

The Authority of Tradition in Mennonite Peace Ethics

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Introduction: The Authority of Tradition

When attempting to determine the justice and limitations of particular wars, Catholics look not only to the Bible, but also to Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, and other prominent thinkers whose judgements have contributed to the “just war tradition.” When judging the merits of particular acts of warfare, leading theologians in the Catholic tradition have both appealed to the authority of their predecessors to support their own conclusions, and been appealed to in turn by their successors.¹ This recourse to tradition is in full agreement with the authoritative status that traditional Church teaching holds within Catholic theology and ethics.

The Anabaptist reformers of the sixteenth-century, however, summarily rejected the authority of Catholic tradition as a basis for establishing right doctrine and ethics. Reading the Biblical texts divorced from the authoritative commentary of the Church fathers, they zealously adopted Martin Luther’s *sola scriptura* position as the foundation for their theology and their behaviour. As participants in what has come to be known as the “Radical Reformation,” Anabaptists condemned mainline reformers, including Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, for compromising the Reformation ideal of reinstituting the church according to the explicit teachings of the New Testament. Rejecting all extra-biblical tradition, Anabaptist leaders such as Menno Simons established non-conformist sects in which membership was to be freely chosen and conversion symbolized by a second baptism. Finding in their readings of the biblical texts alone no Scriptural support for just war theory, many Anabaptist sects practiced non-resistance in the face of violence, even to the point of death.

1. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica II, I, 4, I* and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (2nd Edition, New York: Doubleday, 1997), 602–605, 613–617.

As the spiritual and, in many cases, genetic descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, modern Mennonites persist in the pacifist ethic of their ancestors. Their position in relation to the authority of tradition, however, has been less consistent. While many Mennonites continue to reject the teachings of the church fathers as authoritative, placing great weight on the words of Scripture, many have also come to view their own particular tradition as authoritative. Claims of “Mennonite orthodoxy” are made by citing the writings of the very same sixteenth-century reformers who accepted only Scripture as authoritative. The invocation and reinterpretation of the early Anabaptists has played an especially important role in the redefinition of the Mennonite understanding of non-resistance that has occurred over the course of the twentieth century. In this paper, I shall discuss the various roles that the rejection, reconstruction and reinterpretation of authoritative tradition have played in the evolution of Mennonite peace ethics.

Part I: The Rejection of Authoritative Tradition

It is ironic that in breaking with the Catholic Church and its traditionalism, the founders of what would come to be known as the Mennonite church themselves ushered in a new tradition. Discerning the origin point of Mennonite faith is, at first glance, quite straightforward. Mennonites themselves locate their theological roots among the sixteenth-century Reformers and take their name from a historical person, the sixteenth-century Dutch ex-Catholic priest named Menno Simons. Upon closer examination, the antecedents to Mennonite thought and practice become more complex. Some scholars have seen in the Mennonites continuity with Medieval non-conformist sects, such as the Cathars and the Waldensians.² Dale Schrag has argued for the possible influence of Erasmian humanism.³ Even amongst the sixteenth-century reformers with whom Mennonites identify, a handful of leaders from various regions espoused “Mennonite” theology a full decade before Menno himself converted.⁴ It

2. Schrag, Dale. “Erasmian and Grebelian Pacifism: Consistency or Contradiction?” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. October 1988), 431.

3. *Ibid.*, 431–454.

4. Among others, Conrad Grebel, leader of the Swiss Brethren, is said to have performed the first “Mennonite baptism” in 1525. Dirk and Obie Phillips of the Netherlands led Anabaptist

will therefore be beneficial to quickly sketch the life and doctrine of the man whom diverse groups of Mennonites have chosen, amongst many others, to be their namesake.

Born in 1496 to an undistinguished farming family in Witmarsum, Friesland, Menno Simons was intended from a young age for entering the priesthood.⁵ As such, he was given a monastic education, mastering Latin and achieving some familiarity with Greek. Citations in his later writings indicate that he read Cyprian, Tertullian, Eusebius, and Augustine. In 1524, he was ordained at the relatively advanced age of twenty-eight and took up the position of parish priest.⁶ Early in his career, however, Menno began to experience doubts about certain dogmas of the Catholic faith, in particular the doctrine of transubstantiation. According to his own recollection, Menno first questioned the reality of the transformation of bread and wine while performing the Eucharist in 1525, at first attributing his heretical thought to demonic influence.⁷ Menno, however, was not alone in his doubts; in 1521, a Dutch reformer named Hoen, influenced by Luther's teachings, had begun teaching that the Lord's Supper was meant to be taken symbolically.⁸ Whether or not Menno was familiar with Hoen, Reformation ideas were beginning to reach and influence him. He began to read Luther and, subsequently, the Christian Scriptures. Of his initial contact with the biblical texts, he later wrote; "I had not touched them in my life, for I feared if I should read them, I would be misled."⁹ Finding no explicit support for the doctrine of transubstantiation in the New Testament itself, Menno was conflicted. Upon his reading, the teaching of the Church and the Scriptures were contradictory. At this point, he turned to Luther, accepting his position that the authority of the Scriptures outweighed that of human commandments. Further study led him to question the scriptural foundations of infant baptism. However, Menno's shift of allegiance from the authority of the church to that of scripture would be gradual; despite

