

Mennonite Political Theology and Feminist Critique

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Abstract: This study explores recently published and collected works of four important voices in the conversation on Mennonite political theology. The article begins with a brief account of the broader discourse of political theology, before critically summarizing the political theologies of A. James Reimer, P. Travis Kroeker, Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, and Lydia Neufeld Harder. After surveying Reimer's vision of the entanglement of ecclesial and public life, Kroeker's messianic political theology, Gingerich Hiebert's genealogy of violence and apocalyptic, and Neufeld Harder's theopolitical challenge of naming, the article concludes by exploring the ways in which the dialogue between Mennonite political theology and feminist critique could be furthered by attending to the work of the late feminist philosopher of religion Grace M. Jantzen.

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Political theology is an ongoing scholarly conversation that self-consciously crosses the academic disciplines of theology, philosophy, and certain kinds of critical and political theory. Although political theology concerns itself with the relationship between theology and politics, those who work in the name of political theology are often interested in more than just the political aspects of Christian theology and the Christian structures that continue to influence the secular political sphere. Major works in the discourse on political theology include critical studies of the theological underpinnings of state-juridical concepts, normative defenses of Christian political visions, genealogical accounts of the origins of economy in early Christianity, and explorations of the linkages between debates on iconoclasm and political power, to name a few examples.¹ Political theology is a diverse discourse. It includes not only a range of scholarly identities and normative positions, but is also in the process of

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1. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

engaging with the emancipatory project of feminism—which itself is a diverse and multifaceted conversation, spanning scholarly and activist communities, developing over the course of many waves, and addressing wide-ranging political and theological concerns.

The Mennonite theological tradition has long considered itself to be a kind of political theology. By resourcing the Anabaptist dissent and nonconformity of the sixteenth century, twenty-first century Mennonite theologians solidified their political agenda in, and following, the publication and reception of John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*.² However, since the public revelations of Yoder's pattern of sexual abuse, the idea that Mennonite political theology is ready or able to hear the voices of feminist critique is now more questionable than ever.³ In an effort to contribute to the need for alternative visions to the distortions of Yoder's political theology, and in order to open up new lines of communication between Mennonite political theology and feminist critique, this essay explores four major voices in Mennonite political theology and concludes with some suggestions about future directions for the conversation, focusing particularly on the challenge posed by the work of Grace M. Jantzen. It begins with the work of A. James Reimer, in which the theological and political domains are profoundly entangled, before proceeding to the messianic political theology of P. Travis Kroeker. The essay then moves to Kyle Gingerich Hiebert's genealogy of apocalyptic and violence in *The Architectonics of Hope*, before exploring the theopolitical implications of Lydia Neufeld Harder's conjugation of Mennonite and feminist theologies collected in *The Challenge is in the Naming*.

A. JAMES REIMER'S ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE POLITICAL THEOLOGY

In his posthumously published essay collection *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer developed a theopolitical vision that counters the image of the Mennonite political theologian as a prophetic voice who witnesses to the state from the margins with the voice of a political theologian who is inextricably entangled in secular, political, and public life.⁴ Rather than emphasizing Mennonite particularity and separateness, Reimer's political theology

2. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994). See the symposium on teaching John Howard Yoder in *Mennonite Life* 68 (2014). <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-68/>

3. Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'Defanging the Beast' Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (Jan. 2015), 7-80.

4. A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen, Theopolitical Visions Series 17 (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014), 2.

gives a positive account of law and civil order while seeking to be honest about the ways in which we are always embedded in political institutions and structures. In this way Reimer is a “realist” because he does not entertain the fantasy that a theological position could achieve true separation from the wider political and public spheres. Instead of understanding the Christian church to be a strictly *theological* domain and the secular state a strictly a *political* domain, Reimer proceeds from the assumption that the theological and the political are intertwining categories that overlap in complex and uneven measures, especially when they are used to describe aspects of modern and postmodern life. Taking up what editor Paul Doerksen calls a position of “ambivalence” toward the Mennonite tradition, Reimer identifies in the Mennonite tradition both a critique of the violence of modernity and a contribution to the modern project by its advocacy for conscience and freedom.⁵ Amid this tension Reimer considers the audience of his project to be Mennonites and other Christians living in the postmodern situation, and he summarizes his work in the following way:

The thesis of my “Political Theology” is that a theologically derived politics (not a politically derived theology) for those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition ought to take seriously the biblical-Trinitarian foundations for all Christian social ethics, but also the importance of engagement by Christians in public institutional life, including the political realm. Not only is political involvement a mandate for Christians, it is unavoidable. Those who deny the legitimacy of such engagement are being dishonest; they engage with every facet of their lives, whether consciously or not. In our daily lives, whether we like it or not, we are all deeply enmeshed in multiple layers of civil (cultural, economic, and political) society. Those who withdraw from public life as we normally understand it are doing so only in a very facile sense. They cannot escape the public sphere altogether and are being political in their own way, in their own communities, and as a negative political witness to larger, dominant society.⁶

