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This is a tentative statement. I have adopted a point of view and tried to follow through its implications. When this copy was typed I had not had the leisure to stand back from it to see to what extent it holds up. Your reactions can help me to rethink it, unless it is so hopeless that I am forced to become completely defensive. This is not to be reproduced in any form.

INCARNATION AND IDEAL  
THE STORY OF A TRUTH BECOMING HERESY

Delbert Wiens

In the Preface to A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, J. A. Toews mentioned that "In the initial planning of this history several consultations were held with members of the Executive of the Board of Christian Literature and others interested in the project." I was one of the "interested others" in one of those consultations and participated in a debate whether church or people was to be the organizing focus for this history. Was this to be the account of a way of life or of a denomination? Which was more central to our self-understanding: ethos and ethnicity or doctrine and institutions? The title of the book indicates the decision that was made.

I was on the losing side, perhaps partly because it was not entirely clear to me what I was defending and why. Since then, I have come to believe that J. A. Toews and the Board made the only possible decision. This book, or something very like it, had to be written first. We have not had an up-to-date, systematic statement that codifies the events of our public history and expresses our self-understanding.

This book records the initial struggle of the early Brethren to define themselves over against those others from whom they were separating themselves. One aspect of that struggle was the need to define an idea and an ideal. The other aspect involved the still-continuing effort to create institutions to embody and recommend this ideal by which they wished to define themselves. Both of these aspects constitute the collective face we presented, and still present, to the outside world. They are what makes us "public," and as such they are the "official" truth about ourselves. Insofar as we "appear" in the world, it is by these things that we wish to be known. And it is by these things, in large part, that we wish to know ourselves.

But I have become more than ever convinced of a second thing: those of us who were confusedly trying to identify the non-public, unofficial reality were right about its importance. If we are to understand ourselves, we must also become clear about the "inner face," the side that is pointed to by words like ethos and ethnic. We must do so for two reasons. On the one hand, too great a concentration on the public face can unwittingly speed the decay of the private sphere which nourishes it. On the other, it may turn out that the parts that we are officially silent about may turn out to deserve the greater honor.

I am grateful for this opportunity to express appreciation to Brother Toews for his work. I have already learned much from it and expect to learn more. It has helped me to see the way we have seen ourselvss. And it has helped me to clarify for myself that our vision is inadequate. What we have here is only half the story.

It may be that what I go on to say will distress Brother Toews and the rest of you. I know that it distresses me. My primary criticism, however, is directed at the reality of what we are more and more coming to be and at what we think, not at the book that reports and represents that reality.

I have never believed in shooting the messenger who reveals, sometimes unwittingly, the bad news, especially not when his account also reveals so much of the good news of God's presence in our midst. And so I also wish to thank the organizers of this colloquium for the opportunity to argue for the hidden half. I wish to look at the connection between the public and the private spheres. How does the ideological-institutional relate to the sociological-economic? Or, rather, I will try to provide a philosophical, theological, rationale for their relation. I will group my comments under some assumptions that seem to me to illuminate the problem.

CENTER FOR M. B. STUDIES IN CANADA  
77 HENDERSON HIGHWAY  
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA R2L 1L1

1. THE MENNONITE BRETHEREN IDEAL.

1.1 ONE PART OF OUR OFFICIAL DESCRIPTION OF OURSELF IS THE DESCRIPTION OF AN IDEAL. We Mennonite Brethren have traditionally defined ourselves as a church which possesses a pure doctrine and is made up of individuals who have joined it on the basis of a genuine experience of personal conversion and who then live by elevated moral principles while

striving constantly to witness to the lost. To enhance our fellowship within we have developed a polity that avoids the extremes of congregationalism and of hierarchicalism. We have built institutions to carry out our educational, evangelistic, and caring missions. And we have done all of this out of reverent obedience to the Scriptures, our sole and final authority.

1.2 OUR IDEAL AS THE DESCRIPTION OF OUR REALITY IS PARTLY HONEST. It seems to me that this, with, perhaps, some additions and modifications, accurately represents our ideal. And knowledge of the ideal of a people is necessary for understanding that people. That such an ideal is not reached does not constitute hypocrisy so long as we say to ourselves and to others only that we possess it as the ideal toward which we strive. And, in time, we do tend to become what we talk about, some more so than others.

1.3 OUR IDEAL AS THE DESCRIPTION OF OUR REALITY IS PARTLY HYPOCRITICAL. Individually, very few of us are so deluded as to believe that we have realized the ideal. No congregation would claim it of itself. And yet it seems to me that we have often pretended that our collective self is accurately described by the ideals we individually hold while knowing our failure to attain them. To match our ideal we have constructed an idealized image of Mennonite-Brethrenism-as-true-churchism. And that is dishonest. Or, believing that either our ideal or our partial attainment of it is better than that of others, we have smugly pretended that at least Mennonite-Brethrenism-is-truer-than-other-churchisms. And that is Pharisaical.

