Chapter 2 Secular Mennonite Social Critique: Pluralism, Interdisciplinarity, and Mennonite Studies[1]

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This chapter consolidates and extends my research to date in the area of Mennonite studies. I use the term "Mennonite Studies" to characterize my approach because I want to leave open a set of plural possibilities for interactions between disciplines and discourses that include secular, philosophical, political, literary, and feminist Mennonite voices from both the past and the present. In this programmatic chapter, and in my work more broadly, I am interested in moving beyond or apart from the dominant notion that the baseline ways to study Mennonite thought must be theological, historical, or some combination of the two. The study of Mennonites has long labored within boundaries and social bonds established by theologians and historians. But the hold that theological and historical thinking has had on Mennonite thought has undergone some recent and significant shifts that I am interested in tracking and critiquing in the survey below, the most significant of which is the withdrawal from the normative project of cultivating a distinctive Mennonite identity.

In recent decades, several major theologians and historians who hold positions in Mennonite institutions have moved away from situating themselves

1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented as "Secular Mennonite Social Critique" at a scholar's forum at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. Toronto, ON. January 8, 2020. I am grateful to Kyle Gingerich Hiebert for his organizational efforts and to Alison Murray for her thoughtful questions and suggestions following the presentation.

as representatives of a distinctly Mennonite theological identity. For example, J. Alexander Sider rejects the notion that ethics done by Mennonites ought to focus on *distinctive* aspects of Mennonite identity. He instead suggests that Mennonite ethics should be about "cultivating self-knowledge in the space created by acknowledging ourselves and others as victims, victimizers, and survivors."[2] Sider goes on to say that "The valorization of Mennonite distinctives has characterized a brand of white hetero-patriarchal Mennonite theology and ethics that I hope is in rapid and irrecoverable decline" and he argues further that the desire for distinctives "disguises a much deeper problem of exclusion and methodological violence, namely that Mennonite-distinctives-language is a privilege engine." For Sider, Mennonite distinctives necessarily lead to the marginalization of certain Mennonite identities and create a space for "privileged squabbling about the right way to state whatever normative version of Mennonitism is under consideration (pacifism or nonresistance in the 1940s, nonviolent atonement or not in the 2000s)."[3]

I do not accept this critique of Mennonite distinctives, and my reason for rejecting it is not that I oppose the very admirable values that underpin it. Introspective reflection on complex relations of victimhood and victimization, critique of heteropatriarchy and methodological violence, and opposition to marginalization are very important projects. The reason that I challenge this critique of Mennonite distinctives is because I see nothing in the desire for a distinctive and distinguishing identity that will *necessarily* lead to the bad outcomes that Sider lists. Rather than locating the problem in distinction and its judgments, I think that the problem is with *how* identities are distinguished, configured, and mediated. There is nothing essential about speaking of Mennonite distinctives that will lead to social exclusion or tired ideological debates about the "real" or "good" versions of favorite doctrines.

The problem with both the Mennonite distinctives that Sider critiques and Sider's critique itself is a deeper methodological issue that is rooted in the assumption that distinctive or disjunctive claims will necessarily displace other identities. Surely there are many discourses in which distinctive identity claims are asserted at the expense of others, generating the "privilege engine" that Sider is very rightly concerned about, but just as surely this violent ontology of displacement is not a structural given in all distinctive identities. Holding and presenting distinctive identities need not entail the production

2 J. Alexander Sider, "Self and/as Victim: A Reflection on 'Mennonite' Ethics," *CGR* 35, no.1 (Winter 2017): 27.

3 Ibid., 27-28.

of one identity at the expense of others. The delicate balance between recognizing when identities are distinguished in ways that displace others, and when this displacement is a projection or assumption, requires attention to mediation and "how" questions of mediation rather than "whether-or-not" questions that allow binary oppositions to recur within critiques of their results.

Here at the outset, I want to highlight this problematic assumption at the root of both the retreat from normative Mennonite identity and the desire to secure that identity at all costs. In recent years it seems that Mennonite scholars have taken one of these two paths: the reassertion of a distinctive Mennonite identity that tries to establish its superiority, or the withdrawal from the project of a distinctive Mennonite identity for fear that distinctives are inherently exclusive. I see these fears reflected in recent theological and historical approaches to Mennonite identity. Rather than self-identifying primarily as "Mennonite Theologians" or "Mennonite Historians," many influential Mennonite scholars now avoid positioning themselves as speaking on behalf of something called "Mennonite Theology" or "Anabaptist History" and are moving instead toward the major trends in their academic disciplines.

In Mennonite theology this disciplinary movement has taken several forms, some of the most interesting of which are Jeremy Bergen's argument for "The Ecumenical Vocation of Anabaptist Theology,"[4] and Chris Huebner's critique of the establishment of Mennonite Theology.[5] In very different ways, both Bergen and Huebner move away from the project of building up a distinctive Mennonite theological identity, and toward the Christian theological priorities of ecumenism (Bergen) and virtuous vulnerability (Huebner). While their critiques of the establishment of a distinctive Mennonite theological identity have much to offer, their movement away from a distinctive Mennonite identity in the name of Christian identity leaves much to be desired by those who hold a Mennonite identity that cannot

4 See Jeremy Bergen, "The Ecumenical Vocation of Anabaptist Theology," in *Recovering from The Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, ed. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, Myron A. Penner (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

5 See Chris Huebner, "Mennonitische Theologie: Die Zeit bedenken, oder Was von den Toten lernen müssen." [Mennonite Theology as Dwelling in Time: What We Have to Learn From the Dead] Translated into German by Hans-Jürgen Goertz. *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 66 (2009): 147–59. See also his *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006).

be solely expressed in ecclesial and theological categories (such as secular Mennonites).

Whereas Bergen submits Anabaptist identity to Christian ecclesial identity,[6] understanding the former to be fulfilled in the latter, Huebner prioritizes Christian vulnerability over the cultivation of a distinctly Mennonite identity.[7] I contend that a major limitation of much normative theological work done by Mennonites today comes from the subordination of Mennonite identity to Christian identity. One way that Christian theology disciplines those who work within its bounds is by contributing to the assumption that Mennonite identity is or ought to be strictly Christian, at the expense of more complex secular, philosophical, literary, and political identifications. This is one major way that a disciplinary structure can limit our thinking about what it means to be a Mennonite and what it means to engage in Mennonite Studies.

