

Communism and Labor Unions: The Changing Perspectives of Mennonites in Canada and the United States

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Mennonite political theology, at least as manifested by church pronouncements on communism and labor unions, has been both more and less progressive than the ideology of the broader North American society. When the United States and Canadian governments were obsessed with tracking down enemy “reds” within, Mennonites passed resolutions that cautioned against the identification of Christianity with anti-communism. However, while the Second World War and the decade immediately following saw the expansion of labor unions as North Americans flocked to join them, Mennonites issued statements warning against the compromise of Christian principles that union membership would entail.

While Mennonite attitudes toward socialism and communism were progressive . . . the same cannot be said of their position on trade unions

EARLY RESOLUTIONS

The earliest Mennonite resolution against communism was passed by General Conference Mennonites in the western United States at their annual conference in 1937. The Mennonite interpretation of the Christian faith and the philosophy and goals of communism were seen as diametrically opposed, despite the attraction of leftist views for some Mennonites:

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In this socialistically and economically turbulent age there may be some Mennonites who are carried away with Marxist [*sic*] socialism under the guise of so-called Christian socialism. But such deluded persons do not represent the doctrines, teachings nor practises of Christian faith and life as held by Mennonites in general nor as taught by the church. . . .¹

North American Mennonites had heard firsthand of the atrocities of life under Stalinist rule; many personal letters from Mennonites in Russia to relatives in Canada and the United States were printed in publications such as *Der Bote*. Most of the leadership of the Mennonite churches in Russia, and many Mennonite farmers in the Ukraine, had been exiled to Siberia. Such circumstances undoubtedly shaped the critique of Russian communism expressed in the resolution:

[The Marxist] ridicules Jesus Christ; burns God in effigy; exterminates those citizens of the land that were supplying the food and necessities for the temporal life of the nation; assassinates or executes any leading persons associated officially with the government who seem to disagree with the head of the tyrannic government. They take from the farmer all he produces leaving him barely enough food for keeping soul and body together. There is in this heartless, brutally selfish despotism no vestige of love, pity or sympathy. Nearly all churches have been destroyed or turned to other uses. Public worship of God is interfered with. Preachers of the gospel are gradually eliminated by enforced labor and starvation. There is no peace, happiness or contentment left to the exploited, oppressed and enslaved millions of Russian hapless people.²

The statement concluded that “no spiritual, social or economic relation or cooperation [is] possible, nor does any exist between Russian Communism (Marxian Socialism) and truly faithful Mennonite Christians.” Christianity and historical materialism were incompatible, for “it is impossible to serve God and Mammon simultaneously.”

AFTER WORLD WAR II

Such were the sentiments in the Stalinist era; by the end of the Second World War, a change in perspective had occurred. The experience of some North American Mennonites as service workers among refugees in

war-ravaged Europe led to a redefinition of certain religious understandings. The preservation of the ethic of nonviolence at any and all cost was challenged by the experiences of those like J. Lawrence Burkholder. Burkholder, a theology professor and later president at Goshen College (Indiana), had been strongly influenced by his experiences as a service worker dealing with the complexities of suffering and injustice faced by refugees in China. Burkholder argued that Christians were called to a life of nonviolent confrontation with power rather than a meek submission to it.³

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.⁴

Such confrontation and efforts at transformation necessitated compromise between *agape* and nonresistance—two principles which Burkholder viewed as oppositional. *Agape*, or self-sacrificial love for one's neighbors, was an inadequate principle for life in the postwar world, as it did not address what to do in the face of competing claims of neighbors. Compromise would become possible when Mennonites came to terms with their complicity in worldly power struggles. The determination of when, how, and what to compromise was the job of the discerning community, the church.⁵ Burkholder advocated the replacement of normative nonresistance by "nonviolent resistance as an approximation of the absolute ideal." Nonviolent resistance would grant Mennonites the theological freedom to work for justice in the world.⁶