## 2. AN EXCURSUS: ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF IDEALS

2.1 THOUGH EACH OF THE INDIVIDUAL CONTENTS OF A COHERENT IDEAL MAY HAVE ITS OWN HISTORY, THEY COALESCE AND EMERGE SUDDENLY AS COMPONENTS OF A NEW WORLD-VIEW. It is always misleading to explain a new world-view in terms of its component parts. What is new is the mode of comprehending them, the stance from which they are all seen as in a new light. A world-view is not so much a collection of ideas as it is a way of seeing everything.

2.2 EVERY WORLD-VIEW IS ABSTRACTED FROM A PART OF REALITY THAT IS TREATED AS REVELATORY OF THE WHOLE OF REALITY. A good deal of recent scholarly work has gone into the discovery and description of the bases for alternate world-views. Here I am mostly indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self, and Stephen Pepper, World Hypotheses. When a part of reality is treated as revelatory of the whole, that part functions as a metaphor which guides the interpretation of the whole. Although there are many variations, there are only a few basic metaphors. Most, if not all, primitive cultures treat the aspect of will as revelatory of the whole. From the fact that human acts are willed acts, such people posit that all actions are willed by personal beings. An animistic world-view is a logical extension of this assumption. When the will of the gods came to be expressed and written down as laws, a different sort of world-view had emerged. Especially in Greece the aspect of fabrication, the metaphor of the tool, or, more broadly, of man-the-maker became important. I do not intend here to describe the basic world-views and the metaphors on which they are based. The above are given for their illustrative value. Nor do I intend to reproduce what I tried to do in my essay From the Village to the City: A Grammar for the Languages We Are (Direction, October 1973). Although I confused one or two of the metaphors in what I described as "village," I think that that essay would help convince you of the importance of this mode of analysis for understanding Mennonite history.

2.3 EVERY NEW WORLD-VIEW BOTH REVEALS AND HIDES REALITY, AND IT RELEASES MUCH ENERGY. Whenever one adopts a new way to see, one is able to recognize what had not previously "been there," and one sees even familiar things in a new way. Because some problems can now be solved that could not be solved before, a tremendous burst of creative energy is released in those who grasp the new. But every world-view blinds men to those aspects of reality that it does not reveal. An animistic world-view severely limits technological advances, for the way to influence events is through the bending of wills (magic), not the making of things (technology). On the other hand, a technological society has no logical place for psychic reality. The recognition of this is one of the essential insights of the "God is Dead" theologies.

2.4 EVERY COHERENT WORLD-VIEW, WHEN FULLY REALIZED, DESTROYS THE CULTURE THAT ADOPTS IT. What is truly revealed by every world-view is true. But because it is a part of the truth which pretends to be the whole, it is incapable of maintaining a balanced order. Developed technological societies are especially notorious for upsetting the balance of nature and the psychic health of their citizens. Thus the truth of any world-view comes in the end to function as heresy. So long as the new idea is incompletely realized and is in

tension with other world-views, its demonic tendencies are held in check and may not be noticed.

2.5 EVERY DEVELOPED CULTURE STRUGGLES TO EXPRESS ITS "WORLD-VIEW" IN THE FORM OF IDEAS. WHEN THE WORLD-VIEW ACHIEVES DOMINANCE, IT FIXES THESE IDEAS IN DOGMAS AND THE DOGMAS BECOME IDEOLOGY. EVERY IDEOLOGY IS AN IDOLATRY.

### 3. A NEW WORLD-VIEW FOR RUSSIAN MENNONITES

3.1 ANOTHER PART OF OUR DESCRIPTION OF OURSELF IS AN ACCOUNT OF HOW OUR IDEAL WAS DISCOVERED AND DEVELOPED. This part of our story has been much debated, and it is either foolishness or bravery for one as little versed in the accounts as I am to suggest how this part of our story is to be understood. Here also, much of what I know (and guess) comes from reading the lines (and between the lines) that J. A. Toews has penned.

3.2 THOUGH THEY HAD BEEN KNOWN EARLIER AMONG THE PRUSSIAN MENNONITES, THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE MODERN WESTERN WORLD-VIEW HAD BEGUN TO SURFACE AMONG RUSSIAN MENNONITES IN THE SECOND QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. This rationalistic, technological, version of man-the-maker received its ultimate character from the "revelation" of the machine and of the factory lines that produced them. But at first it was probably received in Russia as a methodology for large-scale business and land management. Thus Johann Cornies is a better indicator of its meaning than the early religious stirrings. As Toews points out on page 23, "the Mennonites of South Russia went through a kind of Kulturkampf of their own" between 1820 and 1850. The religious application of this new way of seeing apparently came later than the initial revelation of its economic meaning. But I do not want to imply by this that new socio-economic structures make new religious understandings possible. I think that they are both related to the emergence of an underlying idea. I believe that the true causes are hidden and that they manifest themselves in all spheres. Also related, though perhaps more logically secondary, is a new sense of confidence and a great outpouring of energy. But the religious leaders mostly remained bound by the more traditional patterns to which they owed their position.

