

ECUMENICAL MISSIOLOGY IN ANABAPTIST PERSPECTIVE

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It is a great joy to be here with so many friends, and I thank you for the invitation. It is a great blessing to be among Mennonites, for Mennonites – though little known in my own country of Scotland, where the Protestant Reformation took an early short cut – have been a major influence in my life. And it is a special pleasure to be asked to take part in honoring the person who has been the most considerable source of that influence from Mennonite thought and practice. Wilbert Shenk has been a wonderful gift to the whole church; to me he has become both a dear friend and a profoundly influential colleague.

Sir Walter Scott had a strange little friend called Marjorie Fleming, a precocious child who died before reaching adulthood. “Pet Marjorie’s” solemn writings are a delight, not least because of their mangled words and eccentric spellings. Here is one of her theological utterances: “An annibabtist is a thing I am not a member of.” The conference organizers were aware that it is also a thing that I am not a member of, yet they invited me to speak on ecumenical missiology in Anabaptist perspective. I joyfully respond. As one who has often been stirred by Anabaptist witness, and has become hugely indebted to Anabaptist missions, I rejoice in any opportunity to acknowledge that debt; and I owe it above all to the scholar whom we honor tonight.

In the brief time allotted, it seems best to begin by addressing the present ecumenical situation in mission, the context into which all Christians are called into God’s mission; and then to proceed to some areas in which Anabaptist missiology may have a contribution of ecumenical significance. I want to argue that some important features of the new situation in the world (and my diagnosis of this will not be particularly novel or profound), are areas where Anabaptist history and experience have things to say to all Christians. Some of those things will not readily come from other sources.

Shaped by the End of Christendom

The present Christian situation is deeply marked by three critical developments of the 20th century. The first of these is the end of Christendom. Christendom is only one of many modes in which Christian faith has been expressed over the centuries; but in Europe it was the characteristic form of Christian expression, and thus the determinative one for the missionary movement as we know it. Christendom has shaped all Western Christians. Even

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those who reject the concept of Christendom and its state-related churches are shaped by that rejection of a norm, by their conscious nonconformity.

At this point I hope I may be permitted to depart from traditional Anabaptist discourse, since I believe it is time that we stopped blaming Constantine for Constantinianism. The Roman Empire is not the place to seek the birth of Christendom. That empire had too much built in pluralism, too many discordant interest groups to allow such an event. The cement that held Christendom in place so long had a cohesive strength beyond anything that a Constantine, a Theodosius, a Justinian could derive from state power or political engineering. To understand it we must go to the period of the conversion of the northern and western peoples of Europe, whom the Romans called barbarians, and from whom the majority of us are descended.

Let us consider an event fairly late in the story of the emergence of Christendom, that took place in Iceland, on the very fringes of Europe, around 1000 AD. Iceland was a land without king or central government. Imagine that we are attending a meeting of the Althing, an assembly of the heads of families. The atmosphere is tense, with much weaponry in evidence. The subject before the assembly is whether or not Christianity should be adopted as the code of life for the island. There is no sign of agreement: there are voices in favor of Christianity, voices in favor of maintaining the old ways. One of the Christian leaders has therefore proposed going to arbitration, putting the decision into the hands of one of the most respected elders of the community, and that elder is now sitting in the dark, his head covered by a cloak. Hour after hour the assembly waits for his decision. Day passes, and night into day again. At length the elder rises, puts aside his cloak and announces his decision:

The first principle of our laws is that all men in this land shall be Christians and believe in the one God – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – and renounce the worship of idols. They shall not expose children at birth, nor eat horseflesh.

The saga whose account has been followed here then says of the elder:

He then dealt with the observance of the Lord's Day and fast days, Christmas and Easter, and all the important festivals.¹

There is disappointment and grumbling in the assembly among adherents of the old ways, but they accept the decision. Iceland, on the outermost fringe of Europe, has done what most of Western Europe has already done – it has entered Christendom.

The saga's account tells us something about Christendom. Christianity is seen here in terms of customary law. And in conversion stories all over Europe, the adoption of Christian faith is presented in terms of customary law, spiritual resources for the community, and the general well-being of society.

