

“It’s a hard thing to talk about”: ‘Fringe’ Mennonite Religious Beliefs and Experiences

Janis Thiessen, *University of Winnipeg*

Henry Peters is a retired meat packer from Winnipeg, an active church member, a regular volunteer, and a friendly conversationalist. In a life history interview with me, his response to my question about how he had experienced faith or God in his life took me aback. “Well,” he answered, “I always think I’ve been very fortunate. I’ve always had health, and endurance, and...” He paused. “I guess from my parents. But I had a...” Again, he hesitated. Then he continued quietly, “It’s a hard thing to talk about. When I was about 12 years old, I had an out-of-body experience.”¹ He found himself drowning in water and began to panic, he said. “That was the most marvelous thing that’s ever happened in my life. It’s a long story. I mean, does it help you, that story, or not?”

Peters was one of more than one hundred individuals with whom I conducted life history interviews as part of a project on North

American Mennonites' religious beliefs and labour histories.² These interviews were conducted over a two year period in three Canadian provinces (Manitoba, Ontario, British Columbia) and three American states (Ohio, Indiana, California) with people who self-identified as Mennonites. A significant minority of the interviewees, like Peters, expressed religious views or described religious experiences that were either unconventional or contradicted official church doctrine. Their stories raise important questions about the locus of authority in the Mennonite religious community.

Peters continued his story after I assured him that I was happy to listen to whatever he chose to share with me. He explained that in the midst of his panic in the water, "everything just opened up." He found himself floating in a tunnel, unable to open his eyes. He saw a blindingly bright light in this "tunnel of cleansing" that he likened to the Apostle Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. The light was warm and welcoming, Peters said, and he felt no guilt: "And it was like a spirit and I joined the spirit." The beauty of this experience was such that he was somewhat disappointed at the time that he had not drowned. He commented that he had had a second such experience, when his throat closed up due to an allergic reaction. Scared and unable to breathe, he "experienced weightless space" in a tunnel. Walking was "almost painful" afterward. These two experiences were, he said, both "marvelous" and indescribable.

Peters did not tell anyone about his first out-of-body experience until eight years after it had happened. "I could not talk about this, because if anybody would have told me a fib like that, I would write them off, and now it had happened to me." Nonetheless, the significance and power of his experience were such that he found it difficult "to keep it bottled in." Needing to tell someone and convinced that she would believe him, he shared his story with his sister when he was 20 years old. These out-of-body experiences, Peters said, have given him the assurance that if he died suddenly, he would join "this spirit of light." Peters said he thinks about these events daily. He credits them with encouraging him to "accept people for what they are" and to "not be too judgmental." He believes they "might be why" he volunteers so much.³

The manner in which Peters shared the story of his experience of faith is revealing. He began this portion of his life history interview by listing two common means by which people experience God: through daily occurrences (such as health) seen as "blessings" or "gifts" from God, and through the moral example of their parents. These were not the most important means for him,

however; it was his two near-death experiences that he believed most clearly revealed the nature of God to him.

Peters' story addresses a key challenge of religious belief for many: the tension between the individual and the group. How is the validity of religious beliefs and experiences determined? Who exerts religious authority? In the Mennonite tradition, authority is not claimed by a religious hierarchy (such as the papal structure of Catholicism) or by the individual, but by the religious community as embodied in the local church congregation. Peters knew that his experience was atypical. He hesitated twice before beginning the story of his near-drowning, and he asked my permission to tell it ("It's a long story... does it help you...?"). He refrained from telling anyone what had happened to him until he was twenty years old, almost a decade after the event had occurred. He acknowledged that, in the absence of such an experience, he would have dismissed anyone who had told him a similar story as a liar. These experiences, atypical though they were, were nonetheless central to Peters' religious understanding. They were "the most marvelous thing" that had ever happened to him. Their significance was more than emotional, however. They shaped his relationships with others, through his commitment to voluntary service and attitude of tolerant acceptance of diversity.

Peters bridged the gap between his awareness of his religious community's rejection of near-death experiences and the centrality of these experiences in his own life by invoking the biblical story of the Damascus road conversion. With the exception of Christ's resurrection, few stories in the Christian scriptures are more important than that of the conversion of Saul. According to the accounts in the book of Acts, Saul, a Pharisee who persecuted the early Christians, was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus when he saw a bright light, fell to the ground, and heard the voice of Christ.⁴ Struck blind for three days, Saul was healed by a Christian named Ananias, baptized, and renamed Paul. As a consequence of his conversion, Paul brought the Christian gospel to the Gentiles through his travels and through the writing of 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. Like Saul/Paul, Peters, too, was transformed by a vision of a blinding light. His invocation of one of Christianity's great heroes enabled Peters to stave off rejection of his experience and claim scriptural justification. And Peters' description of a repetition of his near-death experience on a second occasion under different circumstances further validated his experience. By thus emphasizing that it was not an isolated occurrence, Peters' experience could not be easily dismissed.