In Mennonite history a parallel disciplinary movement has resulted in a turn toward the norms of social history. Following the movement away from confessional historiography during the debates about monogenesis and polygenesis that dominated the field in decades past, historians of the Anabaptists and Mennonites who happen to identify with the tradition (whether privately or institutionally) now seek to satisfy the demands of the historian's profession rather than engaging in the normative preservation or advancement of Mennonite identity. This disciplinary movement has also taken several different forms, but two examples that stand out are Troy Osborne's work on Dutch Mennonite identity and discipline, and the work of Benjamin Goossen on Mennonites and Nazism. In very different ways, both Osborne and Goossen avoid speaking on behalf of a distinctive and normative scholarly Mennonite identity in favor of speaking within the disciplinary constraints of contemporary historical methodology.

6 Bergen writes "The Anabaptist tradition ought to be regarded as a reforming movement *within*, and *for the sake of*, the (capital-C) Church identified by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Several implications follow from this claim. Anabaptism ought to seek not its preservation or advancement per se, nor that of particular denominations, but Christ and the faithfulness of Christ's church, a body in perpetual need of reform and renewal," in "Ecumenical Vocation," 103.

7 Huebner writes "I understand myself as a Mennonite theologian whose work is not informed by the assumption that my task is first and foremost to defend something called 'Mennonite theology' but rather to explore what it means to dwell faithfully in the world as a member of the vulnerable body of Christ," in "Mennonitische Theologie."

For Osborne this is evident in the avoidance of normative assertions in his work on identity and discipline. For example, at no point in his 2016 Eby Lectures does he suggest what his historical investigations ought to entail for contemporary Mennonites who are concerned with the problems of violence or discipline.[8] The absence of prescriptive assertion in Osborne's work is in keeping with the norms of the historian's discipline which now more than ever sets itself apart from theology and the project of advancing or promoting specific religious identities. For Goossen, the determining use of historical method is exemplified by the fact that his book *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* presents a history of Mennonite entanglement with German nationalism in a way that is very rightly critical of fascism, but does not advance this critique from the pacifist standpoint of a Mennonite identity, but instead from his position as an historian.[9] Although I do not advocate for a return to a naive historiography that would instrumentalize the past for narrow confessional purposes, I notice that a major limitation of much descriptive historical work done by Mennonite historians is found in the prohibition on making historically-founded social critiques rooted in a distinctive Mennonite identity.

These two parallel turns away from the normative and prescriptive work of refining Mennonite identity within the academy are patterns that I want to challenge, but not in a simple way that would seek to reassert either a distillation of Mennonite theological identity into a set of naked essentials, or an instrumental and anachronistic use of Anabaptist history for present Mennonite purposes. Neither a strong normative theological vision that would assert the superiority of a specific Mennonite theology, nor a disestablishing or ecumenically bound Mennonite theology are adequate to the historical breadth and depth of Mennonite identity and its current critical potential. So too with history. Neither a cleanly descriptive and neutral Mennonite history that refuses all usability, nor an anachronistic Mennonite history that projects its values back onto the sixteenth century are adequate to the richness of the Mennonite tradition and the possibilities of its renewal.

8 See Troy Osborne, "The Bottle, the Dagger, and the Ring: Church Discipline and Dutch Mennonite Identity in the Seventeenth Century," *CGR* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 114–50.

9 See Benjamin W. Goossen *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). Although Goossen situates himself as a professional within his discipline (referring to himself a historian) he writes in a more personal Mennonite voice in publications like "Sermons I Never Heard," *The Mennonite*, March 28, 2018, and "Mennonite Privilege," *The Mennonite*, February 1, 2017.

Instead of these limited and disciplining options, I want to resist the notion that Mennonite identity and Mennonite Studies should be subordinated to the strictures of theological or historical methodologies and their respective desires to serve the church and preserve a history. I observe that both impulses are fundamentally conservative, simply in the sense that they seek to conserve the integrity of certain theological and ecclesial terms (for theologians who happen to be Mennonite) and conserve the irreducibility of history by avoiding normativity (for historians of the Anabaptist movements). But what would it mean to think about Mennonite identity and Mennonite Studies without the desires to make sure that the church is served and history remains untouched by contemporary use?

Although there is much that one can productively do within the disciplinary bounds of theology or history—often in very liberal and liberating ways—these disciplines ultimately do *discipline* those under them, and this means that there are some places one simply cannot go while under their auspices and while using their terms. However much it may be flexible and complex, contemporary Christian theology ultimately remains accountable to the church and the Christian framework. Operating outside of reference to Jesus Christ and ecclesial accountability is not something that many Christian theologians seek to do. As well, however much they may provide nuanced and subtle accounts of the past, many contemporary historians of Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions remain beholden to the norms of their discipline in ways that limit social critique, especially in their attempts to avoid making use of the histories they report.

Desiring to overcome these limitations, I take up an interdisciplinary and pluralistic approach to Mennonite Studies that does not seek refuge *in* either normativity or description and does not seek refuge *from* either normativity or description. This means that my work attempts to avoid both the theologian's desire to preserve the integrity of Christianity (which often takes refuge in normativity by dealing in ideal-types, and often takes refuge from uncomfortable historical descriptions that challenge the purity of theological terms or ecclesial institutions), and the historian's desire to preserve the integrity of the past from reductive and instrumental use in the present (which often takes refuge from normativity by refusing to use the past for present purposes). Whether my work achieves these aims is something that I hope can remain open to debate, but even if I fail to achieve the goals outlined above in a meaningful way, my priority is to work through these difficult dilemmas by turning toward them rather than avoiding them out of worry that disciplinary boundaries will be crossed.

