

THE PEOPLE ON THE MOVE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIGRATION AND
FAITH--AN ASPECT OF MENNONITE LIFE AND FAITHFULNESS FROM THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

BY

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

The story of Mennonite migrations since the sixteenth century is largely the history of some religious people who tried to find the perfect expression of their faith in this world. Initially because of religious persecution, migration to other countries, for those Mennonites, was often a means of survival. Later when religious persecution stopped, migration for some Mennonite groups became a means to preserve the purity of their faith, which was characterized by an emphasis on a holy life and complete separation of the church from the world. Finally, the preservation of Mennonite way of life also became an important factor. This thesis will attempt to give a realistic appraisal of this history in the perspective of the Mennonite's persevering efforts to realize their religious ideal in a generally hostile world. Meanwhile, a historical exposition of the reciprocal effect of Mennonite migrations on their religious beliefs will help us to approach the kernel of the issue in its right perspective.

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The many shortcomings of this work are the author's own.

INTRODUCTION

When we trace the history of the Mennonite movement, we are struck by the fact that there were a few Mennonite groups who were always on the move. At first they migrated because they were forced to flee their homes due to the persecution directed toward them by a world hostile to their religious faith. Later when religious persecution stopped, migration for those Mennonites became a means to preserve the purity of their faith, which was characterized by an emphasis on a holy life and a complete separation of the church from the world. Finally, the preservation of the Mennonite ethnic community also became an important factor. Migration provided security for the Mennonites to keep their way of life unadulterated. This is true for those Mennonite groups who were of Dutch and North German origins. Their migrations from the Netherlands to Prussia, and then to Russia, North America, and again to South America made them a people whose entire existence in the world was characterized by always being on the move.¹ What makes this even more remarkable is that these frequent

¹It might be for this reason that the Mennonites were thought to have a tradition of emigration. See Waldemar Janzen, "The Great Trek: Episode or Paradigm?" The Mennonite Quarterly Review 51, no. 2(1977): 127.

migrations were by a people who were known for their love of the soil--a people who earned their living by cultivating land; in fact, they were thought of as good farmers in both Europe and North America.² Here we surely have to raise a question: why did these people, especially some who had selected farming as their way of life, time after time leave the cultivated soil and give up their organized life? Without doubt, the reasons for the Mennonite migrations are varied. For example, religious persecution often forced the early Mennonites to give up their organized home;³ the devastation caused by war and the subsequent poverty sometimes made the Mennonites seek a new life somewhere else;⁴ meanwhile, a

²Harold S. Bender, "Farming and Settlement," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. II (Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955-1959).

³This particularly can be found in the cases of Austrian and Dutch Anabaptists' fleeing to Moravia and Prussia in 1530s, and Swiss Brethren's emigration from the Canton Bern to the Palatinate in 1671. See John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe (Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), pp. 110-111, 146, and also see Cornelius J. Dyck, An Introduction to Mennonite History (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1967), p. 94.

⁴The migration of the Palatinate Mennonites to Pennsylvania in 1700s gave us such an example. The war between France and Germany from 1688 to 1697 devastated the Palatinate in which the Swiss Mennonites had settled since the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). As a result, many Mennonites there lost their homes, farmsteads, and all their wealth. However, this was not the only experience that the Palatinate Mennonites suffered at that time. In 1708, a winter cold beyond the precedent of a century killed many fruit trees in the Palatinate. It resulted in such a serious consequence that many Mennonites lost their living resources. All this contributed to the mass emigration of the Palatinate Mennonites to Pennsylvania and other countries in 1700s. See John Horsch, Mennonites in Europe (Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), pp. 266-270, and also see Harold S.

search for land and the desire for wealth also motivated some Mennonite migrations.⁵ However, at this point, recognizing that material interests might have been an important motive in the history of Mennonite migration, it seems wise not to lapse into the quagmire of material determinism⁶ when inspecting the whole issue. This is because every historical event is correlated with others in the same time period. The different aspects of human existence--economic, political, and religious--are so interlocking that no institution can impose its characteristic form upon all the others. Everything which happens has to be considered as interconnected in the immensely complex causal nexus. It might be the case that economics, politics, religion, and other social factors besides, act and react upon each other, each in various ways influencing the others and being influenced by them. Therefore, if we accept Marx's view of human behaviour, we

Bender, "Causes for Emigration to America," in J.C. Wenger ed., The Mennonite Church in America (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1966), pp. 43-56.

