Mennonite Metaphysics?
Exploring the Philosophical Aspects of Mennonite Theology from Pacifist Epistemology to Ontological Peace

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Abstract: This study traces the history of the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy from its early stages in the work of Ralph C. Kauffman and Robert Friedmann, through the differing attitudes toward theological resourcing of philosophy in the works of John Howard Yoder and A. James Reimer, to recent efforts to bring Yoder into conversation with contemporary philosophers. The essay first addresses the supposed contradictions between Mennonite identity and philosophy, and then—drawing on the work of J. Lawrence Burkholder, Chris Huebner, and Peter Blum—it explores the ways in which these contradictions are both resolved and sustained in the conjugation of Mennonite peace theology and philosophy that constitutes pacifist epistemology and its extension to ontology in the debate with Radical Orthodoxy. The study concludes with an examination of pacifist epistemology and the debate between Radical Reformation thinking and Radical Orthodoxy.

> "There is a certain antithesis between being philosophical and being Mennonite."
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> – Ralph C. Kauffman (1943)[1]

In a 1943 essay titled "The Philosophical Aspects of Mennonitism"—likely the first modern essay to explicitly address the role of philosophy in Mennonite thought—Ralph C. Kauffman, a professor of psychology at Bethel College, argued that an "antithesis" existed between philosophical ways of thinking and traditional Mennonite ways of thinking. More than

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1. Ralph C. Kauffman, "The Philosophical Aspects of Mennonitism," in *The Curricula of Mennonite Colleges: Proceedings of the Second Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems, Goshen, Indiana, July 22-23, 1942*, ed. P. S. Goertz (Goshen: Council of Mennonite and Affiliated Colleges, 1943), 113-126.

addressing specific questions of Mennonite identity or popular understandings of what is philosophical, Kauffman's concern focused on the contradictory relationship between the Mennonite theology of his day and the discipline of philosophy.[2] This contradiction was not accidental, particularly in light of the historical ways Mennonite theologians had resisted worldly or intellectual pursuits like philosophy.[3] Kauffman further argued that despite the ways in which Mennonite theology and philosophy were at odds, Mennonite theologians of his time nonetheless employed a philosophical kind of reason that did not rely purely on revelation or a strict appeal to biblical authority.

To be sure, the use of reason alone is not always philosophical—there are also many theological, biblical, or historical ways of reasoning, and Mennonites have long been familiar with these methods of legitimating knowledge or giving reasons for beliefs. Yet in contrast to these other visions of reason, to cite just one example, in 1929 both the Mennonite theologian Harold S. Bender and professor of philosophy at Goshen College Gustav H. Enss emphasized a fundamental conflict between philosophy and theology, arguing that theology affirms the truth of revelation, while philosophy rejects it.[4]

This present study follows Kauffman's inclination and proceeds from his suspicion that this contradiction is only a surface appearance that conceals points of accord and continuity between Mennonite theology and

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2. One of the most interesting recent interventions in the long conversation on Mennonite identity can be found in Robert Zacharias, "The Mennonite Thing: Identity for a Post-Identity Age," in *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America*, ed. Robert Zacharias (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015). In the essay Zacharias names the "distancing gestures (irony, self-consciousness, and so on)" that occur in Mennonite writing on Mennonite identity, and challenges the "conceit of an essential, static, and authentic Mennonite identity expressed through (but not reducible to) stereotypical markers of Mennonite culture, language, and faith" (107-108). Through his analysis of poetry and criticism, from Jeff Gundy to Julia Kasdorf, Zacharias explores "how identity continues to function even when we do not 'believe' in it" (116). This continues the work he began in the introduction in which he situates the essays in a post-identity age in which the concept of identity as the relationship between individual and social being is both fragmenting and persisting (5). This is the delicate sense in which I understand Mennonite identity in the present essay, as I refer most often to Mennonite theology as one particular expression of Mennonite identity—an expression that may seek to further Mennonite identity or may involve thinkers who happen to be Mennonites pursuing different scholarly aims. For another collection that deals with the question of Mennonite identity in all of its multiplicity and complexity, see *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1988).

3. See the entry on "Philosophy of Religion," in *Mennonite Cyclopedic Dictionary: A Compendium of the Doctrines, History, Activities, Literature, and Environments of the Mennonite Church, Especially in America,* ed. Daniel Kauffman (Scottdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1937), 290.

4. Harold S. Bender, "Editorial," and Gustav H. Enss, "The Relation of Philosophy to Christian Theology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1929), 159-168, esp. 161.

philosophical approaches to metaphysics and its sub-disciplines of epistemology and ontology. In order to explore these emerging connections this article presents a brief history of the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy—insofar as the two can be understood discretely—arguing that the tension between the two is partially resolved and partially sustained in the conjugation of Mennonite peace theology with certain strains of philosophy as found in the recent discussions on pacifist epistemology and ontological peace. This presentation of the history of this relationship—including its contradictions and tensions—concludes with a critical examination of pacifist epistemology and ontological peace while suggesting areas for further reflection on the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy.