¹The source here is the saga of Njal. I have quoted from the translation of Magnus Magnusson and Herman Palsson, *Njal's Saga* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1960, 225f

In this case, the primacy of customary law is evident. The arbitrator explicitly declares that Christianity is to be the first principle of the community's laws. After the a somewhat perfunctory reference to Christian belief (one God rather than several is the central assertion) he turns to the immediate modification of law and custom which will occur in two important areas - taboos and festivals. The adoption of Christianity introduces two new taboos. One is about food; the other forbids the exposure of female children, a traditional mechanism for controlling population growth in a harsh environment where extra mouths imposed burdens. Adopting the Christian faith, that is, has its primary focus in public and communal activities rather than private and personal ones. This does not mean that the shift is superficial; these things lie at the heart of society; the change of code makes Christian allegiance the "first principle" of law. Taboos are serious matters, involving spiritual sanctions, the possibility of inviting divine displeasure; and implicit in a taboo on population control was an act of faith that God, who had forbidden child exposure, would provide for any extra mouths that came along as a result. Christendom is Christianity as custom; and it arose from primal societies adopting Christianity as the basis of customary law. Such law is binding on everyone; many of us will have met, in societies where it operates today, the pregnant phrase "It is our custom...". You will have noticed that it never occurred to anyone at the assembly in Iceland to adopt the procedure that we would expect to follow today, namely that the Christians would follow Christian customs, and that the others would adhere to the old ways. That was a recipe for civil war. A single people must live by a single code.

Christendom began in the experience of Christianity as custom. With the spread of the faith among the peoples of Europe and the development of their political systems, it grew quite naturally into the experience of Christianity as territory – the area subject to Christian custom and the law of Christ. At its fullest extent Christendom meant contiguous Christian territory from the Atlantic to the Carpathians, or for those able to think on a wider scale of language and culture, to the Urals. Much occurred over the centuries to modify the concept; more and more exceptions were made to its basic premise; but the premise remained, through all the challenges of the Protestant Reformation, the Wars of Religion, the Enlightenment, and the emergence of liberal society.

It is neither possible nor necessary to indicate here how the Christendom premise and experience has shaped the organization, polity, practice and preaching of the Western churches, (and often, adventitiously, of non-Western churches too). It has also shaped the very way that western Christians have done their theology; their Christian experience having been shaped by law and custom, they have turned naturally to legal models. The effect of Christendom on Christian experience has been less noticed. Christendom forces on experience the gap between profession and realization, between the established norms of a society and its actual procedures. It builds in failure as the main fruit of experience, guilt and judgment as its central problem issues.. The radical movements within Western

Christendom - monastic, Anabaptist, Puritan, Pietist, Evangelical - all stem from this institutionalized sense of failure within Christendom.. In different ways they make a distinction between “real” and nominal, or formal, or official Christianity; between what Christendom ought to be, and what it is.

The relationship between the Christendom experience and the emergence of the Western missionary movement is more complex. For many in the years when Europe was breaking out of its long isolation and coming into contact with a whole new world, the way to propagate an essentially territorial faith was to expand Christian territory, to increase the area subject to the law of Christ. The already established institution of crusade fitted perfectly into this system of thought, and was readily extended to the lands that newly came into European cognizance in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The Spanish conquest of the Americas is the last of the Crusades, and it is no accident that it begins so soon after the crusading success in ending Muslim rule in Spain. Some medieval pioneers foreshadowed a different way of spreading the Christian faith; but the true emergence of the Western missionary movement took place as it became clear that there was little prospect of successful crusades in Asia and Africa. The missionary mode of spreading the Gospel contrasts sharply with the crusading mode. Instead of extending by force the area to be nominally subject to the law of Christ, it sought to commend and persuade without the power to compel. Typically it also involved learning a language, finding a niche in another society, living – to some extent at any rate – on that society’s terms. These were activities that took Western Christians beyond the assumptions and experiences of Christendom.

The missionary movement, often in spite of its own efforts, pointed towards an expression of Christianity different from that of Christendom. And the colonialism that developed out of European expansion began, I have argued elsewhere, the secularization of Europe and the dissolution of Christendom. The process of dissolution was slow, but in the later 20th century it accelerated rapidly, revealing a dechristianized Europe.