Peters was not the only individual to describe such visions to me. Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, director of the Centre for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University, said he also had had such experiences in his life. In 1977, delegates from the North American congregations of the General Conference Mennonite Church met at a triennial convention in Bluffton, Ohio. Debates among American Mennonites about refusal to pay war taxes were at their peak in this period. As a 28-year-old delegate, Ruth-Heffelbower determined that he would speak in favour of a motion that the church engage in "serious study of civil disobedience and war tax resistance."⁵ Most delegates present, he believed, planned to vote against the motion because war tax resistance was a felony in the United States. He did not know what he should say, as he had never spoken at such a convention before. What happened next, he said, was an "odd experience." When he got up to speak, "something strange happened." He said he watched himself standing at the microphone, and recalled seeing the hair on the back of his head and watching himself talk. As he continued to speak, he saw "a motion ... like a wave" in the audience, and realized that people's postures and facial expressions had changed as they uncrossed their arms and began to smile. The vote resulted in "a good, solid win for the motion" with approximately 87% voting in favour of endorsing war tax resistance by Mennonites. Ruth-Heffelbower said he then "came back" to himself and walked away. "I don't tell that story very often, because it's too weird, as you can imagine. But that was my first such experience; I've had others since."⁶

A second "odd experience" occurred when Ruth-Heffelbower's mother-in-law died suddenly. This death was the first of seven in his church congregation in a two-week span, some of them anticipated and some not. Six weeks after the death of his mother-in-law, his father died unexpectedly. In the midst of work pressures and social obligations, Ruth-Heffelbower found these circumstances overwhelming. He suffered an acute and debilitating attack of depression; it was "hard to keep things together," as he had "never had anything like that" before. He went to a Franciscan retreat centre to restore a sense of calmness. While there one day, he abruptly experienced something "like an electric current" running from his head through his feet. With that, he realized that his depression had disappeared: it was a spontaneous healing. "There were a number of times over the next few months where I could kind of see it trying to come back, but I would always say, 'No, no, go away,' and it went away. Quite remarkable. To say the least."

The third instance was one that Duane Ruth-Heffelbower – like Henry Peters – compared to the Apostle Paul’s epiphany. Feeling he was somehow “going the wrong direction,” Ruth-Heffelbower left his job at a law firm and entered seminary, where he prayed and wrote in his journal for two hours at a time. One day, he heard “an audible voice that said, ‘You should get involved with the Mennonite Central Committee developmental disability program.’ Well, I wrote in my journal, ‘Whoa! What?’” Though he had heard of the program, “it made no sense” as there were no job openings there, so he “didn’t know what that meant. But not the kind of experience that I had been accustomed to have.” Shortly thereafter, a friend informed him that MCC needed to hire someone for that very program due to the sudden departure of an employee. “I figured, if there *are* signs, this was one of them.”⁷

Peters’ and Ruth-Heffelbower’s stories may not be typical religious experiences, but such accounts occur with enough frequency that they should not be ignored. A Gallup poll conducted in 1980 found that one third of people who had been in danger of suddenly losing their lives had had a near-death experience, a number that equates to 5% of the total population.⁸ Mennonite Church Membership Profiles conducted in 1989 and 2006 included some questions that addressed the prevalence of such atypical or unorthodox religious experiences.⁹ While these questions were very limited (and did not include visions or near-death experiences), they suggest that, in the past two decades, the percentage of Mennonites who say that they have experienced unusual religious incidents or participated in unconventional religious practices has increased (see Table 1).¹⁰

Table 1 does not provide a complete picture. The 1989 survey was conducted in both Canada and the United States, while the 2006 survey was limited to the U.S. And in one instance, the survey question was rephrased: the 2006 survey asked whether respondents had “healed someone” while the 1989 survey asked if they had “experienced a ‘faith healing’.” A greater percentage of Mennonites thus claimed to have been themselves healed through faith than claimed that they had been capable of healing others.¹¹ In addition, the 1989 question on consulting horoscopes or signs of the zodiac was included in a section of the questionnaire titled “Experiences” that listed twenty activities, only five of which were endorsed by the church at the time. Volunteer work, visiting shut-ins, exercising, avoiding unhealthy food, and refusing to pay taxes destined for military expenditures were listed together with statements that described physical and sexual abuse, gambling, viewing X-rated movies, cheating on taxes, adultery, abortion, drug

use, and a variety of sexual practices and orientations that were prohibited by church authorities at the time (including pre-marital intercourse and “homosexual acts”). The question on faith healing, by contrast, was included in a section on the “gifts of the Holy Spirit.” This organization of questions in the survey and its omission of visions and similar experiences implicitly reveal how Mennonite church leaders at the time viewed these activities.

	1989	2006
cast out demons	1.5%	3.4%
spoke in tongues	6%	7.6%
prophesied	3.3%	5.8%
healed through faith	12%	5.6%
consulted a horoscope or signs of the zodiac before making a decision, at least once	4%	NA

Table 1. Percentage of Mennonites who have participated in unconventional religious practices.

Within the broader Christian tradition, it was only in the medieval period that spontaneous visions (as near-death and out-of-body experiences could be categorized) were condemned. Religious historian Barbara Newman explains that this censure came about as “cultivated” (as opposed to spontaneous) religious visions escaped the bounds of the clergy and the religious orders to find expression in the laity.¹² In response, the religious hierarchy began to question and critique claims of such religious experiences by the common people.