MENNONITES AND PHILOSOPHY

The epigraph from Kauffman sets before us an antithesis that many Mennonite theologians have maintained and perpetuated in various ways since the turn of the century. Lesser-known Mennonite thinkers like Don Wiebe and Delbert Wiens, for example, have both reflected on the anti-philosophical and anti-intellectual tendency in Mennonite thinking while also attempting to show an underlying countercurrent of philosophical Mennonite thinking—Wiebe by critiquing the "impoverishment" of the Mennonite mind, and Wiens by delving deep into the archives of *Mennonite Life* to find articles by John E. Hartzler and Maynard Kaufman that each call for a philosophical reading of Mennonite thought.[5] Thus, over a decade after Kauffman's essay on "The Philosophical Aspects of Mennonitism," Maynard Kaufman wrote a series of articles that drew parallels between Anabaptism and existentialist philosophy, making the first mention of pacifist epistemology. He also drew on the writings of Robert Friedmann, whose philosophically-influenced book *The Theology of Anabaptism* would be published after Friedmann's death in 1970.[6] Friedmann's existential interpretation of Anabaptism will be familiar to many, especially his argument that Anabaptism is not a theology but a lived practice. In *The Theology of Anabaptism* Friedmann argued that:

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5. See Don Wiebe, "Philosophical Reflections on Twentieth Century Mennonite Thought" in *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980) and Delbert Wiens, "Philosophy and Mennonite Self-Understanding" in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Calvin W. Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988), 137-146, 117-136.

6. Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973). Cf. P. Travis Kroeker, "Anabaptists and Existential Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review,* 17:2 (Spring 1999), 69-88.

> Anabaptism is the only example in church history of an "existential
> Christianity" where there existed no basic split between faith and life,
> even though the struggle for realization or actualization of this faith
> into practice remained a perennial task.[7]

Although this part of Friedmann's engagement with philosophy may
sound familiar, what may be unfamiliar is that Friedmann prepared
another manuscript called *Design for Living*, consisting of 283 typed pages
of revised lecture notes from a course that he taught at the University of
Michigan.[8]   Dated 1954, the treatise was possibly the first Anabaptist
Mennonite   philosophical   theology,   although   this   designation   is
problematic because Friedmann sought to argue for Anabaptist ideals by
"secular" means rather than by theological means. The existential values
that Friedmann developed in the manuscript are regard, concern, service,
and love; the texts that he cited range from Tolstoy and Gandhi, to Ovid
and Confucius. Yet despite its uniqueness and relevance to contemporary
Mennonite philosophical theology, scholars have rarely paid attention to
Design for Living. One notable exception was J. Lawrence Burkholder's
1989 entry on "Philosophy" in the fifth volume of *Mennonite Encyclopedia*.[9]

It is no coincidence that the initial four volumes of the *Mennonite
Encyclopedia* lacked an entry on philosophy; nor was it a coincidence that
the entry written for the expansion volume in 1989 was penned by a
scholar who found himself at the edges of the orthodox Mennonite fold of
his day.[10] In his entry, Burkholder, a Mennonite ethicist and former college

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7. Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, 27. Friedmann uses the term existential in a
way that is very different from that used by the philosophical or theological existentialists.
Instead of denoting an existentialist theology defined by anxiety, dread, and nihilism,
Friedmann used the word "existential" to indicate a "realized and practiced" faith in the
gospel, which is defined by certainty rather than interior doubt (29). However different
Friedmann's existential Christianity is from the thinkers of existentialism (such as Sartre,
Camus, and Heidegger), and even from the Christian existentialists (such as Jaspers, Marcel,
or Bultmann), he does draw on Kierkegaard and his critique of speculative and objective
ways of thinking. Kierkegaard's radical affirmation of particularity and subjectivity, as
opposed to Hegel's systematic worldview, is where Friedmann finds resonance with
Anabaptism's implicit theology.

8. See Robert Friedmann, *Design for Living,* ed. Maxwell Kennel (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf &
Stock, forthcoming).

9. In between Friedmann's manuscript and Burkholder's entry is an article by Dutch
Mennonite scholar Johannes A. Oosterbaan (1910-1998) in which the author approvingly
cites Heidegger and calls for Mennonites to learn from the wisdom of the world. See
Oosterbaan's "The World in Its Wisdom," *MQR* 36 (July 1962), 179-188; cf. Wiens,
"Philosophy and Mennonite Self-Understanding," 134.

10. The neglect of Burkholder's work in Mennonite theology may, however, be set to
change with the recent appearance of his memoirs, J. Lawrence Burkholder, *Reflections of a
Sectarian Realist: A Mennonite Life in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Myrna Burkholder (Elkhart,
Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2017); and the forthcoming publication of a three-
volume edition of his *Ethics* (Volume 1: *Nonconformity Examined*; Volume 2: *Social*

president, sketched the contours of the relationship between Mennonites and philosophy, and suggested that Mennonites avoided philosophy for several reasons: 1) Mennonites were historically forced to focus on the practical necessities of fleeing persecution; 2) Mennonites have a theological suspicion of the "world"; and 3) Mennonites have considered philosophy to be a "diversion from the single and undivided task of preaching the gospel and of promoting the kingdom of God and the church."[11] These reasons were compounded by Burkholder's further suggestion that Mennonites avoided the metaphysical questions of ontology because of a preference for what is *to be* (apocalyptic), and what *ought to be* (ethics), instead of *what is* (ontology).[12] In this way, Burkholder argued that Mennonites "have cut off philosophy in principle, not simply by accident."[13]

