

# Mennonite Theology at the Edge: Ecumenism and Prison Contexts



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## Introduction

This book has been written with the idea that it is possible to develop a Mennonite theology within the context of a prison and ecumenical atmosphere. After being ordained as a Mennonite pastor, I served for thirty-five years as a prison chaplain. This experience made me reflect on the ways in which my Mennonite beliefs and theology influenced and were influenced by my context.

### Chapter One

There were times when my Mennonite theology was influenced by other denominations. I worked for ten years with Pentecostal volunteers in a French context in which there were many conversion experiences on the part of inmates. Although these conversion experiences echoed my own experience of faith, the idea that these inmates could be baptized was another matter. A Pentecostal chaplain brought a bathtub into the prison and rebaptized several Catholic inmates on the basis of their confession of faith. This action caused no small amount of consternation on the part of the Catholic priest and the Regional Catholic chaplain. They asked me as a peace loving Mennonite to come up with a solution to this problem.

Conducting communion services was another challenge for me. I was used to the practice of closed communion in which baptized Mennonites would come together to receive the cup and host. I could not assume that the inmates to whom I was ministering were baptized, much less believers. I made a decision to offer communion on the basis of inmates' affirmation of Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Another challenge had to do with providing weekly worship services that were conducive to a sense of reverence and respect. After planning weekly services for a year in which I included a variety of songs, prayers, Scripture readings, and a message, I discovered that the Lutheran Church used a lectionary and liturgy that was similar to the way that the Catholic chaplain ordered his service. That included weekly scripture readings along with a set liturgy. I found this liturgy and lectionary highly practical in planning my services. The structured format allowed me adequate time to be creative in my meditations and more reflective of worship. I had inmates read the scripture passages, the band lead various songs, and the congregation

respond with spoken and spontaneous prayers. The set liturgy freed me up to think more intentionally about worship.

One of the things I discovered after working with Pentecostal volunteers for ten years and using an ordered service for thirty years was that my collaboration with these denominations did not make me a Pentecostal nor a Lutheran. Altar calls and the laying on of hands were at times appropriate in the context of my worship services. These practices, however, were not sustainable because they caused too much emotional upheaval in the inmates with whom I worked. The same limitation applied to my use of liturgy and lectionary. I found that the Lutheran Confession of faith was quite a ways away from my own understanding of faith. The Lutheran catechism regarded the ten commandments as part of the order of creation, separate from the realm of redemption. The commandments were intended to convict believers of sin while Jesus' crucifixion saved them from sin.

I had to rethink my Mennonite theology on the basis of these influences. While I was empathetic towards the Pentecostal and Lutheran expressions of faith, I found myself advocating for a more communitarian understanding of the gospel, along with an affirmation of the fellowship of believers that gathered in the prison chapel every Sunday evening. This journey is documented in the first chapter of the book.

## Chapter Two

One of the things I discovered when I started working in prison is that its organizational structure is more like a large institution like the Catholic Church than the way the Mennonite church functions. The Correctional Service and the Catholic Church operate on the basis of a hierarchical structure in which there is a chain of command and a top down form of authority. A question that arises from this type of institutional structure is whether change is possible.

A prison chaplain for many years, Reverend Dr. Pierre Allard in his 1983 dissertation suggests that change is indeed possible. The Correctional Service's adoption of a mission statement during these years can be compared to the changes that happened in the Catholic Church during Vatican II. The Catholic Church adopted a "people of God" theology while the Correctional Service committed itself to treating inmates as subjects in their own right. These documents regarding a "people of God" theology and the prioritization of inmates were placed before a discussion of hierarchy and organizational structure.

I was drawn to the Catholic Church for another reason. I was one of two Protestant chaplains among twenty-five Catholic priests, nuns, and lay Catholics who were serving as chaplains in the prison system in Quebec. I was curious about how their prison ministry compared to my own.

During my graduate work at McGill University, I worked with Professor Gregory Baum who was a Catholic priest as well as Catholic theologian. He had spent the last thirty years reflecting on the impact of Vatican II and whether change within the church was possible.

On the basis of my collaboration with Professor Gregory Baum, I turned to a book that he had published in 1968 in which he defended the credibility of the church. Baum had by this time been a Catholic priest for twenty years. He saw himself as an apologist for the church. I analyzed this book in order to compare myself as a Mennonite theologian with this Catholic thinker.

Gregory Baum defended the credibility of the church on the basis that it emphasized local initiatives as well as issued universal proclamations. Vatican II represented a time when many local initiatives transformed the hierarchy into a more collaborative and egalitarian structure. At the same time, the church continued to proclaim its universality.