sects in that region prior to the conversion of Menno Simons.

5. Bender, Harold S. "Introduction." *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (CWMS). Menno Simons. trans. Leonard Verduin. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), 4. Subsequent biographical details concerning Menno's life are derived from the same source.

6. Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," CWMS, 668.

7. *Ibid.*, 668.

8. Bender, "Introduction," 5.

9. Simons, Reply to Gellius Faber, CWMS, 668.

his growing inner convictions, outwardly he remained a loyal Catholic, and continued to administer the sacraments.¹⁰

In 1532, several non-conformist Anabaptists (literally, “re-baptizers”) joined Menno’s parish, including members of the “Munsterite” sect.¹¹ The Munsterites, under the leadership of Jan Matthys and, after his death, Jan of Leiden, were Anabaptists who had succeeded in a peasants’ revolt at the outset of 1534 in the North German city of Munster. Overtaking the Catholic elite, Matthys declared the city a “New Jerusalem”, the kingdom of God on earth, and installed himself as king. “Apostles” of this New Jerusalem were sent out to villages like Witmarsum, inviting others to become members of their kingdom. While sympathetic to their rejection of Catholic authority and practice of adult baptism, Menno vigorously challenged the Munsterites, against whom he wrote the first pamphlet of his career, entitled *The Blasphemy of John of Leiden* in 1535.¹² Crucially, Menno built his argument not on the fact that Leiden and the Musterites had deposed the legitimate temporal and ecclesial authorities of Munster, but that the kingship that Leiden had usurped was properly Christ’s. “Behold,” Menno declared, “as certainly as Christ is our Lawgiver and as surely as He is our Judge, so surely is He our King. What then becomes of John of Leiden? Oh abominable blasphemy against God, that a man should call himself the joyous king of all.”¹³

The bloody reclamation of Munster by Catholic forces in the spring of 1535 proved to be a turning point in Menno’s life.¹⁴ Those killed amongst the Munsterites included members of Menno’s parish, including his own brother. Menno became convinced that while the Munsterites were rightly disenchanted with the Catholic faith, they had been abandoned, left as “poor, misguided sheep” without a leader to teach them in the true way of the New Testament church.¹⁵ Feeling the blood of his former parishioners on

10. Bender, “Introduction,” CWMS, 8.

11. For details of the Munsterite Rebellion, see Stayer, James M. *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), chapter 6.

12. Simons, CWMS, 33. While the pamphlet had been written prior to the fall of Leiden’s “New Jerusalem,” it was not published until 1627.

13. *Ibid.*, 36.

14. Bender, “Introduction,” 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

his hands, Menno began to openly condemn the Catholic sacraments. Nine months later, in January 1536, he publicly renounced the Catholic Church, was himself re-baptized, and became an outlaw teacher, church leader and writer in the wider Anabaptist movement until his death on January 31, 1561.¹⁶

In their renunciation of the Catholic Church and membership in the Anabaptist movement, Menno and his followers believed themselves to be released from the bonds of human error and restored to a community of believers who lived authentically Christian lives based on New Testament teachings. Understanding adult baptism to symbolize their freely chosen faith, Menno's early followers believed that they had through faith been regenerated by the power of Christ's resurrection. Their pacifist ethics were a result of their belief in their own personal regeneration, for "the regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strifeThey are the children of peace who have beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and know of no warSpears and swords of iron we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value."¹⁷ The Mennonites understood true Christians to pledge allegiance to no king but Christ; as such, they absolved themselves from all political dealings, especially military service. Trusting in his eternal reward, Menno's peace ethic required not only non-violence, but also non-resistance, even in the face of certain death. He condemns the just war tradition, conceding defeat in the temporal life:

