemorating will mean different things to different people, and these "moments of memory activation" are an occasion for us to consider what narratives are worth telling.¹

In this issue, Laura Schmidt Roberts notes that a growing body of scholarship has called attention to "the ambiguous, mixed history of the Anabaptist tradition regarding matters of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, power, domination, and abuse." Evidently, Mennonites cannot solely call to mind stories of heroism. If a religious tradition is to have a future, the act of commemorating needs to critically engage with the past.

A recently published pamphlet, *Gewagt! (Daring!)*—produced by German-speaking Mennonites and Baptists in Europe—notes that "for 500 years the Anabaptist movement has been a story of highs and lows, of new awakenings, of decline and renewal of debates, discussions and controversies, of courageous faith and feeble faith." The pamphlet goes on to suggest that such a story has the capacity to inspire ongoing reflection of one's own convictions and to be genuinely curious about the faith of others.² Observing the past, then, is not simply about the past but is also always about questions of the present day and the kinds of relationships we have with others.

1 Katherine Hill, "Memories from the Margins? Anniversaries, Anabaptists, and Rethinking Reformations," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no. 4 (October 2019): 531.

2 Leonard Gross, trans., "Daring! The Anabaptist Movement, 1525–2025," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 550.

This issue begins with an essay about whether a celebration in our time makes sense at all. Arnold Snyder answers with a qualified yes. Remembering rightly “can never be purely hagiographical,” he notes. Rather, it “must include the bad as well as the saintly; otherwise, the story is mere propaganda.” Next, Sarah Kathleen Johnson takes aim at the notion of tradition particularly when it is reduced to ethnicity or a list of theo-



The Mennonite story is complicated, and there is a need for reckoning and coming to terms with the mistakes of the past.

logical distinctives. She suggests that we should think about the tradition as a “chain of memory,” a dynamic that allows for making changes, building on those parts where we want to grow. In a similar vein, Laura Schmidt Roberts suggests that a “tradition lives only as it is refigured and reembodyed in the

present via the open, intentional, self-critical engagement of situated interpreters.” She believes that traditions must be interrogated, accompanied by questions “about how elements of power, interest, and ideology have shaped and misshaped the understanding and practice of Anabaptism as a Christian tradition.”

The next essays address Anabaptism’s martyr tradition. Jennifer Otto includes a warning that valorizing martyrs can contribute “to cultures of abuse that silence victims and protect people in power.” She addresses the thorny question of who can be classified as a genuine martyr and adds that martyrdom is not something that Anabaptists invented but belongs to the larger history of the Christian church. Similarly, Susanne Guenther Loewen shrinks from seeing the martyrs solely “as unwavering heroes of the faith.” She proposes reading the martyr tradition “through the lens of trauma theology,” recognizing that the stories can illustrate perseverance and strength but also tragedy and violence. She advocates for an approach that includes “double tellings” and multiple narratives. Finally, Chris Huebner examines the strange incident of a Dutch Roman Catholic priest wanting to create a monument in honour of the radical Anabaptists who, in 1535, were put to death for attempting to take over the Bloemkamp abbey near Bolsward. Huebner provocatively suggests that the priest has given Mennonites a gift of “reconstituting our own memories.”

The Mennonite story is complicated, and there is a need for reckoning and coming to terms with the mistakes of the past. From different vantage points, three writers address the problem of past wrongs. Hans Werner provides a thoughtful reflection regarding the way we might come

to terms with the fact that Mennonites participated “in the crimes of Germany against Jews during the Second World War.” Sarah Augustine urges Mennonites to decolonize their theology, stand with the marginalized, relinquish control, and find ways of indigenizing their “assumptions, ideas, values, systems, and practices that reflect a colonizer’s dominating influence.” Drew Hart adds to this discussion by insisting that reparations must be included in the reconciling process. Without reparations, contemporary Anabaptists cannot genuinely claim to be a peace church.

The final contributions turn to Anabaptism’s global reality. Doug Klassen recounts his experiences with churches of the Global South and argues that Mennonites of North America have much to learn from these brothers and sisters who, he believes, embody the future of Anabaptism. From an Ethiopian perspective, Henok Mekonin provides an overview of the Meserete Kristos Church, noting the degree to which this burgeoning Christian community is rooted in Anabaptist values and simultaneously reflects a hybrid character that is highly tuned to ecumenical relationships. Finally, Gordon Zerbe gives attention to the apostle Paul, who he sees as both embracing and contesting his own tradition. Zerbe concludes that commemorating the Anabaptist tradition has its place, but like Paul, Anabaptists need to think seriously about reframing their tradition. More origin stories, for example, must be integrated “into the narrative of what is now *global* Anabaptism at 500.”

In considering Anabaptism’s quincentenary, this issue invites further reflection on what it means to be Anabaptist today and suggests potentially fruitful pathways forward. While the publication marks Anabaptism’s 500 years, it also points to this journal’s twenty-fifth anniversary. Those of us at AMBS, CMU, and the journal’s editorial council—who are responsible for this semi-annual publication—trust that *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* will continue to be a vital resource for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition and beyond.

About the author

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Should we celebrate birthdays?

On the first adult baptisms in Zurich

Arnold Snyder

On January 18, 1525, the Zurich council promulgated a mandate in which it decreed that “all children shall be baptized as soon as they are born” and, further, that all children hitherto unbaptized were to be baptized “within the next eight days.” Those who refused to comply were to be banished. A second decree on January 21, 1525, closed the “special schools” where such matters were discussed and specified that Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz were to be silent in the future.¹ Shortly after that second decree, probably on the evening of January 21, a small group gathered a few blocks from the cathedral, in the house of Felix Mantz’s mother. What happened next is recorded in the Hutterite *Chronicle*:

*Georg Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptize him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the truth. With this request he knelt down, and Conrad baptized him. . . . Then the others turned to Georg in their turn, asking him to baptize them, which he did.*²

With this first-known act of “adult baptism” in the early modern period, a movement began that led eventually, by various paths, to the Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite—and arguably the Baptist—traditions, now five hundred years later.

1 Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985), 336. Zwingli had initially encouraged Scripture reading in the vernacular in lay groups, the earliest led by Andreas Castelberger already in 1522, with other groups led later by Grebel and Mantz. These “schools” resulted in divisive ideas. See Andrea Strübind, *Eifriger als Zwingli. Die frühe Täuferbewegung in der Schweiz* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003), 138–47; Arnold Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80 (October 2006), 504–505.

2 *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, NY: Plough, 1987), 45. The date is established by Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ*, trans. J. Nordenhaug (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing, 1966), 20.

Why we should celebrate birthdays

It is worthwhile to celebrate all birthdays, including the five hundredth birthday of this “adult baptizing” tradition. With such a commemoration, we remember the coming into the world of a unique religious movement. The first adult baptisms marked new commitments that would endure going forward. Not for nothing were adherents of this movement known as “baptizers” (*Täufer*) or, pejoratively, “re-baptizers” (*Wiedertäufer*).

The first baptism of adults on confession of faith was at the same time an emphatic rejection of infant baptism and a new way of understanding the church and the Christian rite of entry into the church. About a month before the first baptisms, Felix Mantz had written that baptism should be given to

*one who having been converted through God’s Word and having changed his heart now henceforth desires to live in newness of life, as Paul clearly shows in the epistle to the Romans [6:3–4], dead to the old life, circumcised in his heart, having died to sin with Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and arisen with him again in newness of life, etc. To apply such things as have just been related to children is without any and against all Scriptures.*³

Based on their reading of Scripture, the first adult baptizers were convinced that baptism, properly understood and performed, involved a spiritual conversion or “change of heart” marked by baptism in water, all of which led from an old life of sin to a new life in Christ—a process no infant could undertake, water or no water. The baptism of adults emerged from an interpretation of Scripture that placed authoritative emphasis on the words and actions of Jesus Christ and the apostles—a solid Christocentrism anchored the baptizing movement that survived.⁴

By taking baptism into their own hands, Blaurock, Grebel, Mantz, and the other unnamed participants took the traditional Christian rite of entry into the church into their own hands. These adult baptisms marked entry into a church that did not yet exist. It was not at all clear in January

3 Harder, *Sources*, 313.

4 Mantz wrote: “God wills that we keep his commandments and ceremonies, as he has commanded us.” Harder, *Sources*, 314. Heinrich Bullinger recalled that “they drew on Scripture from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles and pointed out that the apostles had not baptized infants but only adult discerning people.” Harder, *Sources*, 335.

1525 what this “baptizing church” would look like. Although the first adult baptisms in Zurich were significant and marked a new direction, it is helpful to think of this event precisely as the “birthday” of what would come later, a day when the infant, still plump and unformed, contemplated a journey of diverse development yet to come.

What the “birthday” was not

The baptisms of January 1525 were a direct contravention of Zurich’s legal decrees and placed the practitioners outside the law. Baptizing in this way was an assertion that the church is in the hands of believers, not of



Separation from the state was a by-product of the political situation, not a principle followed by the first baptizers.

the state. In retrospect, it might appear that the separation of church and state was being put into action here, but it is a mistake to attribute the pursuit of such a principle to the first baptizers. Their central concern was obedience to the New Testament; the principle being put into action was “we must obey

God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). The result of this “scriptural obedience” was the creation of a church that followed its own understanding of Scripture and so threatened the political-religious unity of the time. Any church of that time that insisted on running its own affairs was criminalized by the state. But separation from the state was a by-product of the political situation, not a principle followed by the first baptizers. In the short-lived Anabaptist cities of Waldshut and Nikolsburg (1525; 1526), for example, the baptizing church and the local state worked hand in hand.

The separation of church and state that emerged as an Enlightenment principle in seventeenth-century thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson followed from the attempt to create a secular state; it had nothing to do with obedience to a biblical principle, just as the marginalization of Anabaptist churches had nothing to do with attempting to establish a secular state. It was an accident of history that later secular states made room for Anabaptist-descended churches along with other denominations and religions. It is not the case that sixteenth-century baptizers prepared the way for religiously plural secular states, except in the most accidental way by being a church outside the law. It is misleading to celebrate a democratic achievement when we celebrate our birthday in 2025; the baptizers were looking inward to the church.

The many forms of the baptizing church

The adult-baptizing church that came into being in January 1525 was unformed in fundamental ways, and almost immediately there were varied attempts to live out this new faith commitment. Balthasar Hubmaier,

The adult-baptizing church that came into being in January 1525 was unformed in fundamental ways.

writing from Anabaptist Waldshut in July 1525, first articulated the biblical structure supporting a church of baptized adults. As he described it, with their spiritually informed water baptism, adult believers committed themselves to mutual discipline, living a new life informed by their spiritual new birth, and

celebrating a memorial Lord's Supper as a pledge to each other and of their surrender to the will of Christ.⁵ Hubmaier's sound biblical work is essentially repeated to this day, but there was much that he did not address.

Hubmaier worked to establish Anabaptist churches within local state structures—which assumed that taking the sword of the state was allowed—but his attempts failed in short order. An altogether different understanding of adult baptism emerged in southern Germany. The Anabaptist leader Hans Hut baptized adult converts in an end-times context, convinced that he was personally marking the 144,000 elect with a cross in water on their foreheads. Hut expected that baptized believers would soon participate in the extermination of the ungodly, but he died in 1527—well before the second coming, it turned out. Following the collapse of the Peasants' War, and in contrast to both Hubmaier and Hut, Michael Sattler's Schleithem Articles of 1527 outlined a separated, pacifist baptizing church that would have nothing to do with the state, refusing both sword and oath. In yet another iteration of the adult baptizing movement, some years later in Strasbourg, Melchior Hoffman outlined a baptizing church of the end times that, thanks to his followers in the north, established itself as the notorious Anabaptist kingdom of Münster (1534–35). Still further, in Moravia in 1533, followers of Jakob Hutter understood the baptizing church to be separated from the state in the Schleithem manner but specified that in the true church all goods must be held in common. Fi-

5 H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989), chapter 9, "Summa of the Entire Christian Life," 81–89.

nally, from among the baptizers also emerged those who concluded that the true church would be purely spiritual, with no visible, physical rites necessary at all.⁶

This sampling of early baptizing interpretations of how to be church in the first *decade* after the first adult baptisms in Zurich demonstrates that there was not just one movement born in January 1525; rather, this birthday marked the first of different adult baptizing movements in different locations that developed in their own ways—some of which did not survive over time.

When looking back over five hundred years of adult baptizing history, the temptation for those of us standing in the line of succession is to paint a rosy, edifying picture. But right remembering can never be purely hagiographical. Recalling the realities of the past must include the bad as well as the saintly; otherwise, the story is mere propaganda—admittedly of the finest sort, but propaganda nonetheless. For example, thousands of baptizers died heroically as martyrs for their faith,⁷ but many more recanted, and some of the recanters were also executed. There were other baptizers who died fighting or were executed for supporting violent revolution. One must agree with Charlie Kraybill that the early baptizing movement included them all, and they should all be remembered.⁸ It is edifying in a more realistic way to remember that some but not all of our baptizing ancestors would qualify as heroes of the faith.

Migration, resettlement, and a global church

A significant part of the five-hundred-year history of the baptizing movements that survived (Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites) is the amazing story of migration and resettlement, first in Europe and then to both North and South America. In the first century or two in Europe, local rulers could be found who overlooked religious peculiarities in return for en-

6 For example, Obbe Philipps, who baptized Menno Simons, eventually left the baptizers and became a spiritualist.

7 Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. by Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1972), published originally in Dutch in 1660. The *Martyrs Mirror* did not include persons who recanted prior to execution or any who were executed for being revolutionaries.

8 See the excellent detailed collection: *The Marginal Mennonite Society's Guide to the Anabaptist Martyrs of Europe 1524–1614*, 2nd ed., compiled by Charlie Kraybill (Marginal Mennonite Society, 2018); https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/25737/Anabaptist_Martyrs_Guide_2018.pdf. Kraybill expands on the *Martyrs Mirror* by listing those executed after recantation and those put to death as revolutionary Anabaptists.

ergetic and skilled workers: farmers in the Palatinate and Prussia, swamp drainers in the Vistula delta. Many stories could be told of the efforts made to maintain the principle of nonresistance and independence from local educational and religious institutions, as the baptizers resettled. At the same time, governments anxious to secure marginal lands after displacing indigenous groups were often happy to settle hard-working baptizing groups there. We are only beginning to come to terms with what it meant to be “given” lands formerly inhabited by Cossacks in the Ukraine or by indigenous people in Paraguay, Bolivia, and North America. By occupying and working these lands, often in remarkable ways, our baptizing ancestors unwittingly served the forces of colonization. Reflecting on our history of migration and settlement raises the question: Now that we are aware of the wider significance of how we settled indigenous lands, what should be our constructive response?

As the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth in North America, a significant number of Mennonites became increasingly acculturated via Protestant fundamentalism. A theological tradition that had incorporated ethics into an understanding of salvation was now separated out into a two-track formula that separated ethics from salvation (and emphasized salvation). As Theron Schlabach has described it, “The ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ mentality of quickened Mennonites (of the 1890s) seemed to have more in common with the cultural self-confidence and imperialism of the modern Protestant missionary movement than with Anabaptism.”⁹ Schlabach writes,

*Now salvation became a matter of the Reformers’ preoccupation with guilt of past sin, a revival-style acknowledgment of that sin, and a turning to a Christ who had fulfilled the ritual of sacrifice to a judging God. The call was to that, more than to following the Lord who offered instruction, example, and a new community for a life of suffering love.*¹⁰

The revivalist understanding of conversion and salvation called North American Mennonites to mission, both local and foreign, and changed the discourse around “church” in many Mennonite congregations.

9 Theron Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863–1944* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 48, 52; “quickened Mennonites blurred the Anabaptist insight that church and world, gospel and national culture were radically different” (48).

10 Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel*, 51.

An alternative direction appeared in 1944 with the publication of Harold S. Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision."¹¹ The Anabaptists, Bender affirmed, understood "Christian life as discipleship, the church as a fellowship of believers, [and] the way of love and nonresistance in human relationships."¹² In contrast to the Protestant emphasis on faith and atonement, Bender underlined that for the historical Anabaptist parents

The influence of Bender's vision on the Mennonite church's self-understanding was profound and long-lasting.

in the faith, belief must result in newness of life. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz notes, for Bender "the picture of the Anabaptists blurred into that of contemporary Mennonites," providing a historical "vision" for the current church while blurring historical sixteenth-century realities.¹³ Albert Keim

observes that nevertheless, by the 1940s "sixteenth-century Anabaptism . . . became the orthodox filter through which Mennonites received their theological orientations."¹⁴ While the historical details of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" were challenged and superseded by academic historians,¹⁵ the influence of his vision on the Mennonite church's self-understanding was profound and long-lasting.¹⁶ Whatever else it did, "The Anabaptist Vision" replanted historical roots at the heart of Mennonite identity.

In the meantime, the mission-minded North American Mennonites had been hard at work, planting Mennonite churches abroad in a broadly Protestant revivalist mode. Looked at globally, and more than a century after mission plantings began, the results are beyond surprising. The Men-

11 Delivered as the presidential address at the December 28, 1943, meeting of the American Society of Church History in New York City. Published first in *Church History* (March 1944) and reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1944). For a good historical overview and summary, see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), chapter 14, "The Anabaptist Vision," 306–331.

12 Keim, *Bender*, 331.

13 Cited in Keim, *Bender*, 328. See also Rodney J. Sawatsky, *Mennonite Identity Definition through History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2004).

14 Keim, *Bender*, 327.

15 See, for example, James Stayer, Klaus Deppermann, and Werner Packull, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1975), 83–121.

16 Albert Keim notes, "By the mid-1960s the concept of discipleship had become the common property and the theological meeting place for Mennonites of virtually all theological orientations." Keim, *Bender*, 527.

nonite World Conference currently counts 2.13 million baptized believers in 86 countries. The totals by continental region in 2020 find Africa with the most adult baptized believers in the world, at 36.4 percent (there were zero adult baptized believers in 1900), followed by North America (30.5%), Asia and the Pacific (20.6%), Latin America and the Caribbean (9.5%), with the least in Europe (about 3%).¹⁷ The churches that have grown the fastest, and continue to grow at remarkable rates, are those that came under the energetic leadership of local people: in Ethiopia, Congo, Indonesia, and India, for example. No doubt the most significant story, five hundred years after the first adult baptisms, is the rooting and rapid indigenous growth of Anabaptist-based churches in the two-thirds world.

As we read the historical developments in our baptizing denominations through the eyes of faith, we are attempting to discern the work of the Holy Spirit as the baptizers sought to follow Scripture over centuries, in their different contexts, incarnating the church in their specific ways. There is much to treasure and much to question in this history. We should be open to receiving both encouragement and warning as we ponder five hundred years of growth and change.

About the author

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¹⁷ Information taken from mwc-cmm.org/membership-map-and-statistics.

Tradition and hope

A Mennonite chain of memory

Sarah Kathleen Johnson

Mennonite identity and ethnicity

A few years ago, I walked into a small Mennonite church in Indiana.¹ A woman warmly welcomed me and asked my name. “Sarah,” I responded.

“What’s your last name?” she asked.

“Johnson,” I replied.

“Janzen?” she responded, hopefully.

“No, Johnson.”

When I visit Mennonite churches as a guest speaker, I am often asked, “What is your maiden name?” I am married, but Sarah Johnson is the name I had when I was dedicated as a baby at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener and later baptized there at age fifteen, when I attended Rockway Mennonite Collegiate for five years and lived at Conrad Grebel University College for four, when I received a master’s degree in theology from Grebel and served as a pastor at Ottawa Mennonite Church, and when I spent five years on the *Voices Together* hymnal and worship book editorial team. Yet it remains inconceivable to some that I serve in leadership roles in the Mennonite church without sharing this ethnic heritage.

For some people, *zwieback*, *rollkuchen*, *vereniki*, farmers sausage, and pie are a big part of what it means to be Mennonite. Yoders, Martins, Klasens, and Wiebes claim Mennonite identity—at times whether they want to or not. These ethnic conceptions of Mennonite identity are reinforced in popular phenomena like *The Daily Bonnet* satire news website (now *The Unger Review*) and the *Mennonite Girls Can Cook* blog and cookbooks.²

1 An earlier version of this essay was written and shared as the Founders’ Day keynote address at the seventy-fifth anniversary of Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener, Ontario, in February 2020. Colossians 3:12–17 was the scriptural focus of that gathering.

