The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology

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This essay on the nature and possibility of a Mennonite theology in the modern world is written from the strong conviction that some of the fundamental Enlightenment assumptions about history (historicism)\(^1\) and human freedom (that man is on his own)\(^2\)—presuppositions which have long been accepted without question and have largely shaped modern theology—need to be critically re-examined and a more traditional-classical view of God, man, history, and human accountability given another hearing. This conviction arises not out of a romantic nostalgia for some golden age of the past, nor out of the hope that a classical worldview can be transported into the modern world in its full pristine purity. It is not rooted in a reactionary rejection of the important emancipatory insights of the Enlightenment tradition nor a simplistic denial of man’s historical nature. It grows out of a strong belief that the atrocities of the modern age (including the imminent threat of nuclear self-annihilation) are, ironically, in some sense intrinsically linked to the Enlightenment and the triumph of technical reason, and call for a more radical critique than what Enlightenment assumptions can offer. It may yet be

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\(^1\) Historicism is the modern view that man is captive to and essentially defined by his history. It rejects the belief that man has access to some form of eternal unchanging truth either in more traditional orthodox perceptions of God’s authoritative revelation of himself or in Greek-Platonic notions of eternal forms, or in later concepts of the eternal laws of nature. In the words of Canadian philosopher George Grant, “Historicism was the belief that the values of any culture were relative to the absolute presuppositions of that culture which were themselves historically determined, and that therefore men could not in their reasoning transcend their own epoch.” “The University Curriculum,” Technology and Empire (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), p. 123. The problem thus becomes in the post-Enlightenment west the problem of epistemology. How is it possible to know? If man’s knowledge is radically historical how can one speak of truth and knowledge at all, how can one speak of universal norms by which the relativities of human history can be judged? In his important book Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), Gordon Kaufman attempts to show how it is possible to speak about faith, truth, knowledge, and normativity while espousing the thoroughgoing historicity of man. In his thought-provoking book Time as History (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), Grant also examines “what it means to conceive the world as an historical process, to conceive time as history and man as an historical being.” (p. 7) Unlike Kaufman, however, Grant rightly, I think, sees modern historicism as an inadequate understanding of truth and goodness.

\(^2\) Modern man assumes that he is essentially and radically free. George Grant claims that (1) the reality of technology more than anything also defines the modern age and that (2) this technological spirit is fundamentally rooted in the almost unanimously accepted liberal...
the case, paradoxically, despite modern man’s almost total incapacity to believe in a radically transcendent God whose essence cannot be defined historically, that the classical biblical and patristic-creedal trinitarian view of God can provide a more adequate understanding of reality and human ethical accountability than the modern historicist perception.

What is called for is not a simple rejection of modernity—that would be to misunderstand how profoundly we have all been shaped historically, philosophically, theologically, and linguistically by the presuppositions of the modern age—but rather a critique of the Enlightenment from within the Enlightenment.³ Somehow traditional theological doctrines and creedal formulations concerning God and his creation must be recovered and reaffirmed by taking them through the prism of the Enlightenment without simply accommodating them to the modern age and thus divesting them of their critical power over us. Rather than deliberately setting out to “construct” a new concept of God on the basis of modern historicism, it seems that we ought to recover the profundity of the classical trinitarian view and put fresh

assumption that “man’s essence is his freedom.” At the heart of modern western man’s view of himself and the world is an historicism which assumes that man is on his own and has an unlimited capacity, potential, and freedom to shape and control nature, history, and himself. See “The Univeristy Curriculum,” esp. p. 114/3n. As may become evident in the following pages, my own views owe a great deal to the thought of George Grant. The problem with this second assumption—man’s radical freedom—is the problem of “limit.” Is there not in fact some external sphere beyond or external to nature (human and non-human) which puts absolute limits on human activity and experimentation and holds man accountable for his actions? Interestingly, recent “revolts of nature” against human arrogance in dominating the environment suggest by way of analogy that mankind is in fact not as free as the Enlightenment envisioned—that man is seriously limited in what he may or may not do.

³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, founding members of the famous Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, have precisely this kind of ambiguous relation to the Enlightenment and modern liberalism. On the one hand, they are deeply committed to the fundamental assumptions and aims of the Enlightenment tradition, particularly in their use of critical reason to examine and unmask contradictions in Western society and work toward a more just and humane social order. On the other hand, they are profoundly aware of the most inevitable tendency of the Enlightenment to destroy itself by converting into “positivism”—the reduction of all metaphysics into objectivity, transcendence into immanence, spirit into matter and subjectivity into objectivity. See Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. xiii. In his recent book Theology and Political Society (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), Canadian theologian Charles Davis, while keenly aware of the ambiguities of the enlightenment tradition, and particularly critical of its modern children, positivism and scientism, believes that Christian theology must carry on the Enlightenment program of human emancipation, preserving all the while a strong sense of religious tradition, mystery, and transcendence. It is the religious dimension in politics, he believes, which prevents it from deteriorating into positivism and administration. Although I find myself in agreement with much of what Davis says in this book, in the end he is too ready to evaluate spirituality primarily in terms of its political and social efficacy.
meaning into it in the context of our age.4

These are the basic concerns that lie at the heart of my reflections in the following pages. My interest here is primarily systematic, not historical—that is, I am not first and foremost concerned with a “right” interpretation of sixteenth century Anabaptism, nor with “the recovery of the Anabaptist vision,” nor, for that matter, with a defense of an Anabaptist-Mennonite theology over against that of other theological traditions. I am also not interested here in determining how accurately our Reformation ancestors interpreted or embodied the essence of the gospel. Neither, on the other hand, am I interested in debunking the ethnic and theological tradition of which by fate and by choice I am a part. I want, rather, first to engage in a conversation with four recent and contemporary Mennonite theologians—Harold S. Bender, Robert Friedmann, John H. Yoder, and Gordon D. Kaufman—about the nature of Mennonite theology in the modern context; and, second to suggest a few possibilities for a Mennonite theology which would take seriously its historical particularity and integrity and address in an ecumenical spirit some of the pressing issues facing the universal Christian body in the post-Enlightenment world. The first of these will constitute the major part of the essay.