⁵More detailed comments about the economic motivation of Mennonite migration can be found in Albert Koop, "Some Economic Aspects of Mennonite Migration: With Emphasis on the 1870s Migration from Russia to North America," The Mennonite Quarterly Review 55, no. 2(1981): 143-156.

⁶According to Karl Marx, All human behaviour is powerfully conditioned by material circumstances. People behave in ways that enhance their own self-interests. Here economic forces were particularly viewed as the principal factors in determining the social existence of human beings. See Karl Marx, "Preface to the Critique of Political Economy," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works, Volume I, the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of Moscow ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1950), pp. 327-331.

should not limit our perceptions of human self-interests to the material realm. Something else, for example, a religious self-interest, or the concern over salvation, could also motivate people. This factor might well be demonstrated in the case of Mennonite migrations, because those migrations often happened as movements, or more exactly, they were migrations of religious communities. In other words, the Mennonites developed their community not only into an economic and social unit with a uniquely ethical structure, but also into a religious fellowship with a considerable group solidarity. Religious experience is so closely bound up with the social existence of the Mennonite migrants no matter where they migrated. Thus, when we explore all Mennonite migrations, we must ask to what extent Mennonite faith affected those Mennonite migrants' social behaviour, or more generally their life-style; and more significantly, what part, if any, their faith played in their decisions to migrate. The following chapters will attempt to give a realistic appraisal of the question in the perspective of the Mennonites' persevering efforts to realize their religious ideal in this world. But, it will also be necessary to investigate how Mennonite belief was in turn influenced in its development and its character by the totality of social conditions.⁷

⁷Considering that the motivations which caused Mennonite migrations were very complex, this thesis will focus mainly on those migrations that had more direct religious causes in order to make a clearer sense of the relationship between the Mennonite daily life and their religious beliefs. For this

When we review Mennonite life and thought, which broke away from the pattern of established religion and society, we can find the Mennonites were very enthusiastic for establishing the "true Christian life" upon the apostolic pattern as they understood it. In other words, they attempted not only to reconstitute the relationship between human beings and God, but also to restore a proper behavioral pattern for directing their daily life. This enthusiasm resulted from their belief that the followers of Christ were "called out" from "the world" to live lives of holiness as members of the kingdom of God. While acknowledging the legitimacy of government to be in charge of the "affairs of this world," they asserted the primacy of the claims of God over the claims of government. This understanding of the relationship between their church and the outside world contributed to the development of a "two kingdom" ethic, emphasizing the separation of church and state. It was later expressed in the form of general withdrawal from the world. By this way, they sought to arrange their life as much as possible in accordance with their faith, and with as little interference from the outside as possible. Thus, all discussions about Mennonite beliefs will lead us to see how Mennonite convictions played a decisive role in determining their attitude to the world at

purpose, the following argument basically will follow the development of Dutch Mennonites, namely, their thought, life, and migrations even though giving appropriate consideration to other Mennonites.

large, and how they affected the Mennonite migrations under certain political and economic circumstances. At this point, our reflections will begin with the Anabaptist break from the Roman Catholic as well as the Reformation churches. Special attention will be paid to the Schleithem Confession and its view of "believers" and "the world."