2 See www.ungerreview.com and www.mennonitegirlscancook.ca, both of which rely heavily on ethnic conceptions of Mennonite identity. While the intent is humour and sharing recipes, a side effect is reinforcing the centrality of ethnicity.

There is nothing wrong with being ethnically Mennonite. Immigrant groups with Swiss, Russian, and Latin-American ties have anchored the Mennonite tradition in Canada and the United States for generations. This is a heritage to celebrate.

But the Mennonite church has changed. More than twenty-five languages are spoken in worship in Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA congregations. Worldwide, the vast majority of Mennonites live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and claim a diversity of ethnic and cultural identities.³ There are more and more people like me:

There is nothing wrong with being ethnically Mennonite, but the Mennonite church has changed.

people who were born into the Mennonite tradition but who do not share a specific ethnic heritage.

I have the privilege of being able to pass as “ethnically Mennonite” because I have been part of settings that taught me how to navigate this culture, and because I am white. This is not the case

for many Mennonites of colour, who are often celebrated as bringing diversity without being fully embraced. Korean Paraguayan Mennonite theologian and pastor Pablo Kim describes his experience of this struggle and calls Mennonites to move beyond superficial multi-culturalism to become deeply intercultural—to practice “genuine engagement among cultures” with “each culture influencing the others,” leading to “mutual transformation.”⁴

Mennonite identity and theology

Along with ethnicity, there is a second way that Mennonite identity is often described: lists of beliefs and practices (“distinctives”) that supposedly set Mennonites apart. Some of the most famous lists are Harold Bender’s *The Anabaptist Vision* (1944), Stuart Murray’s *The Naked Anabaptist* (2007), and Palmer Becker’s *Anabaptist Essentials* (2017).⁵ Often the lists include values like following Jesus, community, and peacemaking.

3 Mennonite World Conference, “Map and Statistics,” <https://mwc-cmm.org/article/map-statistics>.

4 Hyung Jin Kim Sun, “Intercultural Global Theology,” *Vision* 19, no. 2 (2018): 81–89.

5 Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 1944); Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2007); Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2017). The Shared Convictions of Mennonite World Conference are in a different category than the other three examples because

There are people who choose to be Mennonite because they are inspired by this vision of Christian faith and life. It can be helpful for all of us to name core values. But it is problematic to define who is and is not Mennonite based on these checklists for at least three reasons.

First, checklists of convictions can make us imagine that religion can be separated from culture, that values can exist apart from context. In real-

It is problematic to define who is and is not Mennonite based on checklists.

ity, values always come from somewhere and are always lived out somewhere. In addition, those who make these lists—often older, white, European and North American, academic men—are shaped by

their contexts. Do their lists really reflect what it means to be Mennonite for everyone, everywhere?

This brings us to the second problem: many Mennonites would not affirm these lists. Some who identify as Mennonite do not identify as Christian. Those who identify as Mennonite are committed to an increasingly broad range of beliefs and practices. Furthermore, in this secular age, most of us live with doubt and uncertainty.⁶ These lists do not describe the breadth of who Mennonites are today.

The third and most concerning problem of lists of distinctives is that these values are shared with many other Christians; they are not unique to Mennonites. Mennonites have a lot to learn from the Society of Friends (Quakers) about peacemaking, from Benedictine monks about community, and from evangelicals about everyday devotion to Jesus. I have spent most of the past decade on the edge of the Mennonite community: at

they were created and affirmed through a collaborative, consensus-based process in the worldwide church. Furthermore, even within this brief document, there is a sentence that acknowledges it is as much the historical tradition of origin as the content of the convictions that makes them Anabaptist: “In these convictions we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modelled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ.” For more on the history of the Shared Convictions, see Sarah Johnson, “The ‘Shared Convictions’ of Mennonite World Conference in Developmental Context and Ecumenical, Anabaptist and Global Perspective,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 36–56.

⁶ Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes how the plausibility conditions that make something believable or unbelievable have shifted since the medieval period. This makes unbelief possible and transforms the character of all belief in contemporary contexts. It becomes possible to construct meaning and significance without reference to the divine or transcendence. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For an accessible guide to Taylor’s argument, see James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

the ecumenical Yale Divinity School, at the Roman Catholic University of Notre Dame, studying varieties of nonreligion in Toronto, and now directing Anglican Studies at Saint Paul University, which is Roman Catholic. There is more that unites us than divides us. There is little we can list that is truly unique.

Mennonite identity as a chain of memory

I want to be clear. There is nothing wrong with being Mennonite based on theological convictions or because of ethnic heritage. But neither of these ways of understanding what it means to be Mennonite is adequate in 2025. Being Mennonite in 2025 is bigger than ethnicity and theology.

I would like to propose a third option: being Mennonite is about belonging to a chain of memory—about claiming connection to a past, a present, and a future that we share. Some of us may be born into this chain of memory. Others may choose it. Still others may stumble upon it. The connection to this chain of memory—however it is formed—is what binds us together.

I am not describing a single chain. I am envisioning a network, a web, that is interconnected, with loops and branches in different directions.

Memory is what characterizes this chain: memories that we have, that we share, and that connect us to larger shared memories.

I borrow the image of the “chain of memory” from French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger who uses it to

define religion: “Religion is an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled.”⁷ This chain of belief is about action more than ideas. This chain of memory is not a historical fact but rather a social construction, or even an act of faith: “It is not continuity in itself that matters but the fact of its being the visible expression of a lineage which the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present, and future believers.”⁸ Connection to

7 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 82.

8 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 81.

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the chain of memory depends not on genetics or cognitive affirmation of a checklist of distinctives but on claiming a lineage and belonging to a community, on invoking the authority of tradition.

Tradition

Tradition is another way of speaking about chains of memory. This is not tradition in the sense of annual holiday traditions. Nor is it tradition as a reason to do things the way they have always been done simply because they have always been done that way. Tradition in the sense I use it here is conceived of as dynamic, always changing, always adapting. Imagine a conversation that has been going on for generations and that will continue for generations in the future, which we get to join in for a little while.⁹ Imagine a river flowing swiftly, a steady presence that is ever changing, both tracing and shaping the contours of the landscape; you cannot step in the same river twice.¹⁰

Our Mennonite chain of memory, our Mennonite tradition, stretches back five hundred years to the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, when a group of people were inspired to follow Jesus differently from their surrounding societies. It stretches back further to the Middle Ages, to lay monastic groups exploring new ways to live in community. It stretches back even further to letters written by an itinerant preacher to a small community in Asia, sharing advice on how to live well together as resurrection people: *Sing with gratitude in your hearts! Show compassion and kindness! Let love bind you together in perfect harmony!*¹¹

Our chain of memory also stretches forward. We still need this advice: *Sing gratitude! Show compassion! Let love bind you together!* We still need

9 This is a positive reframing of Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's description of tradition: "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted." Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

10 Clemens Sedmak uses this metaphor to describe the complexity of the Christian tradition: "Rather than talking about the Christian tradition, we might feel more comfortable talking about many little traditions that have shaped Christianity—many small rivers that come together in the sea of the great tradition of Christianity." Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 43.

11 Cf. Colossians 3:12–17.

ways to live in community. We still need to reform the church. Tradition is dynamic, always changing, always adapting.

When chains of memory matter

In 2001, I was a grade 10 student at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate. I was sitting in chapel when the principal got up and announced that the World Trade Center in New York City had been hit by airplanes, and it was probably a terrorist attack. It was the news story that defined my youth. A Mennonite high school was a good place to hear that news and to live through the wars that followed because the community is connected to a chain of memory that says, *Do not respond to violence with more violence*. A chain of memory that says, *You can take action; you can sing for peace on Parliament Hill or march through downtown Kitchener*. A chain of memory that says, *There is hope, even when it seems like everything is falling apart*.

We continue to face communal crises: pandemics, climate change, polarization, economic decline. We continue to face personal struggles: medical diagnoses, broken relationships, disappointed dreams. I do not know what the 9/11s of the future will be or what personal struggles we each will face. I do know that the Mennonite tradition is a good chain of memory to be part of when they happen—because we are bound not only to the people around us but also to people across time, cultures, and Christian traditions.

Links in the chain

As one of the editors of *Voices Together*, I think of each page in the hymnal and worship book as a link in this chain of memory. Each song, prayer, and work of art shares a memory from a specific person or community in a certain time and place. When an item is included in *Voices Together*, everyone who is connected to that song becomes connected to the chain of memory represented in this book—becomes part of this tradition. As we sing one another's songs, new links are added, new connections are made, and our identity grows and changes.

Mennonite institutions are also places where new links in the chain of memory are forged and new connections are made. Congregations, schools, colleges, and social agencies are connecting places in the Mennonite chain of memory. Each person connected to these spaces is linked to this Mennonite chain of memory—whether they are present once or have been in leadership for decades. Our connections to this chain will change

us—in big or small ways—and we will change this chain of memory. This is both good news and bad news.

The bad news is that this chain of memory is far from perfect. Chains of memory, traditions, are messy—messier than tidy checklists or clear-cut genealogies. They bind us to a complicated history and a flawed community. There are people who are part of this chain that make our lives more difficult. There are historic patterns of oppression—of women, of the LGBTQ+ community, of those who dissented. There is the trauma of migration and poverty. There are ways in which we are imprisoned by this chain of memory.

But there is also good news. Because we are part of this chain of memory, we can change it. When we connect who we are to this community, to this tradition, we are changing it. We can build on the parts of the chain that we want to grow. We can live with gratitude, compassion, and love. Each link in this chain holds together memory of the centuries behind us and hope for the years ahead.

About the author


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The workings of tradition

From “distinctives” to a living tradition

Laura Schmidt Roberts

As the five-hundredth year of Anabaptism approaches, we are afforded an opportunity to recall the past in service of reflecting on what it means to be part of this particular Christian tradition today. Historical streams mark our existence as humans. We find ourselves lodged in and shaped by multiple traditions—of faith, culture, nationality, education, and so on. *Living* traditions continue to have relevance and shaping power because people in them engage past and present understandings in ways that



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make them meaningful for the present and the future. Philosophers and theologians will tell you what you already know from experience: that this results in multiple understandings and incarnations of—and “family” arguments about—the identity of the tradition.

This multiplicity is perhaps truer now than ever, with the emergence of neo-Anabaptism as a pan-denominational movement—meaning people do not change denominations and become Mennonite, for example, but rather identify as hyphenated Anabaptists (e.g., Anabaptist-Anglican or Anabaptist-Baptist). Such variety marks our past as well as our present, as Anabaptism exhibited multiple movements and varied views and communal practices from its inception. This reality leads us to ask how we think about and articulate shared identity in the face of multiplicity, difference, and change spanning five hundred years. Another way of asking the questions is this: How does tradition *work*, creating a sustained identity across time marked also by change and diversity?

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I would like to address these timely questions in two directions: first, by presenting a way of thinking about how tradition works (past, present, and future) and, second, by exploring the importance of narrative for

thinking about shared communal identity across time. I will draw on the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur as I develop these ideas.¹

How tradition works

One way to think about historical traditions is as a “text” that we interpret and reinterpret over time. We have numerous texts that we do this with as Anabaptists: the Bible, as part of the wider Christian tradition, but also the writings, confessions, martyr stories, theological treatises, and so on of historic Anabaptism and of those who have sought to follow this way of being Christian since the sixteenth century, such as Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren. Reading and understanding these texts are primary ways we encounter the tradition and grapple with what it means to be part of it.² That act of (re)reading and (re)interpreting can also serve as a model for how historical traditions work—how they remain vibrant and meaningful across time and why an identifiably distinct tradition that shapes shared identity includes multiplicity, difference, and change across time.

One of the most important things to recognize about a historical tradition such as Anabaptism is that it is an ongoing action—a process of traditioning—in the sense of being as much *operation* as deposit or heritage. A long line of interpreters living out their understanding shape how we are affected by the tradition and our conscious engagement with it. Traditioning is pluriform; varied understandings historically and in the present—with various construals of meaning asserted—constitute the tradition. We do not simply receive the content of a tradition; we must engage it and interpret it to discern what it means to live and believe as persons in this tradition today. Ricoeur puts it this way: “Our ‘heritage’ is not a sealed package we pass from hand to hand, without ever opening, but rather a treasure from which we draw by the handful and which by this very act is replenished.”³

1 For an expansion of this argument, see Laura Schmidt Roberts, “Refiguration, Configuration: Tradition, Text, and Narrative Identity,” in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, edited by Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 33–52; cf. Laura Schmidt Roberts, “(Re)figuring Tradition,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 71–81.

2 Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 27.

3 Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 27.

Situated in traditions

Thinking of tradition as a verb highlights the fact of human historicity, the situatedness of our experience. We are born or brought into families and communities that are themselves shaped consciously or unconsciously by the past—by language, culture, faith, and generations of history and family dynamics. To be human is to be located—in a body, in time and space, in these longer historical traditions. We find ourselves already situated within a horizon of view—what we see and understand from our uniquely shaped perspective.⁴ As we become conscious of this, we do

Our locatedness and consciousness of the horizon of understanding from which we engage a tradition and its texts make possible a refiguring of tradition in the present.

some sorting and sifting, deciding what to carry forward and what to let go of. As we encounter new situations, relationships, or ideas, we do the same. Our views and understandings shift but still remain situated in the sense of having a limited viewpoint. This means self-reflection and critical engagement—considering how our biases shape our understanding, asking whose interests are served by systems and practices and the

ideas behind them—are important. Ricoeur calls this the “dispossession of the ego,” a self-critical hermeneutic that attends to elements of power, interest, and ideology shaping our situatedness and the traditions of which we are apart. This posture of humility includes a genuine openness to having our self-understanding and our understanding of tradition challenged and potentially expanded or figured anew as a result.⁵

This is as true at a communal level as it is for us as individuals. Our locatedness and consciousness of the horizon of understanding from which we engage a tradition and its texts make possible a refiguring of tradition in the present. Refiguring—figuring anew or again, articulating afresh the identity and meaning of the tradition in and for the present context—is necessary because tradition does not live in disembodied form. Tradition

4 Ricoeur’s exploration of this notion explicitly draws on Hans-George Gadamer’s historically effected consciousness and fusion of horizons; see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 207–221.

5 Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, edited and translated by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143, 186–87.

lives only as it is refigured and reembodyed in the present via the open, intentional, self-critical engagement of situated interpreters. Being part of a living, vibrant tradition such as Anabaptism requires such sifting and sorting of past and present because all traditions are ambiguous—marked, as theologian David Tracy observes, by great good and frightening evil, by beauty and cruelty, by reason and error, by mutuality and domination, by belonging and interruption and otherness. There are no innocent traditions.⁶ The same self-critical posture—a hermeneutic of suspicion—must be applied, asking the sometimes difficult but always necessary questions about how elements of power, interest, and ideology have shaped and misshaped the understanding and practice of Anabaptism as a Christian tradition.

The identity of a tradition such as Anabaptism is more iterative than static, and it never gains full closure (unless it becomes a dead tradition of the past). This presents considerable challenge to articulating the identity of a historical tradition. We resort to the language of “distinctives”—listing practices we do or do not do and convictions we hold or object to—as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other groups. But such lists do not capture the fullness of what it means to *live* as a person and community, shaped by and self-critically engaging Anabaptism. For that we need stories.

Narrative identity

Like a living tradition, our personal identity is also an ongoing project. We answer the question *Who am I?* by telling a story of our life. But we never do this from the final end point, death. Rather, at a given point in our lives we tell a story that answers the question *Who am I?* from that point, both backward and forward. The story we tell is selective. It makes connections between disparate events after the fact. We work to make some sense of the discontinuities, changes, and differences; we work to narrate a whole. Doing this requires multiple versions of the story. We introduce ourselves differently depending on the context—by profession, family relationship, or shared interests. The various stories we tell change over time. Sometimes we even say things like *I'm not the person I used to be*. Articulating the nature of the continuous recognizable identity of a per-

6 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 66–81.

son across the span of their life presents a challenge. We are a continuous self, but we are not identifiable as such only on the basis of sameness.

For Ricoeur this is also true of communal identity, and the challenge is best addressed by what he calls the dialectic of narrative identity—a tension holding together identity as *sameness* and identity as self-reflective *selfhood*.⁷ Identity as sameness accounts for similarity and a stability across time born of acquired habits and dispositions. Ricoeur uses character “traits” or “distinctives” as a prime example of this type of recognizability. This kind of permanence by which a person is reidentified as the same via

When we tell and retell the story of our lives, we draw together the significance of various events, ideas, and persons and the relationship between them.

a set of distinctives provides an example of “sedimentation” for Ricoeur. In habits or distinctive traits, sedimentation has overcome the innovation that marks the dynamic, living identity of a person or a community.

A list of traits or distinctives is not a self. It answers *what* but not *who*, and the question of identity is not only a question of *what*. Sameness-only identity is inadequate to the varied stories we

tell of our lives. It is reductionistic—as if the fullness of who we are or who our community or tradition is could be boiled down to a list of traits or distilled into a singular essence. Narrative identity requires both sameness and selfhood. The *self* of selfhood is “the fruit of an examined life,” requiring humility, critical self-reflection, and a genuine openness to risking expanded self-understanding, which requires dispossession of the ego. This self sets about answering the question *who* through interpretive narration.⁸

When we tell and retell the story of our lives, we draw together the significance of various events, ideas, and persons and the relationship between them. Ricoeur argues that doing so makes it possible to integrate sameness-identity (the list of distinctives) with what seems to be its contrary: “diversity, variability, discontinuity, instability.”⁹

7 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 245–49.

8 Paul Ricoeur *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 115–25.

9 Ricoeur, *Oneself*, 140–43.

The process by which we configure a narrative whole that reconciles our own identity and diversity is ongoing. We tell and retell the story (or, better, stories) of our lives, configuring and reconfiguring the answer to the *Who am I?* question differently. It is not seamless, and it is never fully stable. The significance of events changes as we stand at different points and look backward and forward and engage in *emplotment*. (You do not know until well after the fact that you have fired the shot heard round the world, for example.) Ricoeur employs a weaving image to describe the ongoing interpretive and dynamic nature of narrative identity, the dialectic of sameness and difference, of sedimentation and innovation, of permanence and change. New threads get added to the loom that change the pattern, including changing how we see the pattern that was previously visible. Ricoeur summarizes the narrative identity of an individual or community as stemming from endless narrative iterations configuring and reconfiguring the story and the figuring anew (refiguring) of tradition that results.¹⁰

Anabaptism as contrasting narrative?

The discussion of narrative identity here underscores that a list of distinctives is inadequate to describe a living tradition whose story continues to unfold and be reconfigured in the present.

Five hundred years in, we are still faced with the question of how to narrate who we are as a tradition today. It is up to us to decide which stories are adequate to the ambiguous reality of Anabaptism—the rich heritage and present pursuit of faithful discipleship, the missteps, failings and blind spots, the vision of the fullness of God’s righteous and just *shalom* that draws us forward. We must continue to ask which stories and voices are welcome—a question that raises issues of power and inclusion important to the current context in which we reflect on the past and ponder the meaning of Anabaptist tradition for the present and future.

Growing scholarship over the past several decades calls attention to the ambiguous, mixed history of the Anabaptist tradition regarding matters of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, power, domination, and abuse. This sifting and sorting by some in the tradition presents a challenge for Anabaptist self-understanding as a contrasting alternative to a Christendom marked by domination, violence, and oppression. While Anabaptist persecution and marginalization at the hands of reli-

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 248.

gious authorities with greater power are undeniable historical realities, majority culture identity and accompanying elements of race and class privilege, for example, are equally an undeniable part of the experience of many Anabaptist-Mennonites of Western European descent in Canada and the United States, past and present. Even where some wish to draw sharp contrasts, Anabaptism shares in the mixed nature of the broader Christendom-shaped Christian tradition. We must find ways to tell and hear stories that wrestle with these realities, call for critical self-reflection attending to operations of power and privilege, and call for repentance (*metanoia*) made visible in concrete actions.

The self-understanding of Anabaptism as a contrasting alternative has kept most discussions of power focused outside of the Anabaptist community, centered instead on a principled rejection of power as construed and wielded by the secular state and the call for a radical reconceptualization of power in light of Jesus's nonviolent way. While this theology and witness are terribly important, the need for critique and dismantling of ideologies of domination and abuse of power within the tradition remains great—in communities, congregations and institutions; in relationships between persons; in systemic, institutional forms. Deconstruction of these ideologies operational in and through the tradition is part of the price by which tradition continues. Historical traditions—including Anabaptism—remain living only through ongoing interpretation and re-embodiment. Given the reality of power and ambiguity within Anabaptism, a hermeneutic of suspicion must inform the reinterpretation of the tradition, the sifting and sorting, the multiple understandings and incarnations of the identity of the tradition, and the resultant “family arguments.” With a pairing of retrieval and suspicion, there is room both to affirm the truth about God, humanity, and the world disclosed through Anabaptism and to critique the ways the tradition has obscured such truth through conscious and unconscious machinations of power, coercion, domination, and ideology.