Bender’s Anabaptist Vision

The contribution to general historical-theological scholarship and to Mennonite self-understanding of Bender’s 1943 classic The Anabaptist Vision is well known and beyond dispute. Of special interest are two remarkable aspects of this “manifesto” of Mennonite theology. First, Bender defends Anabaptism against its traditional defamers by drawing attention to the fact that the left wing of the Reformation was ahead of its time and in some sense pioneered some basic modern assumptions. For Bender, the fundamental democratic assumptions of the modern world—freedom of conscience,

4 While I am quite willing to admit the “constructive” role of the theologian in formulating and interpreting theological concepts—there has always been this constructive element in theology—I am unwilling to make as radical a break with traditional forms of theologizing on the basis of a thoroughgoing historicism as is Gordon Kaufman in his An Essay on Theological Method (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975). In a sense my own theological movement is precisely the reverse of Kaufman’s. Kaufman continues to become increasingly more disillusioned with traditional concepts of God and his authoritative revelation and seems to be moving in the direction of an increasingly more radical historicism, arising largely out of his epistemological concerns. See esp. Kaufman’s 1977 “Preface” to Systematic Theology: A Historiocist Perspective (New York: Charles Schribner’s Sons, 1978), pp. xivff. I find myself becoming increasingly more disillusioned with the modern Enlightenment agenda, historicism, and the post-Enlightenment obsession with epistemology, and moving in the direction of a re-examination of the power of traditional theological models. It appears to me that they have a more profound understanding of reality, man, and human accountability than do modern historicist options.
separation of church and state, voluntarism in religion—presuppositions "so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy," are ultimately "derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice."5

Much can be said in favor of such an interpretation. The Protestant Reformation in general and the Radical Reformation in particular must surely be seen—especially in their voluntarism and emphasis on personal-individual freedom and choice—as harbingers of modernity. As long as one was generally happy with the basic presuppositions of the modern project such a connection could of course be greeted with enthusiasm. The more disillusioned one becomes with modernity, however, the more one questions some of its central assumptions, and the more one is driven to re-examine critically this strange and alleged alliance between one's tradition and the modern world. Ironically, the very principles which pushed sixteenth century Anabaptism to the periphery of late medieval heteronomous society, today have become common stock and put us in the center. An important question that must be asked, therefore, if Bender's interpretation is correct, is the following: to what an extent must the Radical Reformation and the Free Church tradition in general be seen as representing not a fundamental critique of the Enlightenment but as both a product and an ally of the modern western spirit?6

The second noteworthy aspect of Bender's essay is his understanding of the substance of Anabaptism. The essence of Anabaptism, Bender says, is threefold: "first, a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance."7 Bender goes on to explicate all three essentials of Anabaptism in more or less ethical terms. He distinguishes Anabaptist theology from the sacramental-sacerdotal theology of Catholicism, on the one hand, and forensic justification and the inner subjective experience of God's grace on the other. The early Anabaptists emphasized not primarily intellectual understanding, doctrinal belief, or subjective

5 Harold S. Bender, The Anabaptist Vision (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1944), p. 4."The Anabaptist Vision" was first given as an address before the American Society of Church History in 1943, a society of which Bender was the president at the time.

6 It has sometimes been argued, correctly, I think, that the Believers' Church tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (German Pietism, British Methodism, and American Revivalism) in its suspicion of Protestant scholastic and creedal orthodoxy was in fact part of the spirit of the Enlightenment and, as such, had much in common with rationalism and its protest against traditional authoritarian institutions and theological ideas in favor of individual autonomy. It is interesting, in the light of this, that Donald F. Durbaugh places the origin of the Believer's Church tradition with the early Swiss Anabaptist movement. See The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism (London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1968), pp. 18ff.

7 Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, p. 20.
experience, but rather a regenerate life best described by the term *Nachfolge Christi*. In contrast to Lutheranism, for the Anabaptists there could be no compromise with the evil of the world but only a withdrawal from the worldly system in favor of a new Christian social order in the context of the brotherhood: "extension of this Christian order by the conversion of individuals and their transfer out of the world into the church is the only way by which progress can be made in Christianizing the social order." While the Anabaptists were realistic—they had no illusions about the imminent transformation of the world—they did understand the kingdom of God in historical terms: "The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society, but the Brethren did believe that Jesus intended that the kingdom of God should be set up in the midst of earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith."*

While early Anabaptists, as interpreted by Bender, cannot be charged with espousing an illusory optimism about gradual human progress, so characteristic of the eighteenth and nineteenth century enterprise, there is implicit in it an anthropological and historical optimism, nevertheless—an optimism which distinguishes it dramatically from Lutheranism. According to some of its modern interpreters, Anabaptists believed that finite sinful man could be radically regenerated, his basic nature transformed, and his egoism theoretically overcome with the grace of God in the context of the visible church. The essence of Christianity is in some cases radically historical and ethical, and the kingdom of God is seen as having a measure of continuity with the empirical visible church of regenerated believers. In this "anthropological optimism" and "historicalist" understanding of the kingdom of God early Anabaptism has a profound affinity with the modern project. The very important difference is that early Anabaptist views of man and the kingdom of God were anchored in an inherited recognition of God's transcendence—a recognition lost to the modern world.

**Friedmann's "Existential" Theology**

The emphasis on the historical-ethical nature of Anabaptism becomes even more pronounced in Robert Friedmann's 1973 book *The Theology of Anabaptism*. Here the high regard for the ethical nature of Anabaptist Christianity is combined with a strong anti-doctrinal, anti-creedal and anti-systematic bias. Friedmann, who has been called "one of the foremost experts of Anabaptism," argues that Anabaptist theology is *intrinsic* non-systematic. He uses the problematical term "existential" as distinct from

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8 Bender, *ibid.*, p. 35.
9 Bender, *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
systematic” to describe the nature of Anabaptist theology. The early Anabaptists, he maintains, espoused an existential or lived theology. They had an implicit rather than an explicit theology. This implicit theology is suspicious of systematizing theological ideas and doctrines. It stresses, rather, as Jesus and the gospel writers do, “the expectation of the imminent breaking-in of the kingdom of God.” It calls for a concrete human response to the Christian message, little concerned with the organized intellectual coherence of doctrinal categories. With Paul there begins an explicit and doctrinal theology which was not present earlier, and which later, with the church fathers, particularly Augustine, becomes a full-fledged rational and systematic theology.