Alongside the rejection of systematic theologies by some Mennonite theologians,[14] the reasons Burkholder identified for rejecting philosophy have, until recently, blinded Mennonite theologians both to the ways in which Mennonites have already been influenced by philosophy and to the ways in which philosophy might become a helpful resource to their work. Burkholder concluded his entry by suggesting that Mennonites were already doing a kind of implicit philosophy without naming it as such. "Mennonites," he wrote, "while having resisted formal philosophy, have in fact upheld values, made choices, maintained chronicles, interpreted histories, and perpetuated lifestyles which, when reflected upon against a universal background, constitute implicitly a philosophy."[15] Philosophy, Burkholder proposed, "could function within the Mennonite community as a source of clarification and meaning."[16] Indeed, in the years since 1989

Responsibility; Volume 3: *The Third Way*), ed. Lauren Friesen (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, forthcoming).

11. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Philosophy." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.*—http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Philosophy &oldid=118611 (accessed May 27, 2015).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. For explanations and justifications of the Mennonite avoidance of systematic theologizing see Marlin Jeschke, "How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology," in *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984); and Gerald Schlabach, "Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder's Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology," *MQR* 71 (April 1997), 305-309. For a notable exception to this tendency see Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 1 (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1985) and vol. 2 (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989); and Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). See the examination of this topic in David Cramer, "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," *Conrad Grebel Review* 31 (Fall 2013), 255-273.

15. Burkholder, "Philosophy."

16. Ibid.

that suggestion has been realized in much contemporary Mennonite theologizing.

Like Kauffman and Friedmann, Burkholder was working with a flexible definition of philosophy, sometimes understanding the term to mean simply an underlying way of thinking (e.g., an implicit epistemology) and sometimes referring to particular philosophers or philosophical schools of thought. Whereas Kauffman positioned Mennonitism against some aspects of American pragmatism, and Friedmann drew upon existentialists in his *Theology of Anabaptism* and other philosophers in *Design for Living*, Burkholder identified the death of metaphysics, the rise of positivism, and, implicitly, the philosophies that structure popular and public knowledge as key issues for Mennonites to consider.

POLITICS AND METAPHYSICS

The traditional Mennonite suspicions of philosophy that Burkholder identified were challenged at the end of the twentieth century by two contrasting voices—John Howard Yoder and A. James Reimer. Yoder's political reading of the gospels has left an indelible mark on Mennonite theology, especially since the publication of his book *The Politics of Jesus*.[17] The expansive body of Yoder's work and his troubling legacy of sexual abuse attest both to the political nature of Christian discipleship and to the centrality of Christian ethics for Mennonite theologians. Reimer contested this traditional focus on Christian ethics in Mennonite theology, at least insofar as it is positioned at the expense of metaphysics. In a landmark essay, "The Nature and Possibility of a Mennonite Theology," Reimer argued that Yoder's political and ethical perspectives betray a "noteworthy anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological bias."[18] Reading *The Politics of Jesus* as being primarily concerned with the social and political aspects of the gospel message, Reimer was attracted to Yoder's focus on the normativity of Jesus, but he disagreed with Yoder's emphasis on the political Jesus at the expense of the metaphysical Christ. "What is less convincing," argued Reimer, "is his [Yoder's] politicization of that message at the expense of other dimensions of the biblical message which can be better described in metaphysical and ontological language than with modern political language."[19] The critical point for Reimer was not that Yoder made the gospel political when it is really metaphysical, but

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17. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

18. A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2001), 168.

19. Ibid.

rather that Yoder over-emphasized the political nature of Jesus and in so doing limited our ability to think and describe the biblical message in metaphysical and ontological terms. Reimer lamented the loss of the concept of radical transcendence and critiqued the anti-ontological and anti-metaphysical character of modernity. For Reimer, the recovery of this transcendence can be achieved only by attending to the creeds, to history, and to the metaphysical truths of the Christian tradition.[20]

It is not my intention to analyze deeply the differences between Yoder and Reimer at this juncture. It is sufficient here to simply note that Yoder established a political emphasis that Reimer sought to correct. Although Reimer was not primarily interested in defending a philosophical reading of Mennonite thought—his metaphysics is thoroughly theological—he nonetheless had a deep interest in philosophy from his early work on Feuerbach to his later essay on Habermas, and he did not hesitate to draw upon philosophical sources and vocabulary.[21] Reimer's openness to philosophy and his engagement with critical theory could not have contrasted more sharply with Yoder's strong suspicion of philosophy. References to philosophy or ontology in Yoder's work are nearly always negative; and even though he offered an interesting critique of Kant's categorical imperative, Yoder did not write positively of philosophy and almost never drew positively upon the works of philosophers.[22]

Unlike the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy this antithetical relationship between Reimer and Yoder in their attitudes toward philosophy did not conceal deeper continuities. To the contrary, it reflected deep differences in their theologies. In some ways, it is strange that the next stage in the developing relationship between Mennonites and philosophy would see substantial engagement with the relationship

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20. In some ways Reimer pursued this work in his posthumously published book *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology* in which he outlines a political theology based on the principles of engagement with civic institutions, forbearance in interreligious dialogue, and the intertwining of the *logos* and the *nomos.*—A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014).