About the author

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Remembering Anabaptist martyrs

Jennifer Otto

I am currently writing a book about martyrdom in the Anabaptist tradition, and I am always a little bit trepidatious about telling people that this is what I spend my time researching. What kind of person willingly devotes their days to reading stories about people being tortured and executed on account of their religious beliefs? I take some solace in the knowledge that I am not alone in my fascination with martyr stories. *Martyrs Mirror*, the massive Mennonite martyrology first published in 1660, clocks in at 1,160 pages in its most recent English edition and has been

From the earliest days of the Anabaptist movement, its adherents have commemorated their executed co-religionists as martyrs.

in print for centuries. It is now helpfully available in e-book form for those who lack the upper-body strength and shelf space needed to accommodate the hard-cover edition.¹

Martyr stories are also an unavoidable part of Anabaptist history. The first adult “believers’ baptisms” of the Reformation, whose five-hundredth anniversary

we will celebrate in 2025, took place in the home of Felix Manz. Two years later, the same Felix Manz became the first person to be executed for the crime of re-baptism when he was condemned to drown in the Limmat River by the Zurich city council on January 5, 1527. George Blaurock was the first to ask his friend, Conrad Grebel, to baptize him at that illegal gathering hosted by Manz. He was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1529. First-generation leaders Michael Sattler, Hans Hut, and Balthasar Hubmaier met similar ends. Over the next century-and-a-half, some 2,000–4,000 others would be executed for their Anabaptist beliefs in the territories of Northern and Central Europe.²

1 Thieleman van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christ Martyrdom, From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660*, translated by Joseph Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1938). *Martyrs Mirror* was first translated from Dutch into German in 1749 and then into English in 1837.

2 Brad D. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 201.

From the earliest days of the Anabaptist movement, its adherents have commemorated their executed co-religionists as martyrs. They collected, copied, circulated, and sang the stories of their fellows' interrogations and executions. The oldest surviving Anabaptist martyrology, *The Sacrifice unto the Lord*, was published clandestinely in 1562. New editions documenting ever more martyrs followed in quick succession. *Martyrs Mirror* therefore marks not the beginning but the culmination of a tradition more than a century old of Anabaptists preserving the memory of their martyrs.

The complicated legacy of martyrdom

If it is impossible to tell the story of Anabaptist origins without talking about martyrs, it is also true that the legacy the martyrs have left for the churches who claim them as their spiritual (and sometimes genetic) ancestors is a complicated one. There is something paradoxical about the degree of interest that pacifist, nonviolent Mennonites take in celebrating the torturous deaths of our predecessors. In both its text and (especially) its images, *Martyrs Mirror* offers a pious justification for our gaze to linger on graphic depictions of gory executions. In recent years, Mennonites have also begun to grapple with the ways that the valorization of suffering exemplified in the celebration of our martyrs have contributed to cultures of abuse that silence victims and protect people in power.³

The early Anabaptist martyr stories are also troubling in that they bring up the uncomfortable fact that both the martyrs and their persecutors believed themselves to be obeying the demands of the Christian faith. The executions of Anabaptists constitute part of the larger history of Christianity as a religion for which its adherents have been willing both to die and to kill. We may wish to object that the Anabaptists were not the ones doing the killing—and to congratulate ourselves for this fact. From our pluralist twenty-first-century perspective, the Anabaptists' Christian persecutors are easy enough to condemn. In contemporary North America, where the houses of worship of a dozen or more different denominations can easily coexist in a given neighbourhood—to say nothing of

3 Julia Spicher Kasdorf recounts memories of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hand of a well-respected man in her Mennonite community. "When the man was done," she writes, "I would let his wood-framed cellar door slam shut and walk home through the backyards, thinking, 'well, that was not so bad. It was only my body.' I think that the martyr stories taught me that wonderful splintering trick: it is only the body." Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Writing Like a Mennonite," in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Eve Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 165–182; quote from 167.

the local mosque, synagogue, and gurdwara—it seems absurd that some Christians would be willing to see other believers executed simply for following the teachings of the Bible as they understood them. This raises the question: Why did so many Christians in the sixteenth century believe that Anabaptists were dangerous and that their violent repression was necessary to prevent widespread social disorder?

The history of martyrdom

To begin to answer the above question, we can explore how the idea of martyrdom has developed and been put to use through Christian history. Martyrdom was not something that early Anabaptists invented. One of the potential dangers of focussing too much of our attention on the birth of Anabaptism five hundred years ago is that it tempts us to see Anabaptism as a completely new thing, fully severed from the larger history of the Christian church. But Anabaptism, no less than the other churches that emerged from the Reformations, grew out of the European medieval church, and its past is no less our past than it is the past of our Roman Catholic siblings. During the Reformation, every faction in the splintering Western church encountered opposition at the hands of other Christians at one point or another, and every faction commemorated those of their own Christian persuasion who suffered for their beliefs as martyrs.⁴ That Anabaptists interpreted the deaths and displacements of their fellows as martyrdoms does not make them unique among Christians. Rather, by telling martyr stories, Anabaptists participated in a long, common tradition of piety that they share with many different groups of Christians who have had to make sense of the suffering they experienced as a result of their faith in a God they believe to be both omnipotent and good.

For as long as Christians have been commemorating martyrs, they have also disagreed with each other who qualifies for the designation. The English word *martyr* derives from the Greek *martys*, which initially meant “witness” or “testimony.” By the middle of the second century CE, Christians had begun to use *martys* to specify someone whose testimony *I am a Christian* resulted in their death. One of the earliest surviving Christian texts to use *martys* in this way is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which narrates the arrest, interrogation, and execution of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna. At the outset of the text, Polycarp’s faithful death in imitation

⁴ Brad Gregory’s *Salvation at the Stake* is an excellent resource for exploring martyrdom during the Reformation across Christian denominations.

of Christ is contrasted with the cautionary tale of a failed martyr named Quintus. When Polycarp hears that there have been calls for his arrest, he withdraws from the city and quietly awaits his capture at a country estate. Quintus, by contrast, not only surrenders himself to the authorities; he also “forcefully induced others to surrender voluntarily.”⁵ When

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faced with the beasts he is to battle in the arena, Quintus, overcome by fear, apostatizes. “Therefore,” the narrator intones, “we do not commend those who surrender of their own accord, since the gospel does not so teach.”

Clement of Alexandria, a theologian who wrote not long after the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was first circulated, echoes its critique of Christians who

show too much enthusiasm for martyrdom, calling them “poor wretches dying through hatred of the Creator.” These, he charges, “banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of believing martyrdom, inasmuch as they have not known the only true God, but give themselves up to a vain death.”⁶

Not all early Christians agreed with Clement’s condemnation of so-called voluntary martyrdom.⁷ In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius of Caesarea praises a youth named Apphianus for interrupting a pagan sacrifice by reaching out and grabbing the hand of the city prefect, Urbanus, as he was about to offer incense to the gods. Apphianus is quickly arrested, and over the next four days, he is subjected to round after round of torture before being flung into the Mediterranean Sea with stones tied to his feet. Far from condemning the rashness of his action, Eusebius praises Apphianus for his “courage, boldness, constancy, and ever more than these the daring deed itself, which evidenced a zeal for religion and a spirit truly

5 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4.1 in Éric Rebillard, *Greek and Latin Narratives about the Ancient Martyrs* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 4.16–17. English translation in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890).

7 There is an ongoing scholarly debate over just how widespread “voluntary martyrdom” was in the second and third centuries. See Candida Moss, “The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern,” *Church History* 81 (2012): 531–51.

superhuman.”⁸ One factor that may have influenced Eusebius’s praise was that he knew Apphianus well. The two lived together in a community of Christian philosophers at the home of Pamphilius, the bishop of Caesarea Maritima. On the morning that Apphianus was arrested, Eusebius

Martyrs are made not by executioners but by a community who keeps the memory of their fallen comrades alive through acts of commemoration.

reveals, he told no one of his intentions, concealing them even “from us who were in the same house with him.”

While Saint Augustine would later famously insist that it is “the cause, and not the punishment,” that makes someone a martyr, the example of Apphianus suggests that it is the *community* that makes the martyr rather than the cause.⁹

There are no universally accepted criteria for determining which deaths qualify as martyrdoms. The fact that martyrs are produced in the aftermath of violent opposition attests that the designation is by nature contestable. As Daniel Boyarin has observed of early Christian martyrdom, “For the Romans, it didn’t matter much whether the lions were eating a robber or a bishop, and it probably didn’t make much of a difference to the lions, either, but the robber’s friends and the bishop’s friends told different stories about those leonine meals. It is in these stories that martyrdom, as opposed to execution or dinner, can be found, not in ‘what happened.’”¹⁰

Martyrs are made not by executioners but by a community who keeps the memory of their fallen comrades alive through acts of commemoration. Martyr stories are not journalistic accounts, nor do they make any claim of being unbiased. Rather, they are constructed to suit the needs of their audience and, as such, change over time with the telling. A martyr is less a person who has been killed for a cause than the collective memory of a death that is told in a such a way as to be meaningful for the community who holds it. The upshot is that the same person my community

8 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Martyrs of Palestine* 4.4. English translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, edited Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890).

9 Augustine, “Sermon 94a,” in Saint Augustine, *Sermons*, vol. 4, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John E. Rotelle; translated by Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992).


10 Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94.

celebrates as a martyr may well be condemned by your community as a religious extremist—or worse.

Early Anabaptist martyrs

Which brings us back to the early Anabaptist martyrs. *Martyrs Mirror* consists of a fascinating and sometimes bewildering mishmash of confessions of faith, letters written by condemned Anabaptists to their loved ones, interrogation records, and sentences extracted from official archives that were selected, edited, preserved, and copied by Anabaptists for the purpose of inspiring other Anabaptists. That is not to suggest that they are not authentic, but it is to remind us that they are not disinterested. *Martyrs Mirror* aims to depict the early Anabaptists in the best possible light.

Of the thousands of Anabaptists who faced execution—and the eight hundred or so whose names are mentioned in *Martyrs Mirror*—modern Mennonites regularly retell only a handful of their stories. Among them, no Anabaptist martyr is more celebrated than Dirk Willems. Willems was

 **Dirk Willems is in many ways the ideal martyr for modern Mennonites.**

sentenced to death on May 16, 1569, having confessed to “harboring and admitting secret conventicles and prohibited doctrines, and that he also has permitted several persons to be rebaptized in his aforesaid house.”¹¹ While attempt-

ing to escape capture, he ran onto a frozen river with the town thief-catcher in hot pursuit. When his pursuer broke through the ice, Dirk turned around to rescue him, demonstrating self-sacrificial enemy love in the most literal of ways. The reward for his compassion is death at the stake.

Dirk is in many ways the ideal martyr for modern Mennonites. We retell the story of his selfless actions because they align well with our own sense of the best of our faith and with how we would like others to see us. But Dirk’s story takes up less than a page of *Martyrs Mirror*. In many of the surrounding entries, the Anabaptists come off as rather less selfless, less loving, and more confrontational, even combative. For example, a letter attributed to Hans van Overdam addressed to the Lords and Councillors of Ghent that precipitated his arrest castigates them as “false prophets who resist the truth, even as the Egyptian magicians resisted Moses.” He goes on to charge that the devil himself has “bewitched and blinded your eyes, so that you do not know yourselves, who you are, and how sorely you

11 *Martyrs Mirror*, 741–42.

have incurred the wrath of God.” It is on the Anabaptists’ side that God fights, and the persecution that they suffer is God’s will. They are willing to suffer in the present for they know “Him that hath said, ‘vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense,’ saith the Lord.”¹²

The Anabaptist martyrologies portray the executed faithful as both innocent victims and triumphant heroes, and this portrayal has generally been affirmed and repeated throughout Mennonite history. The making of heroes, however, tends to require the services of villains, and the early martyrologists found no shortage of ready candidates among the informants, interrogators, and executioners who persecuted their fellows. I prefer Dirk Willems to Hans van Overdam and am not at all surprised that it is Dirk, with his bent knee and outstretched hand, that has become the iconic image of the martyrs celebrated by Mennonites today. But as we tell the story of Anabaptism’s origins on the occasion of its five-hundredth anniversary, I think it is important to acknowledge the double-edgedness of the martyrs’ power. The martyr is, by definition, a religious extremist, someone who is willing to die rather than to equivocate or compromise. The same can be said for the inquisitor.

Conclusion

I still find the early Anabaptist martyrs compelling. In their deaths they testify that some things that are worth more than our earthly lives. Their conviction can, and does, inspire comfortable Christians to think more deeply about what we would be willing to endure for the sake of our more cherished beliefs. At the same time, I often find myself troubled by the stories of martyrs who willingly, even joyfully, went to their deaths, revelling in the anticipated vengeance they expected God to rain down on their persecutors. Our martyr stories are not only triumphant tales of courageous heroes but also sad artefacts of the inability of Christians to find ways to disagree with each other charitably, testifying to the ease with which we are willing to vilify each other and to attribute genuine good-faith disagreement to the devil’s machinations. What we are celebrating as the five-hundredth birthday of Anabaptism is also the anniversary of a painful rending of the body of Christ. Jeremy Bergen has criticized the ways in which “martyr memories may be reduced to commodities that circulate in an economy of pious heroism, nostalgia, and sentimentality.” I think he is right, and I echo his suggestion that our martyr stories re-

12 *Martyrs Mirror*, 492–93.

quire a “re-membering in the sense of making whole” that integrates the experience of the Anabaptist martyrs into the bigger story of the Christian church.¹³ To tell such a story would require us to speak about martyrs in alternating voices of appreciation and lament and to remember that the church to which we belong has a history that stretches back far further than five hundred years.

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13 Jeremy Bergen, “Problem or Promise? Confessional Martyrs in Mennonite-Roman Catholic Relations,” in *Martyrdom in an Ecumenical Perspective*, edited by Peter C. Erb (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 175–205; quote from 195.

Martyrdom and double tellings

Remembering resistance and trauma

Susanne Guenther Loewen

“‘YOU MUST BE WILLING TO DIE!’ I pondered his dark advice. I scratched out the word DIE and wrote LIVE.”

—Miriam Toews¹

“Out of so many martyrs, how do we live?”

—Audrey Poetker-Thiessen²

As we commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, we are reminded of the martyrs whose deaths marked the birth of our tradition, many of whom are immortalized on the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Beginning with the death of Christ, this rather intimidating volume recounts the stories of Christians who have died for their faith, complete with grisly illustrations of torture and executions. A large portion is devoted to the Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century, as it was compiled about one hundred years later by Dutch Mennonite pastor Thieleman van Braght to remind his privileged and complacent fellow Mennonites of the radical faith of their spiritual forbears.³

Because 40 to 50 percent of the Reformation martyrs were Anabaptists (a large percentage for such a small movement), martyr stories became identity-shaping for the early Anabaptists and into the present, thanks in part to the ubiquity of the *Martyrs Mirror* in Mennonite homes.⁴ *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, a 2010 collection of poems, stories, and essays inspired by the *Martyrs Mirror*, attests to the ongoing hold that martyrdom has on the Mennonite imagination, as martyrs are viewed “with the same

1 Miriam Toews, *Imra Voth* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2011), 251.

2 Quoted in Kirsten Eve Beachy, “Introduction,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr’s Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Eve Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 23.

3 John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 10.

4 C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 160.

reverence as other groups treat their saints.” Kristen Eve Beachy recounts, “I learned about the *Martyrs Mirror* by osmosis, when I read it in my grandmother’s basement. . . . It thrilled me to the core, it was too horrible to speak of, it challenged me, it humbled me, it made me proud. I was intrigued by the radical women, the revenge fantasies, the transmission of historical trauma, the implicit question: ‘Could you do it?’”⁵

The centrality of the *Martyrs Mirror* signifies, however, that the martyrs have been remembered in a particular way—as unwavering heroes of the faith, as triumphant over their captors and executioners whose efforts to

The centrality of the *Martyrs Mirror* signifies, however, that the martyrs have been remembered in a particular way—as unwavering heroes of the faith.

kill their bodies only succeeded in securing the salvation of their souls. More often than not, the *Martyrs Mirror* depicts them accepting their deaths not only fearlessly but also *gladly*. Maeyken Wens, who was burned at the stake in 1573, reportedly said, “The Lord takes away all fear; I did not know what to do for joy, when I was sentenced.” George Raeck apparently “cheerfully stepped forward to the executioner, and exclaimed with a

joyful heart, ‘Here I forsake wife and children, house and home, body and life, for faith and the divine truth.’”⁶

Such accounts raise questions: Were the martyrs grateful, or even overjoyed, to be going to their deaths? What does this reading of martyrdom convey about suffering and faith to those who survived, who now carry this legacy forward? In what follows, I propose viewing the martyr stories through the lens of trauma theology, recognizing their double-edged nature as stories both of the perseverance and strength of the faithful and of tragic, traumatic violence. Using Chris Huebner’s characterization of martyrs as neither victims nor victors and Serene Jones’s concept of “double tellings” of traumatic events, in which the complexity of the traumatic experience necessitates multiple narratives, I take the position that the martyrs must be remembered as both victims and victors if we are to fully honour them these centuries later.⁷

5 Beachy, “Introduction,” 22, 24.

6 *Martyrs Mirror* quoted by Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, 136–37.

7 Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2006), 198–200. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*:

The victory of the Lamb: Martyr narratives as resistance

The template for martyr narratives has strong biblical roots. Acts 7–8 recounts the stoning of early church deacon Stephen (incidentally, the third martyr in the *Martyrs Mirror*, just after Jesus Christ and John the Baptist), shaping the narrative in such a way that Stephen’s death is a clear echo of Christ’s. As they are stoning him, Stephen prays almost the same words that Jesus spoke from the cross, saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and, “Lord do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59–60).⁸ Already in the Bible, the first Christian martyrdom is understood to reflect spiritual triumph linked with the cross.

The early Anabaptists, in their context of hostile persecution, looked to biblical portrayals of martyrdom as mirrors of their experience, which they interpreted as “the baptism of blood” in 1 John 5:7–8.⁹ According to the early Anabaptists, Jesus’s example shows us three kinds of baptism: baptism of water (the outward, public sign or ordinance), baptism of Spirit (the inner, personal transformation of receiving the Holy Spirit), and baptism of blood (the suffering or even death that could result from the life of faith). During the Middle Ages, this “blood” had been understood spiritually, as dying to sin and new life through discipleship. But for the early Anabaptists facing the threat of martyrdom, the baptism of blood took on a much more literal meaning. Historian Arnold Snyder notes, “The testimony of the Bible, read through the lens of brutal persecution, convinced the Anabaptists that the ‘baptism of blood’ was to be expected for those who had accepted the baptisms of the Spirit and of water, and had set out to follow Jesus in life.”¹⁰ Since Jesus’s life had led to the cross, Anabaptists had reason to believe their lives might lead to violent deaths.¹¹

Using passages like this one from 1 John, the early Anabaptists made sense of the suffering they were experiencing by connecting it, first, to the triumph of Jesus’s own violent death, which was overcome in resurrection, second, to depictions of the early Christian martyrs as triumphant and

Theology in a Ruptured World (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 80–81; cf. 13, where Jones defines trauma as “events in which one experiences the threat of annihilation.”

8 Jesus’s words from the cross are “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46) and “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

9 “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree” (1 John 5:7–8).

10 Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 162, 160.

11 Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 164.

victorious, and third, as receiving their reward from God in the book of Revelation. On one level, it was a way of resisting—of refusing to be defeated by persecution and martyrdom, of refusing to be victims by insisting that God was on their side and that their deaths were not meaningless but holy sacrifices, examples of redemptive suffering. Chris Huebner speaks of this as martyrdom’s “potential to gesture beyond the interminably violent dance of victory and victimhood,”¹² to transcend those simplistic, either/or categorizations. Additionally, given the way that trauma tends to rob

one of language, these narratives played an empowering role, returning one form of meaning and voice to those otherwise facing unspeakable suffering (sometimes enforced with tongue screws).