Very well, seed of Cain, Korah, and Balaam, prepare for defense. Lie, cheat, revile, blaspheme, hate, betray, violate and murder as much as in you lies. Quote all the councils, authors, and learned teachers there have been for centuries. Appeal to every lord and prince, every emperor, king and mighty one on earth. Use all the force, power, art and cunning there is; it will avail you nothing. The Lamb will conquer and gain the victory; the people of God will triumph, not with external weapons but in patience with the Spirit and Word of God.¹⁸

From "the people of God", Menno explicitly excludes both Roman Catholics and other Reformation sects, including Lutherans, Zwinglians,

16. Ibid., 28.

17. Simons, CWMS, 170.

18. Simons, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," CWMS, 175.

and Munsterites, for they “make valid their positions, faith, and conduct with the sword.”¹⁹

Throughout his writings, Menno fiercely attacks the Catholic tradition he inherited. As the preface to all of his works, he includes the words of I Corinthians 3:11, “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Taking a position that was perhaps even more extreme than Luther’s *sola scriptura*, Menno founds his entire thought on his interpretation of Jesus’ teachings. When he does address the writings of the Church Fathers, it is to emphasize that their opinions are not to be given more validity than that of scripture.²⁰ Writing on the particular subject of infant baptism, Menno asks the general question that serves as the guiding principle for both his doctrine and his ethics: “Have Origen and Augustine proved this from the Scriptures? If they have, we would like to hear it, and if not, then we must hear and believe Christ and His apostles, and not Augustine and Origen.”²¹

Despite his being neither the founder of Anabaptist thought, nor the most influential of Anabaptist leaders during his lifetime, diverse groups of Anabaptists have united under the name of Menno Simons. It is uncertain whether Menno himself would have approved; he himself referred to his followers most often as “the Brethren,” however by the 1540s the epithet “Menists” had come into existence.²² After Menno’s death, Anabaptists who had not followed Menno during his life began to associate themselves with his name. The adoption of Menno’s name may have been an attempt by pacifist sects to distinguish themselves from violent Anabaptists, such as the Munsterites, or to supplant the term Anabaptist altogether, which had had a heretical connotation since the Medieval Period. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the Mennonite experience was one of frequent persecution, with disparate sects continually migrating in search of political regimes willing grant them land for farming and exemption from military duty.²³

19. *Ibid.*, 175.

20. Horst, Irvin B. “Menno Simons and the Augustinian Tradition.” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. October 1988), 429.

21. Simons, “Foundation of Christian Doctrine,” CWMS, 137.

22. Bender, “Introduction,” 32.

23. See James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, for a comprehensive history of Mennonite political engagement and migration patterns from the sixteenth to nineteenth

Part II: The Reconstruction of Mennonite Tradition

In light of their rejection of the scholastic tradition, many Mennonites, particularly those who had migrated to North America and founded insular farming communities, did not pursue higher education, nor participate in scholarly activities.²⁴ As a result, James Urry notes, “in Mennonite studies there exists a strange, dark age between the period of Anabaptist ferment and the nineteenth century, when the rise of nation-states presented new challenges to the continuance of Mennonite life.”²⁵ From the time of the earliest reformers, Mennonites had understood that adherence to doctrine was expressed not through participation in the sacraments, nor through mental assent, but in the practices of community life. As such, Donald Kraybill argues that until the turn of the twentieth century, Mennonite identity had been a social construction, based primarily on dialect, food, manner of dress, and ethnic customs.²⁶ However, by the late nineteenth century, Mennonite attitudes were beginning to shift.²⁷ German and Dutch dialects were being replaced by English as the language of family and church life. Afraid of losing their brightest young people to other denominational Bible Colleges, the Mennonite community of Elkhart, Indiana, inaugurated the first Mennonite institution of higher education, Goshen College, in 1894.²⁸ Some Mennonites viewed this move as conforming too closely with mainstream American culture; indeed, the decision to engage in higher education initiated a series of events that has seen progressive Mennonites involve themselves ever more deeply in the world outside their sect.

The first great modern scholar to emerge from the Mennonite church was Harold S. Bender. Born in 1897, he began his university studies at

centuries.

24. While Menno Simons himself said that he “preferred to be the fool of the world’s learned ones, in order that I might be found of God to be wise,” he did not forbid higher education, and in fact encouraged the study of Biblical languages. Simons, “Incarnation of our Lord,” CWMS, 791.

25. Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplemaking*, 10.

26. Kraybill, Donald B. “From Enclave to Engagement: MCC and the Transformation of Mennonite Identity.” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. Jan. 1996), 25.