21. In *Mennonites and Classical Theology* Reimer mentioned that his master's research in the 1970s was on Feuerbach (141); close to twenty years later he wrote a paper called "From a Philosophy of Consciousness to a Philosophy of Language: Tillich's 'Logos-Ontology' and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action," in A. James Reimer, *Paul Tillich: Theologian of Nature, Culture and Politics* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004).

22. See John Howard Yoder, *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 41; *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. J. Michael Cartwright (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1998), 56-57; *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), 130.

between Yoder and philosophers, and little engagement with Reimer on any topic.[23]

THE NEW YODER AND PACIFIST EPISTEMOLOGY

For the second generation of Mennonite scholars of Yoder's work, conversations with philosophers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and Virilio became a prominent strategy.[24] As the essays in the anthologies *Power and Practices* (2009) and *The New Yoder* (2010) amply attest, this approach began a new chapter in the history of Mennonites and philosophy because it provided a forum for the positive resourcing of philosophers within the bounds of Mennonite theologizing.[25] The pattern of reading Yoder through the lens of philosophy began in force with Chris Huebner's *A Precarious Peace* (2006), and has continued with Peter Blum's *For a Church to Come* (2013),[26] to more recent works such as John Patrick Koyles's *The Trace of the Face in the Politics of Jesus* and Jamie Pitts's *Powers and Principalities*.[27] These readings often use philosophers to further Yoder's aims, but they also supplement Yoder's work by looking positively on thinkers with whom he probably would have disagreed.

Two threads connected with this new philosophical Yoder scholarship—both representative of the contemporary relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy—are worthy of closer examination: pacifist epistemology, and the debate between Mennonite theologians and Radical Orthodoxy on the ontology of peace.

A Pacifist Way of Knowing (2010), an anthology of John Howard Yoder's epistemologically significant writings edited by Christian Early and Ted

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23. One interesting use of Yoder in the pursuit of metaphysical aims in this general time period is found in the work of Nancy Murphey and George Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

24. *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2009); *The New Yoder*, ed. Peter Dula and Chris K. Huebner (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2010). Another collection, from the previous decade, dealing more broadly with philosophical themes and Mennonite theologies is *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Mast (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press US/Cascadia, 2000). A further engagement with postmodernity in the same series is J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press US/Cascadia, 2000).

25. An important precursor to the philosophical use of Yoder can be found in the influential work of Harry Huebner. See his *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2005).

26. Chris Heubner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2006); and Peter Blum, *For a Church to Come: Experiments in Postmodern Theory and Anabaptist Thought* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2013).

27. Jamie Pitts, *Powers and Principalities: Revising John Howard Yoder's Sociological Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2013); John Patrick Koyles, *The Trace of the Face in the Politics of Jesus: Experimental Comparisons Between the Work of John Howard Yoder and Emmanuel Levinas* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

Grimsrud, makes explicit an idea that seems to lie just beneath the surface of much of Yoder's work.[28] In the epilogue of the volume titled "John Howard Yoder on Diversity as a Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology," the editors provide a succinct description of Yoder's pacifist epistemology. Beginning with the conviction that Christian faithfulness entails the rejection of violence, it follows that the ways in which we hold knowledge and conduct our discourse must also become nonviolent. In light of this, the editors suggest four major ways in which pacifism, in ideal form, must condition epistemology:

1. "As a way of knowing, pacifist epistemology explicitly rejects coercion of the 'other.'"[29] This is embodied as a kind of witness in which "the other as adversary is transformed and re-characterized as friend. Conversation with the other thus becomes irenic rather than agonistic, and cooperative rather than competitive."[30] This means that a pacifist epistemology rejects coercion, regards the other as a friend, and strives to be dialogical.

2. Diversity is not inherently problematic for a pacifist epistemology.[31] In line with his understanding of the Babel story, Yoder understands that "God scattered humans for their own good."[32] Yoder is aware of the realities of pluralism and relativism but desires to "go through and beyond relativism," so that dispersion, diversity, multiplicity, and diaspora are key words for a nonviolent epistemology.[33] A pacifist epistemology affirms multiplicity and tries not to repress the epistemic problems of pluralism and relativism.

3. One way in which Yoder's pacifist epistemology seeks to go through pluralism and relativism, instead of around it, is by rejecting foundationalism and imperialism.[34] The editors of the anthology understand *foundationalism* to be "the epistemology characteristic of modern philosophy following Descartes" and *imperialism* as "the

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28. John Howard Yoder, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Nonviolent Epistemology*, ed. Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2010). For different understandings of pacifist epistemology see Sara Wenger Shenk, *Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Conversation about Tradition-Based Critical Education* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, 2003), and Ted Grimsrud, "A Pacifist Way of Knowing: Postmodern Sensibilities and Peace Theology," *Mennonite Life* 56:1 (March 2001).—www.ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-56-no-1/-article/a-pacifist-way-of-knowing-postmodern-sensibilities/.

