

Work in Mennonite Theological Perspective

JANIS THIESSEN

Twentieth-century Canadian and American Mennonites altered their image as a rural people as they moved to the cities and established or found work in businesses, a process that accelerated after the Second World War. Whereas in 1941, 87% of Canadian Mennonites were rural, by 1971 that figure had dropped to 56%.¹ This rural-to-urban transformation necessitated a re-examination of Mennonite religious beliefs. While there is no explicit and uniquely Mennonite theology of work, Mennonite attitudes toward labour have been shaped by religious understandings of *Gelassenheit*, nonresistance and *agape*. Shifts in emphasis among these three concepts reveal that in the last fifty years, Mennonites have confronted issues of social responsibility and questions of power in their theology, with implications for their response to labour issues.

Gelassenheit often is translated from the German simply as “yieldedness” though it stands for a much more elaborate philosophy of thought, involving not merely the submission to God of individuals as is commonly preached by evangelical Christians, but also submission of the individual to the faith community.² *Agape* is a form of love that emphasizes one’s relationship with and obligation to one’s neighbours. Nonviolence at first was defined as pacifism but later came to be equated with nonviolent resistance. All three of these themes are connected closely to each other, and are interpreted in different ways by three central figures in twentieth-century Mennonite theological understanding: Guy F. Hershberger, J. Lawrence Burkholder and John Howard Yoder.

In the 1940s, Guy Hershberger promoted a concept of nonviolence that strongly emphasized its connection to *agape* and *Gelassenheit*. Hersh-

berger defined nonviolence as the rejection of the use of force in any form. Participation in war, involvement in Gandhian protests, membership in labour unions and exploitative business practices were all, he declared, “violat[ions of] the greater ethic of love and nonresistance found in the Bible.”³ He asserted that there was “no difference in principle between so-called nonviolent coercion and actual violence.”⁴ Hershberger was one of the first to address seriously the question of Mennonite involvement in the industrial workforce. He believed that “Mennonite businessmen should create islands where ideal relations could exist between boss and worker without struggles for power.” While he conceded that in the modern world, workers “would never get justice without some use of power and coercion,” he insisted that nonviolence necessitated submission to injustice if the alternative was involvement in conflict.⁵ For Hershberger, *Gelassenheit* entailed yielding one’s right to justice, refusing to force compliance with one’s demands, because to do so would violate *agape* love for the neighbour.

A decade later, J. Lawrence Burkholder challenged what he viewed as the subordination of *agape* to the principle of nonviolence in the Hershberger tradition. “Love itself demands responsible participation in a society for it is in the social realm that the Christian meets the neighbor,” he declared.⁶ Burkholder argued that Christians were called to a life of nonviolent confrontation with power rather than a meek submission to it.⁷

The danger of making nonresistance into an absolute is that it leads logically to a lifestyle that is so withdrawn from the conflicts of the world that the real cross is seldom encountered. The cross of Christ is one that is imposed by the world upon those who confront the world and try to change it.⁸

Such confrontation and efforts at transformation necessitated compromise between *agape* and nonviolence—two principles that Burkholder viewed as oppositional. Decisions regarding the nature of this compromise were to be made by the faith community as a whole.

[O]nly through compromise can love be objectified socially, however imperfectly. To place compromise on a continuum of ambiguity as the subject matter for ethics is a function of the “discerning community.” Where to draw the line is the issue. Different times, different circumstances, different identities obviously will bring different answers.⁹

Burkholder's views were dismissed by the Mennonite academic and religious communities at the time, fearing as they did that this emphasis on compromise would "reduc[e] the high cost of discipleship as the believer too easily concedes to the ethics of empire."¹⁰ Consequently, his 1958 Princeton Theological Seminary doctoral dissertation, titled "The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church," was not published until thirty-one years later.

Burkholder was critiqued for his assumption that the abandonment of passivity necessitated by *agape* concern for the neighbour required "some level of involvement and compromise with the institutions and structures of modern society."¹¹ Historian J. Denny Weaver declared that Burkholder's was a "neo-Constantinian outlook"--anathema to a faith community that came into existence in part because of a belief that sixteenth-century Protestantism had not separated church and state clearly enough. The problem, Weaver explained, was that Burkholder's position assumed that

Christian social responsibility happens primarily through societal and governmental structures as agents. It assumes that greatest effectiveness occurs through the eventual use of the government's means, namely violence and war, with the criteria for success and relevancy also supplied and defined by those structures.¹²