This understanding of martyrdom recalls Serene Jones’s reading of the encounter between the risen Jesus and the two bewildered disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 as a trauma narrative. The two disciples, survivors of the trauma of witnessing Jesus’s crucifixion,

are experiencing the “disordered imagination” of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their garbled accounts of what they have just witnessed parallel the PTSD symptom of sudden, intrusive memories of the violent event, “throwing one momentarily back into a state of terror,” which overwhelms one’s memory, ability to speak, sense of agency, and so on.¹³ But on the road, the risen “Jesus steps into the playback loop that holds their imaginations, and he speaks,” retelling the story such that “the repetitive cycle is broken, and their imaginations are reframed around a shared table” of peace and belonging.¹⁴

What starts out as a trauma response—a way to make sense of a terrifying reality and to give voice to unspeakable horrors endured and wit-

By the time of the *Martyrs Mirror*, the martyrs are idealized as superhuman examples who harboured no doubts and went joyfully to their deaths with God’s blessing.

12 Huebner, *Prekarious Peace*, 198–200. Huebner goes on to make the case that it is equally violent to claim to be a victor or a victim, as they are simply flip sides of attempts to gain “power and control.” His point is that martyrs are neither victims nor victors but eschatologically other. This critique of victimhood in particular is called into question by feminist trauma theologies and critiques of the long history of gendered power dynamics. Following the latter, I am rather claiming here that martyrs are both victims and victors.

13 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 16, 18–19.

14 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 39–40.

nessed—over time comes to be theologized as God’s will. In other words, by the time of the *Martyrs Mirror*, the martyrs are idealized as superhuman examples who harboured no doubts and went joyfully to their deaths with God’s blessing. Their deaths are celebrated rather than mourned. The *tragedy* of the violence and trauma they suffered goes unacknowledged.

Mourning the martyrs: Tragedy and trauma

Feminist trauma theologians have seriously questioned the Christian theological tendency to rush toward redemption and victory, specifically for the way it sidelines those who have experienced the shattering effects of trauma. Shelly Rambo quotes a survivor suffering from PTSD who says, “The church didn’t provide me with a place to bring my experience” but responded with “theological silence,” a rush “to proclaim the good news before its time.”¹⁵ I suggest that this could also be the issue with the sanitized, triumphalist martyr narratives of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Recognizing the way that trauma “remains” with survivors, such that “‘death’ persists in life,” Rambo’s response is to call for a theology of “the middle,” an ambiguous, uncertain space—neither cross nor resurrection but Holy Saturday, the day that Jesus was dead, and, according to tradition, descended into hell.¹⁶ Based on Jesus’s call in John 15 to “remain” or abide in his love, Rambo concludes that we are called to “remain” in this way with those who suffer trauma and thus to bear witness that even in the deathly depths of trauma, love is what remains.¹⁷

Many of the contributors to *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* likewise push back against the one-dimensional depiction of martyrs going joyfully to their deaths. Stephanie Krehbiel writes, “Joy? Now looking back, I think this is the cruelest use of the *Martyrs Mirror* to which I fell prey: the idea that not only do our beliefs invite a painful death, but that we should give it a rapturous welcome. Jesus Christ himself didn’t live up to these standards. ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me,’ he said in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39). And on the cross: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46 KJV).”¹⁸ To gloss over the pain and trauma of the martyrs—or worse, to take a masochistic, even “pornograph-

15 Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 2–3.

16 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 156, 159.

17 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 104.

18 Stephanie Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 136.

ic” pleasure in it, as the gory descriptions and etchings of torture scenes seem to¹⁹—objectifies their suffering and the undeserved, unjust violence inflicted on them, ostensibly for the purpose of our spiritual edification.

On reading the *Martyrs Mirror* for the first time, Sofia Samatar recounts feeling disoriented by its “catalogue of pain.” She writes, “Trauma is a form of time travel . . . capable of generating many things: reverence, grief, commitment to one’s beliefs, solidarity with the dead. Anger, too,

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at least in my case, outrage at the injustice, at their helplessness, at my helplessness because I couldn’t go back and save them. The pity of it.”²⁰ The poetry of Sarah Klassen likewise helpfully delves into these kinds of ambiguities in the experiences of the martyrs themselves, depicting them with much more complexity than in the *Martyrs Mirror*. For instance, in Klassen’s poems, one martyr “bravely” sings “her terrified heart out” at her execution, while at the last moment, others “can’t remember what [they’re] dying for” or decide that they “really want to live” and “not die,” “not even for Almighty God’s truth”—but “it’s too late.”²¹ These depictions allow doubt, fear, and pain to shine through the martyrs’ final moments, ultimately humanizing them. This is a way of honouring and grieving their traumas rather than celebrating them, allowing us to remember both their tragedy and their triumph, to see them as both victims and victors.

This double-edged remembrance is what Jones advocates in her concept of “double tellings,” the need for multiple narratives to make sense of traumatic experiences. Sounding much like the Mennonite tendency to tell and retell martyr narratives, Jones notes that, with regard to the cross, Christians are “obsessively committed to telling and retelling the story. We preach it, over and over again, in the hope that people will com-

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19 In calling them “pornographic,” Krehbiel reflects, “As a young woman . . . I’m at no loss for narratives that depict splayed, exploited bodies that look like mine.” Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 140–41. Cf. Rosie Andrious, “Violating Women in the Name of God: Legacies of Remembered Violence,” in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture, and Church in Critical Perspective*, edited by Karen O’Donnell and Katie Cross (London: SCM Press, 2020), 134–36, 139.

20 Sofia Samatar, *The White Mosque: A Memoir* (New York: Catapult, 2022), 178–82.

21 Sarah Klassen, *Dangerous Elements* (Kingston, ON: Quarry Press, 1998), 119, 118, 117.

prehend it anew and be moved. We write it over and over again in novels, poetry, and theatre—we paint it, sculpt it, carve it, hone it, stitch it, sing it, play it—all the time hoping that if we repeat it often enough, we might succeed in unlocking its secret.”²² This is because it exceeds straightforward understanding. As a trauma narrative, it overwhelms us; we both know and don’t know what happened. For Jones, trauma narratives require re-telling from multiple angles. Speaking of a group of women survivors of abuse who met at her church, Jones observes, “Sometimes we needed to give an account of what it meant to have been a *victim* of overwhelming violence and to have come undone in the wake of its horror. Sometimes, however, we needed to tell the same story in a manner that cast us as *fighting feminists* [reclaiming our agency to protect ourselves from harm]. Both stories could be told at the same time by a single person without any contradiction. It even seemed that the complexity of our lives demanded such double tellings.”²³

Lives lost, lives remembered

I find it remarkable that Dirk Willems, arguably the most famous early Anabaptist martyr, is primarily remembered for something he did, not for how he died. His page in the *Martyrs Mirror* does not depict him being burnt at the stake; instead, it depicts him in his act of saving his pursuer when he was attempting to escape from jail. This speaks to a remembrance of Dirk’s life and agency—including a struggle to escape the violence—rather than a sole focus on his death.²⁴ Anneken Jans’s story similarly includes a letter she left for her baby son, outlining the core ethics of her Anabaptist faith. She writes, “Where you hear of a poor, simple, cast off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world, join them. . . . Honour the Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbour. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry. Clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything

22 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 73.

23 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 80–81.

24 For alternative readings of the Dirk Willems story, see Lisa Schirch, “Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 361–84; Kimberly D. Schmidt, “Run, Dirk, Run! Wrestling with the Willems Story,” in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, edited by Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 238–49.

twofold; for there are always some who lack.”²⁵ She calls her son not primarily to die but to live—simply, generously, and faithfully. Likewise, the martyrs’ tortured deaths are not the only thing we remember about them. Instead, we remember the lives of faith they were able to lead before they were snuffed out.

Krehbiel calls for a similar change in focus:

*I need stories that give me hope. I also need stories that offer me agency, the power to act and to create change. The best stories, the honest ones, won’t hide the sometimes deadly cost of defying oppression. But here’s the point I believe is essential to morally instructive stories: the purpose of the action is to make the world a better place. Death may be a consequence, but death is not the point. The thing I dislike about the way the martyr stories are told in Mennonite circles is how we’ve come to focus on the dying, as though dying is a thing that makes us great. If that’s really it, then we might as well skip the rest—we might as well just lie down and die.*²⁶

When re-read and re-told in this way, the martyr stories have the potential to teach us not to deny our power but to find our own “power-from-within.” For Krehbiel, this is what the examples of Jesus and the martyrs offer when valued beyond just their deaths.²⁷ When read as stories of real people facing religious or political persecution, the martyrs also have the potential to “remind us of our commonality with non-Mennonite others” who have faced similar traumatic attempts to erase or annihilate with a mix of courage and fear. “I’ve rarely heard them used for that purpose,” Krehbiel writes.²⁸

Conclusion

As we enter the next five hundred years of Anabaptism, perhaps it would be best to carry the *Martyrs Mirror* in one hand and *Tongue Screws and Testi-*

25 Margaret Loewen Reimer, ed., *Christians Courageous: Stories for Children from Church History* (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Publishing House, 1988), 39.

26 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 142.

27 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 143–44.

28 Krehbiel, “Staying Alive,” 138–39. Cf. the discussion of Mennonite and Cree traumas in Elaine Enns, “Healing Trauma, Decolonizing Memory,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 20 no. 2 (Fall 2019):14–24, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/340>; and Samatar, *White Mosque* 187–89.

monies in the other in order to remind us of the double tellings necessary to convey the multiple dimensions of the martyrs' legacy. I am reminded of the contemporary Latin American liberation practice of remembering those who have been murdered as *¡Presente!*—as present in an ongoing way, enlivening the movement as part of the great “cloud of witnesses.” San Salvador Archbishop Óscar Romero, for instance, was murdered by right-wing government forces while leading Mass in 1980. During a worship service or gathering, people will “take attendance” of the dead, calling out the names of those who have been martyred and asserting their presence among those remaining resisters, gathered in solidarity: “Óscar Romero?” “*¡Presente!*” Dorothee Soelle speaks of this practice of insisting on the enlivening presence of the dead, this refusal to forget those who have been violently silenced and killed, as a form of resurrection.²⁹ May we also be so enlivened in our remembrance of these tragic and triumphant forebears of our faith.

About the author

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²⁹ Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 34; Dorothee Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, translated by Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 106.

Remembering the martyrs of Bloemkamp

A ghost story

Chris K. Huebner

On August 29, 2004, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest named Jan Romkes van der Wal led a workshop to draw attention to a group of people he identified as “the martyrs of Bloemkamp.” The event was part of an ecumenical gathering known locally as the *Kerkendag* (Church Days), which takes place every four years in different locations in the Dutch province of Friesland. Van der Wal was serving at the time as the pastor of the church of Saint Francis in Bolsward. One of the notable features of the church is a large stained-glass window that celebrates the martyrs of Gorkum—a group of nineteen Dutch Catholic clerics from the southern city of Brielle who were hanged in 1572 by anti-Catholic Calvinist rebels known as the *Watergeuzen* (Sea Beggars). The *Watergeuzen* are known for their fierce opposition to Spanish rule during the Eighty Years War, and their campaign of terror was a key turning point in the establishment of an independent Dutch Republic.

The turbulent years of the sixteenth century that saw the making of so many martyrs, the emergence of new religious traditions, and the formation of a new state remain tangibly present in the structure of this contemporary Dutch Catholic church. But it wasn't the Gorkum martyrs or any other Catholic martyrs who were the focus of van der Wal's workshop. Rather, he was interested in discussing a comparably obscure “piece of drama” that is, he suggests, “all too often concealed.”¹ The goal of his workshop was to draw attention to a group of Anabaptists who were put to death in 1535 at the Bloemkamp Abbey near Bolsward. He was also hoping to raise funds for the creation of a monument that would serve as an appropriate way to honour their memory. Just why a Catholic priest in 2004 would seek to commemorate a controversial group of Anabaptists

1 Gerhard Bakker, “De martelaren van Bloemkamp,” *Friesch Dagblad*, August 19, 2004, www.odulphuspad.nl/vanderwal.pdf. Unless otherwise specified, all other references to van der Wal will be drawn from this article. Translations are my own.

who perished almost five hundred years earlier and why he insisted on referring to them as martyrs raises a thorny tangle of issues that captures the difficulty of memory.

I stumbled on van der Wal's interest in the martyrs of Bloemkamp while I was doing some research for a cycling trip structured around various aspects of the Dutch Mennonite martyrological tradition that I did with my son Jonah in the spring of 2022. I was aware of the Bloemkamp Abbey and wanted to figure out where it was located so it could be included as a stop on our itinerary. When I first saw the title of the article on van der Wal—"The Martyrs of Bloemkamp"—I assumed that it was an allusion to some Catholic priests who were killed when the abbey was stormed by a group of revolutionary Anabaptists. I read on, wondering what new details he was going shed on this story. But when it became clear that he was talking about the Anabaptists who took control of the abbey, the article became more interesting in a way I had not anticipated. The site of the former monastery is rather underwhelming. It is little more than a small mound in a pasture behind two farmyards. If one did not already know it was there, it is not something one would notice. But the questions raised by van der Wal's account of the events and issues that are symbolized by this barely noticeable mound gave me plenty to think about as I cycled the many kilometers between the old prisons, castles, churches, town squares, forests, and country estates that served as the destinations of our journey.


The story of the Bloemkamp abbey

The Bloemkamp abbey (also referred to as the Oldeklooster) was a Cistercian monastery that left a profound and lasting mark on landscapes both religious and secular.² It was founded during a period when monasteries were multiplying and generally enjoying significant prosperity. The first buildings of the abbey were constructed in 1191. As the abbey grew in stature and size, it became entangled in a series of significant disputes. At various times, it was engaged in armed conflict against rival monastic orders, the landed nobility, and peasant rebels. Despite extended periods of decline, the abbey managed to survive in an era that was scarred by intense factionalism and civil strife. The beginning of the end for the Bloemkamp abbey arrived in 1572 when it was badly damaged and set

² Details of the history of the Bloemkamp abbey are drawn from the following two sources: Hyco Bouwstra, "Bloemkamp: Geschiedenis van het Cisterciënzer klooster Bloemkamp 1191-1580" (self-published pamphlet, 2008), and "De twa Kleasters by Hartwert," <https://hartwerd.com/2020/10/03/de-twa-kleasters-by-hartwert/>.

on fire by the same group of Calvinist rebels who executed the martyrs of Gorkum. It was finally demolished for good in 1580 when the newly formed States of Friesland ordered the demolition of all remaining monasteries in the area, a move that coincided with the region's embrace of Reformed Christianity and its incorporation into the Dutch Republic. Although no physical trace of the monastery remains today, there is a road named Oldeclooster that runs by two farms that sit on the land where the abbey once stood. In this and other ways, the memory of the Bloemkamp abbey retains a certain power for the people who live in the surrounding area.

Given the eventful and tumultuous saga of the Bloemkamp abbey, it is notable that van der Wal zeroed in on a single, brief episode from its almost four-hundred-year-old history. It is also striking that he, a Catholic

 **Van der Wal zeroed in on a single, brief episode from Bloemkamp abbey's almost four-hundred-year-old history.**

priest, chose to highlight one of the moments at which the religious life of the abbey was at its most vulnerable. And it is all the more remarkable that he was interested in celebrating as martyrs the figures who were responsible for causing that sense of vulnerability. The incident involving van der Wal's "mar-

tyrs of Bloemkamp" took place in the spring of 1535. This was during the period when a group of millenarian revolutionary Anabaptists had taken control of the Westphalian city of Münster and established a notoriously cruel and intolerant government, violently enforcing its ideals of equality and the eradication of private property, which they apparently thought would hasten the arrival of the New Jerusalem that their leaders had prophesied. Two emissaries from Münster named Jan van Geelen and Peter Simons were sent out to recruit new supporters for the cause. Though they had limited success elsewhere in the low countries, their apocalyptic vision seems to have resonated powerfully among the people of Friesland. Equipped with apologetic material written by Münster's court theologian Bernhard Rothmann and loaded down with money for the purchase of weapons, they managed to persuade a sizeable number of people to embrace their millenarian vision of revolutionary Anabaptism.

On Easter Sunday, March 28, a group of some three hundred Anabaptists, including van Geelen and Simons, gathered in the village of Tzum, close to Franeker, and held their own worship service as an alternative to the Easter mass that was being celebrated in the established churches of

Friesland. When a group of soldiers descended on their gathering, they mounted a surprising and successful defense and managed to ward them off before ultimately finding refuge in the abbey of Bloemkamp. How exactly they came to be in control of the abbey is not known. But they overpowered and expelled the monks and lay brothers who lived there and took over possession of the property. It is said that they devised a plan to use this stronghold as a base of operations from which to mount further incursions in the hopes of ultimately winning control over the whole of Friesland. But they were met with significant military resistance. They were able to fend off a series of counterattacks for a number of days. But after about a week, the governor's forces unleashed a more severe and ultimately more successful incursion that allowed them to regain possession of the abbey. It is said that they were tipped off by a monk who had been released by the Anabaptist revolutionaries and who informed them where the weakest part of the fortification was located. Approximately forty Anabaptists were immediately executed outside the walls of the abbey, some by hanging and others by beheading. Another 132 were taken to prison in the regional capital of Leeuwarden, where they stood trial. Of these, fifty-five were executed, including a group of thirty women who were drowned in a nearby river. Van der Wal notes that this was the "largest massacre of Protestants in the history of Friesland." Jan van Geelen managed to escape, but he was killed two months later when he participated in another revolutionary attack designed to take control of Amsterdam's city hall. It is not clear what happened to Peter Simons.

Bloemkamp and the *Martyrs Mirror*

The story of Bloemkamp abbey doesn't figure prominently in the memories of most contemporary Mennonites. But there is no question that it played a critical role in the development of the Mennonite tradition as we have come to understand it. Indeed, it is precisely because of the way it played this role that it has come to be largely forgotten. There are two developments that serve to illustrate this claim. First, it is said that Peter Simons was the brother of Menno Simons. His brother's involvement in the Münster rebellion and the spiritual crisis that Menno is said to have experienced in the aftermath of the Bloemkamp affair is frequently cited as a key reason that he went on to develop the more peaceful version of Anabaptism for which he is known. Van der Wal repeats this claim and relates it to the sense of embarrassment he perceives among North Ameri-

can tourists who are occasionally brought to the site of the former abbey.³ Some scholars have cast doubt on the veracity of the claim that Peter and Menno were related.⁴ So it is now common to offer the qualification that they “may have been” or were “most likely” brothers.⁵ Whether or not Menno or Peter were brothers is likely to remain under a cloud of doubt. But what cannot be doubted is the fact that this connection continues to lie at the heart of the story that Mennonites have learned to tell about themselves. And it is this story that sets up the conditions of forgetfulness of the people whose memory van der Wal was seeking to preserve. That

is because Menno articulated his theology in explicit contrast to the theological convictions that motivated the Bloemkamp Anabaptists. They thereby became the foil over against which Menno’s Anabaptist vision was elaborated.

If the theology of Menno set out the conditions for forgetting the martyrs of Bloemkamp, their erasure was cemented by developments in the Mennonite martyrological tradition that culminated in

the *Martyrs Mirror*. One of the criteria deployed by Thieleman Jansz van Braght to determine who counts as a true example of faithfulness was what he called defenselessness (*weereeloose*), or nonresistance. One of his primary goals was to excise from the record of Anabaptist martyrs anyone who was associated with the Münster rebellion or any other instance of revolutionary Anabaptism like the seizure of the Bloemkamp abbey. In one of his editorial remarks, van Braght boldly proclaims that he has “exerted [his] utmost diligence, so that as far as we know, there are not found among the martyrs of whom we have given, or may yet give, an account,

The martyrs of Bloemkamp’s erasure was cemented by developments in the Mennonite martyrological tradition that culminated in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

3 Van der Wal’s own words are as follows: “[Menno] had wished to retain the positive elements of Anabaptism, but to remove its aggressive sting, and so he laid the foundations for the strictly peaceful doctrine of what were afterwards called the *doopsgezinden*” (translation mine). The distinction between “anabaptisme” and “doopsgezinden” is drawn by van der Wal. I have left “doopsgezinden” in the original Dutch to differentiate it from the more customary English-speaking tendency to draw a contrast between Anabaptists and Mennonites when navigating this territory.

4 See Nanne van der Zijpp, “Peter Simons (16th century),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peter_Simons_\(16th_century\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Peter_Simons_(16th_century)).