29. Christian Early and Ted Grimsrud, "John Howard Yoder on Diversity as a Gift: Epistemology and Eschatology," in Yoder, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing*, 134.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid, 135.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid, 136.

34. Ibid, 137.

epistemology of the establishment."[35] The editors further explain foundationalism as "a social and political move because it seeks to avoid dependency on the assent of the other and bypass vulnerability to the other."[36] Thus, a pacifist epistemology attempts to avoid acquiring or maintaining knowledge through foundational principles or the coercion of political power.

4. Finally, pacifist epistemology sees the Other as inherently part of the "truth-finding process."[37] Not only is the Other someone to be accounted for in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, but that person must be treated as someone vital to that process.

With these four initial principles of a pacifist epistemology in mind, it bears noting that the coincidence of these two terms represents the coincidence of the contradiction with which we began. If Kauffman identified a *contradiction* between Mennonite theology and philosophy, and the debate between Reimer and Yoder turned the contradiction into a *tension*, the pacifist epistemology of the new Yoder scholarship begins to resolve this tension in a very specific way. Pacifist epistemology is a *combination* of the ever-contested Mennonite distinctive of pacifism and the foundational philosophical sub-discipline of epistemology. Although Yoder's pacifist epistemology is a thoroughly theological way of knowing, the ongoing conversation on pacifist epistemology uses philosophical terms and positively draws on the work of philosophers.

This more philosophical expression of pacifist epistemology is found in the work of Chris Huebner, particularly his essay "Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology."[38] In that essay Huebner explores the question of epistemological method and the way in which the "difficult" and "precarious" idea of peace must condition the *medium* of pacifist thinking, as well as its *message*.[39] In the context of globalization Huebner argues against the ways in which pacifist thinking has labored under its own epistemological violence. This violence includes: 1) the separation of form from content in the production of knowledge (with Huebner suggesting instead that knowledge is embodied and lived); 2) the attempt to "secure power and control by means of argument" (suggesting instead a "nomadic" or "diasporic" approach); and 3) the attempt to attain final insular knowledge (suggesting instead that vulnerability and gift-giving

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35. Ibid.

36. Ibid, 138.

37. Ibid, 141.

38. Chris Huebner, "Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology," in *A Precarious Peace*, 97-113.

39. Ibid, 97.

are models for knowledge and discourse that are more faithful to pacifism).[40] Huebner reads Yoder's "ad hoc, dialogical, and unsystematic" approach as an expression of this understanding of peace, and argues for a kind of pacifist hermeneutic that refuses to either "start from scratch" or produce a "final reading."[41] He further defines pacifist epistemology as preferring dialogue to monologue, rejecting "a preoccupation with effectiveness," rejecting abstraction and dualisms, and rejecting narrative as the sole means with which to communicate the gospel message.[42] Huebner reads the various aspects of pacifist epistemology listed above as expressions of a "radical reformation stance [that] involves a dedicated willingness to subject one's own standpoint to criticism and a corresponding attitude of vulnerable openness to new and potentially hostile voices."[43]

The final aspect of pacifist epistemology that Huebner emphasizes, via Yoder, is patience, which is "necessary because conversation takes time and hard work." Patience "is especially important in the interest of hearing all the relevant voices and resisting the violent tendency to silence anyone by virtue of the way that the debate is constructed in advance of actual engagement."[44] Although Huebner does not engage with philosophers at length in the essay, he does make reference to the works of Fredric Jameson, Enrique Dussel, and Edward Said.[45]

CRITIQUES OF PACIFIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Against the backdrop of this outline of pacifist epistemology, drawn from Early and Grimsrud and Huebner's reading of Yoder, we can now turn to a philosophical criticism of the application of pacifism to practices of thinking and knowing. In his article "Why Mennonite Pacifists Should be Reformed Epistemologists," Myron A. Penner, professor of philosophy at Trinity Western University, criticizes pacifist epistemology with a very specific understanding of the warrant and justification of the rejection of

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40. Ibid, 99-100.

41. Ibid, 101.

42. Ibid, 102-104.

43. Ibid, 109. It is important to note that Yoder did not practice this vulnerable openness, but instead disempowered others in specific and important ways that invalidate attempts to restrict discussion of nonviolent epistemology to exegesis of his work. Cf. Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast' Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *MQR* 89 (Jan. 2015), 7-80.