3.3 ALTHOUGH THE EARLY MENNONITE BRETHREN DISPLAY THE CONFUSIONS THAT WOULD BE EXPECTED OF A NASCENT WORLD-VIEW, THE MOVEMENT CAN BEST BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION OF THIS EMERGING CONSCIOUSNESS. I think that this accounts for the high percentage of teachers who were active in the movement. One would expect them to be among the first to understand and appreciate this vision. It would also tend to explain the early, and continuing, emphasis on rational organizational structures, thus partially accounting for the Baptist influence. The individualistic emphases of Pietism also find their logical place within such a construction. The large presence of the poor and of the Fröhliche Richtung in what I am describing as essentially a bourgeois movement is partially a contradiction, but it can be explained. Every important new vision releases great energy and enthusiasm and tends to break up older patterns. The poor Mennonites would welcome the breaking apart of the structures that kept them in near-servitude. And many of them, in their ignorance, would identify the emotion released by the new thing with the thing itself. In any case, the real leaders moved almost too successfully to stamp out emotionalism and to channel the new energy into more productive behavior. More revelatory, and more significant for the long run, was the mood that J. A. Toews caught in the following paragraph (p. 70). The quotation he inserted is from P. M. Friesen.

The worship services of the Mennonite Brethren underwent a marked change during this period (1865-1885). The earlier pietistic emphasis on informal sharing and devotional talks gave way to an emphasis on more systematic teaching and preaching. The members of the congregations seemed to be "hungry for order! order! and for lectures!" This change was accompanied by a change in language. . .from the Low German dialect to High German in the public

Despite the initial opposition from the threatened Mennonite leadership, the attempts to destroy the Brethren were always half-hearted. The reason is that the Brethren, in flawed form, represented nonetheless the crystallization of a movement that was general through the colonies. Many who did not wish to join them were secret sympathizers. Before long the new attitude penetrated the older churches. But the initial opposition as well as continuing tensions strengthened the communal sense that tended to hold in check the gradual pull away from communal to the utilitarian structures implied in the man-the-maker vision.

From this point of view, the emigration to North America presented a different sort of complexity. On the one hand, it represented a reactionary development. Those who came were, on the whole, those who had less clearly assimilated the new structures. To be blunt, a disproportionate number of the early emigrants were those who had not been able to succeed in Russia. I strongly suspect that their claim to be seeking relief from military service was a way of expressing their disenchantment with the speed of cultural advance among the Mennonites in Russia. In the new world, they separated between those who wished a complete return to older communal structures (largely Old Colony emigrants to Canada) and those who had basically accepted the new vision but needed a slower pace for its development. The conditions of the frontier further reinforced a clan-type solidarity. (I suspect the same patterns happened during the emigration from Prussia to Russia earlier.) I also suspect that there were a fair number who came expecting to escape Mennonite communalism altogether. In any case, the Mennonite Brethren communities that developed in the Mid-West exhibited characteristics in some respects more like the earlier nineteenth century Russian scene than like the one they had just left. And they tended to lag behind their Russian brethren culturally and theologically until the destruction of the Russian colonies. This was one source of the strain between those of us who came early and those who came after the Russian Revolution.

On the other hand, the freedom of the frontier, the dispersion of our settlements, the break-up of the village pattern, and the growing desire of many to assimilate to the American way made it possible for the new world-view to develop in purer form than would have been possible in Russia. Thus we have tended more and more to move toward utilitarian social structures. This development makes it possible for us now to see more clearly the inner meaning of our basic point of view, one that was also working itself out in American culture as a whole.

4. DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES AND THEOLOGIES MAY BE DERIVED FROM THE MAN-THE-MAKER METAPHOR. I will attempt a very broad characterization of them and show some parallels to our religious situation.

4.1 ARISTOTLE HAS PROVIDED A CLASSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ASPECTS, OR "CAUSES," THAT APPLY TO THIS SORT OF WORLD-VIEW. When a person sets out to make something, there is a plan in his mind, some material to work on, the agent that does the work (the energy), and the purpose he has in mind for the created object. Modern man applied this to the universe as follows. There is a plan, a rational, natural order comprised of the Laws of Nature. These laws can be deduced by the rational mind which systematically "reads the book of Nature." These laws are absolutes and can be absolutely known. There is also matter, which is composed, ultimately, of lifeless atoms which are in constant motion. By tapping into the energy of the universe, man can apply the laws to matter, reorganizing nature to serve his purposes.