5 See James Stayer, “Menno and Münster,” *Mennonite Life* 64 (2010); Machiel van Zanten, “Menno’s Life,” <https://mennosimons.net/life>.

any who can be shown to have been guilty of gross errors, much less the shedding of blood.”⁶ In this way, van Braght sought to erase any memory of van der Wal’s martyrs of Bloemkamp from the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror*. According to his criteria, they are neither martyrs nor Anabaptists in any meaningful sense.

The problem with strict criteria such as these is that they are bound to be disappointing. They never reach the level of certainty they are designed to achieve.⁷ One of the many things I find interesting about the *Martyrs*

According to van Braght’s criteria, the martyrs of Bloemkamp are neither martyrs nor Anabaptists in any meaningful sense.

Mirror is the way it includes traces of this kind of disappointment. Like many other early modern martyrologies, the *Martyrs Mirror* presents itself as an impenetrable fortification against various forms of unfaithfulness. But when you read it closely, it reads more like a hastily erected edifice that over time comes to be streaked with cracks. As the Anabaptists

walled up in the Bloemkamp abbey came to realize, fortifications always have their weak points. Subsequent research has identified a number of revolutionary-minded people who have slipped through those cracks and found themselves on the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror* alongside more well-known icons of defenselessness like Dirk Willems. The most well-known example is Anna Jansz of Rotterdam, who is remembered as a “model martyr” despite evidence that she also had a “revolutionary past.”⁸ But there are similar stories that are more closely related to the Bloemkamp affair.

6 Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 174. Henceforth referred to as the *Martyrs Mirror*.

7 This notion of “disappointing criteria” is drawn from the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose reflections on criteria lie at the heart of his attempt to challenge the way we might think about the “problem of skepticism.” Cavell’s account is developed in part I of his important book, Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–125. For a helpful discussion of Cavell on these matters, see Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–32; Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Religion After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 201–229.

8 See Werner Packull, “Anna Jansz of Rotterdam,” in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996), 336–51.

The *Martyrs Mirror* includes an account of a man named John Walen from Crommenies Dijk (Krommeniedijk) in the Waterland region of North Holland. He was arrested in 1527, along with two unnamed companions, and subsequently burned at the stake in the Hague. The *Martyrs Mirror* states that “they suffered all this for the name of Jesus and the Word of God, and not on account of any misdeed committed, but only in order to testify to and confess the firm foundation of the truth before this false and adulterous generation.”⁹ More recent research based on surviving legal records suggests that they were apprehended and executed not in 1527 but in the spring of 1534. They were captured when they arrived by boat in the village of Bergklooster, which was the designated gathering point for a large group of Anabaptists (some estimates say there were as many as 3,000) who were on their way to participate in the Münster rebellion. Some of those captured were deemed by authorities to be “innocent” people who were caught up in the revolutionary agenda of others. They were imprisoned briefly and soon released. Only those who were identified as the leaders of the operation were eventually executed. If this is correct, then by van Braght’s own criteria John Walen and his companions should not have been included in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

There is another, more complicated case more directly related to the question of Menno’s relationship to the martyrs of Bloemkamp. Tjaert Reynerts, a “God-fearing peasant” who lived near Harlingen in Friesland, was executed in Leeuwarden in February of 1539. The reason for his arrest, according to the *Martyrs Mirror*, was that he had provided shelter to Menno Simons.¹⁰ But there is significant debate about the identity of this person that in turn raises questions about whether he satisfies van Braght’s criteria for martyrdom. Some maintain that Reynerts was engaged in a variety of revolutionary activities in Friesland, including the occupation of the Bloemkamp abbey. Others suggest that this claim is the result of a confusion of identity between two similarly named people—Tjaert Renickx of Kimsward and Tjaert van Sneek. The former, they suggest, was a friend of Menno and a legitimate martyr. It was the latter who was involved in the Bloemkamp affair and so rightly omitted from the *Martyrs Mirror*.¹¹ It is likely that these questions will never be sorted out

9 *Martyrs Mirror*, 424.

10 *Martyrs Mirror*, 454.

11 For a summary of this debate, see Nanne van der Zijpp, “Tjaert Renickx (d. 1539),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tjaert_Renickx_\(d._1539\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Tjaert_Renickx_(d._1539)).

in a conclusive way. But what is undeniable is the extent to which threads associated with various movements of revolutionary Anabaptism are woven into the fabric of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Even those whose stories were excluded, like the majority of those who were executed in the aftermath of the events at Bloemkamp, haunt the text in a kind of ghostly manner. Van Braght's martyrological project is obsessed with these figures, and his text bears numerous traces of his efforts to erase them from the *Martyrs Mirror*. It is in this sense that the story of the martyrs of Bloemkamp can be described as a ghost story.

Early modern Mennonites were known for their tendency to respond with skepticism to their contemporaries' belief in witches.¹² So it is reasonable to surmise that they may have been skeptical about the existence

The ghosts to which I am pointing suggest that there is another form of skepticism that animates the spirit of the *Martyrs Mirror*.

of ghosts as well. But the ghosts to which I am pointing suggest that there is another form of skepticism that animates the spirit of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Earlier I referred to Stanley Cavell's notion of disappointing criteria. This is part of his effort to reconceive the so-called problem of skepticism by demonstrating that it is not merely a theoretical option in a

debate about the possibility of knowledge in general but also and more importantly names an ethical and affective posture, a question about the character of our desire. In particular, Cavell demonstrates that the skeptic is not so much opposed to knowledge as fanatically obsessed with it. Skepticism names a desire for knowledge that is, if anything, far too strong. It conceives of knowledge as being governed by criteria that do not tolerate any disappointment. It demands a kind of certainty that is purified of the possibility of doubt. In this regard, both the skeptic and the anti-skeptic share the same attitude toward knowledge. Cavell's most important and original insight about this is his observation that philosophical expressions of epistemological skepticism tend to be structured by forms of desire that are similar to those that drive the plots of Shakespearean tragedies. This is especially apparent in Shakespeare's depiction of jealous husbands like Othello and Leontes. These men come to grief because they demand forms of intimacy and faithfulness that are absolute. They treat

12 See Gary Waite, *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

love as a possession, something that belongs exclusively to them. This is evident when they fail to find the love they expect and respond by acts of supreme silencing that strip their wives of the power to speak, and ultimately of their lives.¹³

It is in this sense that the *Martyrs Mirror* can be read as a skeptical and tragic text. Van Braght demands a form of all-or-nothing faithfulness. And when he does not find the figures of absolute purity he desires, his response is one of silencing and erasure. For Van Braght, there simply are no martyrs of Bloemkamp. Because to be a martyr is incompatible with the forms of violence in which they were caught up. The fact that the people associated with this story do not register in the memories of most contemporary Mennonites demonstrates the lasting power of his influence.

Remembering the martyrs of Bloemkamp abbey

The posture of Van der Wal is strikingly different from van Braght's. Van der Wal is not simply drawing attention to the lasting influence of a group of early Anabaptists but, remarkably, is insisting on describing them as martyrs. By identifying a group of martyrs who were denied the status of martyrdom by their own tradition, he is raising questions that cut to the heart of the Anabaptist martyrological tradition in a subtle but powerful way by challenging the desire for absolute purity on which it is based.

Van der Wal does not attempt to justify the use of force to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God. And he suggests that the Bloemkamp martyrs embraced an understanding of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that was profoundly unbalanced. He applauds them for their "strong faith," but he suggests that they went wrong in embracing a conception of hope that moved too quickly. This, in turn, distorted the character of their love, which is where they got into trouble. Nevertheless, he insists that they were right about one important thing: "The Anabaptists," he explains, "taught that each person is personally responsible to God." And he adds that this "has become an important pillar in our Dutch norms and values." In this respect, he suggests that a contemporary Dutch Catholic priest like himself has been shaped by their legacy. And it

13 See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–37. For a more extended discussion of Cavell's understanding of skepticism in relation to a theological reflection the figure of the martyr, see Chris K. Huebner, "Absent Mothers, Invisible Fathers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love," *Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 3 (2021): 192–213.

is for this reason that he wanted to honour their memory, as complicated as it may be.

An anniversary is, among other things, a celebration of faithfulness. We sometimes treat anniversaries as events that provide evidence that our criteria of faithfulness have been met, if not exceeded. But the evidence is often more modest and somewhat mixed. We may be disposed to celebrat-

Van der Wall gives contemporary Mennonites the gift of reconstituting our own memories.

ing anniversaries because they provide us with a cover to mask moments of infidelity, even as we discover that our lives do not reflect the forms of faithfulness we use anniversaries to commemorate. For contemporary Mennonites, one of the gifts that van der Wal offers is captured

by the way he claims to be motivated by a “love for these people I do not want to forget.” If we have not long since forgotten about these same people, we are likely to be deeply embarrassed by them. In this regard, van der Wall gives contemporary Mennonites the gift of reconstituting our own memories. I find in all this an expression of charitable grace that breathes new life into something that used to feel dead or at least deadening. He redirects our attention to the possibility of thinking of an anniversary less as a celebration of something we might claim to own and more as an opportunity to structure our lives in ways other than those of ownership.

All of this is difficult work. When we arrived at the site of the Bloemkamp abbey on May 15, 2022, there was no sign of the memorial van der Wal had hoped to build. But on June 10, 2023, a new and different monument was unveiled. It is located just off the main road on the lane leading to the two farms where the abbey once stood. This monument is built in the form of an arched window like those that would have lined the external walls of the abbey. It is made out of old bricks that still survive from the original buildings. Inside the window frame is a thick pane of glass that allows viewers to see a superimposed image of the old Bloemkamp abbey from its heyday projected onto the contemporary landscape. Underneath the image of the abbey are the following Frisian words: “Op Fryske grûn, troch leauwe en strûd ferbûn” (On Frisian soil, connected by faith and struggle).¹⁴

¹⁴ For some images and a description of the monument, see <https://hartwerd.com/stifting-monumint-aldekleaster/>.

The philosopher of religion Tyler Roberts elaborates a distinction between two forms of memory. The first and most common he describes as a “historicist view of causality and context that . . . put[s] the events of the past in their place.” Drawing on the work of Cavell, Roberts elaborates and defends a different form of memory he calls the work of “remembrance.” He describes this as “a form of responsiveness to the past that dislodges the events and texts from cause and context to bring them to life in the present.”¹⁵ I take Van der Wal’s workshop during the Kerkendag to be an instance of the work of remembrance in Roberts’ sense of the term. The new monument, on the other hand, reflects the more common historicist understanding of memory. The fact that the latter has been completed while the former remains an exercise of imagination bears testimony to just how rare the work of remembrance is.

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15 Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 201.

Anabaptism and Jews

Collective memory and failure

Hans Werner

It is not a good time for commemoration. Or is it? We are on the eve of another milestone that begs for events, writings, and ceremonies that will remember and celebrate five hundred years of Anabaptism. As individuals, our memories and the stories we tell about ourselves and our past are shaped by the context in which we remember and tell them. The stories



One complication of Anabaptist history is the relationship with Jews.

we tell to give meaning to our lives, even if we believe them to be true, are not timelessly objective but are shaped by the attitudes, social realities, and cultural trends of the day. Collective mem-

ory—the memories we share as a family, a people, or a nation—also reflect the sensibilities of our day. Those of us who style ourselves in some way as historians are called upon to help recover and, indeed, create the memories that we then celebrate together. Not surprisingly, we are called to dig out and tell the stories of our heroes: the great men and women of the past. We have become much more sober about our heroes who we now know were colonizers, racists, and at times misogynists and abusers even as they forged nations, offered theological insights, and led churches and denominations. Plaques, monuments, and ceremonies do not lend themselves well to complicating the stories of our past. And yet it is important to find ways to celebrate the vision, persistence, and remarkable events that led to the faith and church experience we call Anabaptism, while acknowledging the ambiguities of that history.

One such complication of Anabaptist history is the relationship with Jews. It is perhaps inevitable that the Holocaust would cast its shadow over five hundred years of history, and in Anabaptist circles the question has recently risen to the forefront with conferences, books, and public discussions that have focussed specifically on Anabaptism's response to

Nazism, the Holocaust, and Anabaptists' duplicity in its horrors.¹ It has been difficult for the discussion to balance a sense of timeless Christian morality while avoiding the prevailing presentism that characterizes our time and its tendency to offer simple solutions for moral dilemmas. A second challenge troubling Anabaptist-Jewish relations has been to know whom one should consider to be an Anabaptist. The variety among radical reformers in the Reformation period has necessitated some "lumping," while in later periods there has seemed to be more "splitting," as it is not always clear to what extent an Anabaptist family name or having grown up in an Anabaptist family or milieu should qualify one as being an Anabaptist, particularly when acknowledged faith or church practice is unknown or non-existent.

Despite these challenges, there is reason to commemorate and possibly even celebrate our shared fate as minorities in a Europe dominated by Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Christians. Certainly, there is also abundant reason to tell and retell the stories of shame and failure in our relationship with Jews, to offer penitence and seek reconciliation.

Early Anabaptist-Jewish relations

For most of the last five hundred years, Anabaptists and Jews lived in splendid isolation. The Reformation generally is tainted by Martin Luther's diatribe against the Jews. Written three years before his death, *On the Jews and Their Lies* is difficult to read and remains a potent example of Christian failure.² While Luther's diatribe has coloured Lutheran relationship with Jews, there is little evidence of overt Anabaptist expressions of antisemitism. Lisa Schirch notes in her overview of Anabaptist-Jewish relations, "Unlike most Catholics and Protestants, early Anabaptists did not embed anti-Judaism ideas into their scriptural analysis nor did they take part in anti-Jewish violence. Most Anabaptists in the 1500s were not

1 Of note are "Stimmen, Lebenssituationen, Erfahrungen. Mennoniten in der NS-Zeit," September 25–27, 2015, Muenster, Germany; "Die völkische Bewegung und der Nationalsozialismus bei den Mennoniten in Paraguay," March 11, 2017, Filadelfia, Paraguay; "Mennonites and the Holocaust," March 16–17, 2018, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. Selected papers from the latter were published as Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). See also "Jews and Mennonites: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust," May 8–10, 2023, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

2 Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society*, IV, vol. 47, translated by Martin Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 121–306.

actively blaming Jews for blood libel, magic or the plague, nor were they instigating violence against Jews.”³

Not only were Anabaptists largely silent on what mainstream Europe considered the Jewish “problem” for most of the four hundred years between 1525 and the twentieth century, Mennonites and Jews suffered similar restrictions on their economic, social, and cultural activities. Both groups were outside of the mainstream religious persuasions that held sway in Europe, and both were at various times the object of discriminatory rulers and governments. As it relates to Anabaptist-Jewish relations, this period can be commemorated with relative ease. While there are no heroes, there are also no stories that force shame upon our collective memory.

Twentieth-century Anabaptist-Jewish relations

Not so for the twentieth century. Here our desire to remember fondly our Anabaptist heritage confronts the reality of relations with Jews that demand an accounting. As the recent conferences have forcefully shown, Mennonites became complicit in the crimes of Germany against Jews during the Second World War. In Germany, Anabaptist groups generally supported the Nazi regime, served in its military, and in some cases participated directly in war crimes. Some Anabaptists in the Netherlands became fascists, while others offered resistance.⁴ In Ukraine, Mennonites were tremendously relieved to see the German armies wipe away the Bolshevik regime under which they had suffered immeasurably for some twenty years. They cooperated with the German occupation and became witnesses to the destruction of their Jewish neighbours. In some cases, they even became translators or members of the notorious *Einzatsgruppen* (special action groups) that combed the countryside in search of Jews. When the German armies retreated, Mennonites were resettled in occupied Poland where many benefited from the spoils of the concentration camps and most men were drafted into the German army or ancillary units.

It is also here that the context for remembering the past is complicated by the present. The first of these is the dramatic rise of the Holocaust

3 Lisa Schirch, “Anabaptist Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries,” *Mennonite Life* 74 (2020).

4 See Alle Hoekema with Gabe G. Hoekema, *Hardship, Resistance, Collaboration: Essays on Dutch Mennonites during World War II and Its Aftermath* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2021).

narrative in modern Jewish memory and in society generally. Until the late 1960s and 1970s, the “memory of the Jewish catastrophe was either forgotten or repressed,” and the death of Jews in concentration camps was subsumed under the general category of war casualties.⁵ Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the memory of the Holocaust as both a uniquely Jewish story and a cautionary tale against genocide became a prominent feature of Western collective memory of the Second World War.

Since the 1990s, the validity of the Holocaust as a necessary collective memory beyond the Jewish community has faded somewhat. Alongside the ending of first-person memories as Holocaust survivors passed away, the rise of polarization and right-wing populism has seen the weakening and fragmenting of the Holocaust narrative and the consensus of its meaning.

Anabaptist-Jewish relations today

Commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of Anabaptism also comes at a time when there are tensions between Anabaptist church bodies and Jews relating to the actions of the state of Israel toward Palestinians. Anabaptist denominations and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) have made statements supporting Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.⁶ These statements have drawn criticism from some Jews who consider conflicts with Palestinians a question of the right of Israel to exist. Moreover, as Mennonites are just beginning to come to terms with their own complicity in Nazism and the crimes of the Holocaust, there is increasing awareness that dealing with the Anabaptist-Jewish past is needed to avoid antisemitism when criticizing the state of Israel.

The present context also has national particularities that make accounting for the twentieth-century Anabaptist-Jewish story challenging. In Germany, the national process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has been a feature of public discourse throughout the postwar period.⁷ Anabaptists have had to come to terms with their own culpability alongside a similar national conversation. Anabaptists in the United States who were not

5 Lawrence Baron, “The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 62–63.

6 “MC USA acknowledges ‘suffering’ of Jews, Palestinians,” <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/mc-usa-acknowledges-suffering-jews-palestinians>.

7 *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the compound noun used in Germany to convey the process of digesting, or coming to terms, with the past, specifically the Nazi period.

directly involved find it easier to internalize the narrative of the Holocaust as a “never again” story.

Mennonites in Canada have their own vantage point that makes coming to terms with the events of the Second World War as a collective memory particularly difficult. In contrast to the United States where only a few Soviet Mennonites immigrated, some seven thousand Mennonites from the Soviet Union joined their coreligionists in Canada in the post-war period.⁸

Trauma was a constant theme for most of these immigrants, but many of their stories were suppressed as they focussed on resurrecting family life, finding work, and generally finding their way in a period of economic expansion. For them, Hitler was remembered as a saviour who had rescued them from Stalinist terror. In his

study of memory as it related to the Pinochet era in Chile, Steve J. Stern posits the notion of “memory as salvation.”⁹ An event, such as the arrival of Hitler’s armies in Ukraine that offered salvation from Stalin, is not easily reframed in memory even when it is shown to

have also involved atrocities against Jews, Roma, the disabled, and others. While in the immediate postwar period, North Americans wrote off the Holocaust as a subset of wartime casualties, Mennonite immigrants put aside what they knew had happened to the Jews on the Eastern front. In some cases, they could justify their own participation or duplicity because the arrival of Hitler’s armies had saved them, their families, and their people from the terror of the previous decades. As the scale of Nazi Germany’s crimes gradually penetrated public perception, immigrant narratives evolved, contextualizing their memories as a no-win situation. As George K. Epp—himself a postwar immigrant—notes in his overview of the postwar immigration: “They were caught between the two dictators. One had oppressed and killed and threatened to kill more of them when the time would come. The other was evil too, as some came to realize, but for the time being he tolerated their churches, and there was no direct perse-

Mennonite immigrants put aside what they knew had happened to the Jews on the Eastern front.

8 Ted Regehr, “Canada,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Canada/>.

9 Steve J. Stern. *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), particularly 30–31.

cution as they had known it for decades. . . . And in any case, there was no choice, their fate now depended on the German protection.”¹⁰

When the Holocaust became an integral part of North American memories of the war, immigrant memories held on to the idea of their salvation by reifying their own suffering as being at the same level as that of Jews. Immigrant narratives began equating Allied bombings of civilians and Stalin’s crimes during collectivization and the purges with Nazi crimes against the Jews.¹¹ They emphasized their own stories of suffering under Stalin, thereby holding onto and justifying the memory of Hitler as being their salvation.

Commemorating 500 years and learning from the past

As we honour five hundred years of the Anabaptist movement, our commemorations must not be only celebratory and certainly not filiopietistic. We are not finished digging deeply into the Second World War era as it relates to Anabaptists and the Holocaust. Those on whose shoulders blame falls tend to offer their apologies and then want to move on. For those suffering hurt and injustice, that is not so easily done. They need to hear the stories told and retold. The conferences in Germany, Paraguay, and the United States have been good beginnings, although absent is a Canadian effort to come to terms with this past.