27. Kraybill refers to the period from 1880-1900 as the “Mennonite Renaissance” in America, 23.

28. Details of the founding of Goshen College can be found on its website, www.goshen.edu.

Goshen College and proceeded to earn a master's degree at Princeton and a doctorate from the University of Heidelberg.²⁹ His illustrious career included such accomplishments as the founding of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, a Mennonite academic journal that continues publication to this day; editing the *Mennonite Encyclopaedia*; serving as dean of Goshen College from 1933-1962 and holding the presidency of Mennonite World Conference from 1952-1962. From the outset of his career, Bender was primarily concerned with apologetics for his Mennonite faith; the rehabilitation of the image of the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers became the primary focus of his endeavours.

In 1944, Bender produced the essay *The Anabaptist Vision*, which went on to become a classic defence of Mennonite beliefs. In it, Bender synthesizes the various strands of early Anabaptist thought into one clear, united statement of faith. He begins his essay by asserting that "it is essential to state clearly who is meant by the term "Anabaptist", since the name has come to be used in modern historiography to cover a wide variety of Reformation groups."³⁰ Of particular concern to Bender is the insistence of his contemporaries, such as Preserved Smith, to identify the Anabaptists as "the Bolsheviks of the Reformation."³¹ Bender is very careful to weed out from his definition of Anabaptists "the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, or even antinomian related and unrelated groups . . . which came and went like the flowers of the field in those days of the great renovation."³² Bender limits the true Anabaptists to those who "maintained an unbroken course in Switzerland, South Germany, Austria, and Holland throughout the sixteenth century, which has continued until the present day in the Mennonite movement."³³ These Anabaptists, he contends, mark the culmination of the Reformation, following the principles of Luther through to their logical ends by recreating the New Testament church. In so doing, the Anabaptists "preferred to make a radical break with 1,500 years of history and culture if necessary rather than to break with the New Testament."

29. For biographical details, see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press), 1998.

30. Bender, Harold S. "The Anabaptist Vision". *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. April 1944), 67-88.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

By associating the Radical Reformers with the earliest Christians, Bender dismisses the entirety of intermediary Church tradition as error-ridden. However, the early Mennonites, having rightly expunged the offending tradition from their thought and practice, attain the same level of authority as the earliest Christian witnesses. In this crucial move, Bender rehabilitates the possibility of an authoritative tradition outside of the Biblical texts.

The arguments Bender constructs to define which Reformers should and should not be considered true Anabaptists—effectively creating an Anabaptist “orthodoxy”—are strikingly similar to those espoused by the early Christian heresiologist, Irenaeus.³⁴ Like Irenaeus’ repudiation of gnosticism, Bender rejects those Anabaptists who do not conform with his understanding of right doctrine, classifying them as unrelated to the true faith. Revolutionaries such as Thomas Muntzer and Jan of Leiden are not Anabaptists at all, but “aberrations of Protestantism.”³⁵ Again following Irenaeus, who establishes his authority by linking himself directly to the apostle John through his teacher Polycarp, Bender emphasizes the importance of “apostolic succession” in his assertion that “Anabaptism proper maintained an unbroken course” from its origins in Northern Switzerland through to Bender himself.³⁶ By selecting out the Anabaptists he deems orthodox from those he finds heretical, Bender, like Irenaeus, actively defines what constitutes orthodox Mennonite faith.

Accordingly, Bender identifies three major points of emphasis in orthodox Anabaptism: that the essence of Christianity is discipleship, the essence of the church is brotherhood, and the introduction of the new ethic of love and non-resistance. Bender’s third point of emphasis betrays most clearly his necessity for excluding the violent revolutionaries from his vision of Anabaptism. Citing pacifist texts of Conrad Grebel, Pilgram Marpek, Peter Riedemann and Menno Simons, Bender establishes as the Anabaptist point of view that “the Christian may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ and the apostolic practice.”³⁷ The Anabaptists who did

34. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III.

35. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision.”