Reimer is not only interested in founding Mennonite theology on trinitarian, creedal, and biblical ground—as he does in *Mennonites and Classical Theology*—but he is also interested in confronting Mennonites with the cultural, economic, and political entanglements of living in postmodern societies that are defined by terms like democracy, pluralism,

5. Paul G. Doerksen, “Introduction,” in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, xviii.

6. Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 2.

and multiculturalism.⁷ Rejecting the anachronistic use of “kingdom” language to divide the Christian church from the secular world, Reimer claims the Mennonite community as his “primary home” and describes his second home as “our local, national, global, and cosmic home in which we live with those of other faiths, ideologies, and cultures.”⁸ Reimer’s image of these two homes leaves much more room for the possibility of feeling at home in multiple places than the feudal images conjured by a “two-kingdom” model, while at the same time the porous boundaries that constitute Reimer’s division between these homes still allow for critique to cross the threshold between church and world in both directions.

In the second chapter of *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, Reimer further presents his political theology as an effort “to look at social ethics through the prism of a theology of Law (*Nomos*) as a way of structuring love.”⁹ Reimer’s generous and non-supersessionist understanding of law, however, is presented concurrently with an account of the relationship between Christian theology and the secular social sciences. Following his critique of Yoder’s distinction between the normative “ought” and the descriptive “is”—of which he writes that “the line that Yoder draws between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought,’ between the ‘Mennonite reality’ and the ‘Anabaptist ideal,’ is too clean”—Reimer praises disciplines that are focused on “the sociology of knowledge” for the way that they keep the normative disciplines of theology and philosophy accountable.¹⁰ Asserting the importance of interdisciplinarity for his Mennonite political theology, Reimer writes that “The ‘ought’ without the ‘is’ (and there never is a pure ‘ought’) is prone to ideological distortion of reality just as easily as the ‘is’ without the ‘ought,’” suggesting that disciplines that concern themselves with normativity ought to be in dialogue with those fields that aspire to description.¹¹

The dynamic and reciprocal relationship between description and prescription in Reimer’s entangled political theology is indicative of his attitude toward the theological and the political as well, both of which are domains and discourses that make claims about what is and what ought to be in ways that are not cleanly separable. Through an intentional and principled negotiation with this entanglement, Reimer’s Mennonite political theology moves beyond a suspicion of politics and beyond the reduction of Christian ethics to politics, toward a constructive and critical account of the powerful institutions that define the legal and civilizing

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

8. Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 23.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

orders of public life. From the entanglement of two homes, to the entanglement of theology and the political, to the entanglement of normativity and description, Reimer's political theology challenges clean distinctions that continue to divide "church" from "world."

P. TRAVIS KROEKER'S MESSIANIC POLITICAL THEOLOGY

In his appreciative foreword to Reimer's *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, P. Travis Kroeker describes his "counter-provocation" to Reimer's work as "a messianic political theology that is neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither Mennonite nor secularist, neither orthodox nor heterodox." Kroeker's messianic political theology proceeds from the Pauline *oikonomia* that "inhabits the mysterious freedom of messianic slavery."¹² Unlike Reimer's vision of entanglement, Kroeker challenges the aforementioned divisions by emphasizing instead the provisional nature of all institutions (church, state, university) and seeking to "upbuild the secular theologically from below." From his early work in *Christian Ethics and Political Economy in North America* to the recent essay collection *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, Kroeker's paradigm for theopolitical vision is deeply influenced by Plato, Augustine, and the Bible, while his contemporary sources range from Mennonite theologians to continental philosophers and political theorists.¹³

For Kroeker, political theology is "a normative discourse rooted in the conviction that political crises—in the complex etymological sense of events, issues, judgments and decisions related to crucial 'turning points'—may be best accounted for with reference to theological terms."¹⁴ In line with the signature pattern in contemporary political theology, Kroeker identifies theological and religious themes and structures concealed in secular modern concepts. Concerning himself with the theological character of political economy, Kroeker proceeds in a way that is exilic and diasporic, rejecting the safeties and certainties of both empire and Christendom in favor of an Augustinian vision in which "citizenship is not to be identified with any earthly republic but rather with the messianic body on pilgrimage in this age."¹⁵ The image of the pilgrimage

12. P. Travis Kroeker, "Foreword," in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, ix.

13. P. Travis Kroeker, *Christian Ethics and Political Economy in North America: A Critical Analysis* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); and P. Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile*, Theopolitical Visions Series 23 (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2017). For commentary on Kroeker's *Messianic Political Theology* see the 2019 online Syndicate symposium.—www.syndicate.network/symposia/theology/messianic-political-theology-and-diaspora-ethics/.

14. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 1.

15. *Ibid.*, 2.

exemplifies Kroeker's messianic political theology, not only because it plays with the resonances of homecoming and homelessness in the Latin *peregrination* (pilgrimage), but also because it rejects discourses that grasp possessively after the things of this world that are passing away—what Paul calls the things that are not (*hos me*).¹⁶ In this way, Kroeker's messianic political theology—in which the pilgrim sojourns in the world—resonates with Reimer's attempt to be at home in two worlds, for both Reimer and Kroeker understand the feeling of home to be both possible and provisional in between church and secular society.

Kroeker's political theology takes this messianic posture to the confluence of the household (*oikos*) and the law (*nomos*) in *oikonomia*, critiquing the distorted economies of technological and materialist modernity. In tandem with his critique of political economy, Kroeker's work suggests new counter-sovereignities that challenge dominant paradigms of power and control with a dispossessive narrative about the "renunciation of possessive desire."¹⁷ In *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* this posture of giving up control is joined by a vision of the human experience of time, in which the present is not related to past and future mechanistically, but apocalyptically.¹⁸ The apocalyptic *kairos* is a moment that challenges the possessive *chronos* with a kind of messianic time that does not proceed through a judgment that discerns discrete moments from one another, but by a recapitulation that gathers and fulfills all things.¹⁹ In this theopolitical vision the political sovereignties of this world that are passing away are challenged by a messianic disposition that opens itself to mysteries that can only be revealed in messianic moments of apocalyptic time.²⁰

By presenting this vision of lived time as a part of the dispossessive posture of the self, Kroeker seeks to educate readers by leading them out of Constantinian love of empire, into a non-possessive space that desires the proper use and enjoyment of things of this world (Augustine), rather than grasping onto things and seeking to control them instrumentally or seeking to know things with finality. This "drama of self-emptying desire," which is "emptied of legal claims and counterclaims," culminates in the figure of the servant²¹—for service is part of the economy of worship, an economy by which one betrays one's priorities by spending time, energy, and money (often in their quantified forms) on particular things, prioritizing, valuing, and glorifying certain powers over others.

16. *Ibid.*, 8, 33-37.

17. *Ibid.*, 8.

18. *Ibid.*, 26.

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

20. *Ibid.*, 15-33.

21. *Ibid.*, 10 and 32.

Kroeker insists that imitation of the form of the servant and the suffering love of the cross is incompatible with the educative violence that both the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation and the tradition of Mennonite pacifism reject.²²

In a way that resonates with Reimer's positive evaluation of law, Kroeker understands the *nomos* in *okonomia* not as a limiting force, but rather as a dramatic and existential unfolding of servanthood, as imitation of the divine. This servant posture of Kroeker's messianic political theology is also in continuity with the critique of technology advanced in the last chapter of *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* and summarized in part by the claim that "only a messianic materialism will restore to us the divine mystery of our created embodiment, our 'personhood' so as to resist movements of disincarnation that would eliminate divine mystery from the world so as to control it on their own terms."²³ Whether it takes the kenotic form of incarnation, the messianic form of "living as if not" (Paul), or the dramatic form of the literary sources he employs (Dostoevsky), Kroeker's political theology challenges the prideful *pleonexia* of human mastery (Plato) with a "messianic becoming" that leads to a "new economy of power."²⁴

In his more recent work on Mennonite literature Kroeker furthers his Messianic political theology by proposing a different economy of power that resists the idolatry of easy binary distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, instead preferring an incarnational power of word-become-flesh.²⁵ The subtle critique of power within Kroeker's messianic political theology, and its rejection of the withholding power of the *katechon* (the mysterious figure who appears as the restrainer of the Antichrist in the second letter to the Thessalonians), has recently been taken up, albeit in a different way, by Kyle Gingerich Hiebert.²⁶

KYLE GINGERICH HIEBERT'S GENEALOGY OF APOCALYPTIC AND VIOLENCE

In his recent monograph *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology*, Kyle Gingerich Hiebert advances a particular vision of political theology that is deeply invested

22. Ibid., 10. See also P. Travis Kroeker, "Educative Violence or Suffering Love? Radical Orthodoxy and the Radical Reformation" *Conrad Grebel Review* 23.2 (Spring 2005), 19-24.

23. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 11.

24. Ibid., 17-18.

25. P. Travis Kroeker, "Scandalous Displacements: 'Word' and 'Silent Light' in *Irma Voth*" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2018), 91-201.