From George Blaurock's baptism "on his faith and recognition of the truth"⁸ in January of 1525 to Menno Simons' defection from the Roman Catholic Church in 1536, the Anabaptist movement experienced ruthless persecution from both the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran and Reformed state churches. Under the mounting pressure of persecution, this diverse movement was severely threatened with disintegration. On the one hand, execution and prison made the movement lose almost all of its important leaders. For example, of the original leadership circle, Felix Manz, Georg Blaurock, Hans Schäffer and Jacob Hutter were executed due to the persecution. Melchior Hoffman was imprisoned and later died in prison. Conrad Grebel and Hans Denk died of illness. Others were widely scattered to escape the search by the authorities. On the other hand, the persecution pushed the religious enthusiasm of some Anabaptists into emotional excesses in the name of special revelation or fanatic belief. It was at this time that Menno Simons arose as one of the most

⁸The Hutterian Brethren, The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren (New York: Plough Publishing House, 1987), p.45.

important leaders in the first generation of the Anabaptist movement. He helped to give the movement more new energy, and to shape its distinctive form by his outstanding theological contributions to the movement. Among these contributions, the most important is his view of faith and its effects, namely, discipleship. Menno thought that faith consisted of several different steps, namely, hearing the Word of God, submitting the mind and heart to the leading of the Holy spirit, giving love toward God and man, obeying the commands of God, and following Christ in daily life. According to this understanding of faith, he insisted that faith not only was spiritual commitment, it also was to be characterized by the establishment of a special relationship with Christ marked by discipleship to Christ. Therefore, it is practical and working. In other words, it is the holy life in this world. This view of faith clearly indicated the prerequisites for membership in the Mennonite church. At the same time, a Mennonite response to the outside world, namely, complete withdrawal of their church from the secular society, was also suggested.

During the process of purifying the Anabaptist movement from the Münsterite fanaticism, not only did Menno play an important role, so did Dirk Philips. The goal desired in purifying the church was to have a church where each member truly qualified to be a member, and to put out of the church those members who did not qualify. Menno, by his view of

faith, gave each member a subjective test that they could apply to themselves to see if they qualified. Dirk developed the doctrine of the church and provided some basic principles that the leaders of the church could apply to each member to see if they qualified. Moreover, Menno drew a clear line of demarcation between the Mennonite church and the outside world in his theology. Dirk, on the other hand, made a real boundary between the Mennonite church and the outside world by the establishment of church discipline. Through sketching Dirk's life and his religious practices in Danzig, chapter three will draw an outline of his role in changing the radical Anabaptist movement into a peaceful church community in which the religious faith and life were merged in a united form. Meanwhile, by explaining Dirk's thoughts about the doctrine of the church, especially on avoidance or shunning, we will also seek to arrive at a clearer understanding of the distinctive model of the Mennonite church and the distinguishing features of Mennonite community life. All these will serve to account for the Mennonites readiness to forsake newly found economic security when faced with the pressure to deny their understanding of the faith.

From the 1530's on, Dutch Mennonites began to find refuge in Prussia. They built some settlements on the estates of sympathetic noblemen. Their earliest congregations were also established during that period. Several historic meetings of Mennonites were held in these settlements. The Mennonite

model of life was developed into a definite pattern during that time. In other words, this was the period in the Mennonite movement which produced a great impact on the succeeding generations. When chapter four reviews Mennonite history during that period, the main goal will be to formulate the key characteristics of the Mennonite way of life that kept the Mennonites in a critical tension with the surrounding society.

The experience of the Mennonites in Russia continued to reflect the way of Mennonite life. It can even be thought of as a kind of vivid summary of the entire history of the Mennonites. Having previously observed how faith was nurtured in times of persecution and hardships, chapter five will now explore the changes of the Mennonite convictions in the face of one of life's biggest challenges--material success. At the same time, we also try to see how some Russian Mennonites fought to hang on to the Mennonite fundamental beliefs, for example, the principle of separation, when their life in Russia was experiencing big changes due to the fact that the society in which they were living was changing drastically.

Due to Alexander's policy of compulsory military service, the Russian Mennonites once again had to make a choice concerning their future. Even though most Mennonites decided to stay in Russia after the Russian government made some compromises in its new policy of military service, about one third of Russian Mennonites, or more exactly, 18,000

Mennonites, crossed the Atlantic into Canada and the United States.⁹ For those Russian Mennonite immigrants, they made their own choice to secure for themselves the freedom to continue living the Mennonite way of life. The experience of those Mennonites in North America will tell us much about their pursuit of a pure religious faith as well as a successful secular life.