I want to work with different paradigms than those currently available in the field, and I want to study Mennonite thought with more freedom than is usually found the need to remain solely accountable to Christian identity or the historian's method. Therefore, I study Mennonite identities and thinkers who work outside, against, or surreptitiously within capture by theological and historical methodologies. In my dissertation, recent book, and research articles, I have followed secular, philosophical, political, literary, and feminist Mennonites, not from the detached standpoint implied by the word "study," but from a pluralistic standpoint within the discipline of Religious Studies—a standpoint that neither assumes value-neutrality nor seeks to conserve religious values, but instead proceeds from the assumption that values are always already in conflict. Surely Religious Studies is a discipline that disciplines, but I have been fortunate enough to study in a pluralistic and interdisciplinary department at McMaster University in which the measure of good work is not whether certain institutions or objects of study are conserved or preserved, but that both method and object of study are opened to critique from a wide variety of perspectives. This means that when I refer to "pluralism" in the title of this chapter I am not referring to the assertion that really, at base, we all can agree, do agree, or should agree on basic values and norms. Instead of this idea of "moral abstinence" I study secular, philosophical, political, literary, and feminist Mennonite thinkers and topics with the express expectation that values will conflict, and with the further assumption that this the conflict of values is preferable to the fantasy that "we" ultimately agree on the important things in our diverse societies.[10]

I call this pluralistic and interdisciplinary approach to Mennonite Studies "Secular Mennonite Social Critique": *secular* in the broad sense of being oriented toward the world, *Mennonite* in the broad sense of being in affinity with Mennonite values, identities, and communities, *social* in its concern for how we ought to live well together in multicultural societies and western democracies, and *critical* in the sense of being discontented with the current state of affairs. This means that when I refer to a Secular Mennonite Social Critique, I am not referring to the "secular" in a strictly atheistic sense, to "Mennonite" in the "ethnic" or "confessional" senses, to "social" in the restrictive sociological sense, or to "critique" in a purely negative sense. Instead, I see great possibilities for expanding the field of Mennonite Studies toward new secular, literary, philosophical, political, and feminist

10 For two very different voices opposing value-neutrality and ethical abstinence see Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Pluralism," in *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993) and Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018).

horizons in which: "secularity" points to a vast world of voices and sources, "Mennonite" is an identity that anyone can claim for themselves without fear of identity-policing, "social" names a shared world of contradicting values, and "critique" names a paradigmatic confluence of positive sympathy and negative suspicion. And so, in order to survey these complex and entangled Mennonite identities (secular, literary, philosophical, political, feminist) from the perspective of Secular Mennonite Social Critique, I want to sketch a brief history of the discourse before suggesting alternative sources for the future of Mennonite Studies.

An Alternate History of Secular, Philosophical, Political, and Literary Mennonites

Readers may be familiar with the history of Mennonite thought that begins with the non-resistance of the sixteenth century Anabaptists who refused to take up the sword, then moves quickly to the pacifism of North American Mennonites expressed in *The Anabaptist Vision* (TAV) of Harold S. Bender, and then concludes with the notion that Jesus is a political figure. This established history of Mennonite thinking very often begins with the *Schleitheim Confession* and its calls to adult baptism and the rejection of the sword, the world, and the oath.[11] Following this confession, it is common to skip to twentieth century Mennonite theology and history, as exemplified by Harold S. Bender's pamphlet *TAV*, in which faithful Mennonite life is expressed by taking up the discipleship, brotherhood, and nonresistance of the Anabaptists.[12] The story continues on after Bender's vision, and often culminates with John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, which influentially interpreted Jesus Christ as a political figure.[13] Although this story is familiar, it is obviously a victor's history—one that has been told and retold for many years in popular and academic settings, and one that has become influential despite the many important figures who have been placed outside of its distillation of Mennonite identity (what Paul Martens calls the "distillation trajectory" in Mennonite Theology).[14]

11 *The Schleitheim Confession*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977).

12 Harold S. Bender, *TAV* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944).

13 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

14 Paul Martens, "How Mennonite Theology Became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver," *JMS* 33 (2015): 149–66.

In recent decades each of these three Mennonite identity documents have been called into question, causing some Mennonites to double down and entrench their commitment to this history, and causing others to enter a period of reckoning and revision. The idea that the *Schleitheim Confession* and Swiss Anabaptism are the true beginning of the Anabaptist movement has been rejected, and now historians of the Radical Reformation not only understand the Anabaptist movement to have many origins and no essential character, but also question the historiographical usefulness of the category of the Radical Reformation.[15] *TAV* is no longer considered to be an authoritative Mennonite identity document because of its anachronistic projection of Mennonite values onto the sixteenth century context, and lastly—most importantly—John Howard Yoder's writings have become nearly unusable in light of the fact that he engaged in a sustained pattern of sexual abuse which he sought to theologically justify.[16]

As the Mennonite theological and historical establishment wrestles with the instability of three of its founding documents and figures, some have attempted to define Mennonite identity using stable terms, and others have questioned whether the Mennonite identity is still worth holding in normative ways. But for my part, I think that a Mennonite identity can still be held in quite scholarly ways if we attend to the problems identified above, and then look to other voices connected to the Mennonite tradition who are not confined to this victor's history. There are many Mennonite-related thinkers who have been placed outside of the bounds of this history, but who still consider Mennonite identity to be important, even if it is not expressed in theological or ecclesial forms. Instead, these marginal and secular Mennonites bear witness to a kind of double dissent, not only identifying with Anabaptist radicalism and Mennonite pacifism, but also resisting the established narratives of Mennonite theology and Anabaptist history.[17]

15 See Michael Driedger, "Against 'the Radical Reformation': On the Continuity between Early Modern Heresy-Making and Modern Historiography," *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 139–-61.

16 See Rachel Waltner Goossen "'Defanging the Beast' Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *MQR* 89 (January 2015): 7–80. and Isaac Samuel Villegas, "The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse" *Modern Theology* (online-2020).

17 For two examples see the exploration of fringe Mennonites and queer Mennonites in Janis Thiessen, "'It's a hard thing to talk about': 'Fringe' Mennonite Religious Beliefs and Experiences," *JMS* 33 (2015): 213–33 and Alicia Dueck-Read, "Breaking the Binary: Queering Mennonite Identity" *JMS* 33 (2015): 115–33.

Below I provide some examples of Mennonite figures who challenge the dominant narrative in order to develop the kind of pluralistic interdisciplinarity that I mentioned above. To survey these complex and entangled Mennonite identities I ask and give some answers to five questions: "Who are secular Mennonites?" "Who are philosophical Mennonites?," "Who are political Mennonites?," "Who are literary Mennonites?," and "Who are feminist Mennonites?"

Who are Secular Mennonites?

