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KEEPING BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER IN CHURCH HISTORY

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[The author has] chosen to tell their [the congregations] inner spiritual history in large measure through the institutions they have created. However, throughout the story he shows a strong awareness of the political, social, and cultural forces that have influenced the life and witness of the church - A. J. Klassen.\*

My first word to this Symposium must be one of enthusiastic endorsement for this timely dialogue, probably somewhat of a precedent. Both, Author J. A. Toews and the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies are to be commended for this innovative undertaking so soon after publication. It may be a difficult exercise, but it should also prove rewarding for all concerned.

Secondly, a word of apology and explanation. The choice of my particular topic was influenced as much by the first and third purposes of the Symposium as by the particular emphasis anticipated for this afternoon session. My presentation will relate to the topic, though not as immediately or as explicitly as may have been hoped. I simply felt I should say in this context what was bubbling to the surface within me. Those purposes were stated as follows:

1. To examine the new History of the Mennonite Brethren Church by John A. Toews, evaluate its interpretations of the rise and development of the Mennonite Brethren Church; use the book to provide a framework for the examination of current issues facing the brotherhood; evaluate possible directions for the future.
2. Clarify the research tasks facing the Mennonite Brethren community and stimulate energies toward more denominational analysis.

I

With respect to the chosen topic, my first task is to define what is meant by the soul and the body of the church in history. By soul we simply mean the real life of the church, its spiritual essence, or its true self expressed in thoughts, attitudes, relations, and deeds. The body is the social vehicle or the social context expressed in terms of time and space which gives the soul the flesh to become incarnate in history. The body can be defined very narrowly or quite broadly. The body is both, the institution(s) of the denomination as well as the total environment to which the church relates. The latter may be

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\*J. A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, 1974), p. viii.

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defined to include the whole of culture in a given period of history and/or in a given geographic area. It may, on the other hand, be limited to various contexts of the larger Christian church to which the denomination is related: all the "Christian churches," or all the Protestants, or all the evangelicals, or all the Mennonites.

This paper will assume both a narrower and a broader option for the church historian and that a credible history must bring body and soul together on at least some level. It will further suggest that the larger the bodily framework, the greater is the potential for a really good history, provided the soul is seen as a truly integrated part of the framework.

## II

Keeping the body and soul together has been at least as problematic in church history, if not more so, as it has been in the theology of the church. Whenever theology failed to acknowledge the relation or to achieve integration between body and soul, history tended to follow the patterns of life and thought that had been set. But even where theology was holistic, we have not always been able to put it all together. Indeed, church historians have even failed to acknowledge the integrated experience brought about from without by the sociological conditions of the world or from within by the psychological inclinations of man.

By sociological conditions are meant those situations when the external environment overcame the church. Quite frequently in history the state and the surrounding society have happily incorporated the church into its life as a useful institution and as necessary social cement. By psychological inclinations are meant the internal environment of the church which needed for its soul an external reference point. Again, not infrequently this need of the church has been met in a response to the culture surrounding it (be it the Mennonite colony commonwealth or the American nation), which became flesh and form for the soul.

The result, of both sociological and psychological tendencies, was more a civil religion than a Christian ekklesia; but be that as it may, the church historian who discovers that the bringing together of body and soul has produced a civil religion is the better historian for reporting and analyzing it. For him at least the soul of religion does not appear in a social vacuum. He at least has recognized that the true soul of the church cannot be portrayed historically without some form of incarnation.

## III

There are at least two major facts that have militated against a profound analysis of the body-soul relationships in the history of the church. The one is theological, the other institutional. A particular theological problem has arisen from "the separation of church and state." Whereas the doctrine originally meant that the state had no authority over religion and the conscience of man, it came to mean that the church had no business in the affairs of the state and, to the largest extent, in the affairs of society. Sunday was separated from Monday, religion from business and leisure, and the personal gospel from the social gospel. In the process the soul was separated from the body. The result was a perception of the church with a rather fragmented if not

completely malformed body. The consequences for historiography were tragic deformities of all kinds, not least the failure to realize that the soul will be incarnated if not in theologically "correct" patterns then in heretical forms.