4.2 MOST PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS CAN BE CLASSIFIED ACCORDING TO WHICH OF THESE ASPECTS ARE CONSIDERED PRIMARY. Those philosophers who emphasized the absolute character of the laws and the presumed capacity of the mind to know them, developed idealisms, assuming the really real to be mental in character. Those who were impressed by the material basis of things developed materialisms, believing that there is no reality except that which appears in space and time. Some others, reacting against these, assumed that energy is basic and developed vitalistic theories. Materialisms tend to look backward for understanding the nature of the reality it perceives (thus most science). Idealisms tend to be oriented to the present. Vitalisms are more likely to be teleological, emphasizing some willed future state as the explanation of the past and present. Other world-views can produce other types of philosophical understanding. The thought world of the Old Testament, for example, does not seem to me to fit into what has here been described. Scepticism and humanism also require special treatment. Indeed, scepticisms tend to be the end result among those who observe that when any given system is fully worked out, it tends to break down and, paradoxically, to turn into its opposite.

4.3 TO THE EXTENT THAT WE MENNONITE BRETHREN HAVE ADOPTED THE MAN-THE-MAKER WORLD-VIEW, OUR OFFICIAL THINKING PARALLELS THE DIVISIONS JUST DESCRIBED. And, unfortunately, our acting tends to follow our theologizing.

4.3.1 THE NEW WORLD-VIEW, THE SCRIPTURES, AND THEOLOGY. Our insistence on the final authority of Scriptures only seems to be the same as the universal Christian recognition that they are one of God's great gifts to the Church. In actuality this insistence is based on the demand that there be a "revelation" of spiritual laws that parallels the "revelation" of natural laws. Corresponding to the rational natural order there is a spiritual order, the absolute laws of which can be absolutely known and can be deduced by the rational mind (the theologian) which systematically "reads the book of super-nature" (the Bible). But, as in nature, those laws are hidden; and the theologian, like the scientist, must sift through the chaotically given to reconstruct the logical order of the thoughts of God. The aim is a systematic theology that structurally resembles the Geometry of Euclid and the Principia of Newton. Unfortunately for man-the-maker, no single systematic, either for the scientist or for the theologian, has proved adequate. For awhile we could hope that either Arminianism or Calvinism or some synthesis of the two could be The Truth. We now know better. Any simple systematic must forever be disputable. And we are not yet prepared to understand what dialectical theologies are all about. Since we have been unable to discover the coherent set of propositions which we sought in the Scriptures, we have fallen back upon the demand for a specific attitude on them. With modern evangelicalism, we are left with the assertion that Scripture is the sort of revelation that makes it possible for us to do what we have not been able to do. For this reason, our defense of Scripture grows increasingly paranoid. However, this anxiety is not really the result of concern for the Scriptures nor are we really comforted that Christians continue to be nourished by them. What is at stake (and I am speaking of us only qua man-the-maker) is the threat to our world-view and to ourselves, insofar as we have identified ourselves with it. Those of us who also live out of different world-views do not entirely have this attitude or share this problem, and the Scriptures can continue to nourish our souls and shape our lives. (I will not repeat what I said on this issue in From the Village to the City.) But insofar as this world-view becomes dominant, the Scriptures become irrelevant. Having been challenged and inspired by the study of several Bible passages conducted by a Bible teacher at a retreat, one brother expressed his enthusiasm to another. The other responded, "Well, that's true. But we don't really know what his attitude is on the Scriptures, do we." Many of us have become more concerned with the shibboleths that guard the bridges to our world-view than with a concern to understand the Bible.

We can no longer pretend that our identity and our unity is granted by a formalism, by a coherent set of propositions that represent The Truth and The Ideal. Nor can it be given by an attitude to the Bible as its presumed source. It is also unrealistic to try to forge that unity and focus around a sense of mission and the institutions that were built to serve it.

4.3.2 THE NEW WORLD-VIEW, THE SENSE OF MISSION, AND OUR INSTITUTIONS. The new vision brought enormous joy and freedom. The old frustrations and pressures had been transcended. A new world could now be built and our elders had every confidence that they could build it. This enthusiasm for an ideal which had been accepted without yet having been fully understood, led them to create churches and satellite institutions to propagate and develop that ideal. They were artists, and their medium was the living structures of life itself. Small wonder that they had little time for "the arts."

But the energy released by their discovery was not the same as the energy demanded by the thing that they created. To create is not the same as to maintain production. Even conversion is a quite different sort of thing for those who experience it as the freeing, exhilarating, discovery of a new world-view than it is for those of us who experience it as forgiveness and the rededication to what we have always been taught. Lacking the joy of a refocusing and the energy of the creator, we must increasingly chastise ourselves to work up the will to maintain the institutions and to "witness." Moreover, the institutions are themselves products of that world-view, and they are not much more secure than is the vision that brought them forth.