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

not hold to this view were, therefore, not true Anabaptists. As President of Mennonite World Conference and Dean of Goshen College, Bender exerted unparalleled influence over the Mennonite church in the mid-twentieth century. From his position of authority, he established a pacifist, non-resistant Mennonite orthodoxy by reconstructing, and then appealing to, the tradition of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

Part III: Reinterpreting the Mennonite Tradition

In addition to the establishment of a Mennonite academia, the early decades of the twentieth century saw the creation of a second institution that would reorient the focus of Mennonite ethics from the insular community to the secular world. The aftermath of the Russian Revolution created great hardship for Mennonites who had settled in Russia. Horrified by the suffering of their spiritual brethren, North American Mennonites founded Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1920.³⁸ This aid organization helped in the resettlement of Mennonite refugees in North America and sent material aid to those remaining in Russia. MCC remained primarily a mutual aid organization, responding to those in need among “the household of faith,” until the beginning of hostilities in WWII.³⁹ As teams of MCC volunteers brought relief to devastated areas of Europe, it became impossible—and unconscionable—to refuse aid on the basis of a victim’s faith.

The onset of the war also required many young Mennonite men to take up positions in the Civilian Public Service as conscientious objectors.⁴⁰ Beulah Stauffer Hostetler argues that, after serving in the “restrictive” program, the former conscientious objectors wished to “express their energies constructively,” and found in MCC relief projects newly available opportunities for travel and cultural exchange.⁴¹ Stauffer Hostetler cites Elmer Neufeld, who describes his own experience as a ‘typical pilgrimage’ common to many of his peers. After growing up in an insular Mennonite

38. Kraybill, 35.

39. *Ibid.*, 36.

40. *Ibid.*, 38.

41. Stauffer Hostetler, Beulah. “Nonresistance and Social Responsibility: Mennonites and Mainline peace Emphasis, ca. 1950–1985.” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. Jan. 1990), 51.

farming community, Neufeld served as “self-satisfied” C.O. before participating in an MCC program.⁴² Increasingly engaging with the outside world, Neufeld and his contemporaries began to question Mennonites’ social responsibility in the face of injustice. Stauffer Hostetler concludes that participation in MCC projects “put Mennonite laypersons in face-to-face contact with those in crises, and Mennonites began to struggle with the adequacy of ‘non-resistance,’—expressed primarily in withdrawal from conflict—as a peace position.”⁴³

In the middle of the twentieth century, the sufficiency of non-resistance as an ethical position was challenged not only from inside the church by Mennonite aid workers, but also from academics outside of the tradition. Writing in response to Mennonite Guy F. Hershberger’s 1944 work *War, Peace, and Non-resistance*, prominent theologian Reinhold Niebuhr contended that while Hershberger’s biblical rationale for non-resistance was consistent, it must be rejected due to its inadequacy as a basis for responsible citizenship.⁴⁴ Niebuhr’s opinion was of no concern to many more conservative, insular Mennonites, who did not understand “responsible citizenship” to be a valid concern for true Christians. Holding an apocalyptic eschatology, they expected increasing violence and suffering before the return of Christ. However, many progressive, educated Mennonites took the accusation of social irresponsibility seriously. While taking up a variety of positions, many invoked the example of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists in their support. In so doing, the authors both contribute to the authority of “tradition” within Mennonite discourse and participate in its definition. In the remainder of this paper, I shall analyze three Mennonite responses to the critique of non-resistance as socially irresponsible, paying particular attention the manner in which each author incorporates Mennonite tradition to support his conception of authentic, orthodox Mennonite peace ethics.

42. *Ibid.*, 55.

43. *Ibid.*, 51.

44. Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Christianity and Power Politics*. (New York, C. Scribner’s Sons), 1940.

John Howard Yoder

While Harold S. Bender was the dominant figure of Mennonite academics in the first half of the twentieth century, John Howard Yoder came to dominate the second.⁴⁵ Prior to pursuing graduate studies, Yoder, like many of his contemporaries, served as an MCC volunteer in the wake of WWII. After completing his term, he began his graduate work under the supervision of Karl Barth in Basel, writing a doctoral dissertation on the Swiss Anabaptist disputations.⁴⁶ Being acquainted with both the sixteenth-century tradition and the practical experience of relief work in war zones, Yoder took on Niebuhr's criticism in a 1953 address to the International Conference Center entitled "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism."⁴⁷

Yoder begins with a challenge to Niebuhr's definition of Christian pacifism. "Pacifism for Niebuhr," he explains, "means the contention in the political area that a state should renounce the use of war as an instrument of national policy."⁴⁸ The pacifism espoused by most conscientious objectors, Yoder contends, is an individual conviction, separate from the political machinations of the state. Historic Christian pacifism consists of the belief that "when a nation makes war, the Christian should refuse to participate in the killing."⁴⁹ Yoder argues that this distinction, which Niebuhr fails to make, is crucial for arriving at a properly Christian pacifist ethic. He goes on to commend Niebuhr for recognizing that the Gospels offer no defence for the taking up of arms.⁵⁰ Niebuhr is also correct, Yoder affirms, in grasping that Christ's non-resistant acceptance of the cross was neither "effective social

45. Yoder's broad and extensive corpus includes many significant explications and defences of his pacifist ethic. For the purposes of this project, I have limited my discussion to his essay in response to Niebuhr. See *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, chap. 2, for a refutation of the Just War tradition built upon an exegesis of Luke's gospel. See Reimer, A. James. *Mennonites and Classical Theology*. (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 295–96 for his critique of "Constantinism".