I use the term "secular" here to refer to the broad and undefined category of the world that exists apart from the bounds of Christian theology, its church, and the category of religion in general. As is indicated by the ancient root word *saeculum*, secularity need not solely refer to militant atheisms or even to solely areligious concepts. Indeed, there are many scholars in Religious Studies and Political Theology work to trace complex processes of secularization in ways that do not cleanly divide the world using categories of sacred and secular.

I use the term "secular Mennonite" to refer to anyone who considers themselves to be a Mennonite (by identifying with the name) but does not necessarily see Christian theology or assent to doctrinal truth-claims as the primary determiner of their Mennonite identity. This secular Mennonite identity is present in several discourses, especially the conversation on Mennonite/s Writing outlined later in this chapter, but here I will briefly survey three intersections between secularity and historically Anabaptist ideas and groups: the work of Hans-Jürgen Goertz, the Anabaptist idea of the Gospel of All Creatures, and the seventeenth century Dutch Collegiant groups.

Hans-Jürgen Goertz

One example of a contemporary Mennonite figure who is deeply informed by secular sensibilities is historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz. In his work, Goertz looks back on the history of the Anabaptists and suggests that their dissent and non-conformity might inspire present-day social critique. The final lines of his social history of the Anabaptists makes this connection between the past and the present:

> The doctrines of the Anabaptists were as much of their age as the theology of those who persecuted them as heretics. This does not mean that impulses from the alternative movements of the sixteenth century cannot be taken up today, wherever, in their religious or social [*kirchlichen und gesellschaftlichen*] experience, people perceive the oppression which obscures a still-awaited 'new heaven

> and new earth,' and wherever they are able to grasp small opportunities to gain freedom.[18]

In this quotation Goertz makes an interesting suggestion that goes against the grain of contemporary Mennonite thinking about both theology and history when he suggests that historical political theologies can be used for emancipatory purposes in the present.[19] Goertz's suggestion is neither restrictively theological nor restrictively historical, but instead he seems to proceed from a humanistic commitment to mobilize the desire for freedom found in revolutionary and reforming movements. Goertz's work challenges the recent transformations of Mennonite history and theology that I critiqued above. Rather than using Anabaptist history in a reductive and anachronistic way by projecting his values back onto the sixteenth century radicals, and rather than refusing to carry forward Anabaptist history for Mennonite identity formation for fear of anachronism, Goertz suggests that although the Anabaptists were "of their day" their impulses can nonetheless be taken up today for the purposes of social critique.

As well, Goertz has identified himself as a Mennonite in a complex and ambiguous way, and it seems to me that his Mennonite identity remains about something more or other than belonging to a church and accepting certain articles of faith.[20] In an autobiographical contribution from the 1980s Goertz reflects on the problems of recognition and heresy-making that he encountered as he reckoned with his Mennonite identity:

> We matured without Mennonite fathers, and were suspected of heresy. But these bitter discussions had a good side. They were a field on which we measured our strength while keeping in touch with our congregations – as unloved but not as lost sons …
>
> I was threatened with censorship so early in my career that I was not able to contemplate a change of course. As far as I was concerned, it was a principle

18 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (London: Routledge, 1996), 135. Hans-Jürgen Goertz *Die Täufer: Geschichte und Deutung* (München: Beck, 1980), 164.

19 See the analysis of this aspect of Goertz's work in my "Müntzer, Taubes, and the Anabaptists: Emancipatory History and Political Theology," *Political Theology* 20, no. 3 (2019): 191–206.

20 See Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Umwege Zwischen Kanzel und Katheder: Autobiographische Fragmente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018). Joel Driedger's assessment of the book suggests that Goertz's autobiography is about the place of nonconformity between the church and the university, communicated in fragments (as the title suggests) and exemplified by the closing quotation from 1 Corinthians 13:12. Joel Driedger, Review of Goertz, *Umwege Zwischen Kanzel Und Katheder*. *MQR* 93, no. 2 (April 2019): 287–89.

> question of freedom of thought and expression. I didn't want to recognize that a small religious community which had suffered the intolerance of the established churches for centuries would now turn the same intolerance against itself and would be unwilling to tolerate self-criticism.[21]

In his scholarly work and the clues he gives to his biography, Goertz is one example of a Mennonite whose work is deeply concerned with secular matters and social critique in ways that are not reflected in the victors' history that runs from the *Schleitheim Confession* to *TAV* to *The Politics of Jesus.*

The Gospel of All Creatures

Another interesting example of how secularity—broadly defined by its orientation toward the world outside of Christian anxiety and theological capture—runs through the history of Anabaptist and Mennonite thinking is found in the early Anabaptist idea of the "Gospel of All Creatures." Hans Hut, Pilgram Marpeck, and Hans Schlaffer each developed the idea that the gospel was something present in creation and all its creatures, and by implication not solely in the institutional church. Mennonite theologians like A. James Reimer and Trevor Bechtel have found in this early Anabaptist idea something that resembles a natural theology. As an historical idea taken up for contemporary use, the Gospel of All Creatures offers an Anabaptist perspective that does not restrict the good news (*evangelion*) to the church, but instead suggests that the gospel is already present in the world in mystical and political ways.[22] Although to call these early Anabaptist proponents of the Gospel of All Creatures "secular" is in some ways anachronistic, it is also meaningful to consider the ways that this mystical and political idea refuses to be captured by contemporary theological desires.

The Collegiants

Others throughout the history of the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions have also considered the immanent, material, "secular" world to have intrinsic value and have rejected the idea that the church must exist in hard distinction against the so-called secular world. The seventeenth century Collegiants were a set of connected groups who met together for discussion and worship in the major cities of the Dutch Republic. These groups—called "colleges"—held

21 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "From the Cloakroom to the Lecture Hall," trans. Victor G. Doerksen, in *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 110–-13.