The position that finally triumphed was, not surprisingly, a version of the already ascendant supernaturalism that gave maximal authority to clerics charged with the discernment of spirits. By their standards the vast majority of reported visions would be judged inauthentic, while those that eventually passed muster as “private revelations” had to meet a daunting set of criteria designed to assure precisely that they had not been cultivated and did not stem from the visionary’s imagination.¹³

Eventually an uneasy equilibrium was established: religious leaders “retained their hold on theological learning, meditational techniques, and the discernment of spirits” while “charismatic experience” became the purview of the laity.¹⁴ The consequence was that in the early twenty-first century, “spontaneous waking visions are rare – though perhaps not so rare as we tend to think, given the powerful stigma now attached to them.”¹⁵

The medieval conflict that Newman discusses finds reflection in the twenty-first century analysis of American Mennonite religious belief conducted by Mennonite church pastor and sociologist Conrad Kanagy. Kanagy was commissioned by Mennonite Church USA to collect and analyze the data of the 2006 Mennonite Church Membership Profile. In his conclusion to the chapter that includes some of the statistics discussed in Table 1 above, Kanagy declares:

God's people have always struggled with the temptation to obey voices other than that of their Creator. ... Mennonites remain firmly committed to a belief in God. ... This belief, however, lacks an equivalent commitment to spiritual practices that nurture the hearing of God's voice.¹⁶

Kanagy's analysis here is possibly shaped by his position as a church leader whose job, in part, is the maintenance of traditional religious expressions and practices. For example, he narrowly equates "hearing God's voice" with reading of the Bible on a regular basis.¹⁷ Kanagy ignores the fact that many Mennonites actually are committed to spiritual practices that they believe "nurture the hearing of God's voice"; these practices, however, may comprise some that are outside the confines of both the institutional church and religious tradition, and as such are not addressed by the 2006 CMP survey. Such practices include – but are not limited to—near-death and out-of-body experiences. Kanagy condemns such extra-church influences as "a manifestation of postmodern American spirituality, a spirituality that is often undisciplined and individualistic – on my own terms and in my own time."¹⁸ "Undisciplined" here is a code word for "outside of the control of the church hierarchy" – which is ironic, as the original sixteenth-century Anabaptist-Mennonite movement itself was outside of such control.

Nor are religious leaders alone in their unwillingness to consider such "undisciplined and individualistic" spirituality as valid forms of religiosity. Until recently, academic study of the sociology of religion has privileged institutional expressions of faith. The historical reluctance of scholars of religion to investigate unorthodox or non-institutional religious practices is illustrated by sociologist N.J. Demerath's description of

an old "Mutt and Jeff" cartoon that portrayed Mutt on his hands and knees searching for a quarter in the dark of night under a corner street lamp. "Is this where you lost the quarter?" asked Jeff. "No," replied Mutt, "I lost it in the middle of the block, but the light's better here."¹⁹

Demerath concludes, "Too often we look for the sacred under a religious street lamp, when we should be searching amongst other experiences in the middle of the block." The narrow search Demerath describes is, in part, the consequence of sociologists' late-twentieth-century preoccupation with secularization theory. This theory, which posits that levels of religiosity are declining, pitted sociologists Bryan Wilson and David Martin against Rodney Stark, Frank Lechner, Jeffrey Hadden, and others.²⁰ Recently, the lines of debate have been redrawn by sociologists who argue that religious *authority* – not religiosity itself – is in decline, a process termed neo-secularization.²¹ With this turn in the debate, the neglect of unorthodox religious beliefs by scholars is slowly becoming a thing of the past.²² The interviews I conducted with North American Mennonites, some of which are shared here,²³ certainly suggest that this group, too, is grappling with questions of religious authority in light of individual experience.

This increase in academic attentiveness to nontraditional belief and practice has not come without its own problems. Some scholars have shared Kanagy's dismissive characterization of unorthodox religiosity as individualistic and undisciplined. Perhaps the best known such example is the discussion of "Sheilism" in Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart*.²⁴ In the mid-1980s, Sheila Larson (pseudonym) described her idiosyncratic religious beliefs as "Sheilism"; the term has been used as an example of late twentieth-century narcissistic religion ever since. Religion scholar Melissa Wilcox is one of those who has attempted to recast our understanding of Sheilism, arguing against Bellah's "fairly strict binary of individualism and communalism," which depicts such individualism as "a sort of religious dilettantism."²⁵ Sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow similarly avoid judgment of religious individualism.²⁶

Roof observes that this religious individualism – or what he refers to as "religious syncretism" – is not unique to the late twentieth century.²⁷ He makes use of French cultural theory to establish the continuity of religious community in the midst of modern individualism, and to argue for new approaches to the scholarly study of religion. Referencing both *bricolage*²⁸ and *pastiche*,²⁹ he notes "the individual speaks in many religious voices and finds something in all of them that gives expression to the multifaceted quality of our selves."³⁰ Individualism and community are thus not an oppositional "either-or" duality; the two instead achieve a "rich and nuanced blending."³¹ Religion is best considered "as a hodge-podge of beliefs and affirmations" which

“blend into some meaningful coherence for the individual believer.”³²

It is not only the historical reluctance of church leaders and scholars to hear these stories of unorthodox religious belief and experience that has kept them hidden for so long, however. Believers themselves are often hesitant to discuss what they know to be unconventional religious experiences. These believers adopt a position similar to that encountered by anthropologist Warren Anderson in his interviews with Mexican migrant workers regarding their experiences of work and migration. Anderson describes what he calls the problem of “narrative alignment”: “For individuals, conformity is the norm. Few individuals stand out, few appear to want to stand out, and the community applies sanctions to those who manage to stand out.”³³ For some within the community, “there is a reluctance to describe events or circumstances that are not widely agreed upon, which are not part of the common lore representing the conventional features of village life that will upset no one.”³⁴ A coping strategy in interviews, then, is what he terms “narrative reduction”: fear “render[s] the open telling of personal stories risky at best. The result can be a carefully dulled recounting of events and experiences on the part of some, a cautious narrative whose very furtiveness speaks volumes...”³⁵ In the case of migrant workers, such fear is the result of personal or social mistrust (a reluctance to confide in those with markedly different ethnic, class, and personal backgrounds) as well as institutional mistrust (stemming from past negative experiences with researchers and/or universities).³⁶ Similarly, some of the Mennonites I interviewed were reluctant to speak of unorthodox religious practices and individual religious experiences, knowing that these are rarely discussed in the Mennonite church community and are critiqued by both Mennonite church leaders and scholars.³⁷

