

First Article on the Mennonites for the New Statesman, posted 28 July 2008

Travel Stories

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Understanding who the Mennonites are is an issue connected to their travels. The journey has brought them to a place quite different from their starting point.

Where do I as a Canadian Mennonite come from, my German acquaintances ask. Sometimes a mischievous streak gets the better of me and I disinform them with a story that goes halfway around the world. I tell them that my first language was Low German. "Oh, so you're originally from Northern Germany." Well, no, I answer, "my parents were born in Mexico". After some bewilderment they conclude that our family fled there during the war. A good guess, but quite wrong. My German speaking great-grandparents, I explain, were Canadian by birth and emigrated to Mexico. "But then their parents must have come from the fatherland?", they deduce. Wrong again. Their parents had lived in a Mennonite colony in Russia. And so it continues, back through Prussia and the Netherlands on to the last syllable of recorded Mennonite time: Switzerland.

Not all young students wanting to change the world become the willing pawns of demagogues or monied interests. Some avoid the mainstream, forge ahead in unexpected directions and invent Microsoft. Or in our case, the Mennonites. But what was it that these lads of the early 16th century invented? The students had a radical idea about how to implement Martin Luther's big religious experiment. Their inspiration sounded like brazen rebellion: Let's not let the city council of Zurich decide how religious practices ought to be regulated. These worthies are responsible for the state, not the church. As St. Paul writes, the state is tolerated by God in order to punish evildoers. But it is outside the Lordship of Christ. Those of us who claim to follow Jesus, they said, cannot allow the state to settle the issues of His community. In this way they redefined the faith community as the counterpoint of civil society. It is a counter-culture whose values occasionally support, occasionally criticize the mainstream culture.

And thus was born the "Left Wing" of the Reformation. My forebears were initially called the Anabaptists (re-baptizers), because members of the first generation denied the validity of their first baptism and baptized one another as adults. What's so bad about infant baptism? Is it the tired old argument that the little ones have no say in the matter? No, their claim was far more outrageous. The institution is questionable, because when universally applied, it assures that a given society remains firmly within Christendom. But they wanted nothing of Christendom. What a revolutionary thought: Christianity without Christendom, faith communities without The Church!

Christians over the ages have expressed their discomfort with the compromises involved in a faith based on the radical teachings of Jesus, but practiced within the confines of the state church. Luther himself thought that a hangman only disobeys the prohibition "Thou shalt not kill" qua bureaucrat, not qua believer. The deed may appear to Jesus and Moses reprehensible, but so long as a man's heart is in the right place, his deed, his contribution to society, is deemed admissible (per gratiam Lutheri). The Anabaptists clearly rejected this duplicity, and themselves often became victims of this sort of "heartfelt" Christian judgment.

It used to be that many Mennonites could tell travel stories about how forced emigration or religious persecution disrupted their lives. But with religious toleration and permanent homes a new situation has emerged for Mennonites: how to maintain a counter-cultural witness alive in a multi-cultural, multi-valent society. So those traits that used to define Mennonite identity are losing their relevance: How does one kick against the goads when anything goes?