22 See my "The Gospel of All Creatures: An Anabaptist Natural Theology for Mennonite Political Theology," *JMS* 37 (2019): 353–68.

meetings that included Mennonites, Remonstrants, Socinians, Quakers, Reformed, and free thinkers.[23]

Meeting on a floor without raised podiums, and therefore without spatial structures of hierarchy, in principle everyone was free to speak in their meetings in accordance with the principle of "free prophecy" (*vrij spreken*), and there were no formal ministers. The Collegiant groups were radically anticonfessional, anticlerical, antipapal, and egalitarian, both rejecting the notion that there is one true church and affirming Spiritualist and Rationalist values in different proportions at different stages in their development. Early Collegiant thinking was influenced by Reformation Spiritualism, and later Collegiant thinking was more influenced by the Early-Enlightenment Rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza, but the group's history is more complex than a linear movement of secularization, and their many combinations of "secular" and "religious" ideas make them uniquely resonant with contemporary post secular thinking about the entanglements of Christianity, religion, and secularity.[24]

The secular Mennonite experiences and ideas found in Goertz's contemporary social critique, the sixteenth century notion of the Gospel of All Creatures, and the seventeenth century Collegiant groups are all very different, but in each case there is a measure of *secularity* (something not reducible to the enclosures of the church or Christianity), a measure of *Anabaptist or Mennonite identity* (but not reducible to confessions or institutions), a measure of *sociality* (in Goertz's social history, in the divine order of the creatures, and in Collegiant practices of free prophecy), and a measure of *critique* (Goertz's desire for emancipation, the critique of political power in the Gospel of All Creatures, and the anticlericalism and antitrinitarianism of the Collegiants).

23 For details on the suspicions that confessionalist Mennonites had of the Collegiants and those Mennonites who were part of Collegiant meetings, see Michael Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona During the Confessional Age* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 49–59. For an older account of Mennonite-Collegiant relations see Samme Zijlstra, *Om de ware gemeente en de oude gronden. Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden 1531–1675* (Hilversum: Uitgeverei, 2000), 406–10. I am grateful to Iris Speckman for providing me with a translation of this section of the book for my research.

24 See my "Postsecular History: Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion and the Seventeenth Century Dutch Collegiant Movement," *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses* 46, no. 3 (September 2017): 406–32. and my earlier study "We Have Never Been Secular: The Concept of the Secular and the Dutch Collegiants in the Radical Enlightenment." Master's Thesis. University of Waterloo and Conrad Grebel University College (2015).

Each of these three moments in Anabaptist Mennonite history can contribute to a Secular Mennonite Social Critique because they challenge linear and unified visions of Anabaptist history and Mennonite theology. Against any prohibition on the use of Anabaptist history and against the notion that Mennonite identity must be subservient to Christian theological identity, the approach that I am calling "Secular Mennonite Social Critique" understands distinctions between church and world to be profoundly troubled and often artificial (something made, not given). This broad notion of secularity and its relationship with ways of thinking that are apart from religion leads toward our second question.

Who are Philosophical Mennonites?

Throughout the history of Mennonite thought, from the time of Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* to the present day, there have been few Mennonite figures whose secular sensibilities have caused them to look outside of the sources often used by theologians, and instead toward philosophical writers who do not attempt to defend, define, condemn, or preserve Christian faith.[25] In 1943 Ralph C. Kauffman stated that there was a contradiction between being philosophical and being Mennonite, but since then many thinkers in the Mennonite tradition have proven this statement to be descriptively false.[26]

Robert Friedmann

One example of the philosophical strain in Mennonite thought is found in the work of Robert Friedmann, who influenced *TAV* but was more philosophically inclined than Bender.[27] During his time at Western Michigan University Friedmann wrote a manuscript called *Design for Living*, in which he defended a humanist, philosophical, and secular way of life based on four key principles: regard, concern, service, and love.[28] This book is exceptional

25 See my entry on "Philosophy" in the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Update to the original 1989 entry by J. Lawrence Burkholder (https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Philosophy) (April 2020).

26 See my "Mennonite Metaphysics? Exploring the Philosophical Aspects of Mennonite Theology from Pacifist Epistemology to Ontological Peace," *MQR* 91, no. 3 (July 2017): 403–21.

27 Friedmann resonated more with Clarence Bauman, who also embodied a kind of Mennonite humanism that this section points toward. See Herb Klassen, "Bauman, Clarence (1928–1995)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Bauman,_Clarence_(1928-1995) (November 2005).

28 See my preface "Discovering the Other Friedmann," in Robert Friedmann, *Design for Living: Regard, Concern, Service, and Love*, ed. Maxwell Kennel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017) and my more recent biographical work on Friedmann, "The Philosophical Legacy of Robert Friedmann" *Anabaptist Historians* blog

in the history of Mennonite thinking because of Friedmann's use of philosophical materials including works by Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Ovid, and Confucius. More attention to the complexity of Friedmann's identity and biography may reveal some of the philosophical influences that are covered over in the dominant narrative of Mennonite theology and history. Like that of Goertz, Friedmann's identity is complex and cannot be solely captured by the Mennonite name. In a footnote to his work on Hans Denck, Clarence Bauman makes an intriguing suggestion:

> Robert Friedmann, more than any other Anabaptist scholar, recognized in his own educated heart [a reference to the first chapter of *Design for Living*, which Bauman read] the implicit Jewishness of Anabaptist spirituality, though in his writings he himself hardly dared to make this connection explicit – possibly for personal reasons—and, instead, identified the genius of Anabaptist 'existential Christianity.'[29]

Throughout his career Friedmann's identity shifted and changed. He identified as a "Jew who sides with Christ" in the 1930s, he situated himself between religious socialists and Anabaptists in the 1950s, and he regularly attended a Quaker meeting in his late life.[30] It is not out of the question, then, to consider Bauman's suggestion that Friedmann's identity may have been more than just primarily Mennonite, but also may have been akin to the Jewish Marrano phenomenon. Complex and ambiguous identities like these must be considered within the scope of Mennonite Studies, both because they challenge the dominant narrative of Mennonite identity from within and because they show profound overlap between philosophical and secular sensibilities and Mennonite figures.

Pacifist Epistemology and Ontological Peace

As Friedmann's *Design for Living* suggests, there are Mennonites whose secularity and philosophical interests overlap. But at the same time Mennonite theologians over the past twenty years have sought to use philosophy to better understand how to be followers of Jesus Christ within the bounds of Christian faithfulness. Recently in the work of Chris Huebner and Peter

(July 2020). https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2020/07/27/the-philosophical-legacy-of-robert-friedmann/

29 Clarence Bauman, "Denck's Spirituality," in *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 44, note 139. I am grateful to Jamie Pitts for bring this to my attention.

30 Astrid von Schlachta, "Robert Friedmann—Searching for the Meaning of Faith for the World," in Robert Friedmann, *Hutterite Studies*, ed. Harold S. Bender, 2nd edn (MacGregor, Manitoba: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2010).