A wide variety of religious phenomena, practices, and beliefs were described by North American Mennonites in their life history interviews with me, not all of them traditional or orthodox. Some expressed a belief in the importance of birth order or their Reiki practice in understanding themselves and connecting with God. Others described incidents of faith healing or discovery of the non-heterosexual identity of relatives as transformative experiences. Another group of interview participants did not mention unusual religious experiences or practices, but instead spoke of their problems with aspects of Mennonitism. These include those who discussed their religious doubts and their questioning of doctrine, and their frustrations with the limitations of their ethno-religious community. Also included are those who spoke of their attendance

at non-Mennonite churches or of their non-attendance at any church, of their belief in universalism, or of their agnosticism or atheism.³⁸

Everett Thomas, Goshen, Indiana, city councilor and editor of the Mennonite Church USA periodical *The Mennonite*, believes that birth order shapes people's lives.³⁹ Early in his time at seminary, he took a course on personality and religious development and learned that parents bond in special ways with the child who shares their same ordinal position. Thomas, like his wife, is a second born child. He attributes some of his struggles with Christology to birth order, noting that he has been somewhat "jealous of Jesus" and his status as a first-born. Thomas has discussed these beliefs with his wife and children – and with the national readership of *The Mennonite* in an Easter issue in 2008, which he says resulted in "only two [subscription] cancelations."

Wendy Chappel-Dick, a Mennonite folk singer in Ohio, teaches Reiki and says that she "experiences Christ" through this practice. She notes that while Reiki is a secular practice, "Christ came" to her through the process "and never left." She compares Reiki to the Biblical practice of "laying on of hands." Through Reiki, she says she is able to "tune in to the [Holy] Spirit in a concentrated way." She feels "love and energy" and an "intense nurturing." At times, she says, she is able to see stigmata on her clients and on herself. Through this practice, she feels a "connection to God's desire to hold and love humanity." While she describes the practice as "deeply meaningful for her," she notes that it is a "gift of a mystical type" which she is unable to discuss in her church. She knows of two other Mennonites who are master level Reiki practitioners: one practices in secret for fear of condemnation and the other refuses to practice professionally. She recalled that a recent Mennonite Church USA retreat for peacemakers included Reiki, which was questioned at the next church conference. For Chappel-Dick, Reiki is a form of communion, a mystical experience of Christianity. She has written papers about the connections between Reiki, faith, and Mennonitism. She finds Reiki a meaningful way to contribute as a Mennonite woman, and hopes to reconcile Mennonites with mysticism. Her dream job, she says, is to be a Mennonite Reiki evangelist, commissioned by the Mennonite church to do Reiki as "the work of God, a gift from God."⁴⁰

Elsie Isaak, a former university instructor in British Columbia, has had two "miraculous happenings" that could be characterized as faith healings. Her oldest daughter, at age nine, became seriously ill at Christmas. She suffered headaches and had numerous swellings, but doctors were unable to provide a

diagnosis. While this daughter was hospitalized and undergoing testing, some in Isaak's local community prayed for her. By 18 February, Isaak's husband's birthday, this daughter returned home in better health, but without a medical explanation of what had occurred. The second experience of healing happened to Isaak herself. Members of her book club said they would pray for her allergies. They began by praying for the allergy that was least severe: an allergy to fish. She later ate some fish and had no allergic reaction. At the next book club meeting, they prayed for her allergy to chicken. She ate some chicken and again had no reaction. Since then she has been able to eat chicken and fish freely. She then began to address her allergy to eggs, and began by touching, tasting, and smelling them. She was fearful of eating them, so rubbed an egg on her hand. When she had no reaction, her daughter used eggs to bake something that Isaak ate; while she had an asthmatic reaction, it was reduced from her typical response to egg consumption. She subsequently ate an egg in water, but as she reacted to that, she has concluded that she is "not totally healed."⁴¹

The experiences of Thomas, Chappel-Dick, and Isaak are – as the Church Membership Profiles and Gallup Poll data suggest – not unique, though they are atypical. The Mennonite faith community does not have a clearly articulated position against any of the practices or beliefs that these three individuals describe. Nonetheless, it is clear that Thomas and Chappel-Dick are aware that their beliefs are not generally accepted within their religious community. Isaak's experience of healing was the most accepted of the three, as more than one in ten North American Mennonites in the late twentieth century attested to similar experiences (see Table 1). Further, the involvement of the millennia-old spiritual discipline of prayer, together with Biblical precedents of faith healing, give a credence to her religious experiences that is missing from those described by the others.