In keeping with the "maker" metaphor, these creations have been increasingly justified as enterprising in the business of the Lord. And that business was increasingly seen to consist in the production of converts. Thus evangelism came to be seen as the final reason for our existence as a denomination and as the focus of our identity. But there seems to be little other reason for conversion than to become a part of the production of more converts. And so, like modern economics; the things produced become secondary

to the overriding need to keep production moving. The process itself has become its reason for existence.

Like the worker chained to his job and dreaming of self-fulfillment during a long retirement in Florida, we can imagine fulfillment only as far away and a long time coming. As for all vitalisms, a futurist teleology becomes essential. The Kingdom is in no sense here. It is all yet to come. And so there grows out of the wish for its nearness a fascination with the eschaton, and we become dispensationalists with a tremendous need to know all the futuristic details that God did not intend for us to know.

4.3.3 THE NEW WORLD-VIEW AND OUR POLITY. Finally, to complete this inventory of our ideals (see 1.1) from the viewpoint of man-the-maker, the contradictions built into our church polity can be illuminated by similar contradictions in that world-view. Just as the ultimate element of nature is the atom-in-motion, so the presupposition of society is the individual man-in-the-state-of-nature. Just as atoms coalesce into material structures, so individuals contract together to form societies. The basic reason for societies is to provide a context for the individual to seek freely his own "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." Yet in forming the social contract he forfeits all but the most basic of his initial "rights." So the Church begins by asserting our individual priority (we are baptized and join as "adults") and ends by subordinating our individual visions and energies to the common task of, presumably, producing more individuals. Each congregation has the right to rule itself. Yet all must be disciplined and coordinated for the sake of the larger truth and the institutions we have built to enable us to carry out our churchly task. We begin with the idea of the shared ministry and the priesthood of all believers, but our model leads us to force our leaders into functioning as foremen and as bosses.

4.4 IMPLICIT IN THE METAPHOR, AND UNDERLYING ITS CONTRADICTIONS, IS AN INERADICABLE DUALISM. The ideal is pure and good. It is true and its truths can be truly known. The thoughts of God have been revealed to us and, as laws, they have become our blueprint. We are the builders who seek to use the matter at our disposal--wood and stone, lives and institutions--and to fashion it according to the blueprint. But the matter resists the plan. It is flawed and weak. The work is no sooner organized, the machines set up, than friction takes its toll. Depreciation immediately begins. Periodically the assembly line must even stop while repairs are made.

And we builders are ourselves the pure ideal and the flawed matter. "With my mind I serve the law of God." But we are also flesh. Truths have become our laws. And, as Paul well know, the laws, though good, can never heal the contradictions they produce: "Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" One thing is certain, cure comes neither from old laws nor from old ideas nor from redoubled efforts. Nor from new ones either. We, like the Jews, must be freed of any single world-view, old or new. We must be willing to give up the point of view of man-the-maker before we can discover what is valid in it. Indeed, this angle for our vision makes it impossible to understand Jesus Christ or the Church or the Christian. From this point of view Incarnation is inconceivable, because matter is only a source of evil. Gnosticism was an early result of a version of man-the-maker. Some variant of that heresy will always be its result.

## 5. OFFICIAL MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND THE LACK OF IT, HAS BEEN LARGELY GOVERNED BY THE WORLD-VIEW OF MAN-THE-MAKER.

5.1 THE "MAKER" METAPHOR DETERMINES CONTENT FOR THE HISTORIAN WHO IS GOVERNED BY IT. Idealists are not much interested in history. Like scientists, they view the past only as the record of where and by whom truths are discovered. But what is then discovered is timeless, eternal, free from the fate of material and social reality, which must always change--or decay and die. Or they look back to some presumed Golden Age when The Truth was discovered and lived out. For us that Golden Age was the first century. Some others posit a second such time in the sixteenth. A few have even thought it reoccurred in 1860. But Time, that enemy of all Idealisms, allowed attrition and decay. And thieves broke in to steal. Vitalists also are not much interested in history. They look for a revelation of the future which, perhaps because it has not yet happened, allows them to imagine that it will unroll with a logical clarity denied to the present. And they then retroject that clarity upon the past, understanding it as no one living then could ever have imagined. Materialists, and institutionalists, are concerned to understand the past, for the present is the result of all the chains of causes that unroll themselves through time.

But what shall our historians see? So far as our official history is concerned, there are three sorts of things that one can talk about. One can emphasize the ideals that we have claimed. Then our history is the account of the discovery and development in time of a timeless theology. Or one can emphasize the vitality of our mission. I take this to be the emphasis of J. H. Lohrenz, and it is fitting that his hopes for restoration lay in "revival." Or one can stress the official "matter," the institutions we have developed. I think that J. A. Toews has looked at all three; but after his chapters of beginnings in Russia and in North America, his description is mostly of our institutions. From the point of view of what the Board of Literature intended, I believe his choices to be justified, in the main. But these comments do not fully explain the book that is before us. J. A. Toews is critical of official Mennonite Brethren theologizing. And he is much too wise to plead simple-mindedly for revival. Nor can what he says in this book be wholly explained by the "maker" metaphor. But much of the content in it can be.