46. Zimmerman, Earl. *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*. (Telford: Cascadia Publishing House, 2007), 21.

47. Stauffer Hostetler, 52.

48. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. 1955), 104.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 105.

policy” nor a pragmatic decision chosen for its effectiveness, but rather was the full embodiment of “unconditional obedience to the nature of love.”⁵¹

It is this “unconditional obedience” that Niebuhr alleges humanity, in its sinfulness, is unable to imitate.⁵² While Christians must still attempt to live up to this “impossible ideal”, they must also live in the tension of their incapability. Niebuhr argues that the pacifist underestimates the power of sin, and, refusing to counter its power, allows unjust leaders to continue in their tyranny.⁵³ He also criticizes pacifists who promote non-violent resistance as “the practical application of New Testament love in politics.”⁵⁴ Agreeing with Menno Simons, Niebuhr contends that the attitude modelled by Christ is non-resistance. Menno’s fault, he maintains, is in asserting the desirability of imitating this aspect of Christ within sinful human society.

Niebuhr’s fundamental error, Yoder claims, lies in his misunderstanding of the purpose of ethics. By concluding that acting in perfect accordance with the Christian ideal of self-sacrificing love is impossible, Niebuhr forgets that ethics is concerned not with one’s actions in reality, but with what one *ought to do*. “No amount of reasoning,” he contends, “can derive an “ought” from an “is,” an imperative from a declarative, a judgment of value from a judgment of fact. The fact that all are sinners is neither a reason nor an excuse for sinning.”⁵⁵ In effect, Niebuhr is rehabilitating selfishly motivated self-preservation into necessity. Once this crucial breach is made, it is all too easy to identify one’s own self-preservation with justice and to legitimize choosing the lesser of two evils, though both are properly understood as sin. Niebuhr fails in recognizing this point, Yoder claims, because he has fundamentally misunderstood the role of the cross. While Niebuhr repeatedly speaks of the cross, he discusses the resurrection not once. He therefore misses the power of the resurrection, which Yoder insists, “opens new ethical possibilities.”⁵⁶ For Niebuhr, the grace of Christ is “primarily the way to have peace in spite of our continuing sin,” for Yoder, it is the power of regeneration into a new creation.⁵⁷

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 106.

53. Ibid., 109.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 114.

56. Ibid., 115.

57. Ibid.

While Yoder does not cite the writings of Menno Simons or the other sixteenth-century Anabaptists in this paper, their influence is on full display in his assertion that “in the Bible, the bearer of the meaning of history is not the United States of America, nor Western Christendom, but a divine-human society, the church, the body of Christ.”⁵⁸ Yoder echoes the Radical Reformation assertion that the primary allegiance of the Christian should not be to the self, or the state, but the church which, being assured of its eternity, has no need of military defence. In one sense, Yoder is most faithful to the spirit of Menno Simons in his refusal to cite any argument but that of Scripture in his defence. However, the words of Yoder’s ancestors, in which he was well educated, echo throughout his writings.

In response to Niebuhr’s criticism, Yoder maintains the traditional Mennonite position, also held by Harold S. Bender, that the non-resistance modelled by Jesus is to be the normative standard for Christian ethics. Christians must practice non-resistance not because it is more effective at solving political problems than violence, but because it is the teaching of Christ. In contrast to Bender, Yoder was unwilling to support the traditional separatist Mennonite position of sectarian withdrawal from the political world. In his book *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, Earl Zimmerman argues that “because nonviolence is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Yoder saw it as the ecumenical possession of all churches,” and should therefore be promoted to other Christians “as persuasively as possible.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, Yoder played a key role in the first ecumenical discussions on the merits of Christian pacifism. From 1955–1962 he was a frequent speaker at a series of four dialogues between the mainline and historic peace churches that became known as the Puidoux Conferences.⁶⁰ Out of those discussions, the churches reached the agreement that “the Lordship of Christ is over the State.”⁶¹ While this statement of faith allowed some room for theological manoeuvring, it also marked a break from the thought of more conservative Mennonites, including Bender, who conceived of a rigid dualism between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of Christ. While continuing to

58. Ibid.

59. Zimmerman, 79.

60. Stauffer Hostetler, 53. The Puidoux Conferences marked the first time in centuries that the mainline and historic peace churches held face-to-face meetings.