While the Mennonite church in North America has had no official position on Reiki or faith healing, its position on homosexuality has been clearly stated since the mid-1980s.⁴² The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the most recent statement of faith of Mennonite Church U.S.A. and Mennonite Church Canada, addresses the issue in its Article 19: "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. ... According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship."⁴³ In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of individual Mennonite congregations were expelled from broader Mennonite church conferences for their acceptance of same-sex couples as church members.⁴⁴ Since then, a

handful have identified themselves as “welcoming congregations” – that is, congregations that accept lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queer, and questioning individuals as members.⁴⁵ Organizations promoting inclusion of non-heterosexual people in the Mennonite church do exist, but are not sanctioned by Mennonite church conferences.⁴⁶ Mennonites who do not embrace hetero-normativity are thus part of a minority (in both their religious community and broader North American society),⁴⁷ and their views are not accepted by Mennonite church leaders.

Two women that I interviewed who described how the non-heterosexual identities of their relatives shaped their religious beliefs thus were expressing controversial religious understandings. Their desire to remain anonymous is further testament to that fact. Iris explained that her son’s revelation ten years ago that he was gay required her to “work out how to make sense” of her religious beliefs.⁴⁸ She has “tossed out” her earlier thinking on Biblical interpretation. She now believes that the Bible is more about problems than about solutions, and no longer believes in an anthropomorphic God. Rather, God is “the love of family around the table.” God, she said, is greater than she is, and she has “no words to explain.” The “spirit of God” is to “live fully and love wastefully.” She is more interested in “what, rather than who, God is.” Her faith and spirituality, she said, “intersect with work and family.” Her individual experience thus caused her to re-evaluate and reconstruct the religious beliefs expressed by her faith community.

Jasmine has not found the same sense of resolution that Iris describes. Jasmine has a sister who was married to another woman by a Presbyterian minister of Mennonite background more than twenty years ago.⁴⁹ Jasmine says she refuses to see these women’s relationship as a sin and “won’t condemn” them. With respect to the theological issues of sexuality, she is willing to “wait for God to sort it out” and thinks that is a discussion best left “in heaven.” As for her fellow church members who assert that domestic violence is “not as wrong” as homosexuality, she “can’t agree.” She concludes “some issues in the church make it hard to stay Mennonite.” While Iris was able to redefine her theological understandings to adapt to new family circumstances, Jasmine is seemingly unable to relocate the authority to do so in herself rather than in the institutional church. For her, institutional religion is still a powerful mechanism of social control.

Like Iris and Jasmine, a number of interview participants expressed their personal doubts about aspects of their religious

tradition. Ontario lawyer Ted Giesbrecht said that his religious beliefs have become more “multifaceted, not so black and white, more amorphous.” While they are “not as well defined” as they had been, they are “stronger. Not as explainable, but more powerful.”⁵⁰ Karen expressed her “wish that every church could have short Confessions of Faith” to allow for variety of beliefs on non-foundational matters.⁵¹ She “lament[s] the narrow picture of God in Protestantism,” and is frustrated at times by her church’s use of non-gender-inclusive language to talk about God. Barbara has struggled with a desire for the firm faith of her grandmother, but realizes that their circumstances (and thus their faith language) are very different.⁵² Barbara said she asks herself, “What foundational pieces [of my religious tradition] can I agree with?” She has a stronger commitment to the Gospels than to Paul’s letters, and is “back in love with God; not so much Jesus.” California school principal John Rogalsky described himself as “more of a doubting Thomas now.”⁵³ While he “firmly believe[s] in the Holy Spirit’s guidance, [and] the authenticity of Jesus and his teachings,” he acknowledges that there are “various ways to interpret” these things. He thinks “many oral prayers make no sense.” His family does occasionally pray aloud, and he is “cautious not to be critical” because he does not want “to create doubt” in his grandchildren. California fruit grower Gordon Wiebe observed he is not as committed to pacifism as he had been, since pacifism means that “only non-Christians should die for freedom.”⁵⁴ Lucas commented that both he and his wife had “developed a healthy skepticism” with respect to authority in the church. He noted that there are “plenty of examples of leadership gone awry” or of leaders having “not considered the angles that need to be addressed.”⁵⁵ A few others voiced unconventional views of the nature of the divine. Ohio social work professor Laurel Neufeld Weaver has changed her perception of God as a person to God as a “non-gendered creator” who helps people “have the courage to fight injustice on earth, whether in our own relationships or in the community.”⁵⁶ Ohio health clinic worker Barbara Chappell commented that she once had an “epiphany”: “God doesn’t exist and she’s a woman.”⁵⁷

Such doubts about the nature of the divine, the power of prayer, pacifism, and church authority do not separate these Mennonites from their religious communities; many were active members of Mennonite churches. Those I interviewed who no longer attend a Mennonite (or any) church similarly continued to see themselves as part of the Mennonite religious community.⁵⁸ Mary has been attending an Anglican church, which has led her to value liturgy over emotion.⁵⁹ She declared nonetheless that she has “not let go of

[her Mennonite] heritage or even the peace stance.” She asserted that she is not unique, that “many Mennonites think this way, embrace different traditions.” It is harder for her than for her parents, she said, “to say ‘here’s how to do faith’.” She “see[s] many being faithful [to God]. Many live outside the Mennonite or Christian tradition and are faithful, too.” British Columbia doctor Marlyce Friesen noted that such a perspective is not unique to the younger generation. Friesen’s mother attended Sunday worship service, but refused to attend mid-week prayer meetings, declaring “enough is enough. What mattered is how you lived.”⁶⁰ Winnipeg employment counselor Kenton Eidse does not often attend church, explaining that “relationships are more important..., church community is not as important.”⁶¹ Sunday morning is a time to be with family, he observed, though he also commented that his limited church attendance is partly the result of a “value shift away from religious practices that were a staple of life before.” Barbara was not comfortable as a middle-aged single woman in churches that tended to be “very family-oriented. They didn’t know what to do with an older professional woman.”⁶² She stopped attending because she “didn’t want to nurture negativity.” Instead, she meets biweekly with a small group of people to have “intentional conversation” about religion. She sees this group as her church: “part of an identifiable community where the Word is preached and the sacraments are observed.” She noted that she is “not trying to be different and the odd person out.” She enjoys Sunday mornings “quietly at home,” where she “nurture[s her] soul over tea with the cat and look[s] out the window.” She also meets with other women to read the lectionary, and sometimes reads Celtic prayers alone. She seeks “what’s life-giving and go[es] there” since she “doesn’t need things that deaden the soul.”