The North American institutional phenomenon known as the denomination has also side-tracked the ordinary church historian from real church history. On the one hand, it prevented him from properly describing and analyzing domesticated or civil religion and, on the other hand, from uncovering whatever prophetic religion, meaning real encounter between a vital church and a decadent society, there may have been.

The denominational institution(s) had so much form and substance of their own and placed so much demand on the spiritual energy of the church, that historians could easily limit the body of the church to those institutions. The tendency, thus to limit the history of the church to the church structures was helped along by the secular historians, whose perception of the human story was likewise terribly truncated. More often than not they too failed to recognize not only the significant historical presence of the church institutions but also the powerful social influence of the religious idea. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, and more and more histories are being written that have more to say about man than the marching of armies and the parade of kings.

In defense of the church historian it can be said that his task often was to fill in the missing pieces left by the secular chronicles, to complete the human puzzles as it were. However, historical gaps are not filled by writing missing parts in isolation, even if the parts are legion. If the pegs of the historical landscape do not fit the holes, the histories remain incomplete.

The problem of the denominational historian is amplified to the extent that he dissects his own institutions ever so many times into ever so many parts without ever finding those parts in their unity. The readers of history then are like that group of blind commentators on the elephant, each of whom had a good feel for either the leg, or the tail, or the trunk, or the side, but none of whom had any idea of the whole elephant. And history itself becomes like Ezekiel's valley of dry, widely scattered and unconnected, bones. The chapters of history may in the nature of encyclopaedias collect these bones into piles, but the question still remains: Can these bones live? Will they take on flesh? And is a spirit alive in that flesh?

#### IV

Knowing Toews, his person, his theology, and his grasp of the historian's task, I knew that we would get from him not only disconnected bones, but flesh and spirit. Not only literary flesh (that to be sure!), and not only spirituality, but in a very real sense the pilgrimage of a people in this world, through this world, trying to reshape that world in the image of God's kingdom. I must confess I was somewhat taken aback when the very first page of the book bounced these words back at me:

Church renewal and new life movements cannot be explained simply in terms of an historical framework of cause and effect. An understanding of events in redemptive and religious history requires more than an analysis or evaluation of social, cultural, or economic conditions in the context of which these events occurred (p. 31).

In the first place, it wasn't clear with which of the previous histories or historians he was arguing. Secondly, I said to myself, momentarily conceding his point, that an understanding of events indeed requires "more than an analysis or evaluation of social, cultural, or economic conditions in the context of which these events occurred." But the "more" must be an additive not a substitute. It is true for us believers that the Lord of the church is above and beyond history, but it does not follow that the church is outside of that history, not before a renewal, not during it, and not after it. Fortunately, for my continued friendship with Toews, his text revealed an abundance of connecting points, where in his analysis the body and soul of the church came together. Let me cite a few examples from the first part of the book in the chronological order of their appearance:

The growing pressure of Prussian militarism under Frederick the Great made it increasingly difficult for the non-resistant Mennonites to remain loyal to their convictions (p. 14).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the far-sighted land settlement policy of Catherine II of "All the Russians" (as expressed in the Manifesto of 1763) was interpreted by many Mennonites as a special manifestation of divine providence (p. 14).

Economic conditions also played a decisive role in shaping the social and religious life of the colonies (p. 18).

Given these geographical, political, economic, and social conditions, it is not surprising that religious life and ethical practices gradually declined (pp. 18-19).

This low level of morals and spirituality cannot simply be explained in terms of socio-economic conditions described earlier (p. 19).

Hence the stage was set for a Mennonite spiritual and cultural exclusivism, and for the development of a territorial church (Landeskirche) in which church membership and citizenship were coextensive. Although the elders and ministers continued to be orthodox in their views of salvation and the nature of the church, in practice they began to surrender or compromise basic biblical principles. A serious "credibility gap" developed between formal confession and actual practice. In many instances baptism seemed to be more a civil than a religious rite, since it enabled young people to get married (pp. 20-21).

Between 1820 and 1850 the Mennonites of South Russia went through a kind of Kulturkampf of their own (p. 23).