Until the 20th century the Christendom experience meant that Christianity was the defining characteristic of European civilization, even for those who rejected it. The year 2005 saw a profoundly significant event. The European Union, with infinite travail, produced a draft constitution that was meant to convey the essence of European existence. The document deliberately excluded any reference to Christianity, even as a historical influence. Christendom is dead; only its ghosts are now in evidence. Faith in democracy, and in elections as a cure for human misery, may be a secularized survival of the Christendom ideal. It is a ghost of especially American provenance. The United States, always a semi-detached part of Christendom, applied to getting the right form of government the energy that Europe put into getting the right form of church..

The first statement, therefore, about the present ecumenical situation must concern the demise of the way of experiencing and expressing Christianity that had prevailed among Western Christians since the conversion of the West. The new situation needs a new way

of being Christian, that can confidently flourish in a plural setting - something Christendom by its nature excluded.

A Cultural and Demographic Transformation of the Church

The second great transformative 20th-century development is the change in the cultural and demographic composition of the church.. In this respect Christianity changed more in the 20th century than in any previous century, except the first. We are all aware that the majority of Christians are now Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, or people from the Pacific region. After the long centuries of Christendom, we have hardly yet begun to work out the implications of Africans and Asians being the representative Christians of the 21st-century. We must expect Christianity to become, increasingly and inexorably, a non-Western religion, and for this to be displayed in its theology, in its worship, in its preoccupations, in the issues that it addresses. Leadership in the church will increasingly reflect the demographic dominance of Africa and Asia within the Christian community. This must include theological and intellectual leadership; Western intellectual leadership of a predominantly non-Western church is an incongruity. We must decrease and they must increase. Western Christians will need to become accustomed to being assigned roles rather than assuming them. Them, and learn to be active, helpful assistants in the work of the kingdom where once they were overseers. Meanwhile, it seems likely that the financial resources of the church will disproportionately concentrated in a declining sector of its membership. The money question will be one of the acid tests for 21st century Christianity

Reverse Migration

The third transformative development in the 20th century was the end of one great period of migration and the inauguration of another in the opposite direction. For about four and one half centuries, from the middle of the 15th to the 20th century, world history was determined by European migrations. Millions of people left Europe for lands beyond Europe. They settled huge territories, usually pushing the indigenous populations to the margins. They created huge nation states by their migrations, not least those of the Americas. They moved populations around the globe, taking people from India and China to Fiji or Guyana. They broke off a huge piece of Africa and put it down in the Americas. They altered the world patterns of trade. They set up huge maritime empires, parceling out Africa and the Pacific between the Western powers. They afterwards took control of the Middle East, invented Iraq, and put together a time bomb in Palestine. And then in the years following World War II, with only two superpowers left, the migration wound down, the empires were dismantled, and Vasco da Gama sailed home.

The religious effects of the great migrations had been mixed. We have already mentioned the fastest recession from Christian faith in Christian history, centered among the peoples of Europe or of European descent. We have also noticed the vast accession to the

faith elsewhere, in Latin America and tropical Africa and some parts of Asia. But there were other religious products of European migration. Modern Hinduism is a product of the British Raj. Pakistan and the idea of separate Muslim states equally so. Colonial rule did more for Islam in Africa and Indonesia than did all the Jihads. The great European migration caused most Islamic governments to be reshaped or replaced. At the beginning of the 19th century the greatest Islamic ruler was the Sultan of Turkey; at the end of that century it was Queen Victoria. By the early 20th century almost the only independent Islamic ruler was the Emir of Afghanistan. In this way the great European migration caused Islam to grow both in numbers and in resentment.

But in the mid-20th century the migration went into reverse. Huge numbers now began to come to the West from beyond the West and make their homes there. All indications are that this reversed migration will continue and increase. It may well determine the course of world history as much as the European migration did, especially in view of the likely emergence of China and India as superpowers. Western nations may not want migrants, but their economies cannot survive without them.

This migration is transforming the church in the West, and the ecumenical Christian situation. In Europe the diaspora communities from Africa and Asia, and in Spain from Latin America, have introduced a whole new dimension to church life. In the United States, the principal target of the migration, there are now Christians from every country under heaven. They who have the potential to transform American church life. The public legislation with the greatest capacity to impact religion in America does not relate to the issues that go to the Supreme Court. It is the immigration act of 1964.