Gregory Baum suggested that the Catholic Church operated on a dialectic between an emphasis on the past and the present. On the one hand, it was tempted to embrace a type of primitivism in which past doctrinal proclamations defined the contemporary church. On the other hand, the church was tempted to endorse a type of modernism in which the culture around it defined its purpose and mission.

These two dialectics made me think about where the Mennonite Church stood on these issues. In general, I would suggest that the Mennonite Church has opted for local initiatives over and above universal proclamations and for an emphasis on the past over the present. The Mennonite church's emphasis on local initiatives can be traced to its transition from an episcopal system to a democratic, constitutional format. The Mennonite church adopted the ways in which the society around it operated regarding its various organizations. The priesthood of all believers was a biblical injunction that spurred on this ecclesiastical reform. One could say that the Mennonite church set itself up as a separate society that mimicked the reforms initiated by the democratic revolution.

The Mennonite emphasis on the past can be seen in its recovery of the Anabaptist vision from the 16th century. During the last fifty years, many books by 16th century authors have been translated and published. Many Anabaptist theologies have been written. Seminary training involved learning New Testament Greek and Hebrew in order to recover some of the gospel insights in their original languages.

These two examples show that there is a sense in which Mennonites believe that the restitution of the Church in its original form is possible: egalitarian leadership, communitarian fellowship, pacifistic adherence, and informed voluntary assent to faith. These attributes represent signs of the early Church.

I conclude chapter two by suggesting that the Catholic Church subsists to a greater extent as an expression of the Christian faith than Protestantism. Gregory Baum's articulation of a dialectic between local and universal, and between the past and the present, demonstrates it is possible to defend a large institution like the Catholic Church while being open to reforms and change. The role of Mennonite theology within this dialectic remains to be seen.

### Chapter Three

One of the surprising things that I learned about prison ministry was that many conservative and sectarian groups were interested in volunteering in the prison. Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, conservative Mennonites, Seven Day Adventists, Christian fundamentalists, and Hasidic Jews wanted to make sure that inmates of their own faith persuasions were being ministered to. These volunteers were open to including other inmates who wanted to become part of their faith group.

There are two reasons for the symmetry between these conservative groups and inmates. The first reason is that inmates represent marginalized people in society. They are attracted to marginalized religions that have to negotiate and interact with the broader culture. The second reason for the symmetry is that these conservative groups along with offenders generally have a black and white mentality. The groups have a clear idea about what truth is and the inmates have a clear idea of what they did wrong. Offenders want to replace the mentality that they had when they committed their crimes with a new strict disciplinary faith that these groups offer.

I compared a religious group that I worked with for five years in Quebec and my own Anabaptist upbringing to illustrate the dynamics of a sectarian perspective. Although radically different in terms of historical setting, theological outlook, and cultural context, the Rastafarians in Jamaica were similar sociologically to the

Anabaptists from the 16th century. While the Anabaptist rejected the status quo by re-baptizing themselves, the Rastafarians adopted an illegal drug, marijuana, as key to their religious reasoning sessions. Both groups were persecuted for these stances and some experienced martyrdom. Both groups retreated to the country in order to establish a peaceful rapport with the larger society. Both groups adopted a kind of egalitarian leadership in the light of the fact that their leaders had been martyred. Both groups adopted an outward visible sign of faith, the Mennonite men with their straight coats and the women with long dresses and coverings, the Rastafarians with their colourful Jamaican flag belts and hair pieces along with their flowing dreadlocks.

I suggest in the third chapter that pacifism can be seen as a sectarian response to the broader culture. It operates as an intramural form of communication, association, and relationship building while not being applicable to general society. The Mennonite theology of these conservative groups means that pacifism serves an important discipleship role that is integrally linked to the beliefs and practices that make up these separate societies.

#### Chapter Four

This sectarian response on the part of Rastafarians and Anabaptists can be contrasted with the idea that pacifism serves as a universal principle. Theologian Gordon Kaufman has suggested that the non-resistance of Christ can be included within the freedom attribute of God. Christ emptied himself of divinity in order to become a man who sacrificed himself for the sake of other people. This non-resistant stance on a part of Jesus serves as an example for Christians and society as a whole.

I make comparisons in chapter four between this pacifistic theology on the part of Gordon Kaufman and the theologies of Maurice Blondell and Gregory Baum. The latter theologians believe that God is the ground of our being who calls us from within to act in redemptive ways. Pacifism in this case serves as an ideal for everyone rather than only operating as an internal practice within the church.

The question that chapter four raises is whether this pacifistic ideal is in some way applicable to the use of coercion. I cite three examples from within the correctional service that shows that coercion can be exercised for the greater good. Peace and reconciliation are possible in an institution as a result of these non-voluntary initiatives.