The fact that the ministers and elders belonged almost exclusively to the wealthier class of the landed farmers, added a tragic dimension to this problem (p. 23).

Wuest was an outstanding preacher: tall, good physique, endowed with a powerful, melodious voice, and well trained in the art of communication. He had an attractive, winsome personality, but also strong Christian convictions, and people who had contact with him either

loved him or hated him--depending on their attitude toward Christ (p. 30).

It is important, however, to see this religious ferment in its social, historical, and theological context in order to understand it properly (p. 51).

That the Mennonite Brethren did not chiefly belong to the landless group can be seen from a resolution of the church which stipulated that members should abstain from any involvement on either side of the landless-landowner conflict. Thus it would appear that although economic conditions may have contributed to the religious restlessness of that period, their primary significance cannot be established (p. 52).

The spiritual ferment in the early Mennonite Brethren movement is closely connected with several questions related to the organization and practice of the church (p. 52).

The two decades following the period of storm and stress (1860-65) were marked, on the one hand, by increased stabilization and maturity in the inner life and organizational structure of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and on the other by rapid growth and expansion into new geographical areas. This is the period in which the "landless problem" was finally solved by the division of crown lands and the purchase of large tracts of land for daughter colonies (p. 69).

This is also the period in which the earlier isolation of the Mennonite Brethren from the rest of the Mennonites, as well as their withdrawal from public affairs, comes to an end. Increasingly Mennonite Brethren become involved often in positions of leadership, in the socio-economic and cultural life of the larger Mennonite community (p. 86).

The winds of change that affected all social and political structures in the Russian empire after the abortive revolution of 1905, also influenced inter-Mennonite relationships, although indirectly (p. 102).

The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on that day triggered off a series of events: war, revolution, terror, famine, emigration, deportation, and suffering unprecedented in modern history. These events also shook the religious and economic foundations of Mennonite life in the Russian Empire (p. 106).

A group of young men, including Dyck, organized a society for the distribution of Gospels, New Testaments, and tracts among the Russian soldiers. Dyck hailed the March Revolution (1917) as the dawn of a new day of religious freedom and of new missionary opportunities (p. 117).

This portrayal of the Mennonite Brethren soul contextually, in given periods of time and in specific areas of space, not only makes the history more dramatic and interesting, but it undoubtedly also makes the history more true. What is true in the portrait of personalities, is true also in the characterization of a people. Let me give an example with reference to

Evangelist Wuest (p. 30). We are told first that "he had come to a genuine experience of forgiveness of sins and a joyous assurance of salvation" and secondly, that he "was an outstanding preacher: tall, good physique, endowed with a powerful, melodious voice, and well trained in the art of communication. He had an attractive, winsome, personality, but also strong Christian convictions . . . people . . . either loved him or hated him." It is obvious, to me at least, that the latter is more revealing about the man than is the former. Cliche aside, one needs more than an abstraction to touch the soul. Historically soul appears only in the earthen vessel of the body.

So it is with the whole church. By seeing the church in the eras of reform and revolution, by identifying both the loves and the hates, and by describing its life and death struggles we experience the soul of the church bodily, as it were. All the related institutional data is necessary and useful, but it is only a fraction of the church's body.

## V

Also in the second section the author tries to reveal the soul contextually. Let me cite some specific examples:

It should be remembered that for the Mennonites a primary motive for leaving Russia was the desire to preserve the principle of non-resistance which was threatened by the Imperial Decree of 1870 (p. 130).

The history of the founding, growth, and development of all M.B. congregations in North America transcend the purpose of this book. The following representative local congregations reflect economic, social, cultural, and religious trends or problems of earlier and later periods in Mennonite Brethren history (p. 133).

For many of these pilgrims who had gone through the wilderness experience of war, revolution, famine, confiscation of property and the restriction of religious freedom, Canada appeared to be in a very literal sense the "promised land," and so they affectionately called it "Canaan" (p. 152).

In retrospect it would appear that a certain "cultural narrowness," although sincerely motivated, may have been one of the factors that retarded the expansion of the group through the years. Paradoxically enough, this ethical conservatism was combined with an exemplary zeal in evangelism and missions which found expression in the founding of charitable institutions and in the commissioning of workers of many areas of the world (p. 185).