61. Ibid.

reject the notion that military interference of the state was necessary, or even able, to fulfill the purposes of Christ, the Puidoux position validated the possibility of a Christian witness to the state within Mennonite thought.⁶²

Orie O. Miller

Through the late 1950s through the 1980s, the progressive wing of the Mennonite church experienced a paradigm shift in its conception of pacifism and non-resistance. Mennonites stationed themselves on the frontlines of the American civil rights movement and the protests against nuclear proliferation and the war in Vietnam.⁶³ In this increasingly activist atmosphere, MCC president Orie O. Miller delivered the following address to the members of the MCC Peace Section at a meeting in Minneapolis in 1965:

The Anabaptist movement from which the Mennonites come was born in a radical protest against evils that had come to be taken for granted. But ... having forgotten how to protest through long disuse of that faculty, and now being aroused to the need for it, and finding some protesters using arrogant means to that end, Mennonites must find a Mennonite or a Christian way of performing this ministry.⁶⁴

Miller redefines the actions of the Anabaptists using the language of “radical protest.” Mennonite political action is therefore not new, but in fact the rediscovery of the authentic, traditional practices of the sixteenth-century Reformers. After re-visioning the early Mennonites as political protesters, Miller builds his argument for the incorporation of political protest into Mennonite peace ethics by appealing to the authoritative example of the same early Mennonites. While arguing that Mennonites must find an authentically “Mennonite” or “Christian” way to protest, Miller implicitly legitimates protesting, elevating it to the status of a “ministry.”

62. Ibid., 56.

63. Ibid., 58-59. Guy F. Hersberger was an associate of Martin Luther King Jr.; Mennonite General Conference Moderator wrote an open letter to President Eisenhower denouncing the nuclear arms race; Edgar Metzler encouraged other young Mennonite men not to avoid all registration, even as conscientious objectors, in the Vietnam war draft.

64. Miller, Cited in Paul Erb, *Orie O. Miller: The Story of a Man and an Era* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald press, 1969) 226.

A. James Reimer

In his 1997 book, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, current Conrad Grebel University College professor A. James Reimer ponders the possibility of a synthesis of Mennonite and Catholic thought. Born in a small Manitoba Mennonite community and educated at the Catholic St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, Reimer levels serious criticisms against Yoder and his disciples in the field of Mennonite ethics. He echoes the criticism of Niebuhr, charging, "What Yoder, in my view, does not adequately account for are the tragic ambiguities of human existence and the ethical dilemmas of concrete social-political (including ecclesiastical) life in the fallen world in which all of us still find ourselves."⁶⁵ To counter Yoder's absolutism, Reimer appeals, surprisingly, to Augustine. In an original twist, Reimer argues that the "just war tradition" that allegedly begins with Augustine, has actually been deceptively named. Augustine, he argues, "did not think violence was just, but he did believe that in our fallen and sinful world violence was sometimes justified as the tragic but lesser evil."⁶⁶ Reimer even challenges the Mennonite adherence to Luther's *sola scriptura* precept and rejection of all Christian tradition after the "Constantinian Fall." He complains, "I have often felt that we as Mennonites hop, skip, and jump a bit too quickly from the present straight to the Bible, maybe with a brief touch-down in the sixteenth century. We do not have a strong enough sense of the historical development of ideas and beliefs."⁶⁷

While Reimer attempts to reclaim the Catholic tradition for Mennonite use, he continues to defend aspects of sixteenth-century Mennonite critiques of earlier tradition. He admits that there was something "seriously wrong" with the political theology of Eusebius produced in the Court of Constantine.⁶⁸ He also maintains that the Mennonites were "rightly suspicious" of systematic theologians, the "'learned ones' who build intellectual edifices of Christian thought removed from real life."⁶⁹ Most crucially, Reimer continues to uphold the "commitment to the Christocentric norm of nonviolent love" as

65. Reimer, A. James. *Mennonites and Classical Theology*. (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 295.

66. *Ibid.*, 490.

67. *Ibid.*, 327.

68. *Ibid.*, 308.