While, according to Friedmann, the Reformation spawned an abundance of theological systems, the Anabaptists were unique in their rejection of such systems of thought and in their adherence to an unsystematic and in some cases nonrational theology. Their creedal formulations consisted of “semiconscious theological insights and ideas concerning God and man and their mutual relationship, eventually expressed in confessional statements.” The reason for this lack of systematic theology amongst early Anabaptist, says Friedmann, was not historically accidental but essential to their view of Christianity. Systematic theology was essentially contrary to the very spirit of early Anabaptism itself: “Theology as a system they considered rather a stumbling block to the discipleship and no real help in man’s earthly predicament.” For Friedmann, therefore, there can, in principle be no explicit or systematic Anabaptist theology. He makes the rather presumptuous claim that “Ever since the days of the apostolic church, Anabaptism is the only example in church history of an ‘existential Christianity’ where there existed no basic split between faith and life … ” He also makes the astounding claim that for Anabaptists there was no such thing as post-conversion doubt and anxiety (Anfechtung) in the Lutheran sense. Anabaptism, he claims, “does not experience an ongoing Anfechtung (inner doubt), no feeling of despair or, worse, of perdition, but rather the exact opposite: the certainty of resting in God’s gracious hands, of being called and able to respond to this call.” It rejected Luther’s famous dictum simul justus et peccator (at the same time justified and sinner)—Luther’s profound

11 The use of the term “Existential” is problematic because it has come to mean in modern thought precisely that which Friedmann wants to exclude in his interpretation of Anabaptism: namely, a non-historical, highly personal, individual, lonely, subjective, and inward experience of reality and the courageous affirmation of faith in the context of and despite inner doubt, meaninglessness, fear, anxiety, and despair.
13 Friedmann, ibid., p. 22.
14 Friedmann, ibid., p. 25.
15 Friedmann, ibid., p. 27.
16 Friedmann, ibid., p. 29.
sense that even after the experience of forgiveness and justification one continues to be plagued and tempted by sin and inner doubt.

Despite this rejection of Luther's "inward" theology, Friedmann claims Anabaptist theology was subjective rather than objective. What Friedmann means is not the kind of subjective of Luther's inner doubt but an emphasis on existence and historical actuality—a regenerate life which expresses itself in historical concreteness. "The Anabaptists were always willing 'to give account of the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15), but they were not willing, nor even able, to construct a systematic theology, a rational edifice of thought. It would be foreign to them and inadequate to the 'subjectivity' of the new birth." Friedmann reveals a remarkable lack of understanding for the nature of and need for systematic thinking about the Christian faith, the importance of which—precisely for Mennonites today—I will briefly allude to in the last part of this article. Ironically, in Parts Two and Three of the book Friedmann goes on systematically to discuss Anabaptist views of the two kingdoms, the trinity, anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and ecclesiology.

Friedmann makes the significant point that the Anabaptist vision must be clearly distinguished from the mainstream of modern thought:

It is almost a truism to say that most of the values of Western civilization—esthetic, scientific, and philosophic—do not fit into this dualistic vision and the implicit hope for the kingdom. The Renaissance, Baroque, Enlightenment, Rationalism, and the philosophy behind the Scientific Revolution—in brief, the entire history of 'Modern Man'—remained outside the Anabaptist realm. All these movements were to them secular happenings which had no bearing on the kingdom of God. This is where I think Friedmann seriously misinterprets the nature of modernity and therefore misunderstands the fundamental connection between the radical left wing of the Reformation and the modern spirit. It is precisely the yearning for the kingdom of God on earth and the assumption that man has the freedom to create such a kingdom that lies at the heart of modern political projects. While it is clearly true that the modern vision is largely a secular one—divested of its transcendent ground—and that Anabaptism cannot be reduced to such a secular Enlightenment vision, still the basic notion of "freedom" (the rejection of predestination is a case in point) and the expectation of an earthly historical realization of God's kingdom and its proleptic realization in the empirical church appears to be at the heart of Anabaptism. Friedmann himself states that, while the Anabaptists did not equate the brotherhood with "an ideal as sublime as the kingdom of God—still "Theirs was always a visible church [in contrast to Augustine's and Luther's invisible church], the living brotherhood-

17 Friedmann, ibid., p. 31.
18 Friedmann, ibid., p. 45.
congregation which they regarded, at least in part, as the nucleus of God's kingdom on earth as its attempted realization." Of primary interest here is not the accuracy of Friedmann's interpretation of Anabaptist theology, nor even of Anabaptist fidelity to the biblical view, but rather the affinity of these views with the modern Enlightenment vision of man and history.

**Yoder's "Political" Theology**

In the case of John Howard Yoder, no doubt one of the foremost contemporary interpreters and exponents of Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, we have a peculiar combination of biblical, historical, and systematic theology at work. For Yoder the hermeneutical key by which to understand and unlock the whole of the Bible is clearly the normative New Testament Christocentric ethic of nonresistant love and "revolutionary subordination," best captured historically by sixteenth century Anabaptists. We cannot here enter into conversation with Yoder on the impressive list of topics which he addresses, all basically from this theological starting point. Nor can we do justice to the nuances of Yoder's theological position. All we can hope to do is to illustrate how Yoder, like Bender and Friedmann, interprets Christianity essentially in historical and ethical terms, betraying in the process a markworthy anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological bias. To put it somewhat differently, using a classification that has sometimes been used in recent theological debates, Yoder shows a clear preference for a prophetic-eschatological theology over a sacramental-priestly theology.20

In what is probably his most widely known recent book, *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder is concerned from beginning to end with demonstrating the social and political nature of Christ's message.21 While he is acutely critical of most modern ethical theories which reject the relevance of Jesus' message for the modern world and construct an ethical position from this side of the bridge, based on common sense fittingness, adequacy, relevance, and effectiveness, Yoder himself is committed to the task of demonstrating the political-ethical "relevance" of Jesus' message for today. Yoder calls his stance "biblical realism." What this means for Yoder is that the "biblical vision of reality" has direct relevance for our age in that it stands "in creative tension

19 Friedmann, *ibid*, p 117
20 David Tracy discusses this distinction between a "mystical-priestly-metaphysical-aesthetic" emphasis and the "prophetic-ethical-historical" emphasis and quite correctly says: "That any religion is really *only* mystical-metaphysical or *only* ethical-political seems an illusion produced by some partial vision of the complexity of the whole." See *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), p 204 My own contention here is that Yoder does not adequately allow for the "mystical-priestly-metaphysical-aesthetic" dimension essential to the Christian religious experience. This is not to say that he dismisses it completely.
with the cultural function of our age or perhaps of any age” without being collapsed into any one contemporary view.\textsuperscript{22} It is this normativeness of Jesus’ message and the New Testament for all ages, including our own, which is most attractive in Yoder’s position. What is less convincing is his “ politicization” of that message at the expense of other dimensions of the biblical message which can better be described in metaphysical and ontological language than with modern political language. In an anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological age like ours, which has, it appears, almost totally lost a concept of radical transcendence—a belief in the first article of the creed—to emphasize the historical-political essence of the kerygma is in fact not a radical critique of the fundamental assumptions of the modern world (as Yoder intends it to be)—but a tacit acknowledgement of modern historicist assumptions.\textsuperscript{23}

Yoder’s hypothesis in The Politics of Jesus is “that the ministry and the claim of Jesus are best understood as presenting to men not the avoidance of political options, but one particular social-political-ethical option.”\textsuperscript{24} So, although Yoder’s argument is that the political option of Jesus is radically different from that espoused by most contemporary ethicists, it is still a “social-political” option—a social-political alternative based on non-violent love. It is evident throughout the book that Yoder is engaged in a polemic, as were Bender and Friedmann, against individualistic, existentialistic, and “spiritualistic” interpretations of biblical texts and, consequently, also of such later subjective expressions of Christianity.