5.2 THE "INERADICABLE DUALISM" OF MAN-THE-MAKER DETERMINES THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HISTORIAN WHO IS GOVERNED BY IT. While reading the text, I became curious about the key word in the phrase "the providence of God." The use of one favorite phrase does not prove anything by itself, and I am sure that I did not find all uses of it. But a characteristic expression that is almost unconsciously used may illustrate what I think I have accurately seen. On page 25 he writes of Russia, "God, in His gracious providence, raised up men and movements to usher in a new day." If he had added "places," this statement would outline every use of the expression save one. The word is used four times to explain the movement or the sudden emergence of leaders. Thus Wuest goes to Russia (pg. 30), Johann Klassen becomes a "trail-blazer" (pg. 44), several powerful men join the young movement during a crucial period (pg. 62), and A. H. Unruh and two fellow teachers move to Canada (pg. 114). There are two negative, and doubtful, instances. That Oncken did not get to the Molotschna as planned in the fall of 1869 appeared "providential" to "some brethren" (pg. 72). It was also "perhaps providential" that none of the original eighteen were ordained (pg. 302). Mass movements of people also require the special consideration symbolized by this phrase. It is used of the emigration in the 1870's (pg. 130) and of the emigrants to Brazil because it led to evangelization there (pg. 417). So also the VBHM became the agency for emigration from Russia in the 1920's (pg. 119). But this movement raised two problems. If it was God's special will that many should escape Russia, why did most of them not succeed? At any rate, there is the comfort that in God's "in-scrutable but gracious providence" a new day was to dawn even for those who remained (pg. 123). And at this remove in time it may appear a bit doubtful that God would move one group of Mennonites out of the promised land of Canada (the Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites to Mexico) just so farms would be available in Manitoba for those who came from Russia. But it is understandable that to the immigrants "it appeared providential" (pg. 161). The word is used three times in reference to a "place." A pioneer missionary to the Russians took five tents to be a "gift of Providence" when he received them from the Russian Red Cross without charge (pg. 117). And Kafumba was destined by providence to become the strategic center for the Congo mission (pg. 411). But the total destruction of the station there, "the pride and joy of the missionary staff," in the Jeunesse Rebellion of 1964 raises a problem. "Many missionaries, deeply convinced of God's overruling providence, believed that even this tragedy could be a blessing in disguise," if, that is, a new beginning would "emerge from the ashes of the old" (pg. 415).

In every case so far, and a revealing exception is yet to come, the word providence has been used in connection with something new and, almost always, either dramatic or inexplicable. Almost always it involves a spiritual new start. It is beginnings that are mysterious. No doubt God is at work all the time, but it is new starts that require providence. The ongoingness of things seems not to do so, so far as the text is concerned. I think that this correctly reflects our usual thinking. It is most clearly expressed in the first two paragraphs of page three.

"Redemptive and religious history" is the story of "church renewal and new life." Such a story is an account of "the gracious providence of God." "Social, cultural or economic" events are "conditions" that function as "context" for "religious history." And they, apparently, are to be understood "simply in terms of an historical framework of cause and effect." And yet these two separate "histories," to which different sorts of explanations apply, constantly intersect. Indeed, almost any given event can be one or the other depending on the viewpoint from which it is seen.

This sort of historiography "is of no private interpretation." It follows inevitably from our official Mennonite Brethren presuppositions. But the faithful application of our principles (and they are not ours alone) causes them to stand out in bold relief and so reveals their inadequacy. Indeed, the book has helped me to realize that I do not accept them. To assert that "Jesus Christ is the Lord of history" seems to me to deny that there even is such a thing as "religious history." And it is a denial also that there is a "secular history." If there is one Lord, then there is, simply, --history.

I think it irrational that "secular history" (the social, cultural, and economic) can only function negatively in relation to "religious history." Throughout this book, these factors are used to explain decline. They account for the sorry spiritual state of things in Russia. They explain the "cultural change" to which our "unchanging faith" must be related and which now threatens that faith. But they almost never get any credit for helping God in His work among us or for in fact being that work among us.

Nor do I understand how the appeal to "God's providence" functions as explanation in either "religious" or "secular" history. We normally bring in that concept when we no longer have any "reasonable" explanation. As historian, it seems to me to be a pious way to "throw in the towel." But as one who has been willingly subjected to "vain philosophies," I must confess that I find the "secular framework of cause and effect" to be at least as mysterious as "providence." The rare event is neither more nor less "natural" than the ordinary one. The only difference, I suspect, is that we do not know enough to expect it. But that says something about our dullness of mind, not about the event. In short, I do not understand "ordinary" events either. But, like the rest of you, I hide that fact from myself by taking them for granted. "We believe that we may understand." The Christian thinkers who worked that out knew that it applied equally well to unbeliefs, and it applies to every science--even to physics--and especially to history. It is my belief that it applies as much to sociology and economics as to theology.