Weaver's critique of Burkholder was shaped by the perspective of John Howard Yoder, whose writings had become highly influential among Canadian and American Mennonites in the interim between the writing and the publication of Burkholder's dissertation. While Burkholder believed that it was the responsibility of Christians to work within the system for its transformation, Yoder "focuse[d] on helping Christians understand external structures and institutions so they [would] not be seduced by them."¹³ He dismissed the classic argument that the Bible addressed personal ethics rather than the power of social structures. Yoder argued that the Christian was called, like Christ, to reject the assumption that it was a moral duty to exercise social responsibility through these structures and institutions.¹⁴ Thus he rejected the belief of evangelical Christians that the way to change society was through individual conversion, "changing the heart" of those in power, or electing Christians to office. Yoder argued instead that "the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian

community.”¹⁵ (Yoder’s views find a new incarnation today in the writings of Duke University ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas.)

Yoder viewed the Burkholdian opposition of *agape* and nonviolence as artificial. Christians, he declared, were called to “respect and be subject to the historical process in which the sword continues to be wielded and to bring about a kind of order under fire, but not to perceive in the wielding of the sword their own reconciling ministry.”¹⁶ Those who wished to downplay nonviolence for the sake of social responsibility were deceived in their egoism. Christians were those who, like Christ, renounced the claim to govern history.¹⁷ They were to “represent in an unwilling world the Order to come.”¹⁸ Despite his argument that it was not the job of the Christian to redeem the world, Yoder was not calling simply for a return to the separatist ethic of Hershberger.

From Hershberger through Yoder to Burkholder, Mennonite theological thinking underwent a shift in the postwar period. From a position that emphasized *Gelassenheit*, submission to the faith community and the rejection of all forms of force, Mennonites moved to one that stressed *agape* as social responsibility and made an effort to distinguish between violence and power. Mennonites’ reconsideration of their religious beliefs was prompted in part by the perceived crisis of their postwar entry into the urban industrial world. In turn, the theological arguments they articulated helped to shape the response of Mennonite workers and business owners to their new environment. In the space that remains, I want to highlight a few examples of such responses.

Historian Ted Regehr argues that within Canadian Mennonite workplaces in the immediate postwar period, a clear pattern of deference to authority existed. He asserts that Mennonite employers were

the bosses, rewarding employees according to what they believed was fair and equitable, much as the head of a farm family expected every member to contribute to the success of the farm and then to be rewarded as the head of the household saw fit. Employees were expected to think first and foremost of the business and, beyond that, to trust the goodwill and generosity of their employer.¹⁹

The willingness of Mennonites to accept managerial authority, even as they accepted the authority of their fathers, husbands, and church leaders, made them model employees from an employer’s perspective.²⁰ This deference resulted from the Mennonite stance of *Gelassenheit*; humility, meekness and conformity to the community translated into submission in

the workplace. Coupled with the belief that Christians should not make use of the courts or other legal institutions to settle disputes, it is not surprising that Mennonite workers were hesitant to assert themselves.

Gelassenheit had implications for Mennonite business owners as well as their workers. Owners attempted to compensate for their powerful status by avoiding conspicuous consumption and choosing to live in ethnic residential neighbourhoods. For example, according to Art DeFehr, president of Palliser Furniture (Manitoba's second largest employer), the DeFehr family made a "deliberate choice" to remain within the Mennonite community and "subject themselves to its judgment." They chose to live and shop within North Kildonan (a Winnipeg suburb with a large concentration of Mennonites), rather than "fleeing to Tuxedo" (a wealthier Winnipeg suburb).²¹ DeFehr's sister, Irene Loewen, explained that their parents exercised personal financial restraint in order not to offend the Mennonite community to which they belonged.

My father, when they had the means, loved to give luxuries to mother. But she didn't want them, she didn't feel comfortable with them. In the States when she was living there, she had learned to use make-up, she went to movies, even tried dancing. When she moved to North Kildonan she dropped all of it except her intellectual interests in order to fit in with the rest of the women. When dad wanted to buy her a fur stole she refused, feeling she would stand apart from the other women of the church. When she finally did get a fur coat it wasn't the luxury type that dad wanted to buy her.²²

Such personal decisions on the part of Mennonite business owners probably helped stem critique of their corporate behaviour.