69. *Ibid.*, 323.

an—perhaps the—essentially Mennonite aspect of his theology and ethics.⁷⁰ While sympathizing with Augustine's pessimistic view of the pervasiveness of sin, Reimer affirms the Mennonite orthodox position that participation in war is always wrong for the Christian.⁷¹ Like Orie O. Miller, however, his ethics of non-violence are activist in nature, as he argues, "Christians involved in relief work, non-violent protests, reconciliation between warring factions, mediation between conflicting parties and so on, are helping to build and bring about within society in a preparatory way the kingdom of God."⁷²

In his appeal to Catholic tradition, Reimer accepts the authority that Menno Simons and his contemporaries rejected. Their pacifist convictions arose not out of a concern for justice or as a means of preparing society outside of the church for the kingdom of God, but from their desire to obey the words of Jesus as they read them. While Reimer claims the heritage of the sixteenth-century Reformers to establish himself as an orthodox Mennonite, the foundations of his ethics are distinctly removed from those of his spiritual ancestors.

Conclusion

In a contribution to *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* answering the question "What I have learned from the Radical Reformers," Richard B. Hays comments,

The Radical Reformers insisted that they were recalling the faithful to live strictly by what the Bible said, rather than by the body of tradition developed in the church over many centuries. But who is to decide how the Bible is interpreted . . . Is each individual free to decide? How then can there be coherence in the community's life? . . . On the other hand, if the community's leaders guide the church in the process of interpretation, then do the community's decisions take on the status of authoritative traditions that shape the subsequent reading of Scripture? If so, how is this different in principle from what Catholic Christianity has always claimed about the authoritative role of tradition?⁷³

70. Ibid., 190.

71. Ibid., 496.

72. Ibid.

73. Hays, Richard B. "Embodying the Gospel in Community." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House. October 2000), 586.

As an outsider looking in on the Mennonite community, Hays identifies a problem that is often overlooked by Mennonites themselves. Over the course of Mennonite history, the authority ascribed to tradition as a foundation for peace ethics has been inconsistent. The Mennonite church was born out of the rejection of the validity of Church tradition to determine authentic Christian faith and ethics. In his essay *The Anabaptist Vision*, Harold S. Bender restores the possibility of an authoritative tradition. He rejects the human errors of the Church tradition, but not the concept of tradition itself. Attributing to his Anabaptist ancestors a faith fully in accord with the precepts of the New Testament, he then identifies their writings as the proper tradition in which to discover truly Christian doctrine and ethics. John Howard Yoder's political non-resistance and Christocentric ethics are profoundly influenced by his Anabaptist heritage. However, by promoting ecumenical dialogue, Yoder rejects the sectarian convictions of the earliest Anabaptists while maintaining the value of their non-violent principles. As the president of the increasingly political, activist Mennonite Central Committee, Orie O. Miller pushed even further than Yoder, arguing that the earliest Mennonites were, in fact, not apolitical, but rather radical political protesters. A. James Reimer rehabilitates Augustine and aspects of the Catholic tradition while at the same time maintaining the validity of the peace position derived from the rejection of that very same tradition by the sixteenth-century Reformers.

Although the thinkers profiled above reach different conclusions concerning the propriety of Mennonite political peace activism, each reconstructs a favourable portrait of sixteenth-century Anabaptism that he can then invoke as an authoritative witness in support of his own conception of peace ethics. As Hays implies, it is perhaps impossible for the Mennonite faith to maintain internal coherency without re-establishing an external authority to guide its interpretation of the Bible, which is, ironically, the very practice that the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers rebelled against. A potential solution to this problem may lie in an open discourse of the complexities, limitations, and fallibility of the earliest Mennonites. It is difficult to defend the ideal of non-violence in a world suffering from gross injustice; by reconstructing their spiritual forefathers as heroic war-resisters bravely choosing to die rather than to commit acts of violence, Mennonites can inspire one another to persist in their peace ethic in a hostile world. Yet however inspiring this mythology may be, it is also historically dishonest.

Moreover, I would argue, it is unnecessary, for the examples of imperfect witnesses such as Menno Simons can still function as inspiring guides for Biblical interpretation and religious practice. By shifting the discourse from 'authority' to 'inspiration', Mennonites can hold fast to their spiritual inheritance from the sixteenth-century Reformers while maintaining the possibility, as Reimer suggests, of reclaiming the inheritance of the Church Fathers, so long as neither is invoked as an orthodox authority. Inspiration, in contrast to authority, allows modern Mennonites the flexibility to engage creatively in the challenging discourse of peace ethics while preserving the conviction, shared by Mennonites and many other Christians over the millennia, to strive after the way of Jesus in all things.