In 1924 the conference gave expression to its conviction that relief and social concern are an integral part of its mission by electing a seven-member relief committee. This was the birth of the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations which took its legitimate place alongside the Board of Foreign Missions and other boards of the Mennonite Brethren Conference (pp. 204-205).

Cultural pressures and spiritual needs of congregations in an urban environment precipitated many changes, including changes in the role and function of the ministry (p. 308).

A changing culture demands a periodic reevaluation of the Christian response to various social, economic, and political issues (p. 323).

It would thus appear, that as congregations become more "acculturated," they are increasingly tempted to surrender their spiritual heritage and their confessional identity. There is a greater pressure in the urban environment to conform to the common ethical norms and practices of the community, or of other churches (pp. 334-335).

The relationship between the profession of a "left-wing" Reformation theology and the adherence to a "right-wing" political philosophy needs further examination and study (p. 345).

As Christians who give their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ and his kingdom, Mennonite Brethren can make one of their greatest contributions to state and society through intercessory prayer and ministries of compassion (p. 360).

The search of the early Brethren for biblical patterns and principles for the fellowship of believers did not occur in a theological vacuum, however, but in a definite church-related and historical context (p. 362).

However, in some areas this "spirit" has weakened the structure and has led to a lack of emphasis on Christian discipleship, church ordinances and social concerns (p. 366).

In the past (and in some churches in the present) this evangelistic emphasis has not always been properly related to social concerns. Mennonite Brethren have occasionally been charged with being indifferent to the material needs of men. They were interested, critics have said, in saving souls, not in saving people (p. 373).

As a result of socio-economic conditions described in Part One, Mennonite Brethren cooperated with the "churchly" Mennonites in public education, general welfare, and alternative service (p. 381).

Great and revolutionary changes have taken place in India since the country achieved independence in 1947. A rising nationalism and opposition to foreign influence have also affected the pattern of M.B. missionary involvement in India. In God's providence these winds of change have aided in the indigenization of the M.B. Church in that country (p. 404).

Slowly the rebels were pushed back by government forces. The national church went through a period of reorientation and repentance since some members had participated in this movement of militant nationalism (p. 415).

At a large rally in Filadelfia in July, 1966, "Johann Giesbrecht," one of the first Lengua converts, gave this testimony: "The Mennonites have not only brought the gospel to us; they have also shown us a whole new way of life (p. 425).

In 1958 a new day dawned for evangelical missions in Columbia when the Liberal party came into office in the national elections. The persecution had proved to be a blessing in disguise, purifying the Christian churches and changing the course of national politics (p. 436).

This section reveals a handicap not present in the first section. It is primarily due to a change in the organizational scheme. Instead of moving the church as a whole chronologically through the struggles in given historical situations, the author chooses a series of relevant topics, usually institutionally oriented, and then traces those particular institutional histories, usually over the full period of 115 years.

All of this is comprehensively, reliably, and interestingly done. The parts of the elephant appear in all their beauty and the bones of the various limbs are en fleshed and moving. Within the parts, the author recognizes the soul struggle with the principalities and powers and that body and soul are indeed inter-related. In my opinion this relation comes through at its best in "Organization for United Action" (Chapter 13).

Generally though, it is left to the reader to try to understand what the whole church was like in given periods of time, as for instance the war, inter-war, and post-war periods. Without the chronological organization it is almost impossible to see the parts within the whole.

## VI

Even with this criticism, however, our author has taken a major step forward in the contextual writing of history, complete with the most essential raw institutional data. Future historians--he surely will himself be one of them--will build on this foundation. For the most part they will be free to do the analytical exercise, the chore of the data-gathering having to the largest extent been completed. That exercise as difficult as the first will, in my opinion, lead to the following considerations:

1) A clearer integration of Mennonite Brethren history around a central theme or themes. In our emphasis on the need for body, we must not overlook the need for a single soul in the form of a dominant theme. Unity begins not with the body but with the soul. Author Toews has already identified one of the most plausible themes, when he says: "A survey of conference periodicals, yearbooks, and other literature leads one to the conclusion that no other subject has received as much attention among Mennonite Brethren as missions and evangelism" (p. 373).