Yet the story of the Mennonite migrations does not conclude with their arrival in North America although Russian Mennonites obtained almost everything they wanted in North America, such as religious freedom, peaceful life, and even wealth. In the twentieth century the history of the Mennonite migration repeated itself in many ways. There were more migrations from North America to South America. Chapter seven will particularly focus on the migration of 6,500 Old Colony Mennonites from the Canadian prairies to the Mexican plateau--the Mennonites who conservatively insisted that the whole purpose of their life was to maintain their Mennonite religious and cultural identities in the world. Here again some Mennonites sought escape from unwelcome impositions and impingements through the traditional device of emigration even though others were trying to adjust to the prevailing conditions around them.

Following the insights gained thus far, we will come to

⁹Cornelius Krahn, "Kansas," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. III (Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1955-1959).

the conclusion that for the centuries to come, the experiences of some Mennonite groups were closely linked to their trek around the world. And this trek, in some degree, could be seen as a unique expression of their understanding of themselves and of the outside world. Initially, religious persecution forced the Mennonites to flee their homeland. They had to seek asylum from one place to another so that they could escape execution or prison. In other words, the forces of circumstance pushed them from one unfamiliar world into another. When the movement received its new energy, namely, the principles of Mennonite brotherhood and separation from the world, from some of its famous makers, such as Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, theological concerns supplied a more focused dynamic that kept the Mennonites on the trek. Migration, in certain circumstances, was thought of as the only way to maintain their religious identity. However, as time went on the Mennonites merged their religious beliefs, such as discipleship of Christ, separation from the world, and the disciplined church, with their way of life and values. As a result, religious separation from the world became geographical and social isolation within the society in which they were living. The Mennonites established their own socio-religious society that was neither "in the world" nor "of the world." Migration, at this point, gave them an opportunity to rebuild their traditional life-style when it became undermined or threatened by their host society. Since some Mennonites

often fastened on some specific aspects of their tradition, such as the village community, the German language, and the private school, migration also became a means of their resisting social reform. In those cases, these conservative Mennonites insisted that everything that they had learned from their forefathers be preserved as an integral part of their way of life. The result was that many migrations and resettlements happened when they faced political and social pressure. However, it seems to be only a matter of time until the Mennonites found that the available parcels in which they could build their self-sustaining communities became less and less due to the political and economic development of the whole world. Most Mennonites learned that their traditional isolated life-style had passed into history and could not be re-established again.

Although the Mennonites generally lost their early enthusiasm for mission and sought isolation in order to escape ruthless persecution, some Mennonite missionaries began to enter China in the 1890s. In the following years, several Mennonite churches were established in different provinces of China. As a Chinese, I am particularly interested in the Mennonite experience of converting Chinese people who had a completely different cultural tradition. I also want to share my interest with all the people who are concerned about the Mennonite missions in China. Since the topic does not belong to the main body of the thesis, a brief historical review of

the Mennonite missions in China is placed in this thesis as an appendix.

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE SWISS BRETHREN TO THE MENNONITES

The first step towards a better understanding of the Mennonites is to trace the development of the movement. By understanding the history of the movement we can discover the role it played in the Reformation, and then, we can also understand the religious and social aspects of the movement.

1.1 Anabaptism and the Reformation

The Mennonites, first known as Anabaptists, were dissenters from both Roman Catholicism and the established Protestant churches during the Reformation period. One of the earliest roots of the movement goes back to the Anabaptist movement in Zürich, which came out of the earlier Zwinglian reformation movement in Switzerland in 1525. For several years the earliest leaders of the movement, known as the Swiss Brethren, were loyal followers of Zwingli. Essentially, it is their attempt to bring to fulfilment of Zwingli's hope for the

restoration of a primitive Christian church.¹

However, with the further development of the Zwinglian reformation, the Swiss Brethren came to disagree with Zwingli's strategy and timing to reform the church.² They felt that Zwingli was going too slowly and too mildly in his reformation. Greater earnestness was required, they thought, than Zwingli was manifesting.³ By 1523, it appeared that this feeling of dissatisfaction had gone deeper, and that a tinge of disappointment began to colour the Swiss Brethren's attitude toward Zwingli. They realized that Zwingli had failed to provide the leadership necessary to set up truly apostolic church, because he failed to free the church from the power of the civil authorities.⁴ When it became evident that Zwingli had chosen a course that would necessarily lead to a union of church and state, a rupture took place.