Largely through an exegesis of Luke, Yoder shows that the kingdom of God, which John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed as imminent, must not be understood as a “spiritual” reality, but as an “historical reality,” a “visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among people of God, achieved by his [God’s] intervention in the person of Jesus as the one anointed and endowed with the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{25} This “new social reality” is not a quietistic, mystical, spiritualized kingdom but a messianic-prophetic vision: “The cross is beginning to loom not as a ritually prescribed instrument of propitiation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Yoder, \textit{ibid.}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{23} I see the recent move from orthodoxy to orthopraxis in political and liberation theologies—a move which incidentally has much in common with the Anabaptist refusal to separate theory and practice—as theoretically sound only if it does not represent a collapsing of metaphysics into historicism. It is true that theory and doctrine must not be separated from ethics as it so often has been in the past. Nevertheless, I maintain that theory always in some sense is prior to and even separate from practice. Theology must remain prior to politics even though all theology is political in a certain “relative” sense. The new doctrine of orthopraxis can be sound only if it is based not only on affirmation of the second person of the trinity (God as historical Christ), nor only of the third person of the trinity (God as immanent Holy Spirit), but also on an affirmation of the first person (God as absolutely transcendent creator, beyond time and space); otherwise, God once more becomes a puppet of social-political-ethical programs either inside or outside the church.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Yoder, \textit{ibid.}, p. 23.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Yoder, \textit{ibid.}, p. 39.
\end{itemize}
but as the political alternative to both insurrection and quietism." 26 The alternative Jesus is offering to earthly, kingly rule is "not 'spirituality' but servanthood." 27 It is "not a cultic or ritual separation, but rather a nonconformed quality of ('secular') involvement in the life of the world. It thereby constitutes an unavoidable challenge to the powers that be and the beginning of a new set of social alternatives." 28 It is precisely this strong urge in Yoder to de-spiritualize the kerygma and to de-emphasize the cultic and the ritual (the priestly-sacramental) dimension of the early Christian message and religious experience in general that does not adequately meet the crisis of the modern age in which precisely this mystical, contemplative, sacramental quality of life has lost out to technical and historical reason.

Jesus' message and vocabulary, according to Yoder, was not "existential" but "political." He was not primarily a moral teacher with political implications, nor a teacher of spirituality who was misinterpreted politically, nor a sacrificial lamb for the purpose of atonement, but rather, in his prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, someone who bore the possibility of a new human, social and political order. Christendom, says Yoder, has by and large remained unaware of this political-social dimension of Jesus' message and has given a mystical interpretation to being "in Christ" and "dying with Christ." In fact, however, "... the apostles had and taught at least a core memory of their Lord's earthly ministry in its blunt historicity"—namely, a social, political stance within the world. 29 The cross of Calvary "was the politically, legally to be expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society," not "an inward experience of the self" (as in Müntzer, Zinzendorf, revivalism, and Christian existentialism). 30 His treatment of Christ and power, revolutionary subordination as expressed in Romans 13 and the authority of the state, his re-interpretation of the Pauline notion of justification by grace, and finally his discussion of the apocalyptic image of the war of the lamb are all seen by Yoder as further bearing out his central thesis:

A social style characterized by the creation of a new community and the rejection of violence of any kind is the theme of the New Testament proclamation from beginning to end, from right to left. The cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy, the power of God for those who believe. 31

Yoder's emphasis on the social-political-ethical significance of the New Testament message is rooted in a theological method that is fundamentally

26 Yoder, ibid., p. 43.
27 Yoder, ibid., p. 46.
28 Yoder, ibid., p. 47.
29 Yoder, ibid., pp. 130-131.
30 Yoder, ibid., p. 132.
31 Yoder, ibid., p. 250.
historical-eschatological (horizontal) in nature and entails a tacit bias against a metaphysical and ontological (vertical) understanding of the Christ event. This is perhaps most clearly evident in his recent Preface To Theology: Christology and Theological Method, a compilation of lecture notes given in systematic theology over a period of almost 20 years. While the first part of the book is an explicitly historical examination of the development of theology from the New Testament to Chalcedon and the second part deals more systematically with the theological discipline and doctrines as such, both are fundamentally historical in approach. Metaphysical interpretations of the Christ event must be seen as accretions—historically understandable and quite likely legitimate and necessary for given periods of history, but, nevertheless, additions—which are superimposed upon, move beyond and possibly depart from the original claims of Christ and the earliest disciples. Yoder is quite ready to defend systematic thinking about Christianity and allows for the development of Christian doctrine to meet the exigencies of given historical periods: “The New Testament Church,” he says, “did not assume that the truth was all there in the teachings of Jesus or in the teachings about Jesus. It is assumed that truth will keep coming, that new revelation of a kind, new workings of the spirit, will continue.” He treats the early development of the Logos doctrine of Christ and the trinitarian and Christological creedal formulations with remarkable sympathy. Nevertheless, an underlying bias against metaphysical and ontological understandings of Christ surfaces repeatedly.

The earliest claims concerning Jesus did not give him metaphysical status but were simply “Jesus Christ is Lord.” While using the Hebraic and Greco-Roman language of deity, these earliest claims were not metaphysical in the sense of the theological synthesis that came after the first two centuries. Thus, Yoder, in his interpretation of Philippians 2, expunges any metaphysical sense from what is probably one of the earliest creedal- and hymn-like affirmations of Christ’s nature and work: “So then the humiliation is not a metaphysical humiliation, ceasing to becoming absolute and becoming finite—but a moral humility of staying in one’s place; of doing what Adam didn’t do—accepting the position of creatureliness.” Yoder in effect reinterprets many passages as well as the creeds—traditionally understood in a metaphysical sense—ethically and morally. What distinguishes the Judeo-Christian tradition from the Platonic worldview is precisely the former’s historical-moral-prophetic-eschatological view of reality as distinct from the more metaphysical and ontological perceptions of the latter. The biblical view

33 Yoder, ibid., p. 286.
34 Yoder, ibid., p. 32.
35 Yoder, ibid., p. 42.
emphasizes primarily the meaningfulness of time as an ongoing historical process in distinction from a Platonic non-temporal and non-historical hope.