44. Ibid, 110.

45. In his "Patience, Witness, and the Scattered Body of Christ: Yoder and Virilio on Knowledge, Politics and Speed," Huebner looks more closely at Yoder's work on patience alongside the French philosopher Paul Virilio's suggestion that "violence is primarily a function of speed."—*A Precarious Peace*, 119.

violence.[46] Penner's article disputes the idea set forth by Huebner that the principles of modern epistemology are intrinsically violent and should be avoided. Penner suggests that "pacifism is a bold assertion about the way the world is" and he identifies three conditions for pacifist epistemology. These consist of two prohibitions—"don't be inconsistent and don't be 'modernist'"—as well as a positive criterion—namely, "pacifism is the control-belief according to which all other beliefs and epistemic criteria are subordinated."[47] Penner argues that "Pacifist Epistemology doesn't have the resources to give an account for why pacifists should give pacifist beliefs . . . a positive epistemic evaluation." Alvin Plantiga's Reformed epistemology, on the other hand, does provide such a resource because it can show how justified beliefs become justified.[48]

However insightful we might find Penner's general suggestion that not all modern epistemologies are violent, his critique of pacifist epistemology is not convincing. First, pacifist epistemology does indeed give reasons for its positive epistemic view of pacifism by appealing to the gospel and the peace church tradition. Second, pacifist epistemology does not demand consistency in a way that would damage its normative claims if it did not live up to its own standard. Furthermore, as an analytic philosopher Penner writes in ways that contradict the very terms upon which pacifist epistemology rests. By appealing to the critical standards of analytic philosophy, his critique seems to confuse pacifist epistemology with a set of coherent, internally consistent, and propositionally structured syllogisms that must live up to the standard of warrant that separates the certainty of knowledge from true belief. Yet these characteristic qualities of analytic methodology are the sort of discursive patterns that pacifist epistemology rejects—for example, the antagonistic structure of defending, advancing, or attacking arguments or positions.[49] Both the legal resonances of terms like "warrant" or "justification" and the trial-court paradigm that characterize Penner's critique suggest that shared ground between the two methodologies is almost entirely foreclosed.

A more attuned critique of pacifist epistemology as expressed by Early, Grimsrud, and Huebner's readings of Yoder must account for how pacifist epistemology understands itself, thereby holding it to its own standard— namely, the rejection of violence in our ways of thinking and knowing,

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46. Myron A. Penner, "Why Mennonite Pacifists Should be Reformed Epistemologists," *Conrad Grebel Review* 21:2 (Spring 2003), 24-32.

47. Ibid, 24-26.

48 Ibid, 31.

49 Cf. Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence: Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, vol. I (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

extending to the way in which we validate the rejection of violence in our ways of thinking and knowing.

At issue here is not just the obvious violence of essentialization that reduces an identity to singularity, but other less obvious forms of violence that, for example, forget history or futurity (anachronism) or are culturally homogenizing (orientalism, colonialism, racism, etc.). Under these conditions we can ask several questions of pacifist epistemology as presented by Huebner and the editors of the Yoder anthology. If, for example, pacifist epistemology is by nature diasporic in its approach, then how can it avoid capitulating to or reinforcing the fragmentation of knowledge rather than naming the ways in which our human experience is indeed piecemeal? Or, to address Yoder's method in particular, when is the approach of challenging the questions that underpin a discourse an evasion strategy rather than a way of helpfully deconstructing a problematic framework? Furthermore, how can we distinguish between situations when patience is an expression of the peaceful refusal to make snap judgments, and situations when patience is an expression of aversion to conflict and the refusal to speak in a timely and incisive manner to matters of justice? These are suggestions of the sorts of criticisms that hold pacifist epistemology to its own goal of conjugating pacifism and ways of knowing and speaking.

But the relationship between Mennonite theologians and philosophy is about more than philosophical readings of Yoder as they are present in pacifist epistemology. Indeed, the pursuit of a pacifist epistemology must exceed the bounds of Yoder scholarship if the conjugation of pacifism and practices of knowing is to have any weight in present discourses on Mennonite theologizing, especially given the deep contradictions between Yoder's life and work, and the rejection of violence.

FROM PACIFIST EPISTEMOLOGY TO NONVIOLENT ONTOLOGY

In order to discover ways in which Mennonite theology and philosophy might have an even deeper connection than in the discussion surrounding pacifist epistemology we can look to the dialogue between Mennonite theologians and the theologian John Milbank, whose theology of Radical Orthodoxy is characterized by a broad engagement with historical and contemporary philosophers. Whereas a pacifist epistemology is concerned with our habits of knowing and ways of conducting ourselves in discourse, the conversation with Milbank regarding a nonviolent ontology is concerned with the metaphysical structure of our experience and the degree to which our very being and existence are violent. If a pacifist epistemology is concerned with *how* we hold our knowledge, the debate between Mennonites and the theology of Radical Orthodoxy is

more concerned with the *object* of that knowledge itself. Here we distinguish between epistemology and ontology in a way that is initially quite simple—epistemology concerns our *knowledge* of what is; ontology concerns *what is*, even apart from our knowledge. But we quickly recognize that separating the two in any rigorous sense is very difficult. Ontology and epistemology are inextricably related because all ontologies are undergirded by an epistemology, and all epistemologies assume a particular ontology. The question is not whether one can have one without the other, but how the two interact.