It was a bit dishonest of me to use that loaded phrase "vain philosophies." The biblical reference is not to what we mean by "philosophy." It refers precisely to the kind of thinking that asserted that God was the author only of "new beginnings" in "religious history." The source of the trouble in Colossae was a gnosticizing that was current in that world. They thought that spirits and demons accounted for the ordinary. The great high God could not be bothered with the picayune. The modern versions of this for modern man-the-maker types have not changed that much. "Natural Law" now does the work of spirits but is no less mysterious than they. And there is only one really logical place left for God. He is needed, if at all, to get the whole thing (and other new beginnings?) started. Deism is the logical theology for man-the-maker dualisms.

That I can say all this testifies to several things. In the first place, I too have adopted a stance, a metaphor, and it may be that I have misunderstood it. It is certain that I do not fully know the difficulties that may attend it. I too am to be judged, and of that I am more than a little afraid. But, in the second place, I think that many of you do essentially agree with me.

The first two sentences of the Preface tell us that the beginnings of this book, the vision for this sort of history, came from the Board of Reference and Counsel and the Board of Christian Literature. J. A. Toews accepted the assignment from them despite "serious apprehensions." The last sentence of the Preface reads, "Above all I am grateful to God who in His gracious providence gave the necessary strength to complete the task." The single exception in his use of Providence is in its single reference to himself. The ordinary experience of strength and health to do one's daily task is surely a part of ordinary history. But he knows, and all of us know it when we stop to think, that it is every bit as much a special gift of God as was the "sudden" appearance of Quest in southern Russia. The Creator sustains what He creates and redeems what He sustains. So sure of this were older theologians that some of them could even describe that Sustenance as an every moment re-creation of the whole. Indeed, I think that it makes as much sense, and as little, to reverse our ordinary judgments. Someone, in the normal course of events, got the idea that someone else should write a book. Then God gave continued grace for its writing. Is this not a parable for other things? In the normal course of events in cultural history, an idea surfaced. And God looked down, noticed it, and said to the Holy Spirit, "Oh! Oh! There are eighteen hot-heads down there doing it again. Before they totally blow up things, let's get down there and work together with them to bring some good to pass out of it all." In any case, the sustaining is no less a miracle than the creating. Many of us have learned that this is so in our own relationships to God. In practice, we have ceased to believe and to live out our profoundest, and proudest, heresies. But we forget this when we put our "official voice" to speak accredited "public truths." And that, too, is normative for Mennonite Brethren leaders. I suspect that many of you do not yet know that you do not believe them.

6. OUR OFFICIAL IDEAL, AND THE METAPHOR UPON WHICH IT IS BASED, DOES NOT REFLECT THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT US. We all know that we have not lived up to the best of the ideals that we profess. What many of us do not yet know is that our stated ideals have neither produced nor accounted for the lives of the best among us. It came as a revelation to me when I finally realized that my father was a far better man than the theology he preached. Or, better put, the real theology he lived from and intended was poorly expressed in the rhetoric he had been taught.

6.1 A HISTORIAN KNOWS THAT WHAT WE HAVE SAID ABOUT OURSELVES DISTORTS THE TRUTH. We all tend to talk about the things that are still questions for us, either the things we are not yet clear about or the things we are clear about but have not yet made our own. For example, a future historian sorting out the charred remains of the popular church literature of the twentieth century might well notice that in the 1970's there was much more said about the importance of the family than seemed to be the case in earlier decades. Is he to conclude from this that family life was then becoming better? "Methinks he doth protest too much" is an appropriate scepticism for all those areas in which our records are very insistent and where we continue to react a bit too quickly and too loudly. Our insistence on conversion, on evangelism, and on biblicalism is obviously suspect.

6.2 A HISTORIAN KNOWS THAT THE RECORDS OF WHAT WE HAVE SAID ABOUT OURSELVES HIDE MUCH TRUTH. We do not talk about the things we so assuredly are that we can take them for granted. Indeed, one might argue that we seldom or never bother to think about that which most deeply characterizes us. It may be that the most difficult job of the philosopher, the theologian, and the social scientist is to discover those truths that are so obvious that everyone has forgotten what they are.