The assumption that biblical, historical Christianity and Greek Platonic philosophy cannot truly be reconciled hovers in the background of Yoder's thought and becomes much more explicit in the theology of Gordon Kaufman as we shall see below. Even in Yoder, however, this assumption becomes quite distinct, at points bordering on an alliance with modern historicist thought. Following his explication and critique of various atonement theories, and in an attempt to search for new ways of describing the work of Christ on the cross which is both more faithful to his perception of the biblical view and to modern historicist thought, Yoder makes the following telling comment:

\[\text{We are aware of history as a process. This awareness is characteristic of our age as it was not of earlier ages. We are learning to discern a more Hebraic view of things, which differs from the Hellenistic and later Greco-Roman world views. We think of the church as a concrete group of people and not first as an institution or an organization or a body of doctrine. We think of reality as going on in the awareness of people in groups. History is the only reality we know, we do not think about realities 'out there' having their being in themselves. We think of reality as happening in personal relationships, in institutional relationships, in the passage of time. So if we would take historicism as a philosophical stance that is congruent with the Bible, in reading the Bible—we might have a new resource for developing an understanding of the need for the work of Christ.}\]

It is here where I think Yoder shows his true colors. It is here that his "Hebraic view" of biblical Christianity is quite explicitly linked to modern historicist thought. Yoder's emphasis on the social-political-ethical nature of the New Testament message is in fact deeply rooted in and influenced by modern Enlightenment thought. All of us—including Mennonite theologians—are in a sense captive to Enlightenment assumptions. We cannot—even if we wanted to—extricate ourselves from modern views of history and freedom. Nevertheless, a profound critique of the modern

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36 Yoder, ibid., p. 226.
37 This is not to disparage Yoder's thought, it is simply to point out that Yoder too has been profoundly influenced by modern conceptions of history in his biblical interpretation, as we all have been. Further, the linking of the "Hebraic view of history" with modern historicist views—an association which seems to be almost unanimously accepted in theological circles—has some serious problems. While it may be true that the Hebraic view of history was more eschatological and theological than that of the Greek ontological and cyclical view, and in this sense has greatly influenced western conceptions of history up to the present, both classical views had this in common: they presupposed an absolutely transcendent spiritual reality (God), a presupposition which is lacking in the modern historicist view. In this sense, I would argue, Jerusalem and Athens had more in common with each other than either has with the modern world.
perceptions of reality which have shaped us is surely called for. The question is: On what basis can such a critique take place? Simply to say that the historical Jesus is normative begs the question. The point is: What kind of theological and historical interpretation do we give Jesus? To interpret Jesus primarily from a moral, ethical, and political perspective is itself a modern stance. I think it could be argued quite persuasively that Athens and Jerusalem, the Greek view of things and the Hebraic view of reality (that is, the classical perspective, whether Hebrew or Greco-Roman) have more in common with each other than either has with the modern world in which a metaphysical and ontological understanding of God's transcendence and interaction with the world is almost completely lost. If this is the case, then it seems that some kind of recovery of transcendence in its classical form—a recovery of metaphysics and a notion of "eternal verities" whose essence cannot be defined in historical-political terms but stand as points of reference limiting and judging history and politics—may in fact be precisely the basis upon which a critique of modern assumptions can take place.

This "metaphysical" or "transcendent" sense of God's reality and presence has historically been expressed through creedal and doctrinal formulations, sacraments, cult, worship, prayer, and corporate and private spirituality. My objection to Yoder's interpretation of primitive Christianity is not ultimately an objection to his emphasis on the relevance and normativity of Jesus' claims for Christians in the modern world (with this I heartily agree), nor with Yoder's emphasis on the social-political-historical dimensions of the Christian message (which, I agree, is one fundamental aspect of Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection), but with Yoder's inadequate recognition of the ritualistic, cultic, mystical, and sacramental aspects of the religious experience, both in the corporate-communal sense and in the personal, existential, individual, and private-inward sense. It is the communal and individual-personal sacramental-priestly dimension of human existence and religious experience that is inadequately allowed for by Yoder, who tends to emphasize the prophetic-eschatological above all else.

It may be that in this respect Anabaptist-Mennonite theology has been truncated all along. We idealize our Anabaptist ancestors in terms of their prophetic-eschatological power and tend to view historical periods in which the cultic and ritualistic, on the one hand, or the inward "spiritualistic" on the other, predominate, as periods of departure from the original ideal (an assimilation to mainline Protestantism). It is my contention that both the sacramental-priestly and the prophetic-eschatological—or to put it somewhat differently: both the metaphysical-ontological (the vertical) and the historical-ethical (the horizontal)—are implicit in the Christian experience from the beginning and that both are ineradicable dimensions of human religious experience. The prophetic-eschatological understanding of the Christian message has often been associated with the capacity to critique that which "is" in the light of that which "ought to be." The sacramental-
priestly emphasis, on the other hand, has sometimes been seen as "sanctifying" the present at the expense of the ethical imperative. I would argue, however, that stressing the sacramental-priestly dimension of religious experience today may itself be a powerful left-handed critique of an age that no longer recognizes the importance of contemplating a universal good which transcends and intersects with the historical and the temporal plane.

Gordon Kaufman's 'Historicist' Theology

Gordon Kaufman's theology draws us into the very center of modern liberal and post-liberal theological concerns. David Tracy places Kaufman alongside a long line of what he calls post-modern or post-liberal "revisionist" theologians.38 Kaufman, in his major theological work—not including some of his theological essays where he deals specifically with the nature, distinctiveness, and task of Mennonite theology39—makes few explicit references to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. His basic 'historicist' approach, however, I maintain, is the echo of his own heritage and, in some sense, stands in continuity with Bender's, Friedmann's and Yoder's emphasis on an historical, ethical, and eschatological interpretation of New Testament and Anabaptist theology. In short, it seems to me that, while Kaufman's "historicism" is much more explicit and radical than the "historicality" of Bender, Friedmann, and Yoder, there is still a continuity among the four which harks back to the left wing of the Reformation with its voluntarism, protest against all forms of human heteronomy, and its emphasis on an historical, ethical, and eschatological kingdom of God.