In his 2000 essay, "For and Against Milbank: A Critical Discussion of John Milbank's Construal of Ontological Peace," Paul Doerksen outlined Milbank's reassertion of theology as a master discourse and his "hope of providing a counter ontology to the pervasive metaphysics of violence embedded both in Christian and non-Christian discourse."[50] Following from his critique of secular reason, Milbank contrasts the ontology of violence present in postmodern thinkers (he lists Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida) with the ontology of peace that he attributes to the Christian tradition. The postmodern ontology of violence that Milbank describes relies on a "historicist genealogy" and an "ontology of difference" that together result in "an ethical nihilism."[51] Within his broader critique of secular reason, the postmodern ontology Milbank identifies becomes another competing myth or narrative against which the Christian tradition can stand. Doerksen contests this reading, especially the "tragic dimension" of the ontology of peace that allows Milbank to embrace an Augustinian justification of state violence because coercion is retrospectively justified and supposedly redeemed when the coerced party comes to understand the world like the coercing party.[52]

In an essay titled "Educative Violence or Suffering Love: Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation," published several years after Doerksen's article, P. Travis Kroeker noted the sharp differences between Radical Orthodox and Radical Reformation perspectives.[53] As his title

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50. Paul Doerksen, "For and Against Milbank: A Critical Discussion of John Milbank's Construal of Ontological Peace," *Conrad Grebel Review* 18:1 (Winter 2000), 48-59.

51. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006), 278. For an incisive yet charitable critique of Milbank on ontological peace see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (London: SCM, 2001).

52. Doerksen, "For and Against Milbank," 55-56; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 424.

53. P. Travis Kroeker, "Educative Violence or Suffering Love: Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation," *Conrad Grebel Review* 23:2 (Spring 2005), 141-174. For more Mennonite engagement with Milbank at this stage see John Milbank, Chris K. Huebner, Laura Schmidt Roberts, Gerald W. Schlabach, Malinda E. Berry, and P. Travis Kroeker, "Roundtable: Radical Orthodoxy and the Radical Reformation: What is Radical about Radical Orthodoxy?" *Conrad Grebel Review* 23:2 (Spring 2005), 41-54.

indicated, the choice is between Milbank's approval of "educative violence," and the "suffering love" of the Anabaptists and their contemporary Mennonite representatives. In line with the concept of epistemological nonviolence, Kroeker points out elsewhere that Milbank contrasts "ideological purity" with the "expediencies of power" and favors the latter.[54] Milbank's preference for the expediencies of power emphasizes effectiveness and enacts the desire to make history turn out right. This contrasts sharply with what Kroeker calls "the power of weakness that refuses to make the world safe."[55]

The next iteration of the debate between Mennonite theologians and Milbank appeared in *The Gift of Difference*, a 2010 collection of essays edited by Chris Huebner and Tripp York.[56] A nonviolent approach to the topic of ontology, the editors suggest, should ask whether the whole exercise of metaphysics is violent to begin with. Is metaphysical language and the discourse on ontology a type of violence? Does metaphysical language violate something that we should hold dear? Does the mere exercise of metaphysics transgress a boundary that we should hold sacred?

Peter Blum's essay in the volume, "Two Cheers for an Ontology of Violence: Reflections on Im/Possibility," is particularly relevant regarding the questions surrounding the relationship between a Mennonite pacifist epistemology and its application to ontology.[57] Acknowledging that metaphysical language easily does violence to the world it describes, Blum turns to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his essay called "Violence and Metaphysics."[58] For Derrida, one way in which the Greek root of metaphysics has done violence to our ontology is in its dominating emphasis on sameness and singularity. In order to move past this Greek violence Derrida drew on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who himself looked beyond being to the dismantling of being, and described a way of thinking that "calls upon the ethical relationship—a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other—as the only one

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54. P. Travis Kroeker, review of *The Gift of Difference, Conrad Grebel Review* 31:1 (Winter 2013), 95.

55. Ibid, 97.

56. *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*, ed. Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York; foreword by John Milbank (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2010).

57. The essay also appears in his book *For a Church to Come.*—Blum, "Two Cheers for an Ontology of Violence: Reflections on Im/Possibility," *For a Church to Come*, 143-159.

58. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics."[59]

This passage from Derrida suggests that there is still hope for the discourse of metaphysics to exceed the limitations of its Greek heritage without being enslaved to violence. This hope is based on the ethical imperative of responsibility to the other (the stranger, the neighbor, the enemy, for example) that Derrida drew from Levinas's work, but which Mennonites have drawn from the gospels and the peace tradition. Contained within Blum's appreciative critique of Radical Orthodoxy is a reflection on Derrida's provocative statement: "predication is the first violence."[60] Derrida suggests that there is something inherently violent about the very act of affirming one thing about another. When we predicate, we merely associate one term with another; but for Derrida this is a kind of violence because it violates the irreducibility of things to each other. This violence of predication—and indeed identification—is at the core of our epistemology and our language; it is implicated in our very being and existence.

In light of this, Blum questions the very possibility of peace, and suggests that the reader entertain the possibility that violence may be an inherent ontological determiner of the world as such:

> What if nonviolence really is impossible? What if violence is not only practically unavoidable, as many people assume, but somehow radically inescapable? What if there is no place where we can make our bed, but violence is there? What if we really cannot do other than violence? Deconstructionist thinkers want us to take seriously the idea that this may be so.[61]

Challenging Milbank's assertion of ontological peace, Blum asks the reader to sit with this question. Later he suggests that "to admit that violence may be ubiquitous and unavoidable, that there is no *hors-violence*, is not to say simplistically that everything is violence, such that nothing can be done."[62] The problem that Blum raises sees no solution or resolution in his paper. This is appropriate to his postmodern purpose, for giving final answers would be a kind of violence in light of his argument.