In light of this (re)new(ed) interest in questions of justice, Mennonites reconsidered their position with respect to communism. Rather than merely issuing statements of simple condemnation, Mennonites began to acknowledge that socialist philosophies expressed valid critiques of economic and social injustice. Not surprisingly, at the forefront of this shift were those relief and service organizations which had had the closest contact with the postwar devastation in Europe and Asia: Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) International, for example, issued a "Report on Communism" in 1952. In their report, MCC recognized the positive aims of communism as "a worldwide campaign for social and economic justice to be realized in an all-embracing community of men."⁷ Communism was "a judgment" on western civilization which "requires of Christians a self-criticism which will enable them, in a cold-war situation, to see clearly their relationship to those aspects of national, cultural, and economic life which would tend

to continue the conditions which have contributed to the cause of Communism.” Christians were called to respond, not by embracing “atheistic” communism, but by practicing “a close relationship of non-resistance and the way of the cross to self-denial in our economic life.” MCC’s position is all the more remarkable given the anti-Communist rhetoric of both postwar Canada and McCarthy-era United States.⁸

LATER RESOLUTIONS

A decade later, MCC’s balanced position on communism was reflected in the stances of two of the largest Mennonite church conferences. Both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church passed resolutions on communism in 1961 and 1962 respectively.⁹ These resolutions were not wholesale embraces of communism—such a position was impossible, given the atheistic nature of actually-existing socialism at the time. Nonetheless, the resolution reflected some of the sympathetic understanding of the reasons for the popularity of communism that had been demonstrated in the earlier MCC report. Mennonites were called to demand that government take action to “remove the conditions that contribute to the rise of Communism and tend to make people vulnerable to Communist influence.” As in the 1952 statement by MCC, communism was described as a judgment on unfaithful Christians, the unwelcome result of the failure of Christians to take the life of discipleship seriously. Mennonites were accordingly urged “to be more concerned to live out the gospel fully in all areas of life.”

Mennonites were actively discouraged, however, from participating in the anti-communist rhetoric of the Cold War. The equation of Christianity either “with Americanism or with any particular economic, political, or materialistic system” or with anti-communism was rejected clearly.

[A]lthough we teach and warn against atheistic Communism, we cannot be involved in any anti-Communist crusade that takes the form of a “holy war” and employs distortion of facts, unfounded charges against persons and organizations, particularly against fellow Christians, promotes blind fear, and creates an atmosphere that can lead to a very dangerous type of totalitarian philosophy.¹⁰

Instead, Mennonites were to offer material aid, prayer, and the gospel to everyone, including “reputed enemies” and “those who suffer for Christ behind the Iron Curtain.” The resolution recognized that such behavior would leave Mennonites open to the charge of harboring communist sympathies. Nonetheless, such behavior was demanded of a Christian, what-

ever the consequences.

The broader Christian society's equation of Christianity with anti-communism was the particular concern of a statement issued by the Peace Problems Committee of the Mennonite Church in 1964. The statement, titled "Anti-Communism on the Radio and in the Press," criticized the methods of Christian anti-communists.

[I]t is our belief that many of them use a manner of attack which is unchristian; that frequent charges are made against persons and institutions which cannot meet the test of simple truthfulness; and that to lend such movements our support would constitute involvement in the use of evil means for the opposing of evil.¹¹

Citing McCarthyism as an example, the committee observed that "[t]ime has proved that extremist views of the past have frequently been wrong." The rumors of communist influence in the Warren Commission, the equation of American capitalism with Christianity, and the derision of the American civil rights movement as communist inspired were all condemned, "the more so when they purport to be made in the name of Christianity. . . ." Christians were to "witness against" such actions, even at the risk of being labeled "subversives."

ON TRADE UNIONS

While Mennonite attitudes toward socialism and communism were progressive by the standards of the wider Christian community in Canada and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the same cannot be said of their position on trade unions.