#### Chapter Five

I make mention in chapter four of the Catholic Catechism's understanding of a beatific vision, its explanation of original righteousness, and its teleological interpretation on the ten commandments in order to show how these ideas compare favorably with pacifism as a universal ideal.

These ideas are carried forward in chapter five in order to develop a specific discipleship model for inmates. The fact that the Catechism believes that human beings have been created in the image of God, that they naturally seek after God, and that they can be restored to original righteousness after falling from grace is something that is especially appealing to me. I worked for many years with offenders who had committed serious harm and who were deeply regretful of their actions. The question I asked is how these inmates could be healed and have hope for the future.

A belief that they had been created in the image of God, and that they could be restored to original righteousness through repentance and forgiveness meant a lot to the men that I worked with. Celebrate Recovery spoke about the reality of denial, the necessity of repentance, and the ability of believers to surrender to God. Lacking from this twelve step program was a specific way in which inmates could access original righteousness in order to move forward.

A second naivete, in which innocence, trust, loyalty, faith, belief, and love were experienced, was possible in order for offenders to move forward. The Catholic Catechism included a detailed description of how life in Christ could be accomplished. It spoke in specific terms about moral virtues, emotions, passion, and the role of conscience in integrating one's mind and body. While concupiscence represented a tendency to sin, it could be resisted by believers.

I dedicate the fifth chapter to developing this discipleship model as outlined in the Catholic Catechism. I am not aware of another catechism that spends as much time looking at the ways in which we are all tempted to sin. The catechism builds on the injunctions of the ten commandments in making its point.

## Chapter Six

A reader may draw the conclusion from chapter six that I have moved significantly into a mainline church worship and belief format of doctrines, lectionaries, liturgies, and catechisms.



This is indeed true. I have found, for example, Jaroslav Pelican's five volume work on doctrines, along with Hughes Oliphant Old's five volume work on lectionaries to be specifically important in understanding the broader church. I continue to endorse a Mennonite theology while being aware that these broader works include aspects of Christianity of which Mennonites are tangentially aware. Chapter six is dedicated to helping believers understand the broader nature of Christianity. I have specifically used creeds, lectionaries, liturgies, and catechisms to develop my theology.

### Chapter Seven

The fact that I continue to stand apart from some mainline church emphases can be seen in chapter seven. A diagram in that chapter shows a continuum from low church worship practices to the manner in which mainline churches worship. I include a numbering system from 1 to 24, from the importance of the Bible, cross, and Sunday worship for numbers 1 to 3, to the importance of Mary, icons, and the pope for numbers 22 to 24. When I started as a prison chaplain, I would have emphasized the importance of testimonies, worship teams, and adult baptism, numbers 7 to 9 along the scale. More recently, I have become convinced of the importance of a confession of repentance, an affirmation of faith, and the passing of the peace during worship. These actions represent numbers 13 to 15 along the continuum.

More problematic for me has been the wearing of vestments, the role of Mary, and the idea that it is necessary to have a pope as the head of the Church, numbers 18, 22, and 24. I continue to hold on to a Mennonite theology while being empathetic to a more ecumenical and mainline format of worship.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that I am at the edge of Mennonite theology because there are so many aspects of my reflections that are more tuned to a universalistic understanding of Christianity that includes doctrines, liturgies, lectionaries, catechisms, and communion.

This universalistic understanding of the gospel comes as much from my prison ministry experience as my ecumenical connections with Pentecostals, Lutherans, and Catholics. How does one explain the gospel to sixty inmates gathered in the chapel who have a very rudimentary understanding of Christianity? Repentance, forgiveness, conversion, surrender, and recovery are all included in what it means to

come to faith in Jesus Christ. It is more difficult in this environment to know how to proceed with two sacraments of the church, baptism and communion. One thing is clear. Offenders want to hear the truth of the gospel in as black and white terms as I am willing to enunciate it. It is only as I and the men mature together that more shades of grey are allowed to creep in.

This book represents an ecumenical work in which I have adopted liturgy and lectionary while remaining transparent about the fact that I continue to be a Mennonite and Protestant. My development of the idea that there is such a thing as a beatific vision, that we can turn to original righteousness after falling from grace, and that the ten commandments can be seen theologically in relationship to loving God and loving neighbour are all ways in which I have built on a Mennonite theology of peace, pacifism, and reconciliation. Covenantal theology represents the framework in which the Old and New Testament can be seen as one. God's loving relationship represents the framework within which the recognition of sin and the forgiveness of sin can be exercised.