In telling and retelling this story, we would do well strive to understand this part of the Anabaptist past in ways that also offer insight and understanding for the moral dilemmas faced by our ancestors. We must ask what the Christian is to do when all the choices that appear to be available are not compatible with Anabaptist Christian understandings of Jesus and his teachings. We must ask how MCC was to bring together their responsibilities to Anabaptist siblings with their mandate as a Christian organization, amid changing war and postwar realities and an unknown future. We may well conclude that they fell short, but seeing through their eyes will offer the possibility of genuine repentance and accountability. As Aileen Friesen has written, “To engage in a conversation of atonement, it is important for those of us who were not placed in untenable positions, not forced to make compromised choices, to acknowledge that faced with

10 George K. Epp, “Mennonite Immigration to Canada After World War II,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 113.

11 Hans Werner, “A Usable Past: Soviet Mennonite Memories of the Holocaust,” in *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, 290–306.

the same dilemmas we also might not have emerged morally unscathed. It is time to heed this call for collective responsibility.”¹²

We must also seek a balance between the timeless moral and ethical principles that emanate from Jesus’s teachings as our Anabaptist heritage has understood them and the sensibilities of our time. Presentism, as a fallacy of history, imposes the knowledge, values, and understandings of our day onto our forebears in ways they could not have known. We are prone to believing our contemporary thinking will stand the test of time and are quick to impose our sensibilities on the past. Telling stories of the past necessarily and rightly involves reflections on what we believe to be true, good, and ethical today. We do well, however, to strive to understand their world and remember that we also “see through a glass darkly.”¹³

About the author

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12 Aileen Friesen, “Soviet Mennonites, the Holocaust, & Nazism,” *Anabaptist Historians*, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2017/04/25/soviet-mennonites-the-holocaust-nazism-part-1/>.

13 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

Five hundred years of Anabaptism and colonization

Sarah Augustine

I have the great privilege of sitting on the “Anabaptism at Five Hundred” advisory group put in place by MennoMedia about two years ago. It has been wonderful to join with diverse Anabaptists in creating resources to commemorate our shared identity. While I am a Mennonite woman, I am also Indigenous. As a Tewa (Pueblo¹) woman, it is impossible for me to engage in this celebratory look into our Anabaptist history without also viewing the history of Anabaptism through the lens of my people. Let me start with a side-by-side look at the history of Anabaptism and my own Tewa people.

Anabaptist and Tewa history

Sixty years after Michael Sattler was speaking into the Schleithem Confession in 1527, Spanish conquistador Juan de Onate had established control of the lands of my people, perpetrating the Acoma Massacre in 1599 to enforce absolute obedience to his authority. The armed resistance of the Acoma Pueblo to Onate’s rule was met with swift and brutal retribution. Eight hundred to one thousand men, women, and children were massacred, nearly stamping out the entire Acoma pueblo. Survivors were sold as slaves, signaling to other Pueblos that survival would require complete acquiescence to Spanish rule.

Nearly forty years after Dutch Mennonites began their migration from the Netherlands to settlements in New York in 1644, my people were engaging in the Pueblo revolt of 1680 in defense of our spirituality and religious leaders, who were executed for practicing traditional ceremony deemed by Catholic overlords to be sorcery. We were able to hold our

1 A note about my people: The Tewa people were named *Pueblo* by Spanish colonizers. *Pueblo* is the Spanish word for *house*. My ancestors lived in communities of homes they made from clay, raising crops and sheep in the territory now known as the Southwest United States. When the Spanish encountered us, they named us for the structures of our communities. The word *Pueblo* is used in two ways: (1) the entire tribal group; and (2) a community of Pueblo people in a specific place. Today, there are nineteen remaining Pueblos in northern New Mexico.

traditional territories for twelve years, but by the Mexican American war of 1846 nearly two hundred years later, our lands were annexed in their entirety by our new colonial overlord, the United States.

I have heard it said by Mennonite friends and colleagues whom I respect that Catholics, not Mennonites, perpetrated genocide, colonization, and enslavement on my people. That may be true, since Mennonites began settlement in New Mexico in 1908, just a few years before New Mexico became a state.² However, I know Mennonites living on my homeland today, while I remain a displaced person—what the United Nations calls “internally displaced”—a person expelled from my own homeland

Five hundred years into the colonization of my people, the descendants of conquistadors and Anabaptists alike enjoy the bounty of my peoples’ sacred lands and waters.

but within the borders of my country of origin.³ Five hundred years into the colonization of my people, the descendants of conquistadors and Anabaptists alike enjoy the bounty of my peoples’ sacred lands and waters.

When Anabaptists found sanctuary and blessed land in North America, they were moving into territory that had been effectively cleared of Indigenous Peoples by way of genocide. It is estimated that

one hundred million Indigenous People lived in the Western hemisphere prior to 1492, a number that declined by 96 percent by 1900, when just four million Indigenous People were alive in the Western Hemisphere.⁴ In the United States by 1900, just two hundred thousand Indigenous People remained alive.⁵ Historian David Stannard termed this massive extermination “the worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed.”⁶ The spoils of this genocide went to the descendants of Christians. The Doctrine of Discovery articulated that Christians alone were authorized and empowered by God to own, improve, and govern land. All sovereign-

2 Harlan Unrau, “New Mexico (USA),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO) [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=New_Mexico_\(USA\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=New_Mexico_(USA)).

3 United Nations High Commission on Refugees, <https://emergency.unhcr.org>.

4 Russel Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 42.

5 US Bureau of the Census, *Indian Population of the United States and Alaska, 1910* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1915), 10.

6 David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46.

ty flowed to Christian European monarchs by mandate of the Catholic Church. Anabaptists may not have wielded the sword that struck down my people, but they certainly benefitted from it.

In the cosmology I have been taught by my elders, the soil of our homeland—the place now called New Mexico—is sacred because it is made from our ancestors. The remains of all our relatives—the human people that came before us, the four-legged ones, the winged ones, the standing

Given the reality of my Indigenous People, I wonder how we should commemorate the Anabaptist tradition that is now five hundred years old.

green nation of plants and trees, the insect people—all make up the soil. This includes the invisible ones, the microbes that give soil life and enable crops to grow. We as living Tewa people are part of this cycle of life, the land-and-water protectors who are alive now. Everywhere we look on our lands is sacred, from the high places where the holy ones dwell, to the river valley, to the ex-

pansive desert that looks barren to the casual observer. Yet we have been removed from our lands, generation by generation, most recently when the United States government deemed our home “empty” and therefore a good place to develop the atomic bomb.

Given the reality of my Indigenous People, I wonder how we should commemorate the Anabaptist tradition that is now five hundred years old. Our shared reality is defined by the colonial experiment—the colonization of what was blithely called the “new world.” In this reality, the (Christian) descendants of European settlers benefit from the systems that were designed to annihilate and remove Indigenous Peoples and possess our lands completely.

Historically, Anabaptists responded to the colonial experiment by settling fertile farmlands cleared of Indigenous Peoples. Anabaptists are the beneficiaries of a violent, colonial system that continues to advantage Christian and European descendants even as it removes Indigenous Peoples from our lands and subjects us to structural violence. Mennonites have referred to themselves as “people of the land” and “the quiet in the land.”⁷ Since land is a primary feature in the imagination and story of Anabaptist settlers, Anabaptists are inexorably linked with the original

7 Laura L. Camden and Susan Gaetz Duarte, *Mennonites in Texas: The Quiet in the Land* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

peoples of the land, the original land and water protectors, Indigenous Peoples. Mennonites and Indigenous People share a history. Indigenous removal from our sacred lands meant safety and prosperity for Anabaptist communities. Anabaptists may need to take a new posture five hundred years into an identity as followers of Jesus. Perhaps it is time to be quiet no more.

Anabaptism and decolonization

Like the many generations of Mennonites who have come before me, I am committed to living out the call of Jesus as a peacemaker in community. My mentors in the Mennonite church have encouraged me to be humble, seek justice, and listen to the Spirit in community, not insisting on my own way. I have taken these teachings seriously, and I have committed myself to them.

Anabaptist tradition prioritizes internal spiritual discernment expressed in outward action. Discipleship, or *nachfolge*, broadly means forsaking one's own desires and self-interest to live out Christ's teachings.⁸ Anabaptist theology likewise emphasized self-surrender or yieldedness, where God's will is made manifest only to those who have surrendered their individual will. The German term for this concept is *Gelassenheit*, or submission.⁹ Discernment takes place in the workings of community, where those in the body discern the will of God together, yielding to each other in the process. Humility and yieldedness are interpreted as outward signs of discipleship.

I suggest here that these elements of Anabaptism call us to engage in decolonization, acknowledging our role in the context of settler colonialism. *Decolonization* means that the colonizing powers and their beneficiaries relinquish control of a subjugated people and then identify, challenge, and restructure or replace assumptions, ideas, values, systems, and practices that reflect a colonizer's dominating influence.¹⁰ As we live into an

8 William Klassen and Hans-Juergen Goertz, "Discipleship," GAMEO, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Discipleship>. The authors write, "In their understanding the individual responds to the call of Christ, forsakes his life of sin and self, receives a new nature, comes under the lordship of Christ, and takes Christ's life and teachings as normative for himself and for the church, and indeed ultimately for the whole social order. His faith in Christ thus finds expression in 'newness of life.'"

9 Robert Friedmann, "Gelassenheit," GAMEO, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Gelassenheit>.

10 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "decolonize," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decolonize>.

understanding of our role in settler colonialism, we have the opportunity to interpret Christ's teachings from the lens of the most vulnerable, those who are living with the structural violence caused by colonization. We can discern together our response in community, engaging with Indigenous relatives to form a decolonizing stance. A crucial way to commemorate the Anabaptist tradition is to decolonize the theology of empire and commit to indigenizing our theology, identity, and actions as a people of God.

Imagining decolonization

In my role as a member of the “Anabaptism at Five Hundred” advisory group, I have been on the team imagining the *Anabaptist Community Bible*. In this ambitious project, the editors of the Bible asked five hundred groups of Anabaptists to form Bible study groups and submit their notes, which will contribute to the Bible's marginal notes. These notes cover every passage in the Bible. Each group or congregation who signed up was randomly assigned a few passages from the New and Old testaments and provided prompts to help them respond collectively. In this way, the *Anabaptist Community Bible* engages in a core Anabaptist value, the collective interpretation of Scripture in community together.

Building on this good idea, together with the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, I asked a few dozen groups and congregations to respond to their assigned scriptures using a decolonizing lens.¹¹ This process is a process of imagination—calling on communities across North America to imagine a theology decolonized. We essentially called

11 In particular, I asked groups to reflect on the following questions for a decolonization lens: In this passage, who is in control of land, labor, and capital? In what ways are women, foreigners, or the sick and vulnerable portrayed in this text? What is the message conveyed for the most vulnerable in this text? Does this text lift up the narrative of the powerful or the weak? How might we read this text from the margins? What would the most vulnerable feel or respond to what is going on in the text? What might we assume (from our own racial/cultural/economic backgrounds) that goes unsaid in this text? Many of us have learned a routine interpretation from childhood, Sunday school, theological preparation, etc. What might be an alternative interpretation? Are there characters who are inanimate in the passage – land/water/animals? What would they tell us if they could speak? What might be the perspective of the land? What might justice look like for the person/character/group with the least power in this story? Is there good news in the text for those who do not have enough? And/or is there an invitation of sacrifice/relinquishment to those who control the resources? If the text is not good news for the most vulnerable, what might be your challenge to the text? What shifts in our perspective or imagination if we imagine the main characters in the text are Black and/or Indigenous People?

on groups of Anabaptists across the United States and Canada to rethink our theology, focusing responses from the margins.

In the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, we are actively working to decolonize our theology. We are challenging theologies

**Decolonization
must mean collectively
relinquishing
control of land.**

of supersessionism (or replacement theology) and Christian supremacy. We are prayerfully learning how to stand with the marginalized, creating and centering a theology from the margins. Decolonized theology is a theology that relin-

quishes control of a subjugated people. What has been done in the name of Christ must be undone in the name of Christ.

Decolonization requires challenging our knowledge, our understanding of life, and our value systems to dismantle harmful, colonial power structures and establish noncolonial, life-giving systems. For Anabaptists in North America in 2025, decolonization must also mean collectively relinquishing control of land. As scholars Amam Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes write, “We cannot decolonize without recognizing the primacy of land and Indigenous sovereignty over that land.”¹²

Many Christians I encounter across the country respond to me with anxiety followed quickly by sadness when I propose land return as a strategy for seeking repair with Indigenous Peoples. A common refrain I hear is, *I am not willing to give up my home and turn it over to Indigenous People, so I can't join you in dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery.* Like the rich young man who encounters Jesus in Matthew 19, the cost is just too high. In response, I suggest we center land return not in our individual actions but in our actions as a collective.

This requires some imagination. Even though our Anabaptist tradition centers community prominently in discernment and discipleship, we are still embedded in an individualist culture and tend to think through the lens of personal over corporate action. It is hard to imagine what relinquishment of control via land return might look like for us as a collective. Land bequests are a significant source of wealth for our church institutions, and Anabaptists are part of a society that advantages white skin and the beneficiaries of historical wealth accumulation. These realities lead us to consider questions like these: What would it mean for Anabaptists to

¹² Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes, “Towards the ‘Tangible Unknown’: Decolonization and the Indigenous Future,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): iii.

join together to return land as it flows into the hands of our church institutions? How might we imagine seeking right relations with Indigenous Peoples by returning this land? Following the example of Zacchaeus, can we imagine returning a portion of the land that comes into our control? How might we use our collective voice to advocate for and with Indigenous relatives seeking land return from our public institutions? What would it mean for us collectively to stand with Indigenous Peoples in negotiating return of state and national lands held by the public?

Imagining indigenization

In an interview with Max Rameau on the Next World podcast, Judith Le Blanc makes the point that decolonization focuses a locus of action on a system of oppression—colonialism.¹³ She urges Indigenous activists to struggle for *indigenization*, which she defines as reclaiming and restoring indigeneity. Indigeneity, she goes on to say, is our relationship and responsibility to land. For Indigenous People, this often means a struggle for land rights and rights to water. I especially appreciate Le Blanc’s urging to focus the locus of action on what I would call a struggle *for life* rather than focusing the locus of action *against systems of death*. Here in the United States, I see that as settler colonialism.

As Anabaptists accompany Indigenous leaders in their movements for self-determination and land and water protection, we are contributing to indigenization by lifting up Indigenous voices and ways of life. I long for such indigenization. As Anabaptists, we can work together as our forebears did to envision a new world and seek to build it: the kin-dom of God. As a step toward indigenization, we can form right relationship with our Indigenous siblings—relationship where power is balanced and those who now hold power share it with those who do not.

About the author

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13 <https://dignityandrights.org/2023/09/listen-our-struggle-is-to-indigenize-judith-le-blanc-of-native-organizers-alliance-on-the-next-world-podcast/>

Anabaptist reparations after 500 years

Mennonites and the Doctrine of Discovery

Drew G. I. Hart

Western Christendom and the Doctrine of Discovery

Western Christendom birthed the Doctrine of Discovery (DoD) project, and Euro-Anabaptists took advantage of the plunder in North America for centuries. The DoD's diseased framing of the great commission converted land, bodies, and cultures into sites for Christian conquering and bolstered a supremacy complex while conflating Western European Christianity, civilization, and bodies. The DoD ecclesially justified the stealing of lands and the domination of non-white peoples as part of European Christian duty, providing a sacred justification for plunder and creating the heresy of racial hierarchy.

The DoD was first articulated in the fifteenth century and was used to justify the colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of Africans by Spain and Portugal, soon to be joined by other European nations. Papal bulls such as *Dum Diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) theologically authorized seizing non-Christian (or non-European) lands and enslaving non-Christians (non-Europeans). The DoD is based on the idea that European Christians had a right to claim any land that was not inhabited by Christians. As Pope Nicholas V declared in the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455,

We had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso—to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities,

*dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.*¹

The DoD project that would unfold over five centuries was an inevitable outgrowth of medieval crusading ideology. It merely extended the trajectory that Western Christendom was already on. Missionary zeal during these years was simultaneously caught up in colonizing zeal and the goal

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of civilizing non-Christian peoples into Western ways of living. Evangelism and the Great Commission played a significant role in facilitating conquest and the plundering of peoples in Africa, the Americas, and parts of Asia. Colonial conquest and plunder, white supremacy, anti-Black oppression, Indigenous erasure and displacement, the mechanistic

plunder of the earth, and subsequent xenophobic and anti-immigrant policies are all deeply part of the DoD project. The impacts on Indigenous Peoples and African Americans in North America were particularly death-dealing. The DoD brought prolonged and disproportionate suffering, often by the hands of professing Christians, to Indigenous communities and descendants of enslaved Africans that persist to this day.

In his book *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings details the “diseased theological imagination” and underpinnings of colonial Christianity in Portugal, Peru, South Africa, and the United States.² Part of the ongoing power of his book for Anabaptists is how he picks up church history right where white Mennonites, Brethren, and Neo-Anabaptists wrap up. White Anabaptists are known to offer vital and powerful anti-Christendom critiques, but for centuries this has not traditionally included a critique of white supremacy and colonial conquest. Jennings helps everyone, including white Anabaptists, perceive the way that Western Christian imagination has profoundly shaped Christianity and the world we inhabit today.

There is a growing movement to recognize the historical impact and contemporary reality that the DoD has constructed. Among Anabaptists and beyond, the call to confess, repent, resist, and make amends for the

1 See <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/nichol05/romanus-pontifex.htm>.

2 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

DoD is swelling. Robert P. Jones's latest book, *The Roots of White Supremacy*, takes a macro and micro look at white supremacy.³ He argues that the origins of American white supremacy can be traced back to 1493, "the year in which [Columbus] returned to a hero's welcome in Spain" and Western domination and conquest went global with the church's support.⁴ He acknowledges the earlier Papal Bulls in the mid-fifteenth century but sees this year as decisive. His 1493 argument may or may not stick, but most of the book offers a powerful narration of local stories unfolding over many centuries in three different regions of the United States. With each regional story, white supremacy is unveiled as an American project. This kind of storytelling helps followers of Jesus comprehend their centuries-long participation in a society that is more shaped by the DoD project than most want to acknowledge.

Anabaptists must move beyond asking who physically forced Indigenous tribes off the land, or who owned enslaved people. Such a narrow focus is used to aid white Anabaptists in skirting historical complicity. The real challenge today is to perceive the comprehensive project that was the DoD and how Anabaptists benefited and advantaged themselves through their missional participation in a diseased imagination.

White Anabaptists' reckoning with their history

Anabaptists must reckon with their complicity and participation in the DoD project as they recognize their 500-year milestone. Their participation often came through claiming land that had been stolen by Indigenous Peoples, benefiting from an economy built on the enslavement of stolen Black labor, and assimilating into white habitus and society. While most white Anabaptist communities rarely took part directly in the physical act of enslavement or forcible removal, they nonetheless participated in it and advantaged themselves socially rather than resisting it. For that reason, they need to repent and join Jesus's reparative presence in our world in response to these harms.

It is easy to understand how white Anabaptists have struggled to see their participation and complicity clearly when considering how they frequently tell church history that conceals their own unfaithfulness regarding the DoD project over the last five centuries. A more truthful

3 Robert P. Jones, *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy: And the Path to a Shared American Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

4 Jones, *Hidden Roots*, 14.

account must emerge that narrates beyond the anti-Christendom disposition of Anabaptism but also unveils how European Anabaptists engaged with white supremacist North America (and white supremacy around the world). Then it will be clearer that white Anabaptist narratives fail to offer the moral clarity necessary for white Anabaptists to be a healing rather than harmful ecclesial presence in response to the DoD project.

I frame Anabaptism not as a peace church tradition but instead as an anti-Christendom tradition. My decision to interpret Anabaptism as

I frame Anabaptism not as a peace church tradition but instead as an anti-Christendom tradition.

such is a result of how I have encountered Anabaptism through books and informal conversations with other Anabaptists. There is a common story told by Anabaptists. Sometimes it is told with more nuance, and other times it is simplistic, but either way it reveals the anti-Christendom disposition of Ana-

baptism while also concealing white Anabaptist participation in white supremacy and the colonial project.