Union membership was rejected in part because the threat of strike action was considered an exercise of force on the part of labor. Management use of force, through the control of labor conditions and terms of employment and the ability to terminate employees, rarely was critiqued in the same manner.¹² The Mennonite Church passed a resolution against union membership as early as 1937.¹³ Several Bible passages were cited in support. Verses such as Isaiah 9:6 and Matthew 26:61–63 declared that the highest authority for Christians was God—not the union oath of membership. Other verses, such as Matthew 5:38–45 and John 18:36, suggested that Christians should not press demands for justice or seek to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Scriptural references to nonresistance (Rom. 12:17–21, 2 Cor. 10:4, Eph. 4:31–32, Jas. 5:6) were used to argue that the coercive nature of strikes and the adversarialism of collective bargaining were incompatible with Christian values. North American Mennonites had

their greatest articulator of these views in Guy Hershberger, peace theologian and professor of history at Goshen College (Indiana). For Hershberger, there was "no difference in principle between so-called nonviolent coercion and actual violence."¹⁴ Killing someone as a soldier in wartime was morally equivalent to walking a picket line in peacetime.

The 1937 Mennonite Church resolution made reference as well to the most often cited Scripture passage used by Mennonites to defend their position against organized labor. Christians should not join unions because of the apostle Paul's admonition:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.¹⁵

The resolution concluded that church members could not join a union. In an effort to be balanced, church members who were also employers were informed that they "should by fairness and liberality seek to forestall labor dissatisfaction among their employees." Somewhat unrealistically, it was noted that the church itself should, "in anything that savors of class strife," maintain impartiality, "not favoring the unscriptural practices of either capital or labor."

In a similar vein, both the Brethren in Christ Church and the Mennonite Church approved a statement regarding industrial relations in 1941. Class conflict was condemned as a power struggle emanating from "an absence of the Christian principle of love."¹⁶ The statement declared that "Biblical nonresistance enjoins submission even to injustice rather than to engage in conflict," an echo of Guy Hershberger's advocacy of passive meekness. As a consequence, Christian employees could not be involved in unions because of the threat of force implied in "the monopolistic closed shop, the boycott, the picket line and the strike." At the same time, Christian employers were not to join manufacturers associations if they existed to counteract the labor movement through use of "the lockout, the blacklist, detective agencies, espionage, strike-breakers and munitions." Mennonite employees were to be assisted in negotiating their exemption from union membership through the creation of a Committee on Industrial Relations.¹⁷

Ten years later, a study conference of the Mennonite Church acknowledged that members were not adhering consistently to the 1941 statement.¹⁸

The rapid postwar rural to urban shift experienced by North American Mennonites was doubtless a key reason: increasingly Mennonites moved to urban centers, found jobs in cities, and had contact with the labor movement.¹⁹ The 1951 study conference accordingly warned that Mennonites needed to produce educational literature that would instruct them on the types of employment contracts that were compatible with their religious beliefs. It was reiterated that Christians could not be union members. The inconsistency with which the 1941 statement was being followed was “weakening the position of the church on the entire question of nonresistance and the recognition we seek to obtain for that position.”

Three years later, the Mennonite Church softened its position. The Committee on Economic and Social Relations (formerly the Committee on Industrial Relations) acknowledged in 1954 that unions “serve a useful purpose for the maintenance of justice and a balance of power in a sub-Christian society.” Mennonites were free to “cooperate with the union (as . . . with the state) in so far as doing so does not conflict with . . . Christian testimony.”²⁰

Other Mennonite groups followed suit. The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, opposed union membership in 1953.²¹ By 1967, the denomination left union membership to the individual as “a matter of conscience.” Employment in union shops was permitted if the equivalent of dues could be paid to charity and if Mennonite employees refrained from voting on certain union issues (presumably strike votes).²² Similarly, the Mennonite Brethren Church decided in 1969 not to forbid union membership. Mennonites were warned, however, that they should not engage in union-related violence or intimidation.²³ The prejudice against unions had not completely disappeared: the original motion had included the phrase “nor should we judge or condemn those who are members of unions.” This wording was removed when the motion was amended.

THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the end of the twentieth century, there were few, if any, Mennonite denominations that explicitly prohibited union membership.²⁴ The current confession of faith of the combined Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, adopted in 1995, makes no mention of union membership in the article that traditionally would have included it: Article 22, on Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance.²⁵ Nor does the 1991 Conservative Mennonite Statement of Theology.²⁶ The Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Conference has an Article on work, rest and the Lord’s day, which makes no mention of labor union membership, but does state:

As creatures made in the image of God, Christians imitate the Creator by working faithfully as they are able. They are to use their abilities and resources to glorify God and to serve others. Because they bear the name of Christ, all believers are called to work honestly and diligently and to treat others with respect and dignity.²⁷

Not all Mennonites had abandoned their concerns regarding organized labor. John H. Redekop, professor of political science, still viewed union membership as a threat to Anabaptist Christian understandings of nonviolence in 1989.²⁸ The *GAMEO* entry on labor unions, which he wrote, concludes:

Many [Mennonite] leaders and congregations have not known what advice to give striking teachers, nurses, physicians, factory workers, and, especially in Canada, postal workers and other government employees. The situation becomes even more difficult when Mennonites belonging to the same congregation find themselves involved on opposite sides during a crisis situation or when church members find themselves caught up in illegal strikes or lockouts. . . . On balance, Mennonites have had major difficulty successfully relating the peace position to their interaction with labor unions. In the years ahead ethical issues dealing with labor unions will be one of the most important practical testing grounds of Christians committed to the way of peace and reconciliation.²⁹

Redekop's concerns notwithstanding, it is to be hoped that, much as twentieth-century Mennonites eventually abandoned their theological obsession with communism, twenty-first-century Mennonites will redirect their interest in political theology from unionization to the many problems of global capitalism instead.

NOTES

1. General Conference Western District, "Mennonites and Russian Communism," 46th Session, 20–22 October 1937, McPherson KS, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns, 1900–1978*, ed. Urbane Peachey (Akron PA: Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Peace Section, 1980), 19–20.
2. Ibid.

3. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Nonresistance, Nonviolent Resistance, and Power," 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), 134.
4. *Ibid.*, 136.
5. "[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." J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 48–49.
6. J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church* (Elkhart IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989), 223. Other Mennonites besides Burkholder advocated this philosophy of compromise. *Concern*, a small group of American Mennonite graduate students, missionaries, and relief workers, met in Amsterdam in 1952 to discuss issues facing the Mennonite church in Europe. Like Burkholder, the members of *Concern* were shaped by their contacts with European war refugees. Over the next twenty years, the group held retreats and published pamphlets at irregular intervals on the relationship of faith, church, and society. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, s.v. "Concern Pamphlets Movement," by J. Lawrence Burkholder.
7. Mennonite Central Committee, "Report on Communism," International Mennonite Peace Conference, 9–11 June 1952, Heerewegen, Zeist, Netherlands, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 20.
8. For the Canadian experience, see Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
9. Though passed by different church conferences in different years, the two statements were identical. Mennonite Church, "Resolution on Communism and Anti-Communism," 32nd session, 23 August 1961, Johnstown PA; General Conference Mennonite Church, "A Christian Declaration on Communism and Anti-Communism," 36th Session, 8–14 August 1962, Bethlehem PA, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 19–21.