Blum's essay constitutes a helpful criticism of both Milbank and Mennonite peace theology insofar as he attempts to destabilize the certainties of both. But several questions still remain: is there not a kind of violence that we risk by *not* answering these questions and refusing to

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59. Ibid, 83.
60. Ibid, 147.
61. Blum, *For a Church to Come*, 146.
62. Ibid, 155.

make predications regarding the relationship between ontology and violence? How can we ask whether our predications are always intrinsically violent without hoping that the answer is no? How can we negotiate the relationship between description (the *is*) and prescription (the *ought*) in our epistemologies and ontologies without challenging the fragmented nature of our thought and speech, not to mention the fragmented nature of our discourse on the structure of our thought and speech? To investigate the possibility of answering these questions in the context of the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy (for they are lodged in this context by the concern for pacifism and knowledge) we need to push beyond the limits of both pacifist epistemology and ontological peace, and envision anew the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy.

FRONTIERS IN MENNONITE METAPHYSICS

This essay began with Kauffman's suggestion that the relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy is contradictory (an "antithesis" in his words), and his counterproposal that Mennonites do nonetheless have an underlying philosophy. It then explored the ways in which philosophy has been an underlying influence in Mennonite theology, as identified by Wiens and Wiebe, despite the contradictions identified by Burkholder. In the works of Yoder and Reimer the philosophical tendency moved from contradiction to tension; and it came to fruition in the second-generation reception of Yoder's work. We may ask why this shift has taken place, and what historical conditions permitted it. Here it suffices to say that the contradictions traditionally alleged between Mennonites and philosophy were really a surface tension that concealed underlying continuities that have since manifested themselves. Although it would be difficult to make a causal argument connecting the early work of Kauffman, Friedmann, and Burkholder with later Yoder scholarship, we can nonetheless identify a major strengthening of the connection between philosophy and Mennonite theology in the discourse on pacifist epistemology and its conjugation of the Mennonite rejection of violence with the philosophical concerns of epistemology and ontology. In light of this identification, we should ask: what further opportunities for dialogue exist between these two domains?

Neither a pacifist epistemology nor a nonviolent ontology as described above constitute an engagement between Mennonites and philosophy so much as they constitute the Mennonite use of philosophical language for Mennonite theological purposes. The relationship between Mennonite theology and philosophy has rarely seen a situation in which the two established identities voice their differences and seek mutual

understanding without foreclosing disagreement. For a deep engagement between Mennonite thinking and philosophy we must, in keeping with the kind of dialogue required by pacifist epistemology, move beyond the unidirectional usage of philosophers and philosophical language by Mennonite theologians. One step toward this goal would be to use philosophy positively within Mennonite theology, as Burkholder suggested. Rather than merely using philosophy as a tool for Mennonite purposes, Mennonites should positively resource philosophy while acknowledging the ways in which certain philosophies or philosophers are profoundly at odds with some Mennonite ways of thinking. At the same time, however, they should not allow those differences to minimize the potential insight offered by divergent philosophies and philosophers.[63]

One recent example of a more sustained engagement with metaphysics on its own terms by a Mennonite theologian can be found in Justin Heinzekehr's work *The Absent Christ and the Inundated Community: Constructing a Process-Anabaptist Micro-Metaphysics*.[64] A longer-term engagement between Mennonite theology and hermeneutic philosophy can be found in the work of Lydia Neufeld Harder, from her use of Gadamer and Ricoeur in her graduate work, to her steady development of Mennonite feminist thought over the course of her career.[65] In light of these unfolding connections between Mennonite theology, process theology, and feminism, a major question for the future of Mennonites and philosophy is whether further continuities and discontinuities might arise between Mennonite theology and philosophy, and a further task will be to explore what pacifist epistemology might have in common with the rejection of violence and oppression in other disciplines in the humanities. Many discourses, from feminism to postcolonial studies and critical race theory, have already heralded nonviolent ways of knowing similar to those that Mennonite theologians have espoused.[66] In order to further the dialogical engagement with the many "others" of Mennonite theology—

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63 One possible example of this kind of engagement can be found in Christian Early, "Dreaming of Life in Babel: Toward an Anabaptist Philosophy of Religion," *MQR* 89 (Oct. 2015), 573-597.

64. Justin Heinzekehr, *The Absent Christ and the Inundated Community: Constructing a Process-Anabaptist Micro-Metaphysics* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia, forthcoming).

65. See Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998).

66. Indeed much intersectional work is currently being done in the discourse on Mennonite theology and feminism. See Susanne Guenther Loewen, *Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver* (Ph.D. diss., Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology, 2016); and Kimberly Penner, *Discipleship as Erotic Peacemaking: Toward a Feminist Mennonite Theo-Ethics of Embodiment and Sexuality* (Ph.D. diss., Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology, 2016).

to avoid becoming a monologue unto itself—Mennonite theology must continue to overcome its blindness to philosophy and metaphysics in order to explore how the critique of violence might bridge the divide between Christianity and the secular, and perhaps even provide a way to see beyond this division entirely.