Blum, the Mennonite peace witness has taken on a new form.[31] For some contemporary Mennonite theologians, the peace witness is not only important because pacifism opposes the idea that we should physically harm others or participate in war, but it is also important for how we think and hold knowledge. This is called "pacifist epistemology" and its main contention is that if Mennonites are to follow the peaceful witness of Jesus Christ then this must entail the rejection of coercive, dominating, and abusive ways of conversing with others. To be a pacifist in one's way of thinking and speaking means rejecting imperialistic or colonial ways of engaging with others. Rather than gaining satisfaction from winning arguments or setting out to demolish or destroy the position of the other person, certain philosophical Mennonite theologians suggest that there are more peaceful ways of engaging in rhetoric and persuasion.

A similar point is made by feminist philosopher of religion Grace M. Jantzen, who writes that phrases we commonly use to characterize our discourse like "advance," "defend," and "position" are in fact military terms.[32] If Mennonites or those who feel an affinity with Mennonite identities want to be distinctive critics of violence, then we must resist the slow creep of imperialistic and colonial thinking into not only our ways of holding knowledge and communicating is, but also into our ontologies and metaphysics.[33] The implicit ways that we understand our world to be structured are always political, even when we would prefer to think in neutral ways. Even the most abstract categories for understanding the human relationship with the world rest on visions of how human beings ought to live together in that world. This is why attention to secularity and philosophical thinking cannot afford to be without politically engaged social critique, for our categories are never neutral.

31 See Peter Blum, "Two Cheers for an Ontology of Violence," in *For a Church to Come: Experiments in Postmodern Theory and Anabaptist Thought* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2013) and Chris Huebner, "Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability," in *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, And Identity* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006). For a fascinating precursor to these twenty-first century applications of pacifism to epistemology see Edgar Metzler, *Let's Talk About Extremism*. Focal Pamphlet Series No. 12 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1968). See also the online version, *Anabaptist Historians* (January 2021).

32 Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

33 See my "Critique of Metaphysical Violence," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review/Revue canadienne de philosophie* 58, no. 1 (March 2019): 125–62.

Who are Political Mennonites?

So far, I have argued that secular and philosophical Mennonites have been on the fringe of Mennonite thinking, often exiled from its history, or ignored by its disciplinary and disciplining establishment. Although being political has been a part of the mainstream Mennonite story for some time, when I refer to "political Mennonites" I am thinking of politically *engaged* Mennonites who enter civil and public entanglement and contestation, rather than Mennonites who seek to withdraw from the state and build up the church as a counter-political body.

J. Lawrence Burkholder

One major example of a Mennonite figure who was engaged and entangled with broader secular, philosophical, and political worlds, is J. Lawrence Burkholder. Considering his recent autobiography and the new edition of his dissertation, the present image of Burkholder is not only of a Mennonite who volunteered with the MCC and was president of Goshen College late in his career, but also of a Mennonite who was deeply troubled by the moral ambiguities of power that he encountered while flying refugees out of Beijing.[34] Burkholder was a Mennonite who was confronted with difficult decisions between life and death during his MCC term in China, and these confrontations demonstrated to him the inadequacy of traditional Mennonite ethics. This turn toward "realism" is reflected in an oft-quoted line from the preface to the late publication of his dissertation:

> What impressed me most was the ambiguity of power. Without power nothing could be accomplished but when power was exercised, invariably some people were helped and others were either deprived or hurt.[35]

Burkholder engaged in secular politics during the civil rights movement, put philosophy on the agenda when he moved from Harvard University to Goshen College, and advocated for engagement rather than isolation from political and state matters. Rather than withdraw from the life of the surrounding culture (which is still one kind of political move), Burkholder resisted the established Mennonite norms of his day and rejected the idea

34 J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Autobiographical Reflections" in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1993), 12.

35 J. Lawrence Burkholder, *Mennonite Ethics: From Isolation to Engagement*, ed. Lauren Friesen (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2018), 200. See also J. Lawrence Burkholder, *Recollections of a Sectarian Realist: A Mennonite Life in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Myrna Burkholder (Elkhart, IN: IMS, 2016), iv.

that moral purity is superior to compromise. Given his participation in secular social movements and institutions, his use of philosophy, and his political engagement, Burkholder is an important resource for any counter-history of Mennonite thinking.

New Mennonite Political Theologies

Other Mennonite thinkers have also challenged traditional Mennonite separatist political theology by working in between and apart from the categories of theology, philosophy, secularity, and politics. For example, Mennonite political theologian A. James Reimer sought to help Mennonites become more honest about the fact that entanglement with civil and public life is unavoidable, making theological separation not only impossible but dishonest. Mennonite theologian Lydia Neufeld Harder has also found engagement with political and philosophical matters to be important and has engaged in dialog with feminist theologies, attempting to help Mennonites mediate between a hermeneutic of suspicion and obedience to community. More recently still, Travis Kroeker and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert have articulated political theologies that are deeply influenced by Mennonite thinking, but are not reducible to that designation.[36] These Mennonite-related political theologies, which follow the broader trend in political theology of complicating both political and theological normativity, present us with ways in which Mennonite identity can be held amidst complex relations with theological and ecclesial institutions of commitment and non-commitment, proximity and distance, trust and distrust.[37]

Who are Literary Mennonites?

The aforementioned ambiguities of identity and affiliation are even more richly represented in our fourth movement in this counter-history of fringe Mennonites. The idea that one can have a complex and uneven relationship with established Mennonite theologies and institutions is most starkly illustrated by the long-standing discourse on Mennonite/s writing. Mennonite affiliated writers of literature and poetry like Patrick Friesen or Miriam Toews are not defined by theological or church structures, but instead create works

36 See the survey of Reimer, Neufeld Harder, Kroeker, and Gingerich Hiebert in my "Mennonite Political Theology and Feminist Critique," *MQR* 93, no. 3 (July 2019): 393–412.