These Mennonites’ views resonate with the arguments of Robert Wuthnow in his discussion of the contemporary Christian church: “Christianity has always championed community – its very theology encourages believers to be a people, concerned about the needs and welfare of one another. But the church, as it has evolved in the twentieth century, is in many ways ill-suited to provide community.”⁶³ In an urban context, members of any particular church congregation are scattered geographically. As a consequence, they spend little time together, which works against the creation of fellow-feeling. The structure of many Protestant church services, with their focus on the sermon, precludes much active participation by those assembled. “For many people, the odds against [community] happening at church are sufficiently high that they have given up entirely.”⁶⁴

Acceptance of non-Christian religious traditions, the embrace of universalism, and expressions of agnosticism were expressed by some of the North American Mennonites I interviewed. Indiana social worker James Yoder noted his appreciation of Buddhist writers, declaring that it is “important to believe in an inclusive and understanding and compassionate God.”⁶⁵ Everett Thomas explained the value of the Sufi discipline of the enneagram as a “way to find and develop a coping mechanism” for life.⁶⁶ Former Indiana small business owner Carl Yoder has been shaped by his reading of Christian philosophers George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, Richard Rohr, and Rudolph Steiner – sources he “would have ignored when younger” that now teach him that “truth is everywhere.”⁶⁷ British Columbia doctor Art Friesen said he is “closer to a universalist idea of God” than he was, though he does “not know if all roads lead to God.”⁶⁸ For him, the Bible is “not more important than Christ.” Ohio nurse Linda Houshower declared she does “not have the theological answer,” but has met very spiritual non-Christians and “can’t say they’re going to hell.” She is “not sure how to say they’re not loved by God and part of His kingdom.”⁶⁹ California Mennonite church pastor Steve Penner, in part as the result of a youthful experience with Muslims in Chad, believes that there is “room for theological space and God’s grace” on the question of non-Christian religions.⁷⁰ Ohio lawyer Mitchell Kingsley asserted that “Christian principles are expressed by non-Christians too, and by non-Christian movements” such as the nonviolent protests led by Gandhi.⁷¹ Nathan stated that he is “not a solid materialist,” but he “thinks there is no reason to believe in God.”⁷² He “believes in Jesus and his writings” but does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Mennonite Christianity, as has already been stated, is a non-hierarchical faith tradition. This is not to say that Mennonitism is without either religious authorities or boundaries. Who is permitted to (re)draw these boundaries is a question as laity, clergy, and scholars compete to define orthodox Mennonitism. Individuals who find themselves outside the bounds of this accepted and acceptable Mennonitism are encouraged to “rejoin the fold,” though usually not through the ban or shunning or excommunication (as is and has been practiced in conservative Mennonite communities such as the Holdemans). Rather, the boundaries are internalized to the extent that many practice self-censorship, refraining from speaking too publicly about their unorthodox religiosity. Such self-censorship can be more than the attempt to protect oneself from judgment, however. A reluctance to speak of such beliefs and experiences also results from recognition that these are “holy experiences.”

Awareness of their rarity may be accompanied by an unwillingness to “cast one’s pearls before the swine” – that is, to trust others with such deeply personal experiences.⁷³

The function of boundaries in the Mennonite community was illustrated by my conversation with Dennis Langhofer, dean of the School of Business at the Mennonite Brethren church-affiliated Fresno Pacific University. He recalled a Mennonite Brethren professor at Tabor College, Kansas, who drew a circle and told his class that, as a Mennonite Brethren, one was “either in or out” of the circle.⁷⁴ Langhofer’s own view some decades later is to “say here’s the centre” and strive to “pull people to the centre” instead of telling them that they are “out.” He said that his “lament about the Mennonite Brethren” is that “they’re not easily trusting. You must earn trust, and can lose it in a flash.” People who are not Mennonite Brethren are “not easily let in,” he commented, yet Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren are “easily accepted” by other Protestant denominations. This situation “disturbs [him] a lot but is the reality.”

Ohio farmer Joyce Schumacher described an example of such exclusionary practices by Mennonites. She had thought that singing in four-part harmony was an important part of Mennonite religious identity.⁷⁵ She later became frustrated by such singing, as she saw it as a way of alienating individuals who cannot sing or who come from a non-European cultural background. As a consequence, the treatment by many Mennonites of hymn number 606 as a “Mennonite anthem” has “destroyed the song for her.” Schumacher believes it is wrong to make pride in one’s singing ability a defining feature of Mennonitism. In light of her remarks, then, totems of Mennonite religious culture like 606 symbolize the struggle to define Mennonitism – in this case, a struggle that is drawn in part along ethnic lines. This hymn has united many North American Mennonites in a sense of community and common identity for more than forty years. The broadening of the cultural base beyond Swiss, Russians, and Germans to include Hispanics and Asians may have redefined this symbol of unity into one of division and exclusion.