New Missiological Agenda - Community, Principalities, Suffering, Radical Conversion

The three transformative 20th-century developments that we have noted have between them brought about a post-Western Christianity and a post-Christian West. For Christians, this requires ways of thinking and acting that were not part of traditional missiology, nor specially characteristic of Christendom. One of these requirements is a consciousness of Christian community that can cross ethnic and cultural boundaries at local level, while at the same time maintaining a sense of mutual belonging among Christian peoples across the world. The Christendom concept was a powerful one, catching the imagination; but the old Christendom is dead. There is a danger, however, that a new version that assumes an American original for Christianity, may replace it. The new situation requires Western Christians to find a joyful place in a predominantly non-Western church.

The second need is for a new sense of the biblical theme of principalities and powers. There are two senses in which these have been interpreted - malign spiritual forces or political forces, Caiaphas/Pilate figures. Either way, Paul tells us that they are world rulers despoiled by the blood of Christ's cross and the triumph of his resurrection. Africa, Asia, and Latin America bring both these aspects of the principalities and powers and their

spiritual manifestations on to the theological agenda. Western theology has since the Enlightenment been reluctant to grapple too closely with Paul's meaning. The problem with Western theology is that it is not big enough for the world outside the West; it belongs to a small-scale, pared down, universe. Most Africans, and indeed most human beings, live in a mental universe that is larger and more populated. In addition, an active missiology needs to be alert to the danger of being co-opted by Pilate and Caiaphas.

A third need, arising from the fact that Pilate and Caiaphas, both fairly run of the mill politicians, are representative world rulers, is an awakened recognition of the possibility of suffering as a test of Christian authenticity. A few minutes' thought may suggest which parts of the world has God been preparing through suffering for leadership of the church?

The fourth need is the recovery of the radical nature of conversion. Christendom inevitably baptized unrepentant elements of society. The new mode of Christian living must seek to turn all aspects of the Christian community to Christ, opening it up to him. Conversion is necessarily a turning to Christ of what is already there, not of substituting something that is not. Conversion thus retains identity, indeed it goes to the root of identity. That leaves abundant room within the Christian community for difference. In the new post-Western Christianity, globally polycentric yet locally multicultural, different segments of social reality will be living side-by-side within the same society. They must recognize their mutual belonging. The ecumenical tests of the 21st-century will have little to do with denominations. They concern whether African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and Western and Eastern European and every sort of American Christianity can share in the body of Christ, realizing that body, enabling it to function until we all come together to the full stature of Christ.

Traditional missiology has few resources for these things because it has hitherto had little relevant experience. Anabaptists through their special history and peculiar relationship to Christendom, have a good deal of relevant experience. Anabaptist missiology can draw from a rich understanding of community, consciousness of worldwide dispersion, recognition of the principalities and powers and of the relation of suffering to discipleship; radical views of conversion and converted life.

I cannot conclude without some of reference to the way these and other virtues of Anabaptist missiology have been demonstrated in the one we honor tonight, though it must be for others to do so in detail. When I first met Wilbert Shenk, he was a mission administrator, wrestling with the realization that the new situation must radically alter mission agencies and how they operate. He has delved deeply into the history of the church, its whole history, not just the Anabaptist sector of it. He sympathetically entered the establishment Anglican mind of that great missionary administrator of the 19th century, Henry Venn, and patiently gathered Venn's writings for the benefit of later generations. He has been an architect of ground-breaking projects in the history and the theology of mission. He has directed important studies of the American dimension of the missionary movement,

acting as kindly Socratic midwife for the work of others. Like a true Anabaptist he has exercised discrimination about fashionable trends. His early critiques of the church growth movement were trenchant but constructive. His warnings about instrumental views of culture, about treating culture as an evangelistic tool, were much needed. Anabaptists are aware of culture issues, and no one has done more than Wilbert Shenk to bring gospel and culture, not least gospel and Western culture, together. His early practical work in the field of African independent churches and his recognition of their place within the church catholic was significant far beyond Mennonite circles.. In all these things and many more, he has been the supreme networker, the encourager, getting the best out of other people, keeping the team together, always leading them to the realization of the larger aim. I record my immeasurable debt to him and to Juanita too, for the privilege of friendship and collegueship over these many years. These are people of the Kingdom of God. This is a wise master builder who has brought the Anabaptist perspective to ecumenical missiology. Wilbert - 'Almost thou persuadest me to be - a Mennonite!'