37 Recent expressions of Mennonite Political Theology range from Christian theological visions to feminist critiques, to secular and queer literary explorations. See my edited special issue of *Political Theology* on Mennonite Political Theology (forthcoming March 2021).

of literary art that are very connected to their Mennonite communities in ways that are both challenging and appreciative.[38] Those who participate in the current conversation on Mennonite literary art tend not to police their borders by trying to ensure that those who write within its bounds give assent to one confession or creed, and many who work in the field of Mennonite/s writing consider themselves to be near-Mennonites, ex-Mennonites, non-Mennonites, and "Menno-nots" (to reflect the theme of the 2015 issue of the *JMS* and the name of the now defunct Mennonite literary magazine *Mennonot*). This literary Mennonite conversation has developed under quite different conditions than the discourse on Mennonite theology and history, and it has fostered a sense of openness and welcome despite very deep differences. Below I will briefly survey recent work by one Mennonite literary critic (Daniel Shank Cruz) and one secular Mennonite literary figure (Miriam Toews).

Mennonite Literary Criticism

Daniel Shank Cruz's recent book, *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community* performs something very similar to what I am attempting to do when I knit my work around the heading "Secular Mennonite Social Critique." Cruz begins by conjugating the two identities of his title, giving an expansive and generous account of Mennonite and Queer identity.[39] For Cruz, and others, queerness is not reducible to sexuality, for the act of queering something can refer to any number of ways that one might challenge simplistic and rigid black-and-white distinctions. Cruz reflects the broader discourse on literary Mennonite thought when he allows the name "Mennonite" to apply to anyone who chooses to identify themselves as such. This openness stands in stark contrast with ways of defining identity that attempt to police its uses. Cruz's book avoids such identity-policing, preferring instead to allow both Mennonite and queer identities to mutually open discussions about community, activism, mutual aid, and the pursuit of peace. Cruz points out how Mennonites are already quite queer in their rejection of capture by Protestantism and Catholicism, and in the values of activism and the search for a better world.

38 See my analysis of Friesen's work in "Violence and the Romance of Community: Darkness and Enlightenment in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*," *Literature & Theology* 33, no. 4 (December 2019): 394–413.

39 Daniel Shank Cruz, *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

The discourse on Mennonite identity comes alive in literary-critical works like Cruz's in part because of his refusal to position himself as the final arbiter over the faithful uses of the name "Mennonite," alongside his equally important assertion that Mennonites have a distinctive identity and contribution to make by virtue of their values of peace and justice. Cruz makes clear and distinctive statements about Mennonite identity that have historical and theological resonances, but which move beyond the disciplining powers of church and university, and toward a Mennonite identity that is more plural and generous, while nonetheless being normative and critical. Appropriately, this kind of pluralistic yet critical Mennonite identity resonates well with the literary works of secular Mennonites.

Miriam Toews' Women Talking

In late February 2020, the Canadian novelist Miriam Toews came to McMaster University to be interviewed by Grace Kehler and Travis Kroeker about her book *Women Talking*. Toews novel dramatizes and responds to a crisis of sexual violence in a Bolivian Mennonite colony that occurred between 2005 and 2009 when men committed acts of sexual violence on colony women (some were subsequently tried and convicted in court in 2013). Her introductory note to the novel clarifies, however, that abuses may continue in this colony and others.[40] Understanding that the women who experienced these rapes were accused of fabricating the events out of "wild female imagination," Toews decided to write a novel about these violent events because she wanted to respond to them with her own "act of female imagination." The theological resonances of Toews work have been developed in several articles by Kehler and Kroeker, the most recent of which is Kehler's "A Parable of Becoming Divine Women: Miriam Toews' Women Talking." [41]

Women Talking is all about whether the women of the colony will decide to "do nothing," "stay and fight," or "leave." Deliberating between these three options, the women—led by Ona—enlist the help of a colony man named August. The novel is a parable meant to instruct its readers in thinking more deeply about not only sexual violence, but also about how we make systems of authority and power that contain people within cycles of abuse. *Women Talking* asks its readers to join with the colony women and consider the stakes and the problems of these three responses to abuse: do nothing (and perhaps forgive the men), stay in the colony and fight back (perhaps breaking the rule of nonresistance), or leave (into a world they do not know). Each

40 Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Toronto: Knopf, 2018), note.

41 Grace Kehler, "Becoming Divine Women: Miriam Toews' *Women Talking* as Parable," *Literature & Theology* 34, no. 4 (December 2020): 408–29.

option has consequences and risks, and the women must reach an agreement among themselves in only two days, before the men return from the trial.

During the event at McMaster, Grace Kehler asked Miriam Toews about how she sees violence haunting communities that say they are pacifist. Toews responded, saying that although she considers herself to be a secular Mennonite—having left a repressive Mennonite community—she still considers herself to be a pacifist who desires a more complicated kind of peace. Rather than policing the use of the term Mennonite, Toews spoke of herself as a secular Mennonite and expressed her frustration with those who would say that she is not a Mennonite.[42]

With this critique of Mennonite identity policing in mind, let the reader also notice that the framing of the novel was based on a very particular act of love that also refuses to police certain boundaries while nonetheless drawing other boundaries. During the McMaster event a student in the audience asked Toews why, in a book called *Women Talking* that is about women's decision to overcome rule by men, did she decide that the narrator should be a man? Toews responded by first saying that, within the world of the novel, it would not make sense for a woman to be the narrator because women in these colonies are usually illiterate (which is another part of patriarchy). But beyond this practical reason, Toews suggested that there was a deeper reason that she decided the narrator should be a man.

The narrator of the novel, August, is not well. He struggles deeply with his mental health, and there is evidence in the novel that he may be suicidal. August is not very connected to the other men in the colony. He is different, more educated, and not very agriculturally inclined like the other men are. He also has a complicated past that continues to haunt him, but he has a friendship with Ona—a leader of the women who the novel focuses on. Toews explained that in the story, part of the reason that August Epp is the narrator is because Ona saw that he was not well and decided to give him a job to keep him busy, and more importantly, to keep him safe for those hours that they were talking together. Toews pointed out that the women in the story are illiterate, and therefore have no use for a transcript of their meetings, so why would they ask the colony schoolteacher to write everything down for them? They are never going to use it. They cannot read. Later the transcript is used to pack their food as they strike out from the colony into the unknown.

42 For more on "secular Mennonite" identities see my "Secular Mennonites and the Violence of Pacifism: Miriam Toews at McMaster," *Hamilton Arts and Letters* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2020). Special Issue on Mennonites, ed. Grace Kehler.