38 Tracy describes five theological models Orthodoxy theology, Liberal theology, Neo-Orthodox theology, Radical theology and Revisionist theology Kaufman places himself Gregory Baum, Michael Novak, Langdon Gilkey, and Van Harvey into this fifth category, a theological approach which is aware of the disillusionment with some of the oppressive consequences of the Enlightenment but refuses to return to a form of mystification. Instead, the revisionist theologian "believes that only a radical continuation of critical theory, symbolic reinterpretation, and responsible social and personal praxis, can provide the hope for a fundamental revision of both the modern and the traditional Christian self-understanding." According to Tracy, "For the post-liberal theologian both secularity and traditional Christianity should be challenged in accordance with publicly available criteria for meaning, meaningfulness, and truth " See Blessed Rage For Order The New Pluralism in Theology (New York The Seabury Press, 1975), pp 33-34 In my view, Kaufman is much less willing than is Tracy to incorporate into his theology a radical critique of modern assumptions on the basis of more traditional theological categories Tracy's rootedness in the Catholic tradition guards him against the severe doctrinal and theological iconoclasm that marks Kaufman's work

39 A reading of Kaufman's recent collection of essays written over a period of almost 20 years, published under the title Nonresistance and Responsibility and Other Essays (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1979) gives one important insight into Kaufman's theological engagement with his own Mennonite tradition. Particularly revealing is how Kaufman applies his theological method to social and political ethics.
In *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, probably the most important of Kaufman's books, at least for understanding his underlying philosophical assumptions, he tries to show why it is that all human thought is relative and subject to radical doubt. The book is basically a phenomenological analysis of the evolution of the human self from its early pro-cognitive stages through various levels or "orders" of consciousness. The norms and criteria by which we distinguish between truth and error gradually emerge together with the development of the structure of the self and the world. Truth and knowledge is in a genuine sense evolutionary or "historical," the term which Kaufman prefers. This view of knowledge stands in marked contrast to the notion that knowledge is "the grasping of the eternal forms (Greek) or laws of nature (modern)—factors which are forever constant, however much the situation of the subject may alter in time and history." 40 In a very real sense we are prisoners of our own thought, captives to history, and do not have access to "universally valid" truth(s). On a philosophical level, the book is an impressive attempt to address the epistemological problems that have so bedevilled modern thought ever since the Enlightenment. The problem with modern historicism, however, of which I take Kaufman’s stance to be a good example, is not only that is is an inadequate view of human experience, 41 but that it ultimately leaves one without an adequate basis for ethics. Having accepted the fundamental Enlightenment assumptions of historicism and freedom, it cannot critique the negativities of the modern age as radically as is necessary. In Kaufman’s case, this is particularly evident in his ethical relativism, perhaps best expressed in his essay, "Nonresistance and Responsibility," one of a number of essays in a recent book by that title. 42

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40 *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith*, pp 65-66

41 There are certain fundamental human experiences—looked at purely phenomenologically—that cannot be defined in essentially historical terms. I would cite the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, the facing of one's own death, just to name a few, as examples of experiences which, while clearly taking place *within* history cannot in themselves be defined in terms of the movement of past to present to future, let alone in terms of ethics, but break into our temporality in a radically vertical, a-temporal or even non-temporal sense.

42 Kaufman cannot be accused of an absolute relativism in metaphysics or ethics. His whole book *Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* is an attempt to take seriously both the historical relativity of all human knowledge and the belief "that our knowledge somehow participates in that which transcends the relativities of our situation," a grounding of our norms of right and wrong, truth and falsity ("functional absolutes") in that which "is ultimately real, beyond all illusion " (p 86) Nevertheless, Kaufman's historicism drives him to a relativization of ethical norms in concrete situations. The ultimate metaphysical reality which stands beyond or above history remains without concreteness and particularity. Thus the application of the Christian norm of "redemptive love" and "nonresistant love" in actual situations becomes highly relative and situational. Redemptive love which must by definition go into the heart of the sinful situation may demand that we "support" the military bill most in accord with the highest ideals and best moral insights of the total American society." "Nonresistance and Responsibility," *Nonresistance and Responsibility*, p 71 Love must adapt itself to the needs of every new situation for "Love thus never becomes a rigid absolute, the ethical implications of which are clearly and absolutely defined for every situation " (p. 75)
We cannot here do justice to Kaufman's serious struggle with the assumptions of modern thought and the problems inherent in his attempt deliberately to construct a more adequate concept of God for modern man on a post-Kantian basis. We must look briefly, however, at how he applies his historicism to systematic theology in his most substantive theological book to date: Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective. What does Kaufman mean by "A Historicist Approach" to theology? In entails the fundamental affirmation that man is "intrinsically historical like God Himself," that man "has been created in the on-going movement of history (as has all other finite reality) and been shaped into a being intrinsically historical, one whose distinguishing characteristic is his historicity . . ." It is the profound conviction that in a genuine sense humans create themselves, each other, and the human species. In his historicity man is truly created in the image of God, who is the "primordial historical being." In the light of this profound conviction of human historicity Kaufman shapes his major theological categories around the trinitarian understanding of God rooted in the historical Christ, and radically distinct from Greek ontological dualism with which, according to Kaufman, the biblical view of God and man has little affinity. Indebted to Barth's view of the trinity, but, unlike Barth, interpreting the trinity from his own historicist perspective, Kaufman understands God as having three "modes" or "masks" of being: God as Father is God as historically transcendent, God as Son is God as seen historically in the event of Jesus Christ, and God as Holy Spirit is God as historically present in, to, and with us.

What does Kaufman mean by "Systematic Theology?" Systematic theology is concerned with comprehensiveness, inclusiveness, and inner consistency and coherence. Each of the various Christian doctrines expresses a sphere of experience in relation to God and together they give us a comprehensive picture of the world as a whole. The whole of human experience and knowledge must be illuminated through theological thinking. Systematic theology has a double reference point: an historical norm (the Christ-event and present experience. Systematic theology is the attempt to

43 This Kaufman tries to do in his carefully argued book, An Essay On Theological Method, in which he maintains that there are three essential moments in all theological construction. In an article "Theological Method, Modernity and the Role of Tradition," I try to point out the strengths and weaknesses of Kaufman's theological method. See Prophetic Vision Applied to One's Academic Discipline. 1978 Mennonite Graduate Seminar. Published by the Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana.
45 Kaufman, ibid., pp. 329, 332.
46 Kaufman, ibid., p. 332.
47 Kaufman, ibid., p. 346.
48 Kaufman, ibid., pp. 94ff.
show not so much the historical connectedness between past and present, but the universal significance of the Christ-event for all of life; it tries "to develop a special conceptuality making it possible to grasp and understand the entire world of our experience as under the sovereign lordship of the God-defined-by Christ: built into the very logical structure of Christian theological language is reference to the historical Christ as normative." Systematic theology is concerned with showing the different Christian doctrines in their essential unity and interconnectedness, as a way of illuminating all of human experience in a balanced way, to avoid one-sidedness and self-contradiction. In his general theological enterprise—his concern with the linguistic and epistemological presuppositions of all theology, in his preoccupation with the problem and meaning of God in the modern world, and in his attempt to illumine all aspects of contemporary human experience in a balanced way—Kaufman differs from Yoder's more critical-prophetic-eschatological approach to theology. In his emphasis on the normativity of the historical Christ and the ethic of self-giving nonresistant love as central to an understanding of the trinity and the biblical message as a whole, Kaufman and Yoder have much in common.