10. Ibid.
11. Mennonite Church Peace Problems Committee, "Anti-Communism on the Radio and in the Press," Spring 1964, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 21–22.
12. Roy Vogt, "Mennonite Studies in Economics," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983): 65; T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 158.
13. Mennonite Church, "Resolution on Unionism," 20th Session, 24–26 August 1937, Turner OR, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 105.
14. Guy F. Hershberger, "Nonresistance and Industrial Conflict," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 13, no. 2 (1939), 147. War, nonviolent social protest, union membership, and economic exploitation were all violations of the biblical ethics of love and peace. Lydia Harder, "Power and Authority in Mennonite Theological Development," in *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, ed. Calvin Redekop and Benjamin Redekop (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 84.
15. 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 (KJV). The New Revised Standard Version replaces the agrarian image "unequally yoked" with the less evocative "mismatched." This same passage was used by the Bishops of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in 1941 as the rationale for their opposition to union membership. Mennonite Church Lancaster Conference, "Labor Unions," Board of Bishops Special Meeting, 24 September 1941, Ephrata PA, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 107. An earlier meeting of the Bishops in 1933 also condemned union membership, but did not quote from 2 Corinthians. Mennonite Church Lancaster Conference, "Labor Unions," Board of Bishops, 18 October 1933, Lancaster PA, *ibid.*, 107.
16. Brethren in Christ Church, "Industrial Relations," 71st Session, 4–9 June 1941, Milford IN; Mennonite Church, "Industrial Relations," 22nd Session, 26 August 1941, Wellman IA, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 102–3, 105–6.
17. The Committee on Industrial Relations was known after 1951 as the Committee on Economic and Social Relations. In 1965, it was merged with the Peace Problems Committee to become the Committee on Peace and Social Concerns of the Mennonite Church. Mennonite Central Committee formed its own Peace and Social Concerns Committee in 1964. Mennonite Church, "The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite*

- Encyclopedia Online*, 1999; available from <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/W39.html>; Internet.
18. Mennonite Church, "Organized Labor," Study Conference, 24–27 June 1951, Laurelville Mennonite Camp, PA, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 106–107.
 19. Despite the Mennonite Church's concerns, North American Mennonites were not joining unions in significant numbers. By 1972, only five percent of North American Mennonites were unionized (whereas thirty-two percent of the Canadian population as a whole were union members in 1970). J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale PA: Herald, 1975), 146; Jelle Visser, "Union membership statistics in 24 countries," *Monthly Labor Review* (January 2006): 45, Table 3.
 20. John H. Redekop, "Labor Unions," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989; available from <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/L205ME.html>; Internet.
 21. Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, "Labor Unions," Special Delegate Conference, 27 September 1953, Galva KS, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 104.
 22. Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, "Labor Unions," General Conference, 4–8 August 1967, St. Anne MB, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 104. This statement also declared that membership in cooperatives would be left to "the discretion of each local Church staff."
 23. Mennonite Brethren Church, "The Christian and Labor Unions," 51st Session, 23–26 August 1969, Vancouver BC, in *Mennonite Statements on Peace and Social Concerns*, 104–105.
 24. The principle of local church autonomy among Mennonites, however, allows individual congregations (to some extent) to make their own decisions on matters of doctrine. Thus the Locust Grove Mennonite Church of Belleville, Pennsylvania, a member of the Conservative Mennonite Conference, states the following in their church constitution, adopted in 1993: "We believe that the way of love extends also to labor relations in our brotherhood to both employers and employees. We counsel employees to work diligently, to see that their jobs give opportunities to serve Christ, and to refrain from participation in violence which may be required of members in labor unions." Reference is made to Ephesians 6:5–9. This passage declares: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ,

- doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality." Locust Grove Mennonite Church, *Statement of Faith and Practice*, 1993; available from <http://locustgrovemc.org/documents/faith.htm>; Internet.
25. Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1995), Article 22; available from <http://www.mennolink.org/doc/cof/>; Internet.
 26. Conservative Mennonite Conference, *Statement of Theology*, 24 April 2004; available from <http://www.cmcrosedale.org/about/theology.shtml>; Internet.
 27. Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, *Confession of Faith*, 30 March 2004; available from http://www.mbconf.ca/home/products_and_services/resources/theology/confession_of_faith/detailed_version/#16; Internet.
 28. For a discussion of Redekop's anti-union stance at sessions on labor-management relations organized by Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, see my article "Committed to Christ or Conformed to this World? Postwar Mennonite Responses to Labour Activism," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 36, no. 2 (2007): 317–38.
 29. John H. Redekop, "Labor Unions," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989; available from <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/L205ME.html>; Internet.