In the light of this fact, and given the title of the book, it is somewhat jarring to discover the younger churches treated largely as an appendix. Even the statistical overview, immediately following, ignores them. Apart from this treatment of the younger churches, numerically the larger part of the church, the author recognizes the mission theme throughout, but usually departs from it as a center or as a stream along which the whole Mennonite Brethren movement in the last century of world history might be perceived.

2) A more vigorous interaction between the spirit of the age and the spirit of the church. Very significant changes have come to the church in the North American environment. In fact, as the old separation and isolation disappeared, the new Mennonite synthesis, including that of the Mennonite

Brethren, assimilated many outside influences of all kinds. This type of body-soul togetherness must become more evident in later histories of the church.

3) A meaningful identification of historical periods. Since the spirit of the age must be identified in terms of cultural phenomenon in given periods (i.e. roaring twenties, depression, war, television, Vietnam, energy, mass evangelism), an attempt should be made to discover the total spirit or soul of the church in terms of such periods. In the writing of history, one must find the right balance between length of a particular treatment and the breadth. One can make the time period too short and a topic too broad, but I am sure that 115 years is too long a time and "publishing" (to give one example) too narrow a topic to stretch out a century and still get real history out of it.

4) Institutional dynamics. Institutional history itself is not to be rejected. On the contrary, to ignore it would be to leave an important part of the body untouched and church history incomplete. But history, if it is to be more than an encyclopaedia, must deal with institutional dynamics lest the soul of the church appear to be dead. Future historians can take this into account.

5) Religious movements are idea-movements. The author has written the theological history of the church with broad strokes. Building on this foundation, more can and will be done to probe the many ideological and ethical cross-currents that have affected the Mennonite Brethren historical experience. Here again, the significance of the soul in historical body-soul relationship becomes apparent.

Thus, we see that the historian who would keep body and soul together must not only look outward for the visible forms but also inward for a more profound understanding of the spiritual essence. But he may not look in any one direction alone or for too long because the phenomena which he must understand and integrate are many and varied. Actually, no single historian can grasp it all in one undertaking or even in a lifetime, and this is why history is a demanding, though delightful, never-ending process.

In conclusion I want to acknowledge that this event is for me, as for you, more than an academic exercise. It is a time of fellowship and mutual recognition. In that spirit I quote from some earlier editorial paragraphs entitled "A Century of Life," (The Canadian Mennonite, VII (January 2, 1959), p. 2):

The opening of the Mennonite Brethren Centennial will draw various comments from historians, churchmen, and laymen alike. More will probably be said about the first year than the hundredth year of the denomination. Much that will be said about the first year will represent two extreme points of view.

But that is history and must be left to historical judgement. The fact of the matter is that we have at our hands now the centennial year and the hundredth birthday of a vigorous and spiritual denomination.

Speaking not for Russia, the United States, or South America, or any of the mission fields, but for the Canadian situation alone,

an honest evaluation calls for a genuine appreciation for the Mennonite Brethren achievement.

There is not another Mennonite denomination in Canada that during the last thirty years has with a proportionate membership seen such a record of growth, spiritual witness, and outreach. They have led the way in stewardship, education, evangelism, foreign missions, Biblical teaching, and a consistent emphasis on regeneration and the believers' church, not only in theory but also in practice. Their precise and accurate handling of congregational and conference affairs remains a lofty ideal for most of their sister denominations.

So at the opening of the centennial year, may the traditional criticism of spiritual pride, Pharisaic dogmatism, excessive emotionalism, and narrow denominationalism be forgotten on the part of sister Mennonite groups, and may they reach out their hand of warm congratulation and spiritual greeting as a debt of gratitude for leading the way in many areas.

We covet for the Mennonite Brethren for their centennial year all the blessings of thanksgiving and self-examination which they themselves desire. May the third and fourth generation spiritual recession feared by so many, not come true, and where it may have already begun, may it be reversed, for the greater glory of God and the increased fellowship and witness of Christians everywhere.