Theologian J. Lawrence Burkholder spoke briefly of his own well-known struggles with boundary maintenance in the Mennonite community.⁷⁶ After completing his doctoral dissertation, which was critical of some cherished aspects of traditional Mennonite theology, he said he was “worked over” by the Mennonite church under the leadership of Guy Hershberger.⁷⁷ Many years later, Burkholder left his position at Harvard’s divinity school to become president at Goshen College, the Mennonite educational institution in Indiana. Though he “was well received by faculty and

administration in general,” he said his ideas were considered to be “too far out.” He found himself in “an awkward position, trying to appeal to those who suspected [him]” of unorthodoxy. A few days after our interview, the president of Goshen College and two representatives from the college’s development office were scheduled to visit Burkholder. He said he knew what they wanted, as he was 92 years old and would not have much longer to live.⁷⁸ They would want to know if he would be leaving any money to the college. He noted that he had lost income when he left Harvard for Goshen, and “in that sense” he felt he did “not owe them much.”

What can be concluded from these individual stories of varying types of religious unorthodoxy among North American Mennonites? In their study of the religious experiences of American Jews, Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard decry a “limited and moralistic conception of community and commitment” that posits “authentic” Jews against those who have adopted aspects of the surrounding non-Jewish culture. They argue that ethno-histories which focus on issues of settlement and integration too often ignore the fact that American Jews “are not encountering modern America; they *are* modern America...”⁷⁹ In the same vein, the Mennonites discussed here should not be viewed as “fringe elements” on the spectrum of faith but as within the circle of belief that is Mennonite Christianity in twentieth and twenty-first century North America. It is clear from these stories that, within the Mennonite faith, the tension between the individual and the community (whether expressed in bodily experiences or in intellectual commitments) has not been readily resolved. The heterogeneity of religious narratives, nontraditional religious experiences and beliefs, and the ongoing challenge to define the boundaries of religious identity are evidence of a strong individualist stream within the community of North American Mennonites.

Notes

- ¹ Henry Peters, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 16 March 2010.
- ² This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- ³ Henry Peters, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 16 March 2010.
- ⁴ Acts 9. See also Paul’s speech following his arrest in Jerusalem in Acts 22: 1-21 and his speech to King Agrippa in Acts 26:12-18.
- ⁵ General Conference Mennonite Church, “Legal and Legislative Exemptions from War Tax Withholding (GCMC, 1980),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1980, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/L432.html>.
- ⁶ Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, interview by author, Fresno CA, 1 May 2010.

- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Steven A. McLaughlin and H. Newton Malony, "Near-Death Experiences and Religion: A Further Investigation," *Journal of Religion and Health* 23 no. 2 (Summer 1984): 149.
- ⁹ See: Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale PA and Waterloo ON: Herald Press, 2007).
- ¹⁰ See: Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 72.
- ¹¹ Church Membership Profile of Mennonite Church USA, 2006 (hereafter CMP 2006), courtesy of Conrad Kanagy. The CMP 2006 surveys had a response rate of 76%.
- ¹² Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 80 no. 1 (January 2005): 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3. See also: Carol Zalesk, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Hubert Knoblauch, "Europe and Invisible Religion," *Social Compass* 50 (2003): 271.
- ¹⁶ Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey*, 107.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-109.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ¹⁹ N.J. Demerath, III, "The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 no. 1 (March 2000): 4.
- ²⁰ David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (London: Ashgate, 2005); Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1969); Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60 no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 249-273; Frank J. Lechner, "The Case against Secularization: A Rebuttal," *Social Forces* 69 no. 4 (June 1991): 1103-1119; Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Toward Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces* 65 no. 3 (March 1987): 587-611; Karel Dobbelaere, "Bryan Wilson's Contributions to the Study of Secularization," *Social Compass* 53 no. 2 (June 2006): 141-146.
- ²¹ See Mark Chaves, "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority," *Social Forces* 72 no. 3 (March 1994): 749-774; David Yamane, "Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 no. 1 (March 1997): 109-122; William H. Swatos, Jr., and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60 no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 209-228; Don Grant, Kathleen M. O'Neil, and Laura S. Stephens, "Neosecularization and Craft versus Professional Religious Authority in a Nonreligious Organization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 no. 3 (September 2003): 479-487.
- ²² See: Reginald W. Bibby, *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), 119.
- ²³ The interviews, together with archival research, are part of my forthcoming book, *Not Talking Union: Mennonite Responses to Labour in North America*.
- ²⁴ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