J. A. Toews knows the social, ethnic, side of us. And I think that many passages show his love and concern for these, our hidden parts. Although this side was not intended to be stressed, he knows that it must at times be discussed in order to explain what happened in our churchly side. But, even so, much that is most deeply true of us has been left unsaid. Someone who had only this book by which to understand us would almost have to read between the lines to discover that Mennonite Brethren lived in families. According to the index, "family" is first mentioned when the effects of urbanization and television are discussed. There are four very brief mentions after that, only two of which apply to either Russian or North American Mennonites. For that matter, except for the kissing problem in the early years and for missionaries, one would scarcely guess that there were sisters among the brothers. The index names ten women: six were missionaries, three wrote something, and one was Katherine II of Russia. Some others were named in the text who were not indexed, especially in the chapter on missions. So far as one could learn from the book, women were rarities in the Mennonite communities, existing only as a Mrs. So-and-So unless she was a missionary or had worked on a book. Since I believe that the sources have been faithfully reflected, I assume that neither the quality of family life nor the status of women was considered by those who left the records to be either an M. B. distinctive or a special problem. But surely this does not mean that the quality of our family life and the character of the women are irrelevant to our self-understanding. What I think it means is that these aspects were considered to be either irrelevant or were taken for granted so far as our appearance in the public sphere was concerned. The man spoke when we spoke "officially" in and of the church and to the world, unless the audience consisted of "benighted heathen."

But how would an interested non-ethnic know the importance of the extended family and clan among us? How could he guess the myriad ways that these ties gave us psychic strength and influenced our obediences and our ability both to attract others and to repel them? Unless he had studied the patterns of ethnic adjustment to North America among other immigrants, how could he hope to understand our transition from a sense of superiority to self-doubt and, even, from self-hatred to a still tentative but growing feeling of our right to be American? Without a feel for earth being turned by the plow how can I expect my own city-born children to understand the profound relationship that existed between "Bibel und Pflug"? And how can anyone understand anything if he does not have at least a passing feel for Low German?

I reject the idea that our "ethnic oddities" are more culture-bound than our theology or that our thinking is more exempt from the effects of sin than is our daily living. Even if God is ever the same, our thinking about Him changes. Our truths may point to the Truth, but all our words are time-bound cultural artifacts. I know of no proposition in theology that inerrantly and unchangeably communicates what it was shaped to signify. God is as truly revealed by our unofficial side as He is in our preaching.

A year ago I foolishly agreed to teach a course in Mennonite Brethren history. Since I knew even less than I do now, I knew better than to set up as an expert. And so I ignored the standard approaches. Moreover, there were a number of young "sceptics" in that class. Instinctively, they, like many of us, are revolting against the heresies of man-the-maker. Our official pieties would only have increased their scepticism. And so I invited a stream of the saints among us to come and talk about themselves. We asked those visitors about the games they played and the way they lived and worked and thought. They described the farm and the shape of their conversions. And we were haunted by the loveliness we saw. We saw a holiness that was more a result of family and clan, and of land and work, than it was of our official pieties and theologies. We found incarnations,

not empty ideals or bloodless concepts. We sensed that reality is more profound than all the ways and metaphors we find to talk about it. We found that we have limitations, but we discovered that even our most unlikely curiosities can be vehicles of grace. Any attempt to hold on to our own youth that does not begin with living people has forfeited the game before it starts. Any Christian who does not understand that the Christ had to come as flesh, as the living, culture-bound Jesus, is a heretic. Whoever does not understand that the Gospel is more a story than a set of propositions is selling himself to the spirit of this age.

We have often been less than the things we said about ourselves. But we have always been much more. And we have been healthiest when we lived out of more metaphors than one. Our elders spoke about their new ideals. They were right to do so. But they did not forsake the older structures by which they had lived. The new had not done away with the old, and so the strengths of the old could nourish the new and keep it from becoming everything. But more and more we have tended to become the things we talked about. And so we lost the old that we either took for granted or were ashamed of. When we shall have succeeded in fully remaking ourselves in the image of our public pieties and our official truths, we shall have turned them into an empty husk, a shrill ideology, and an idolatry that damns us.

7. BUT WHAT SHALL WE DO? One thing that we can do is to set our hearts to tell the story again. Not the official story. That has been done. Now we must shape a drama that sings the truth which cannot literally be said. So far, the only serious historian among us of this sort is Rudy Wiebe. But there are other ways than his to tell it.

We cannot expect much from our official leaders. They have become who they are because we have rewarded those who most completely embodied the official wisdom. We have elevated those who have despised or never understood the private parts, the quiet incarnations, the beautiful old songs. That is not completely true. Some of the older ones and some of the younger too have not been wholly shaped by the way we talked. They too are now horrified to discover that their concentration on the many good things that they said and did has helped to undermine the wholeness that we were. And so I appeal to those of you who remember that wholeness to meditate upon it and to tell us how it came to be. If you do not then we, or our children, will have to discover the meaning of wholeness somewhere else.

But I fear it is too late. The new community cannot be based upon our single metaphor. Nor can it be based upon Low German and centennial celebrations. And so I will celebrate with those who begin again. I believe that God is working in all places to bring His will to pass. Somewhere, hidden by the confusions of this time-between-the-times a new pattern with a promise will be born. I pray that my children will find it. And if I do not join them, I hope that they will recognize in me one who could not celebrate new incarnations if I did not celebrate the old.