The purpose of having a male narrator is complicated, but much of it has to do with Ona's care for this man who does not fit in, this man who is not well, and perhaps is at risk of suicide. This means that the entire framing of the novel—the way that it reaches the reader through the text—is based on an act of generosity, love, and charity by one of the colony women toward a man. It is difficult to overstate how powerful and vulnerable this is, given traumatic sexual violence that the men of the colony have inflicted upon the women. But Ona still invites August into their circle of trust and asks him to help them do something that they do not really need to have done. Although we ought not universalize it or make it compulsory, this is one of the most inspiring aspects of Miriam Toews parable, for it embodies a kind of vulnerable love that cannot be expressed in concepts and cannot be possessed by Mennonite identity, but is nonetheless a distinctive secular expression of it that resonates with new Mennonite feminisms.

Who Are Feminist Mennonites?[43]

One further tradition in Mennonite thought that has been uniquely and severely suppressed by the victors' history outlined above is Mennonite feminism. Below I engage with the work of one exemplary Mennonite feminist theologian whose work resonates with the secular Mennonite feminism outlined above, and with the broader contours of this alternate history of secular, philosophical, political, and literary Mennonites. Malinda Berry's work on Mennonite Political Theology proceeds under the banner of a "Shalom Political Theology."[44] As I have become more familiar with Berry's work, and as I have considered why her political theology has not yet had the hearing it deserves, I have been drawn toward the ways that she resists different forms of dissociation.

The word "dissociation" initially says nothing about what exactly is being prevented from associating, and it is also a term that has a very specialized use in the field of counseling and psychotherapy where it refers to an escape from or defense against experiences that are overwhelming (symptoms of which range from "checking out" of a stressful conversation to more severe flashbacks and memory gaps, which are often symptoms of trauma and/or PTSD).

43 This section summarizes my "Political Theology and Dissociation: A Response to Malinda Berry." Theology and Peacebuilding Consultation. Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, March 2020.

44 Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship," *CGR* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 49–73.

I think that a major reason why Mennonite feminist theologies continue to be ignored is that they challenge patriarchal dissociations that separate everyday life from scholarly work. Berry's Mennonite feminist approach to Political Theology refuses to dissociate theological and academic work from her subject position and the social problems of everyday life. This became evident over the course of our conversations preceding the colloquium that occasioned an earlier form of this section. Instead of exchanging papers and reading them in the detached and distancing way that our shared discourse often encourages, we talked "face to face" for a few hours over two video calls, where our discussions strayed from and returned to the task at hand, where we were embedded in everyday problems of household management.

By resisting the dissociation of work and life, Berry's embodied and published work both assume that the personal is already political. In her contribution to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Living More With Less* Berry reflects on *oikonomia*.[45] But rather than dissociate and abstract the term from the realm of life into the realm of scholarly work, she tells stories and draws the attention of the reader to the theologies of cooking and homemaking. The dissociative desire for theology and academic study to be safely separate from biography is something that Berry's work fundamentally resists, and I want to extend her resistance of dissociation by suggesting that the first steps toward its remediation must be to admit that there is a fundamental connection between work and life, and then to seek out ways of being faithful to our autobiographies. This does not mean giving up abstraction entirely and taking refuge in particularity or narrative, for that will not save us either. What it means is giving up the notion that there is no relation between work and life and then attending to how we abstract and how we connect with others. Under the regime of dissociative desire, we want to keep separate our personal interests and cares from the abstract representations that we deal in, but ultimately, we cannot. Our personal stories and investment in our abstract academic work continue to be re-inscribed within our work, regardless of our attempts to dissociate from it. I draw attention to Berry's work here at the conclusion of this survey because I want to highlight that dissociative desire lies at the base of the victors' history outlined at the beginning of this chapter, and it is a commonly used strategy in the identity policing critiqued by Sider and others.

45 Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "The Five Life Standards: Theology and Household Code," in Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More With Less*. 30th Anniversary Edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 35–37.

Conclusion

Let us notice in conclusion that the problem that underpins the victors' history that this chapter seeks to challenge, is the problem of a dissociative gaze that turns away from Mennonite identities that do not conform to pre-decided standards or measures. There would be no need for a corrective vision of the history of Mennonite identities if Mennonites had consistently recognized (seen, validated, affirmed, dignified, both personally and politically) those who claimed the Mennonite name from unconventional subject positions.[46]

The Secular Mennonite Social Critique that I trace above calls for broader, more pluralistic, and more interdisciplinary approaches to Mennonite Studies that do not turn away from the difficult conflicts of values that define us. Therefore, I have not attempted to linearize the alternate history I present, nor have I attempted to reconcile contradictions between the figures who I survey. Instead, I point to several overlapping traditions within the tradition and give voice to some Mennonite identities who have not yet received attention comparable to those within the victor's history. The very idea of a victor's history is premised upon a relationship with time and history that takes up the past and future and uses these terms to authorize powerful assertions in the present through a kind of theopolitical periodization.[47] However, I am not suggesting that we must replace the victors' history outlined above by forcibly reasserting the importance of secular, philosophical, political, literary, and feminist Mennonite figures. That would be to fall back into the ontological violence of assuming that identities will necessarily displace each other in relations of antagonism and dominance, and the problem of allowing this assumption to determine our discourse rather than contribute to a critique of power.[48]

Instead of suggesting that we must replace dominant Mennonites with marginal ones or invert a power relation between them, I am suggesting that the needed remediation for the problems addressed above is the rejection of our dissociative desire which causes us to turn away from identities and ideas that make us uncomfortable. Instead, in the interest of opening up

46 On the politics of recognition see Alexander Garcia Düttmann, *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate (London: Verso, 2000).

47 See my *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time*. Radical Theologies and Philosophies (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

48 For more on this point see my dissertation, "Ontologies of Violence: Jacques Derrida, Mennonite Pacifist Epistemology, and Grace M. Jantzen's *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*." (McMaster University, 2021).

Mennonite identity to those who have been excluded from its grand narrative, and opening Mennonite Studies toward a broader future, while refusing to withdraw from the project of articulating a distinctive Mennonite identity, in conclusion I call for the cultivation of a much richer and more interdisciplinary politics of mutual recognition whereby we turn toward the aforementioned Mennonite identities by beginning with affirmation rather than protective or dissociative gestures of turning away. Following the thread of secular Mennonite social critique that runs through the voices surveyed above is one such approach to this broader form of recognition, and surely there must be others.

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