An interesting example of the use of Mennonite religious principles by non-Mennonites is the unsuccessful effort of Winnipeg Local 191 of the International Typographical Union to organize Friesens Corporation (a printing firm in southern Manitoba) in the early 1970s. The Mennonite owners of this company initially agreed to make a joint presentation to the workforce with the union organizer. The union presentation was to equate labour unions, cooperatives and credit unions, emphasizing that all three were member-driven. The *agape* ethic among Mennonites had developed into a strong practice of mutual aid over the centuries, and thus Manitoba Mennonites had a history of commitment to cooperatives and credit unions. In fact, the owners of Friesens Corporation served as directors of such organizations. According to the union organizer, when the owners of

Friesens Corporation saw the union's planned presentation and realized it "had a fifty-fifty chance," the meeting was cancelled.

Among Mennonites themselves, it was not the ethic of *agape* but the principle of nonviolence that shaped their attitude toward unions. Involvement in labour unions was actively preached against in Canadian and American Mennonite churches mid-century, and various Mennonite church conferences issued statements against them. Union membership was rejected in part because the threat of strike action was considered an exercise of force on the part of labour. Management use of force, through the control of labour conditions and terms of employment and the ability to terminate employees, rarely was critiqued in the same manner.²³ As Burkholder's emphasis on social responsibility has taken hold among Mennonites, opposition to union membership has been declining, particularly among more educated urban Mennonites of higher socio-economic status. Surveys conducted in the late 1980s found 54% of Canadian and American Mennonites favoured joining unions.²⁴ Nonetheless, the percentage of Mennonites who are members of labour unions has not changed significantly (5% in 1972, 6% in 1989).²⁵

The decade of the 1970s, with its inflation and unemployment, was notable for its labour activism in Manitoba. A number of Mennonites in this province refused to join unions during this period. Henry Funk, a baker and a Mennonite, was fired from his job at McGavin Toastmaster in Winnipeg for refusal to join the union as per the collective agreement. He applied to the Manitoba Labour Board, requesting exemption for religious reasons under section 68(3) of the Labour Relations Act. As a Mennonite Brethren, he declared he objected to "the violent tactics of unions" and to taking an oath of membership. His application was dismissed as the relevant section was not applicable to his circumstances. Even if it had been, his application would not have been successful, Chair Murdoch MacKay declared, observing that the Mennonite Brethren Church had no official stance against unions at that time and so Funk's opposition to joining one was founded upon personal rather than religious beliefs.²⁶ Though objecting to the coercion of unions, Funk was not opposed to the coercion of the courts, as he took his case to the Manitoba Court of Appeals, which ruled in his favour in 1976.

Situations like Funk's led Mennonites in Manitoba to request information and assistance regarding their stance towards unions from Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba's Peace and Social Concerns Committee. MCC-Manitoba responded by organizing a series of three

seminars on labour-management relations in Steinbach, Winkler and Winnipeg in January 1976. Political science professor John Redekop, and Gerald Vandezande of the Christian Labour Association of Canada, were the presenters at these sessions. Their comments focused on the need for individual Christian employers and employees to be “salt and light” in the existing system, but did little to question the system itself.

The actions of teachers against the Ontario government in the 1990s prompted yet another examination of the Christian response to labour issues by Mennonites. The *Conrad Grebel Review* published a number of articles on Mennonites, unions and strikes in 1998. John R. Sutherland and Susan Van Weelden, professors of management and business, developed four criteria to determine if a strike was morally justified.²⁷ Striking was legitimate only if the matter in dispute was gravely unjust, if all other means of dispute resolution were exhausted, if “innocent bystanders” would not be hurt, and if the “legitimate moral rights of others [would not] be violated.” Ontario school trustee Ted Martin responded that such criteria required condemning as “morally wrong” the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott.²⁸ By ignoring lockouts by employers, transfers of production to other facilities, employer strike-provocation and strike-breaking, the authors revealed their anti-union bias, he declared. Furthermore, collaboration, mediation and other alternative dispute resolution methods “often increase the power of the strong to take advantage of the weak.”²⁹ In the face of an inequitable economic system, unions needed the right to strike.³⁰ Once again, the argument was whether to place greater emphasis on *agape* or to nonviolence.