The common story goes like this. The early church was born on the margins of society without political or social power. They experienced periodic persecution in different regions. However, they took discipleship to Jesus seriously, even to the point of rejecting the sword and accepting the consequences of living into the peace of Christ. While some Christendom habits were beginning to get implemented in the life of the church in its first centuries, things changed radically after Constantine came to power, eventually becoming the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. During that time the church began moving from the margins to the center of the empire. Bishops got elevated to the place of the Roman senate. The church received all sorts of privileges. Soon, the once-persecuted church began persecuting other religious minorities (and often other Christians who did not fit into their definition of orthodoxy). The emphasis of this story is on the pre-Constantinian versus Constantinian church. There is deep concern to pay attention to the power dynamics of the early church and its bottom-up Christianity in comparison to the Constantinian church that coercively wields a top-down Christianity. The more nuanced versions of this story will talk about how Western Christendom did not happen all at once but took many centuries and climaxed in the medieval period.

Most Anabaptists do not have much knowledge of medieval Christianity, so as they tell church history most skip immediately to Reforma-

tion history. A similar theme arises. Two reformations take place: the magisterial reformation, including Lutherans and Reformed Christians in Europe (and reforms within Catholicism), and the Radical Reformation, which includes Anabaptists. Anabaptist historiography unveils the ways that folks like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin did not end the entanglements of church and state but instead simply fractured Christendom. Mini-Christendoms still organized as state churches persisted with the same “Constantinian Christian” mindset. Anabaptists, in contrast, severed church and state ties, recentered the life and teachings of Jesus, and formed concrete communities defined by mutual aid, the priesthood of all believers, rejection of the sword, and adult baptism that led to a radical clash with Western civilization. They were deemed heretics by Christendom churches and were violently drowned, burned at the stake, tortured, hunted, and displaced. The major emphasis again is on the clash of these two different expressions of the church, highlighting the power dynamics and the manner in which following the way of Jesus confronted the Christendom logics and practices of the mainstream church.

I have noticed a different concern rise to the forefront when white North American Anabaptists begin to talk about church history after the Protestant reformation. From that moment forward, I hear stories of

The common Anabaptist way of telling the story of Western Christianity hides as much as it reveals.

Swiss and German Mennonites, Dutch and Russian Mennonites, horse and buggies, denominations and splits. I hear stories of whose family lineage goes back to the days of Menno Simons or Alexander Mack. I am told of shoofly pie and plain dress customs. While learning about the splits and fights among white

Anabaptists over the last few centuries is helpful for comprehending the particular fights and divisions among Anabaptists today, they lack the social analysis of the earlier story, especially as it relates to power dynamics that have been so prevalent for Anabaptist rehearsals of church history prior to North America. This way of telling church history can condemn other mainstream Christian traditions for their participation in the Christendom project while simultaneously concealing Anabaptist assimilation into the DoD project and its white supremacist entrapments in North America. Anabaptism does theology and ethics in conversation with church history; however, the common Anabaptist way of telling the story of Western Christianity hides as much as it reveals.

White Anabaptist participation in the DoD project

White Anabaptists in North America were full participants in the DoD project. After Indigenous Peoples were violently displaced by others, Mennonites and Brethren were quick to claim thousands of acres of stolen land, even before the tears and blood of Indigenous People had dried. Old Order Anabaptist groups are still uniquely associated with land. The DoD project in the United States was translated into the idea of Manifest Destiny. This was not a deterrent for white Anabaptists who saw

Many Anabaptists fled European persecution when they came to North America only to build their lives on the suffering of others once here.

lands as *available for them* and therefore sought economic opportunity by coming and turning purported empty lands into square acres of productivity. Many Anabaptists fled European persecution when they came to North America only to build their lives on the suffering of others once here. There was no vision of joining the Indigenous of the land in mutuality. They replaced them on the

land. Working the stolen land with an imagination of Western productivity and civilization led to significant wealth accumulation in an exploding economy built on the stolen labor and exploitation of Black people. The wealth accumulated from this past (that is still present) is obscured by phrases about living simply, yet few white Anabaptists voluntarily lived at the poverty line in solidarity with those on the underside of engineered systemic poverty, as the slogan might suggest. As Black people were tortured by whips on plantations, sold as property on auction blocks, and had their families torn apart never to be seen again, white Anabaptists frequently flourished. Anabaptist abolitionists actively seeking to end the enslavement of Black people were the exception to the rule, not the norm.

Mennonites and Brethren assimilated into whiteness and white society during their time in North America. Many initially retained their German language and lived in farming communities until the late nineteenth century. The early twentieth century in North America produced various forms of nonconformity in terms of plain dress and a rejection of the ways of “the English.” But most Anabaptists were deemed white and not subjected to Jim Crow, Native reservations, Chinese exclusion, or Japanese internments. In the early twentieth century, many white Anabap-

tists had internalized racial segregationist practices and habits.⁵ The civil rights movement was similar to the abolitionist movement, where active participation in the movement was an exception rather than the rule for white Anabaptists. Most mirrored the fractured and polarized positions characteristic of white dominant culture. This assimilation process into white identity and white mainstream society through the twentieth century, coupled with economic advantages from a system built on exploitation and plunder, underscores white Anabaptist participation and complicity in the DoD project.

My critique of white Anabaptists in North America mirrors the critique that Anabaptists have traditionally laid at the feet of Protestant reformers. White Anabaptists failed to take their anti-Christendom critique to its logical conclusion, extending its implications towards an anti-colonial and anti-white supremacist disposition in solidarity with those on the underside of the DoD project's death-dealing plunder and oppression. White Anabaptist stories are helpful in exposing some Christendom abuses, but they lack the stories, experiences, and wisdom of those who have most experienced the underside of white supremacy and colonialism to enable Anabaptism to become an actual shalom church in twenty-first-century North America. White Anabaptism needs to be anchored in Black and Indigenous stories to avoid the sanitized myth and self-aggrandizing narrative that has been told for the last five hundred years in most Anabaptist corners. White Anabaptists must reckon with their participation in the DoD project as it unfolded over the last five centuries as they recognize their 500-year milestone. There are not enough Anabaptist landed stories with deep analysis.⁶ Anabaptist participation in claiming stolen land, benefiting from an economy built on slavery, and assimilating into whiteness and white mainstream society is reason enough to pursue reparations.

Anabaptist reparations after 500 years

White Anabaptists are often quick to identify with Jesus when reading the Bible, and often they imagine they must live like Jesus *for others*. Discipleship to Jesus certainly must lead us to embody the Jesus story for our neighbors; however, it does not always mean that the character in the

5 Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

6 Elaine Enns et al., *Healing Haunted Histories : A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

Jesus story that most rhymes with our own lives is Jesus. Sometimes our discipleship to Jesus will be anchored in our ability to see ourselves from the vantage point of those Jesus encounters. I want white Anabaptists to take this 500-year milestone as an opportunity to identify with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who advantaged himself by benefitting from the exploitation of his Jewish siblings. Zacchaeus took up a trajectory that ran directly contrary to the flow of Israel's story of having been dominated by many empires. Zacchaeus found himself complicit in the imperial project of plunder of his own community. And yet, on encountering Jesus and his jubilee vision, he radically responded to the messianic reign that had irrupted into the world by redistributing half of his wealth to the poor and then committing reparations (fourfold) to all those who experienced the exploitation of his imperial activity. Scripture tells us that this act of repair and healing led Jesus to announce that salvation had come to his house.

White Anabaptists must encounter Jesus again, witnessed by Black and Indigenous people, as they strive to become a shalom church five hundred years into their story.

This story is good news to an Anabaptist tradition in North America that has too frequently been lost but still can be found faithful despite centuries-long participation with the DoD project.

It is not clear that the Anabaptist tradition in North America has earned the title “peace church,” given its response to genocide, slavery, displacement, oppression, plunder, and ongoing discrimination on this land.

However, its story is not over. Now is the time to anchor Anabaptism in the twenty-first century with the experiences and wisdom of those most affected by the DoD project. This is not an erasure of Anabaptism but a more robust Christian discipleship that is as anti-colonizing and anti-racist as it is anti-Christendom. It is a liberating, harmony way, grounded in Black and Native theological wisdom. White Anabaptists must encounter Jesus again, witnessed by Black and Indigenous people, as they strive to become a shalom church five hundred years into their story.

Pursuing reparations precedes being a shalom church. There is no genuine shalom without restorative justice and healing mercy also present as its foundation. Avoiding conscription to war while apathetically letting your neighbors be destroyed does not make for a peace church. Reparations is part of the harmony and liberating way that must be taken up as disciples of Jesus. White Anabaptists must seek reparations that are not

limited by narrow conversations defined by financial debt. Like Zacchaeus, Anabaptists must promote the comprehensive healing, wellbeing, and ultimate thriving of those who have had their backs against the wall of white supremacy. There are multifaceted dimensions to reparations work that must address eradicating ongoing racial injustice at local, regional, state, and national levels in housing, education, livable wages, policing, prisons, safety, and physical and psychological healthcare.⁷ And then there is redistributing *land*. None of this can be done without radical and prophetic truth-telling so that we can live into a more healed future. There is an opportunity to participate in the delivering and reparative presence of Jesus Christ in North America, but first Anabaptists must come down from their tree like Zacchaeus.⁸

As Anabaptists mark this significant 500-year milestone, there ought to be celebration and lament. Lament and repentance can transfigure the church's witness toward God's shalom, especially for Indigenous and Black Americans and the many other peoples who have suffered from this anti-Christ and death-dealing project that is also approximately five hundred years old. Let Anabaptism after five hundred years lead disciples of Jesus to work for repair and amends for its assimilation into a violent mainstream dominant culture that enjoyed the advantages of whiteness and benefited from the stolen land and labor of Indigenous and Black people. The time is now for Anabaptism to become a shalom church.

About the author

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7 Michael D. Barram et al., eds., *Reparations and the Theological Disciplines: Prophetic Voices for Remembrance, Reckoning, and Repair* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023).

8 Drew G. I. Hart, *Who Will Be A Witness: Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love, and Deliverance* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2020), 241–76.

Encountering the global church

From Mennonite culture to radical witness

Doug Klassen

Mennonite culture and the global church

Five years ago in January, our son Levi indicated that he wanted to join the baptism and membership class at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary where I was pastoring. Rose and I were excited, and the Pentecost party planning for May 27 began in earnest.¹

I phoned my parents and invited them out for the event. Most certainly they were coming, and then my dad said, “Would you have time a few days afterwards for us to drive north to Beaverlodge, Alberta, to see if we can find my parents’ old homestead?”

“Let’s plan for it.”

“Great. I will contact some of the relatives up there to say we are coming.”

So, after the baptism weekend, we drove eight hours north to Peace River country. There it was: the log cabin with the dirt floor. This is where they landed in 1926.

The family only stayed for several years. The work was hard, and the farmer holding the mortgage was dishonest. They decided to leave with some others for Tofield to work in the open coal mine. My Opa and his coworkers had to fill one boxcar per day with coal.

Some years later, right after World War II, General Motors in St. Catharines was hiring, and one of the foremen spoke German. Some families packed up and arrived in Vineland right when Vineland United Mennonite Church was coming into its own.

Before long there was a new building, vibrant German school, bursting Sunday School programs, choirs, another building expansion, quilt-

1 This essay is adapted from a plenary address delivered at the Mennonite Church Manitoba AGM, March 3-4, 2023, hosted by Douglas Mennonite Church in Winnipeg; the below dialogues are reconstructed from memory and are not intended to serve as transcriptions of the conversations.

ing circles, and in 1965 a new minister, J. K. Klassen, from the far away land of Winkler, Manitoba.

In 1973, when Grand Funk Railroad, Stevie Wonder, Dianna Ross, and the Doobie Brothers were topping the billboard charts, the congregation made the decision to separate the German and English services, though it was not going to happen until J. K. implored the congregation that this would result in a 25 percent increase in his workload, and he was not asking for further compensation.

This story is not meant to belittle the congregation. These were people who still carried trauma from the Russian Revolution. Anxiety decreases when you are worshipping in the company of others who share an experience. And this is not just the experience of Vineland. Many of the Eurocentric churches among us would have been the same—with heart-language hymns and chorales, Low German conversational language, and so much good food. There was safety in like company.

But what was once an attraction to like-minded others eventually became a barrier to those in the neighborhood who did not share the same story. The kids did not carry the trauma either, at least not in the same way.

Fast forward fifty years, and many of these churches have limited Sunday School programs, if any, buildings that are more than they need, difficulty pulling a choir together, and pastors' salaries that—though lower than other similar professions—are the largest lines in the budget.

Cultural peculiarities have become more of a societal identifier of what it means to be Mennonite than our expressions of faith in Jesus Christ.

As far as Mennonite culture goes, I was amused by Ivan Emke's columns in the *Mennonite Distorter* and more recently Andrew Unger's satire in *The Unger Review* (previously *The Daily Bonnet*). My amusement was mixed with concern,

however, because cultural peculiarities have become more of a societal identifier of what it means to be Mennonite than our expressions of faith in Jesus Christ. What worries me even more is that, for the most part, we have forgotten (or maybe given up on) the vision of what the church is to be in the world.

Paul starts Ephesians 3 with a wide-angle lens, talking about how in God's wisdom, God held onto the mystery of Christ until the moment it was revealed to the apostles (of whom Paul says he is the least) so that it

could be shared beyond the bounds of the *freundschaft*, beyond the Israelites to the gentiles:

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him. (Eph. 3:10–12)

If I would have read these verses in Africa or other places in the Global South where 84 percent of the Mennonites in Mennonite World Conference are now located, there would have been a rousing applause or several *amens*, not only because they are more expressive than North American Mennonites but also because they have entrusted their lives to God's vision for the church as the vehicle through which the restoration of all creation will come. Lao people have told us that they would drop everything for Jesus. Leaders in Vietnam and China have been jailed for the gospel. Below I recount two recent encounters with people from the Global South as a challenge to those of us Mennonites in North America who can let Mennonite culture supersede the radical call of discipleship to Jesus.

An elderly man in Ethiopia

We had just finished worshipping with the Mennonite Church in Adama, Ethiopia. The building was packed to the rafters, and there were no cars allowed in the small parking lot because there were benches set up and a loudspeaker for the overflow crowd. There were at least five hundred people there, the majority under the age of forty.

After the service they wanted to show us the elementary school that they run. Of the six hundred students enrolled, one hundred of them attend for free because they cannot afford to pay. If Mennonite leaders see a child living on the streets, they pick up the child, contact the authorities, and, if the child has no home to go to, take the child into a Mennonite family and send the child to this school. I did not see any street children in Adama. The Mennonites make sure there are none.

As we were driving to the school and then to the hospital established in 1945 by the first Mennonite missionaries to arrive there, an elderly man kept trying to sit beside me in the van. I could not figure out what was going on until he said, “I want to tell you something. I did not have a good childhood. My life was in peril. I took a chance and came to this hospital that the Mennonites started here. I asked them for a job, and they hired me to be an orderly.”

“That’s great.”

“I’m not finished. You see this building here? Every day the Mennonites would go in there together for a time. We asked them what they were doing in there. They answered that they were worshipping God. We asked if they were doing that so they wouldn’t get sick. They answered no. They came together to tell each other what they have seen God doing in their lives and in the lives of the patients, and they worship and give thanks to God for it all. And then they also pray for the many needs. We asked if we could join them, and they said yes!”

The elderly man went on to tell me breathtaking stories of how the peace of Jesus Christ transformed his life and the life of the other Ethiopians who worked alongside him. In the end he asked, “Do you know why I told you all of this?”

“I think you wanted to express gratitude—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I want to tell you this because I know in North America you are struggling. You are losing the vision for the gospel, and all I can say is, How dare you? How dare you keep the good news to yourself? It is my choice whether or not to follow Jesus, but withholding the good news from others, the good news that can transform their lives—that, my friend, is colonial.”

Just then Fanosie, an Ethiopian who serves in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You just got told!”

“Did I ever!”

A tribal chief in the Philippines

Dann and Jojo Pantoja, Mennonite Church Canada witness workers, have been made honorary members of the Tagabawa tribe way up on Mount Apo on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines because of their relationship with the tribe and how they have been instrumental in bringing peace between warring factions around Mount Apo.

When visiting, I asked the chief why she and her people have paid attention to Dann and Joji. Surely, she has met many missionaries and others who have come. Why them?

“The Tagabawa people are polytheistic,” she replied. “We believe in a supreme god who is the creator, and we have many demi-gods who assist. But like many other indigenous peoples, the Tagabawa regard the *limokon*, the dove, as a messenger of the spirit world. We heed the direction from which the dove coos either as a warning or as good news. Your symbol in Mennonite Church Canada is a dove with a branch. You have come from the spirit world as messengers of good news.”

Dann and Joji have not lost a vision for the gospel but bring the good news in the spirit of the *limokon*, the dove.

Learning from the global church

Change is happening in the global church. The winds of God’s Spirit are swirling all around us. The question is whether we choose to participate or not. What if we North American Mennonites—together with Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, and others—followed the example of the global church and started thinking and praying together in our own neighbourhoods about how we can be people of God’s peace?

I remember standing in that field with my dad in Beaverlodge, Alberta. Little did he know that he and I would travel together to Thailand, where he would meet migrant workers from Myanmar, house church leaders from Khon Ken, a former Buddhist-Muslim who is now Christian business owner and house church pastor in Hau Hin, or that he would celebrate his eighty-second birthday in Tokyo in the company of people in the global Mennonite church. His heart nearly explodes when he talks about how big his church is now—not only back home but now around the world. This is the wisdom of God being made known through the church, as Ephesians describes. And we are headed, I believe, for abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

About the author

Doug Klassen is executive minister of Mennonite Church Canada in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Anabaptism in Ethiopia

Six markers of the Meserete Kristos Church

Henok T. Mekonin

In visiting the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia, European and North American Mennonites might be surprised at what they see, given the church's hybrid character and high level of ecumenicity. And yet, this church is deeply rooted in Anabaptist values and has evolved in response to various religious, economic, and political factors.

Meserete Kristos Church (“A church founded on Christ”¹), based on 1 Corinthians 3:11 (assumed to be Menno Simons’s favorite verse),² started as a church with ten people’s water baptism in Addis Ababa in 1951. The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) now consists of 1,400 congregations and 922 church planting centers, comprising 450,793 baptized members, 63,586 believers under instruction in preparation for baptism, and 247,091 not-yet-baptized children—totaling a faith community of 761,470. In 2022 alone, 23,426 new converts came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, and thousands have been baptized.³

The MKC is organized into fifty-three regional offices across a country of 123,000,000 people with a land mass about the size of the province of Ontario, or twice the size of Texas. Each region has its own office that coordinates the ministries of its outlying congregations.

The MKC head office in Addis Ababa gives general oversight to all fifty-three regional offices and administers special programs in collaboration with the regions.⁴ Some of those programs include education, evangelism

1 Carl E. Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2023), 18.

2 Lydette S. Assefa, “Creating Identity in Opposition: Relations between the Meserete Kristos Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1960–1980,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 544.

3 Desalegn Abebe Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), 1951–2023” (fundraising presentation, June 26, 2023). In 2023, Desalegn Abebe, the president of MKC, was in the United States for a two-month fraternal visit, and these are the statistics he used from the previous year, 2022.

4 Ejo, “Meserete Kristos Church (MKC).”

and missions, translation and production of important materials into local languages, peace and reconciliation, prison ministries, women's ministry, and relief and development. All of these programs reflect MKC's Anabaptist roots. The various ministries also illustrate how mission is an integral aspect of the MKC's identity with its integration of evangelism and social activism.⁵ The church continually demonstrates this commitment by focusing on the following six markers.

A teaching church

First and foremost, MKC emphasizes the authority of the Bible and the importance of being a teaching church. Since its inception, MKC has held a high view of the authority of Holy Scripture as found in the Protestant versions of the Bible. Born within the context of missionary-founded Bible schools, elementary schools, and the renowned Nazareth Bible Academy, MKC has consistently been recognized as "a teaching church" and remains dedicated to biblically based education. The founding missionaries carried that emphasis with them as they established the Dresser Bible School in Nazareth, being sure to include the Bible in their curriculum as they trained medical assistants for the hospital work.⁶ They then established the Nazareth Bible Academy as a full boarding high school to train leaders for the church. The Bible was integrated into the curriculum. They felt that any educated Christian must have a good knowledge of the Bible. Even during its darkest days of Marxist persecution when all those institutions were lost, secret home cell churches were nourished by carefully prepared lesson guides to facilitate Bible study.