- ²⁵ Melissa M. Wilcox, "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," *Sociology of Religion* 63 no. 4 (Winter 2002): 498 footnote 1, 509.
- ²⁶ See: Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).
- ²⁷ Roof references feminist-fundamentalist women in California studied by Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) and Jewish working women in Manhattan studied by Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- ²⁸ See: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage (The Savage Mind)* (English translation 1966). Nancy Faraday, "Lévi-Strauss, Claude," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 404. The concept of *bricolage* was further refined by theorists Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.
- ²⁹ See: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
- ³⁰ Wade Clark Roof, "Religion and Narrative: The 1992 RRA Presidential Address," *Review of Religious Research* 34 no. 4 (June 1993): 308.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 301-302. See also: Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 256-258.
- ³² Wade Clark Roof, "Religion and Narrative," 303.
- ³³ Warren D. Anderson, "Oral History and Migrant Wage Labor: Sources of Narrative Distortion," *Oral History Review* 28 no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2001): 8.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-14.
- ³⁷ Bibby observes that the dismissal by both religion and science of such experiences has meant that those experiencing them "haven't talked a lot. Who needs the stigma? ... Unfortunately they haven't realized that most of the people they work with, sit beside, and pass in shopping malls have had similar experiences." Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 119.
- ³⁸ See: Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185; N.J. Demerath III, "A Sinner among the Saints: Confessions of a Sociologist of Culture and Religion," *Sociological Forum* 17 no. 1 (March 2002): 16.
- ³⁹ Everett Thomas, interview by author, Goshen IN, 12 November 2009.
- ⁴⁰ Wendy Chappell-Dick, interview by author, Bluffton OH, 3 November 2009.
- ⁴¹ Elsie Isaak, interview by author, Surrey BC, 11 December 2009.
- ⁴² See: Willard S. Kraybill, "Sexuality," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S493ME.html>; Loren L. Johns, "Resolutions on Human Sexuality Compared," 1989, <http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/Resolutions.htm>.
- ⁴³ Mennonite Church U.S.A. and Mennonite Church Canada, "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective - Article 19," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1995, http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C6652_1995.html/C6652_1995_19.html.

- ⁴⁴ See: Loren L. Johns, "The Mennonite Church," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Homosexuality*, ed. Jeffrey S. Siker (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 149–155.
- ⁴⁵ These congregations include Calgary Inter-Mennonite Church, First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, and Chicago Community Mennonite Church. Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests, "Supportive Communities Network – SCN," 20 July 2011, <http://www.bmclgbt.org/scn.shtml>.
- ⁴⁶ Such organizations include Harmony, a grassroots group created by members of Mennonite Church Canada (<http://mennoharmony.org>), and the Pink Menno Campaign, a group that emerged from a demonstration at the Mennonite Church U.S.A. convention in Columbus, Ohio in 2009 (<http://www.pinkmenno.org>).
- ⁴⁷ Harmony and Pink Menno, some might argue, do not go far enough. Tolerance, as English and American Studies professor Michael Warner notes, does not challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality in today's world. "Even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world." Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991): 8.
- ⁴⁸ "Iris," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁴⁹ "Jasmine," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁵⁰ Ted Giesbrecht, interview by author, Kitchener ON, 8 October 2009.
- ⁵¹ "Karen," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁵² "Barbara," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁵³ John Rogalsky, interview by author, Reedley CA, 30 April 2010.
- ⁵⁴ Gordon Wiebe, interview by author, Reedley CA, 28 April 2010.
- ⁵⁵ "Lucas," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁵⁶ Laurel Neufeld Weaver, interview by author, Bluffton OH, 23 October 2009.
- ⁵⁷ Barbara Chappell, interview by author, Bluffton OH, 27 October 2009.
- ⁵⁸ Reginald Bibby cites research which reveals that, since the early 1980s, four times as many Canadians described themselves as Mennonites to census takers as were actual members of Mennonite churches. Bibby, *Unknown Gods*, 155. See also: Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey*, 120, 147.
- ⁵⁹ "Mary," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁶⁰ Marlyce Friesen, interview by author, Abbotsford BC, 5 December 2009.
- ⁶¹ Kenton Eidse, interview by author, Winnipeg MB, 13 March 2010.
- ⁶² "Barbara," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁶³ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 214.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ James Yoder, interview by author, Goshen IN, 16 November 2009.
- ⁶⁶ Everett Thomas, interview by author, Goshen IN, 12 November 2009. The enneagram is "a nine-pointed figure inscribed in a circle" used to describe

- personality types. International Enneagram Association, "Enneagram," <http://www.internationalenneagram.org/enneagram/index.html>.
- ⁶⁷ Carl Yoder, interview by author, Goshen IN, 18 November 2009.
- ⁶⁸ Art Friesen, interview by author, Abbotsford BC, 5 December 2009.
- ⁶⁹ Linda Houshower, interview by author, Bluffton OH, 5 November 2009.
- ⁷⁰ Steve Penner, interview by author, Reedley CA, 26 April 2010.
- ⁷¹ Mitchell Kingsley, interview by author, Bluffton OH, 26 October 2009.
- ⁷² "Nathan," pseudonym for anonymous interview participant, interview by author.
- ⁷³ For this insight, I am grateful to my friends and former colleagues Terry Dirks and Bob Hummelt.
- ⁷⁴ Dennis Langhofer, interview by author, Fresno CA, 4 May 2010.
- ⁷⁵ Joyce Schumacher, interview by author, Pandora OH, 6 November 2009.
- ⁷⁶ See, for example, Perry Bush's review of Theron Schlabach, *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethics* (Scottsdale PA and Waterloo ON: Herald Press, 2009) in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 29 (2011): 278-280, as well as Everett J. Thomas, "Burkholder's dissertation 'all but banned'," *The Mennonite*, 9 March 2010, http://www.themennonite.org/issues/13-3/articles/Burkholders_dissertation_all_but_banned.
- ⁷⁷ J. Lawrence Burkholder, former Harvard University divinity professor and former president of Goshen College, interview by author, Goshen IN, 13 November 2009.
- ⁷⁸ I am thankful to have had the opportunity to meet Burkholder for tea and conversation (and a recorded interview) before his death on 24 June 2010.
- ⁷⁹ Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1992), 5. Italics mine.