In conclusion, an understanding of the changing interpretations of *Gelassenheit*, *agape* and nonviolence can provide insight into the Mennonite workplace. *Gelassenheit* promoted worker deference while at the same time curbing excesses on the part of employers. The decreased emphasis on *Gelassenheit* among Mennonites, together with new understandings of *agape* and nonviolence in light of Burkholder’s critique, may or may not have been translated into class consciousness on the part of Mennonite workers. Investigation of these issues over time in a variety of Mennonite workplaces is required. A number of questions must be addressed. How have Mennonites reconciled their religious beliefs with the capitalist system in which they are immersed? In what ways and at what times have Mennonite employers and employees used their common Mennonite ethos to shape workplace conflict? Have class distinctions

transformed the unity of Mennonite communities over time? How have Mennonites (re)created their identity in the face of the competing claims of class, ethnicity and religion? While some of these questions have been touched on by sociologist Calvin Redekop's studies of Mennonite employers, questions of class, particularly from the perspective of employees, have been ignored. What is needed are micro-histories of Mennonite-owned businesses and Mennonite workforces that acknowledge the importance of religious belief in shaping the Mennonite labour experience.³¹ It is only recently that Mennonites in Canada and the United States have shown a willingness to confront problems of power and authority in their theology. Now is the time to make use of these writings to examine these same issues in Mennonite labour history.

Endnotes

1. T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), Appendix F.
2. Laura Weaver, "A Mennonite 'Hard Worker' Moves from the Working Class and the Religious/Ethnic Community to Academia: A Conflict between Two Definitions of Work," in *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*, ed. Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 116.
3. Lydia Harder, "Power and Authority in Mennonite Theological Development," in *Power, Authority and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Calvin Redekop and Benjamin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 84.
4. Guy F. Hershberger, "Nonresistance and Industrial Conflict," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 13, No. 2 (April 1939): 147.
5. Theron F. Schlabach, "To Focus a Mennonite Vision," in *Kingdom, Cross and Community: Essays on Mennonite Themes in Honor of Guy F. Hershberger*, ed. John Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 30.
6. J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church* (Elkhart IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989), 25.
7. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Nonresistance, Nonviolent Resistance, and Power," in *Kingdom, Cross and Community*, 134.

8. Burkholder, "Nonresistance, Nonviolent Resistance, and Power," 136.
9. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rod Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 48-49.
10. Scott Holland, "Introduction," in *The Limits of Perfection*, iii.
11. J. Denny Weaver, "The Socially Active Community: An Alternative Ecclesiology," in *The Limits of Perfection*, 78.
12. Weaver, "The Socially Active Community," 78.
13. Harder, 86.
14. John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 100.
15. Yoder, 157.
16. Yoder, 214.
17. Yoder, 241.
18. Yoder, 97.
19. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*, 158.
20. Roy Vogt, "Entrepreneurs, Labourers, Professionals, and Farmers: A Response to *Mennonites in Canada, A People Transformed*," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 15 (1997): 13.
21. Art DeFehr, conversation with the author, Winnipeg Manitoba, 2 September 1997.
22. Mary M. Enns, *Mia: The Story of a Remarkable Woman* (Winnipeg: A.A. DeFehr Trust, 1982), 148-149.
23. Vogt, "Mennonite Studies in Economics," 65; and Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970*, 158.
24. Blue collar Mennonites 58%, business 61%, students 51%, housewives 40%, professionals 65%, farmers 37% (Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in the Global Village* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000], 45, Table 2-6).
25. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1975), 146; and J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger,

- The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*, with a foreword by Donald B. Kraybill (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 92, 207-208.
26. Manitoba Labour Board, Application under Section 68(3) of the Labour Relations Act by Henry Funk, applicant, McGavin Toastmaster Ltd., employer-respondent, and Bakery and Confectionery Workers' International Union Local 389, bargaining agent and agreement holder, "MCC Manitoba (1974-80)," Volume 3636, Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg MB.
 27. John R. Sutherland and Susan J. Van Weelden, "To Strike or Not to Strike: Job Action in the Context of Justice and Reconciliation," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, No. 1 (Winter 1998): 19.
 28. Ted Martin, "Ontario Teachers and the Moral Obligation to Strike: A partial response to 'To Strike or Not to Strike' by John R. Sutherland and Susan J. Van Weelden," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, No. 1 (Winter 1998): 24, fn 1.
 29. Martin, 29.
 30. Martin, 30.
 31. The postwar Mennonite workforce at three major Canadian companies, founded, owned and originally staffed by Mennonites, are the focus of my dissertation. These three companies, all located in Manitoba, are Friesens Corporation founded in 1933 (one of Canada's largest printers with more than 600 employees), Loewen Windows founded in 1905 (Canada's largest wood window manufacturer with more than 1200 employees), and Palliser Furniture founded in 1944 (Canada's largest furniture manufacturer with more than 5200 employees).