The split first came into evidence during the second disputation with the Catholic churchmen at Zürich in October of the same year. At this disputation, the Swiss Brethren looked for the immediate abolition of images and of the mass,

¹Hajo Holborn, The Social Basis of the German Reformation, quoted in Walter Klaassen, "The Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," The Mennonite Quarterly Review 45, no. 3(1971): 291.

²Ibid., p. 118.

³John Christian Wenger, Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1959), p. 19.

⁴Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church, fourth edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. 448.

which the city authorities were not prepared to do.⁵ Conrad Grebel, one of the founders of the Swiss Brethren, in demanding the abolition of the Mass without further hesitation, declared: "It would be futile if they did not begin to change the mass. Much has been said about the mass, but there would be no one who would be willing to stop this great abomination to God."⁶ However, Zwingli, at that time, felt that a union of church and state would best serve his reformation program in Zürich.⁷ He therefore was prepared to make only such changes as he could bring about with the approval of the city council. This led Zwingli to reply to Grebel: "Milords will discern how the mass should henceforth be properly observed."⁸ This statement, in the eyes of the Swiss Brethren, was absolutely unexpected and very disappointing because it contradicted Zwingli's earlier teaching that the civil authorities were not to rule over the Word of God.⁹ It also made the Swiss Brethren believe that Zwingli had seriously modified his earlier reformation program

⁵John Horsch, Mennonite in Europe (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House), 1950, p. 36.

⁶Leland Harder ed., The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1985), p. 242.

⁷Horsch, John, Mennonite in Europe (Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), p. 38.

⁸Leland Harder ed., The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1985), p. 242.

⁹Ibid., p. 38.

as well as his doctrinal position.¹⁰ He was going to compromise the revealed truth in the Bible in deference to a secular power. Without doubt, for the Swiss Brethren, this only meant that the authority of the Word of God would be sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. As a result, the Reformation in Zürich would necessarily be put under the control of the secular authorities, and eventually lead to an aberration of apostolic Christianity no less serious than the papal system. In other words, the Swiss Brethren believed that Zwingli's compromise with the secular authorities was actually a betrayal of the true ideals of the Reformation. About this point of view of the Swiss Brethren, a contemporary chronicle of the Anabaptist movement gave a historical demonstration when it commented on the compromising nature of the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformation: "As soon as they began to cling to worldly power and put their trust in human help, they were just as bad--like someone mending an old kettle and only making a bigger hole They struck the jug from the pope's hand but kept the broken pieces in their own."¹¹

It was not hard to see that the Swiss Brethren now were put into an embarrassing situation. In other words, as Zwingli's loyal followers, they would be asked to hand themselves over, body and soul, to a secular power, even

¹⁰Horsch, John, Mennonite in Europe (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), p. 21.

¹¹The Hutterian Brethren, The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren (New York: Plough Publishing House, 1987), p. 41.

though they were striving to put off the control of the papal system so that the sole authority of the Scriptures might be recovered. In fact, the real issue here was not the disputation of the liturgy, but rather a bitter and irreducible struggle between two mutually exclusive ideas of the church. So Simon Stumpf, another founder of the Swiss Brethren, cried out: "Master Huldrych! You have no authority to place the decision in Milords' hands, for the decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides."¹² It was from this time that the Brethren declined to follow Zwingli in his departure from his former position. In the following days, despite continuing attempts to discuss the matters of the liturgies, the gap between the two parties widened.

1.2 The Final Break and the First Believers' Baptism

Finally, at the beginning of 1525, a complete rupture took place. This resulted in the rise of the Swiss Brethren movement. The trigger point that touched it off was the controversy over infant baptism. After the second disputation in 1523, a serious question had developed amongst the Swiss Brethren regarding the validity of infant baptism. Wilhelm Reublin, the first Swiss priest to marry, began early in 1524 to preach against infant baptism. As a result of his

¹²Ibid., p. 242.