Kaufman's comprehensive theological approach—his attempt to develop a theological perspective which takes seriously Christian doctrines as well as insights from all spheres of modern thought and life—is impressive and persuasive. What I find less convincing is his too quick rejection of the traditional, classical, and orthodox (conservative, if you like) understanding of the Christian faith. While I am fully aware of the dangers of obscurantism, of the problems of certain forms of rigid orthodoxy and classical dualism, I am not at all convinced that the modern post-Enlightenment historicist view of reality is more adequate or truer than is the classical non-historicist Christian and Greek view.

I have in another essay tried to show to what an extent Kaufman's

49 Kaufman, ibid., pp 10-11
50 For instance in a "Theological Brief," included in Christian Theology A Case Study Approach (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976), Kaufman is highly critical of what he calls "the ideational development of Christianity" with its "tendency to regard the approved ideas and formulas as definitive and unchangeable dogmas. Faith becomes understood as a matter of assenting to or 'believing' certain verbal formulations or ideas about God and Christ, sin and redemption." (p 119) Kaufman suggests that Christ must be seen less ideationally and more existentially "ideas, concepts, verbal formulations—especially those about 'God' and 'Christ'—will be used by thoughtful Christians only insofar as they help to promote the upbuilding of human community and the realization of free personhood, for these are the actual incarnation of Christ in contemporary life." (p 120) Aside from the difficulty inherent in trying to separate ideas, concepts, and verbal formulations from the substance and content of the faith, the problem with substituting new "myths" for "old myths," existential Christianity or ideational Christianity is, of course, precisely that we create the kind of Christianity for ourselves that accommodates our modern culture rather than perceiving the revelatory content and expression of classical Christianity as standing in judgment of all human ideology throughout the ages
theological method is in fact grounded in the Enlightenment protest in favor
of the individual theologian's capacity "deliberately" and "self-consciously"
to construct concepts of God which will evoke popular piety. In his An Essay
On Theological Method, Kaufman quite explicitly states:

We no longer can settle theological issues by appeal to the authority of
scripture or tradition. We must now undertake the much more difficult
and hazardous task of deliberately and self-consciously constructing
our concept of a God who is an adequate and meaningful object of
devotion and center of the orientation of human life. In doing so we are
free to entertain on their own merits a variety of models for constructing
the concept of God, and to accept or reject them without regard to their
scriptural authorization.

It is in how they view the normativity of biblical and ecclesiastical
authority vis a vis Enlightenment views of freedom, that Kaufman and Yoder
differ. Kaufman states this difference perhaps most clearly himself in his 1963
essay, "The Christian in Church and World," when he says:

It will be observed here that I do not agree with Yoder... that I have
rejected the all-too-great authority of the church in the Anabaptist
tradition in the name of the mass-church tradition; it would be more
correct to say I am rejecting the common authoritarianism of both these
lines in the name of 'liberal' traditions rooted in the Enlightenment and
modern experience. The character and the theological significance of
the relativism emergent from these more recent traditions, I have
sketched in my book on Relativism, Knowledge and Faith.

The basic Enlightenment project of emancipation from heteronomous
finite authorities cannot be disregarded without becoming reactionary and
obscurantist. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment protest is profoundly
ambivalent: the modern triumph of human freedom and technical reason (a
direct consequence of the Enlightenment) makes possible a technological
monolith and the tyranny of a totally administered society which is more
heteronomous than any of the traditional authorities.

While Kaufman is fully aware of some of the ambiguities and negativities
of modernity and partly for this reason develops a concept of God as "Limit,"
his confidence in the Enlightenment assumptions of historicism and freedom
remains relatively unscathed. In fact, in some of his most recent comments
this confidence seems to have increased rather than lessened. In his 1979
"Preface" to Nonresistance and Responsibility, he says

I now would not interpret the Christian life as founded so arbitrarily on

51 A. James Reimer, "Theological Method, Modernity, and the Role of Tradition" in Prophetic
Vision Applied to One's Academic Discipline.
52 Kaufman, An Essay on Theological Method, pp. 54-55.
an authoritarianism of revelation, as some of the chapters of this book written a good many years ago suggest, but would be inclined to argue the value of a posture of redemptive love as intrinsically right and good for humans . . .; thus the heavy appeal to supposedly authoritative biblical texts would not find such a prominent place were I to rewrite these chapters today.54

In a very similar vein, in his 1977 "Preface" to Systematic Theology, Kaufman states:

It is now clear to me, therefore, that a properly conceived systematic theology should not begin with simple acceptance of the givenness of 'revelation' (as in the present work). This simply perpetuates the authoritarian structure of theology and makes it difficult to see at what points the tradition is to be seriously criticized and reconceived. On the contrary, a theology should begin in a careful analysis of the way in which, and the reasons why, the human mind finds is appropriate, and even necessary, to create and use the concept of God . . .55

What I find questionable in Kaufman's analysis is not his rejection of arbitrary and destructive authoritarianism and heteronomy, but rather his increasing confidence in a modern historical alternative to a traditional, classical understanding of reality. I am fully aware of the epistemological problems and the dangers of heteronomy inherent in the classical view of God, but I am not at all convinced that the modern-historicist model has fewer problems and frees us from heteronomy. In an age faced with total self-annihilation, on the one hand, or total administration on the other (all under the guise of freedom, science, and reason), the traditional view and formulation of God, man, and history—in which man sees himself not as the master and creator of himself, the human species, and the future, but as accountable to a radically transcendent being—calls for a new hearing. Not that it can be transplanted into the modern world in its pristine purity—it necessarily must be taken through the prism of the Enlightenment which has profoundly shaped us all—but at least its fundamental affirmations should be openly reconsidered.

The Possibility of a Mennonite Theology

Is there a Mennonite theology? I have tried to show in the context of my examination of Bender's Anabaptist vision, Friedmann's "existential" theology, Yoder's "political" theology, and Kaufman's "historicist" theology that there is a continuity here, a common thread that runs through all of these modern representatives of Mennonite thought. The common thread which ties all four together is an emphasis on the historical-ethical. All

54 Kaufman, Nonresistance and Responsibility, p. 9.
four have a deep suspicion of a more classical emphasis on that part of human experience which one might variously call the vertical, mystical, ontological, sacramental, or a-historical dimension of reality. While Kaufman, more than the other three, is interested in metaphysical-epistemological problems and allows for the aesthetic-sacramental dimension of the Christian experience in the context of a systematic theology which attempts to illumine all aspects of life, in the end he defends the most radical historicism of all. Thus Kaufman can say, "We are our histories" 56 or "Man is preeminently an historical being because he is both made by his history and he himself makes history; thus man makes and remakes himself. All of nature is created in the historical process; man alone takes an active part in his own creation in history." 57 Kaufman, I would suggest, is simply drawing the more radical conclusion of what is already seminally present in the other three.