Anabaptist Christians in Ethiopia employ a hermeneutic of trust when reading the Bible. Since 1994, to safeguard, consolidate, and unite its leadership in a commonly held Anabaptist theological stance, MKC has been developing the Meserete Kristos College as its national school, which now offers baccalaureate and diploma programs in Bible and Christian Ministry. Further, the regional offices have launched local Bible institutes offering Bible and ministry training on the postsecondary diplo-

5 Henok T Mekonin, "Caring for People above All Else: Integrating Prayer, Relief, and Peace to Build God's Church," *Anabaptist Witness*, <https://www.anabaptistwitness.org/2023/03/caring-for-people-above-all-else-integrating-prayer-relief-and-peace-to-build-gods-church/>.

6 Chester Lehman Wenger and Sara Jane (Weaver) Wenger, *Bearing Fruit: A Collection of Memories as Told to and Shaped by Deborah Anna Good and Betty Wenger Good-White* (self-published, 2017), 117.

ma level to several hundred local leaders on weekends. Curriculum and qualifications of teachers are monitored by the Meserete Kristos College at Debre Zeit, which grants the diploma.

A witnessing church

Second, the MKC is committed to being a witnessing church. It continues to see the Great Commission as its primary calling. Its Evangelism and Missions Department encourages congregations to reach out and establish “daughter” congregations. There are also “tent maker” church planters supported by the head office, along with numerous international “tent makers” in other countries. And yet, all members of the church are involved in these ministries. All members have the authority to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons.



One of the major factors contributing to the rapid growth of the church is its complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit.

One of the major factors contributing to the rapid growth of the church is its complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit in the day-to-day activities of

hundreds of churches across the country. The influx of a high number of people coming to Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit has led to a complete transformation of their lives, both inwardly and outwardly. This transformation has not only strengthened the church but also attracted other people to come to Christ. The emphasis on prayer and group Bible study has brought about changes in the behavior, attitudes, speech, interests, and morals of new believers, as well as how they spend their time. There is the conviction that all should preach the gospel to their neighborhood under the motto of “Agenda 28/19,” which stands for Matthew 28:19, the text the current president of MKC has cited to encourage all MKC members to preach the gospel. Further strategies are employed, such as limiting the maximum number of baptized members in one local church to one thousand. Once a community has reached this number, it divides into two, thus creating another congregation. Each local church has an outreach center with the goal of increasing its numbers annually by 10 percent.

A giving church

Third, the MKC is committed to be a giving church. Although the MKC is in one of the poorest countries in the world, all members are expected

to contribute a tithe, no matter how small, to their local church office. Beyond the tithe, members bring offerings to the worship services on Sundays. With most members being students or young people with little means, church income is still small.

Nevertheless, with the annual income from all tithes and offerings, the churches support 4,482 full-time ministers (pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and teachers) and 1,282 support staff. Money from tithes and offerings also contribute to administrative expenses and to funds aimed at building or improving church facilities. Of the ministers who are supported, 386 are missionaries or church planters. Church planters' salaries are supported 75 percent the first year, 50 percent the second year, and 25 percent the third year. It is assumed that an emerging new congregation should be able to carry the full responsibility to support its leaders thereafter. Further, the department gives short training to one hundred international "tent making" missionaries who take jobs in neighboring countries. Some of these are quasi-clandestine operations, the details of which are kept secret for security reasons.

A compassionate church

A further commitment of the MKC is to be a compassionate church, a wholistic ministry to a society in great need. This work is facilitated through MKC's Development Commission (MKC-DC), which operates as a semi-autonomous branch of the head office to administer over sixty-five projects relating to poverty alleviation, such as famine relief, food security, child and youth development, HIV-AIDS related ministries, and conflict management and peace building. Administering the successful completion of these projects requires the employment of 393 personnel with an annual budget of multiple millions of US dollars supplied by Ethiopian believers and international non-government agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee, Canadian Food Grains Bank, Tearfund UK, Pact, Compassion International, and other organizations.

A church that visits those in prison

Fifth, the MKC is committed to visiting those in prison. Its prison ministry was started in 1993 when prisoners at Jimma read the MKC's magazine, *Miskir* (Witness) and wrote to MKC for help.⁷ Today this ministry is present in thirty-three of the nation's 134 prisons. This ministry follows

7 Ejo, "Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)."

a wholistic approach, meeting spiritual and humanitarian needs. The prison ministry has placed full-time ministers in prisons who evangelize, teach, counsel, lead Bible studies, give discipleship training, and lead the congregations that have formed inside the prison walls. In some prisons, the ministry even builds latrines, dormitories for women and their dependant small children, and chapels for worship. It also establishes kindergartens for the small children who live with their incarcerated mothers. Congregations have emerged in most of these prisons, and in some of the prisons more than one half of those incarcerated are now committed Christians!

The prison ministry's goal is to bring transformation in the lives of prisoners mentally, spiritually, ethically, physically, and socially. It hopes to see those incarcerated transformed to become upstanding citizens committed to promoting peace and justice in their communities and to reduce and prevent crime in Ethiopia. To do so, it seeks to give a general practical education to all prisoners in areas such as work ethics, government and citizenship responsibilities, human rights, mental health, children's physical and mental development and the role of parents, HIV-AIDS awareness and prevention, peace and justice and reconciliation, and forgiveness as an alternative to revenge killing.

A peacemaking church

Finally, the MKC is committed to be a peacemaking church. MKC's wholistic concept of ministry includes one of reconciliation between the individual and God and between individuals—and to work for peace within a society torn by conflict. Right after the establishment of the church, through the church's experience, MKC leaders became more aware of the fragility of unity and the possibilities for disaster that conflict can bring to an otherwise healthy church. The first responsibility of the peace ministry was to create awareness throughout the denomination's leadership of the centrality and importance of living together in peace and harmony, viewing conflict as a potentially positive growth-factor, and learning the techniques of transforming conflict into a resolution that brings health and growth to personal and institutional relationships. Since that time, the peace office has been preparing training manuals for peace committee membership, conflict transformation and peace building, restorative justice, stress and trauma healing, and HIV-AIDS. With these preparations and materials, the peace ministry is gearing up to transform MKC into a truly historic peace church. The Meserete Kristos College is also

contributing to the promotion of peacemaking as an integral part of the Christian ministry by offering a peace minor with its BA in Bible and Christian Ministries.

Conclusion

The Anabaptist tradition is rooted in several important theological beliefs and values that have been practiced, shaped, and reshaped by Mennonite communities over nearly five centuries across various parts of the world. The MKC, deeply rooted in Anabaptist values, has emerged in response to various religious and political factors in Ethiopia.⁸ The various influences that have impacted the MKC, such as Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and Anabaptism, reflect the hybrid nature of the community. This hybrid nature has been present in Anabaptism from its inception. For the MKC, Anabaptism is a part of the broader evangelical movement in Ethiopia.

Within the MKC, there is a high level of ecumenical sharing and involvement among leaders and members. Congregations often invite preachers from other denominations to speak on Sundays, or they join together for area conferences and the like. Yet, the six markers of the MKC mentioned above illustrate how the church's work is deeply embedded in its identity, emphasizing prayer, teaching, and a complete reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹ This is what present-day Anabaptism looks like in the Ethiopian context.

About the author

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8 Every time I read about the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, it strikes me how similar the theological, religious, social, and political issues are to what happened in Ethiopia. See especially chapter 3 of Tibebe Eshete's book to observe the similarities and differences in theological, religious, social, and political issues between what happened in Europe and what occurred in Ethiopia. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience*, reprint edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

9 Mekonin, "Caring for People above All Else."

Embracing and contesting tradition and identity

Drawing on Paul for framing “Anabaptism at 500”

Gordon Zerbe

“I was exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers; but then God’s Son was unveiled within me.”

–Galatians 1:14, 16

“For I also handed over to you what I also took over [from others].”

–1 Corinthians 15:3

“You are holding fast to the traditions, just as I handed them over to you.”

–1 Corinthians 11:2

Identity and tradition

Our word *identity* comes from an abstract word in Late Latin (*identitas*), referring to the “sameness” or “thatness” of an individual or a collective entity.¹ These days, the notion of identity is increasingly complex and contested. When it comes to identity as “what I belong to” (as opposed to “what I am in my own person”), often individuals hold multiple identities at the same time, such that identity can be layered, conflicted, diffuse, or shifting.

The English word *tradition* can be used either for “the process of handing something down” (e.g., “received by tradition”) or for “what is handed down” (e.g., “they affirmed the tradition”). The same is true of its Latin root (*traditio*) and its Greek equivalent (*paradōsis*, e.g., Gal. 1:14). But the transmission process through time involves both delivering and receiving: Paul’s own use of what was conventional terminology highlights both the correlative “handing down” or “handing over” (*paradidōmi*) and “taking up” or “taking over” (*paralambanō*). What is more, the nuance of

¹ Related to the words *idem* (“the same”) and *id* (third person neuter pronoun, thus “that thing”).

these terms in Greek implies the handing over of something *for custodial safekeeping* and the taking over of something *as one's own*, in the sense of embracing something, thereby also indicating a kind of responsibility.²

While we sometimes think of received tradition (whether positively or negatively) as monolithic, inflexible, or unchanging, the reality is that all traditions (or cultures) evolve through time. Moreover, they often represent the consolidation of multiple influences or starting points and

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are often porous, inspired by neighboring or even competing traditions. Meanwhile, all traditions draw on foundational events or sacred texts, the focus of later commemoration. Associated with this commemoration is often a quest to recover in later generations the original or essential meaning of foundational events or texts. Over time, the sacred texts as received become somewhat in-

determinate in meaning (that is, open to multiple possible meanings), even if they cannot mean just anything. When reflecting on a tradition, whether from the inside or the outside, what is sometimes far more revealing is how the sacred texts or foundational narratives have been received or appropriated. To commemorate is both to embrace and to interrogate and potentially reframe a tradition-in-the-making, as meaningful for ever-changing contexts.

The entire Bible is arguably a complex expression of the constant process of constructing, interpreting, transmitting, promoting, and reworking received tradition, as it intersects with changing ecological, material, political, demographic, and cultural conditions. At some critical moments, the normally incremental process explodes into dramatic and disruptive transformations. Paul (also known in Scripture as Saul) embodies and represents one of these massive transformations. As a figure, Paul is himself also “traditioned” (transmitted to and received by us) in more than one version. Is he (1) the dogmatic, tradition-rejecting and tradition-founding supersessionist and institutionalist? Or (2) the rhetorically flexible, both tradition-embracing and tradition-contesting reformer or revisionist? In

2 The compound Greek verb *paradidōmi* (“to hand over”) is also the regular term for “handing over” someone into physical custody, and in the passive voice, the term has the sense of “committing” someone to someone or something (as in Rom. 6:17).

contemporary Pauline scholarship, the former figure is giving way to the latter.

The messianic “now” and “soon”

On first impression, the case of Paul does not seem helpfully analogous for our thinking about the meaning of “Anabaptism at 500.” We moderns orient ourselves primarily with the remote or recent past. By contrast, Paul seems entirely shaped by a critical orientation to the messianic “now” (the irruption of Messiah Jesus into his own “present” time—e.g., Rom. 3:21) and “soon” (the imminent future conclusion of all things—e.g., Rom. 16:20). Paul thus stands between the decisive *already* and the inexorable *not yet* and claims that time itself has been compressed in these concluding times as history reaches its goal (1 Cor 7:29; 10:11). The once (the past) seems to shade in value. From one angle, there seems to be nothing by way of reform or even restoration of what has been but rather a claim to the messianic unveiling (*apokalypsis*, revelation) as absolute novelty, singularity, and finality—and thus incommensurable to anything else.

Indeed, this is an important *part* of the figure. In a crucial sense, as a result of sacramental incorporation into the body of Messiah, all existing identities (or differences, the flip side) are called into question in one way or another (Rom. 6; Gal. 3; 1 Cor. 12; Col. 3). In some cases, the reorientation of existing social identities involves reframing binary structures that involve socially constructed *us and them*, or *bettors and lessers*.³ Paul fosters a kind of radically disruptive messianic inversion, inclusivism, and universalism. The question becomes whether this ultimately becomes a coercive universalism, through a tolerance that operates as indifference to particularity and difference, one that undermines any continuing particularity of cultural-ethnic identity.⁴

3 See Gordon Zerbe, “The One and the Many, the Part and the All: Unity and Diversity in the Messiah’s Body Politic,” *Vision: A Journal of Church and Theology* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 77–90, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/295/248>.

4 This is the complaint of Talmudic scholar and Jewish cultural critic Daniel Boyarin in *Paul a Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). Boyarin reclaims Paul as a fellow Jewish thinker, who produced “a discourse on radical reform in that culture” (2). Boyarin thus wrestles “alongside” Paul, admiring many of Paul’s criticisms but also, in the end, “against” him (3). For Boyarin, it is Paul’s “very tolerance that deprives difference of the right to be different, dissolving all others into a single essence in which matters of cultural practice are irrelevant and only faith in Christ is significant” (9).

Solidarity with all that is “other”

Crucially for Paul, the messianic *soon* means a critical *not yet*. The messianic community must always see itself as a proleptic and incomplete figure of the grand goal (*telos*) of God’s restoring work. The messianic community must ward itself from any arrogance as having arrived, remembering that it is a *mere* remnant (not the *special* remnant), always longing for its reabsorption into the fullness. It must always regard itself with a kind of self-suppression, recognizing itself as only a provisional part that longs for its reunification with the All, when God’s unconquerable mercy will overcome all remaining binaries and divisions. It thus seeks to be in relation to and in solidarity with all that is *other*, all that is *lost*. For Paul, then, it is the *soon* future and the already *now*—and not the burdened and fractured *past*—that allows the messianic community to see itself as presently One, in anticipation of the fullness of the Oneness still to come.⁵

In this respect, Paul refuses to claim that the messianic community has taken over the prerogatives of Israel as if it were the “new Israel.” There is no replacement or displacement theology in Paul, as there is elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Peter) and in early Christianity (e.g., Epistle of Barnabas). The goal to which all leads is the combined “fullness of the nations” and “all Israel” (Rom. 11).

Reaching back and recovering origins

There is another angle: this orientation to the *now* and the *soon* should not blind us to Paul’s careful, even if polemical, positioning of himself in the ongoing contest for the meaning of his own scriptural and Judean-Israelite traditions. The dominant conversionist-supersessionist figure of Paul may be the cleanest, whereby Paul departed completely from everything in his past. But the bi-cultural, migrant Paul never stopped being “Saul” so that he could be “Paul.” We meet him as “Paul” only because his legacy lives on in Greek linguistic guise. He is firmly rooted in his past and continues to be deeply committed to his own tradition and people, as a self-identified Judean-Jew, who has nevertheless been “taken over” by Messiah (Rom. 9, 11; Phil. 3; 2 Cor. 11). To be sure, the outcome of “the apocalypse of Messiah within himself” occasions a massive attempt to reformulate and reframe the nature of his tradition and eventually to

5 See Gordon Zerbe, “The Relevance of Paul’s Eschatological Ecclesiology for Ecumenical Relations,” in Gordon Zerbe, *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics* (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2012), 108–120, www.cmu.ca/docs/faculty/CMU-Citizenship-Chapter-7-The-Relevance-of-Pauls-Eschatological-Ecclesiology-GZ.pdf.

develop new forms of tradition (see below). His great pride in his Israelite past pales in significance *only* in its comparative relation to its transformation into the messianic present (e.g., 2 Cor. 3).

In seeking to reorient his own sacred tradition, Paul's fundamental argument is this (to put it somewhat simplistically): *Abraham is in* (as the crucial starting point), along with some of the prophets; *Moses is out* (or, with

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better nuance, is entirely relativized). As such, Paul can say that "the gospel was previously preached to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8). And whereas the original covenantal promise with Abraham is "now" being fulfilled through Messiah Jesus, the

covenantal law of Moses has been entirely reframed. Through Messiah Jesus, the "seed of Abraham," all those immersed into Messiah, thereby also become direct heirs of Abraham (Gal. 3). His comments about the interim Mosaic era "under the Law," however, are not entirely consistent and depend on whether he is advocating for the full status of new arrivals (Galatians) or challenging the arrogance of new arrivals (Romans). Meanwhile, the form and content of the ethical "rule [*kanōn*] for walking" (Gal. 6:16) promoted by Paul shows both departure and continuity in relation to the framework of his earlier practice within Judaism.⁶

Creating and consolidating new tradition

Paul does not only contest and reframe the received tradition of his fathers in light of messianic revelation. He is also attentive to the matter of establishing new tradition within the messianic community. On the one hand, he admits to "taking over" tradition "handed over" from others "in Messiah" before he was. He deliberately seeks for those in his assemblies

⁶ Paul vigorously argues that it is precisely the new regime of grace "through" and "in" Messiah that has the potential to inspire and energize a fulfillment of "the justice requirements of the Law" (Rom. 5-8). What we see, more or less, is a move away from the largely casuistic (case-oriented) regulations of his own Judaic heritage ("works of Law") toward a set of mainly social virtues ("fruit of the Spirit"), under the banner of the command to love neighbor, a summative recapitulation of the entire Law. Accordingly, Paul can even talk about the "law of Messiah" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Paul certainly still offers casuistic guidance at times, but this does not appear to be his main line of interest. Rather, he encourages constant discernment and testing (Rom. 12:1-2; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-10) in concert with core elements of the new messianic tradition so that the will of God, the "good," can be known and "walked."

to “take over” and “hold fast to” what he has “handed over” to them.⁷ He even assumes that assemblies that he has not yet visited have been “committed to” tradition and teaching “handed over” to them (Rom. 6:17). Sometimes Paul quotes or refers to specific traditions being handed down orally, whether confessional (1 Cor. 15:3–7), ethical (1 Cor. 7:10), liturgical (1 Cor. 11:2, 23), or organizational (1 Cor. 9:14). While the specific source of these traditions is often unattributed, noteworthy is how Paul emphasizes the special status of the “command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25; 9:14; 14:37). We can thus observe an embedded *Jesus tradition* in Paul’s letters, even though it is not often specifically identified as such (e.g., Rom. 12:9–21; 13:8–10).

On the other hand, Paul can vigorously contend with those who preach (in his view) a “different Jesus” or a “different gospel,” in contrast to “my gospel” or “the gospel that I preach among the nations.” He can confront a “contrary teaching,” other than the one “received” (Gal. 1–2; 2 Cor. 10–13; Rom. 16:17–19). The rhetoric can at times be fierce, at other times generous. And the battles lines are multiple. What we discern is that, just as European Anabaptism as a movement was marked by polygenesis, so was the broader Jesus messianist movement. Within the first thirty or so years of the Jesus movement, at least four other distinct streams can be identified other than that of Paul.⁸ In the next generation, some of these will seek to disinherit others.

Reframing “Anabaptism at 500”

Just as the messianic *now* was an occasion for reimagining the past, it seems to me that the *now* of global Anabaptism (which cannot be reduced to formal institutional bodies) requires a reconsideration of the genealogical construction of Eurocentric Anabaptism and its missional or colonial expansion into the world. We need rather to position ourselves in the *now* of global Anabaptism and then reflect on multiple affinities, associations, and genealogical connections and affirm multiple independent starting points.

In Paul’s day, non-Jewish Jesus messianists were not required to pass through known genealogical lines to become full heirs; rather, in the time compression that is “in Messiah,” they could become direct heirs

7 For the reception side of the tradition process, see, e.g., Rom. 6:17; 16:17; 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Thess. 2:13.

8 See, e.g., Zerbe, “Paul’s Eschatological Ecclesiology,” 128n2.

of Abraham (Gal. 3; Rom. 4). Anthropological research shows that genealogically constructed lineage systems evolve over time, according to changing political and ecological conditions. By contiguous living, or by deliberate alliances, neighboring tribes become incorporated into existing genealogies—but at the front end, not the back end. The apical (or eponymous) ancestors of newer communities *become siblings* with the founding ancestors of the (once) majority movement.

While we imagine traditions through time as a kind of family tree (with roots, trunk, and branches), the tree model of actual genealogical connections itself breaks down past a couple of generations on both sides. Real biological connections are more like the complex interconnectedness of a bramble bush. We need to incorporate and commemorate many more origin stories into the narrative of what is now *global* Anabaptism at 500.

About the author

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