So, in answer to the question: Is there a Mennonite theology? I would say, Yes, there is an implicit Anabaptist-Mennonite theology which has evolved over the years and, particularly recently, has expressed itself as an "historicalist" theology suspicious of classical doctrine, sacramentalism, and cult. All four thinkers we have examined ultimately stress the actual, concrete, prophetic, and ethical side of the Christian faith at the expense of the mystical, "spiritual," and sacramental side. In this, I would suggest, all four are fundamentally modern, for to be modern is to see time as history, as movement from past to present to future, to see man as defined primarily in terms of history, ethics, and politics rather than ontological being. This "historicalist" thinking can be traced back to the left wing of the Reformation, which in turn, can be linked with the rise of the modern spirit.

This "historicalist" Mennonite theology has some particular strengths; it, possibly better than some other theological traditions, can translate traditional theological categories into historical-ethical terms more understandable to the modern world. But precisely in its over-preoccupation with ethics to the exclusion of other-than-ethical dimensions, it is in danger of becoming truncated and needs serious reassessment. While all human experience can take place only within history (this is self-evident), there are however, experiences which are in themselves not intrinsically or essentially historical and ethical. This must be loudly affirmed if our social-political-ethical-commitment as Mennonites is not to become a form of human ideology and positivism. Mennonite theology must break its unquestioned alliance with some of the dominant assumptions of the modern age if it is to maintain the critical stance that has historically characterized it. In order to do this it must develop a systematic theology which is larger than prophetic-eschatological-ethical theology.

Is it possible to develop a Mennonite systematic theology? Can there be a

56 Kaufman, "God and Humanity," Nonresistance and Responsibility, p. 35.
way of theological thinking which has a distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite mark, context, or methodology, different from the way Catholics and Lutherans and Calvinists think and engage in theology? Can such a distinctiveness be built into a system? Friedmann says there is such a distinctive Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, but it is unique precisely in its not being a system. It is rather a concrete, historical, lived faith based on discipleship, the way of the cross, a theology of the kingdom of God. While there is a distinctive Mennonite theology, there can be no distinctive Mennonite systematic theology that is faithful to the Anabaptist heritage, for such a theology would in principle not be a lived "existential" theology.

This is where I must strongly disagree with Friedmann. I can see nothing intrinsically contradictory between a systematic or explicit theology and an implicit, existential or prophetic-eschatological theology. I strongly believe Mennonites must develop an explicit theology which will reflect the implicit theology that they have had all along, and that precisely such an explicit systematic theology will push Mennonites to place their strong historical-ethical concerns within a larger and sounder theological context. In a sense, Gordon Kaufman has attempted to do just that, but because of it his radical historicism his theology, in my opinion, does not provide an adequate basis upon which one is able both to illumine all of human experience as well as to critique the modern age as seriously as is demanded.

Why should we have a systematic theology? First, we need a systematic theology because for some of us there is no other option. For some of us it is absolutely imperative if we want to remain both Mennonite and Christian that we systematically bring together our inherited Christian beliefs with the critical questions and insights we encounter in the various disciplines and in the cultural matrix of the modern world. Secondly, we need a systematic theology (and here I heartily agree with Kaufman) to help prevent us from becoming one-sided and truncated in our Christianity and our humanity; to guard us from reducing the whole of the gospel to one of its parts (ethics or the historical Christ). Thirdly, we need a systematic theology for the sake of ecumenical conversation. I stress conversation and not only critique and witness. We need to recover as Mennonites the concept of the universal catholic church, of which we are only a small fragment. Only through systematic theological thinking, in which we identify our distinctiveness theologically in the context of the whole, can we both learn from and make a contribution to the universal Christian community. Fourthly, we need a systematic theology for catechetical reasons, so that we have tools by which not only to teach younger generations the accumulated wisdom of the ages but also to guide ministers in their preaching and teaching ministry. In an age when the tyranny of common values and assumptions are rapidly eroding any kind of traditional distinctiveness, we need an explicit theology which will give us an identity and integrity, a continuity with our own past, while at the same time accounting for the diverse cultural and religious traditions that
have in the past century claimed the name Anabaptist-Mennonite for themselves without identifying with a Swiss or Dutch stream. We must develop a theology which is larger than what most of us have traditionally understood as Anabaptist-Mennonite without sacrificing the central tenets we hold dear.

What more specifically might such a systematic Mennonite theology look like in the light of all that has been said up to this point? First, there would need to be in such a theology a universal element; namely, that which makes it not uniquely Mennonite theology but Christian theology. This universal element would link it not only with the biblical text and the earliest Christian creeds, but with the Christian church as it has developed through the ages—with believers past, present, and future. It would attempt to express the “eternal verities” of the Christian faith.

What are these “eternal truths” of the Christian faith which the church affirms? They have been expressed in the earliest creeds: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” “And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord . . . ,” and “I believe in the Holy Spirit . . . ” The universal element of Christian faith which binds together all Christians of whatever tradition is the affirmation of faith in the trinitarian God: God as transcendent creator, God as revealed in the historical Christ and redeemer and God as immanent spirit, dynamically active and present within history and his creation. A trinitarian affirmation is important, not only because it is implicit in the biblical text, not only because it is expressed in the early creeds of the church, but also because it prevents us from an heretical one-sided emphasis only on the transcendence of God, or only on the historicity of God, or only on the immanent-experimental presence of God. Our Mennonite Christological theology—in which the historical Christ plays such a primary role—should be systematically woven into a trinitarian theology to keep it from becoming a form of theological reductionism.

In his emphasis on a Christocentric trinitarianism, Kaufman provides us, I believe, with a possible paradigm of how one might go about “contructing” a Mennonite systematic theology. There would be in a Mennonite systematic theology a particular element, an element which would constitute a distinctively Anabaptist-Mennonite color to the whole theological enterprise without becoming solipsistic as a church. This particular element would consist of a strong christocentric-ethical component which would find its place not at the end of the theology, but would run as a thread through the whole “system.” All the classical theological categories would be interpreted from the perspective of Mennonite historical-ethical emphasis on nonviolent love without at any point reducing theology to ethics. This eschatological and ethical concern should at no point be perceived as the starting point for theology (only an affirmation of faith in the trinitarian God can be the basis of theological thinking) but rather as the tone of the whole enterprise. The strength of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has always been its prophetic-eschatological
capacity to stand over against and critique radically the negativities of violent contemporary culture. The possibility for such a critical stance should be preserved in such a systematic theology without isolating the Anabaptist-Mennonite community from other Christian traditions and without sacrificing what I have in this essay called the cultic, sacramental, and mystical dimension of the Christian faith.
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