26. The biblical figure of the *katechon* wields a certain kind of power that political theorists have found instructive. For a comprehensive account, see Massimo Cacciari, *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*, trans. Edi Pucci (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

in and influenced by Mennonite theological voices.²⁷ The main thesis of the book is that by tracing the genealogical roots of modern political theology to the Nazi legal philosopher Carl Schmitt, the discourse on political theology can better understand how the desire to restrain enemies by violent means is a problem endemic to certain thinkers (such as Johann Baptist Metz), who only appear to have made a break with Schmitt's work but still remain beholden to its political categories of friend and enemy. This contribution is not only important because it trenchantly critiques forms of political sovereignty that seek the forcible containment of violence by means of violence, but also because it focuses on resonances between violence, beauty, and apocalyptic that are so often obscured in the wider discourse on political theology.

Kyle Gingerich Hiebert's genealogy of apocalyptic and violence contends that political theology is a kind of vision that tries to see the violence of the world clearly, despite the ways that it conceals itself in "the brutality of the marketplace, the commodification of knowledge and the pathos of modern politics and economics."²⁸ But the brilliance of *The Architectonics of Hope* is that while seeing this social violence clearly, Gingerich Hiebert advocates for a response that opposes the assertion of a kind of power that would forcibly fix or coercively cure the violence of the world. Instead of capitulating to the use of apocalyptic language or images for the purpose of greater securitization and social control, Gingerich Hiebert advocates for a kind of hope that can resist the political manipulations of crisis without becoming what it hopes against.

Toward this goal, *The Architectonics of Hope* traces "the complex relationship between violence and apocalyptic as they are appropriated in political theology" by showing the influence of Carl Schmitt on the ostensibly "new" political theology of Johann Baptist Metz, and then by critiquing the rhetorical and persuasive use of appeals to beauty in the works of John Milbank and David Bentley Hart.²⁹ Gingerich Hiebert draws attention to the definition of sovereignty central to Schmitt's political theology: the idea that more powerful than the one who makes and enforces the law is the one who also decides when they can also act as an exception to the law. As a descriptive or analytic concept this definition of sovereignty is helpful, but when taken as a normative prescription for the exercise of political or social power, Schmitt's work becomes toxic. Working against this use of Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, Gingerich Hiebert notices how violence is "beautified" through its association with

27. Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology*, foreword by Cyril O'Regan, Theopolitical Visions 21 (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2017).

28. *Ibid.*, 4.

29. *Ibid.*, 5, 53, 90-116.

the maintenance of order in ways that are put in service of a coercive and educative political program.³⁰ Gingerich Hiebert's political theology critiques those who conceal the ugliness of coercive power by appealing to the beauty of apocalyptic violence, particularly Milbank's defense of the violent correction of evil through an instrumental identification of beauty and reason.³¹

In the penultimate chapter of *The Architectonics of Hope* Gingerich Hiebert argues that "in Yoder's hands political theology is apocalyptically inflected in such a way that we are enabled to see that dissonance creates space for renewal."³² He writes further that "to be clear, I am not suggesting that Yoder is the next step or final stage in my argument." But feminist critique demands that the key place of Yoder in *The Architectonics of Hope* be critiqued further. For example, Gingerich Hiebert fails to make a distinction between the positive and creative potential of dissonance and the many ways in which cognitive dissonance is put to use in order to maintain patriarchy.

The specter of Yoder haunts Mennonite political theology from Reimer and Kroeker up to Gingerich Hiebert. In the introduction to *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, Kroeker critiques Yoder for his inadequate account of desire, citing his inability or unwillingness to "bring his sexuality in obedient weakness to the power of the cross" as well as the failure of church and educational institutions to adequately hold him to account.³³ While Gingerich Hiebert places the specifics of the issue beyond the scope of his book, elsewhere he writes that "this is a blind spot in the theopolitical vision I articulate in the book, although I hope that my recognition of Yoder's sexual violence against women means that it is not a form of willful blindness on my part," and suggests further that Yoder's sexual abuse "goes well beyond a simple failure to embody one's own best insights, and is rather a form of willful blindness with devastating and ongoing material consequences that made life itself, as she [his interlocutor Nancy Bedford] puts it, 'uninhabitable' for scores of women."³⁴ Reimer, Kroeker, and Gingerich Hiebert each address the problems of institutional and social power that undergirded Yoder's distorted political theology, but even so, the question of the relationship between Mennonite political theology and the emancipatory project of feminist critique remains unanswered in their work. In her review of both

30. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

31. *Ibid.*, 95-96.

32. *Ibid.*, 119.

33. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 9.

34. Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope*, 174. Gingerich Hiebert, "Agonism, Aesthetics, and Apocalyptic" *Conrad Grebel Review* 36.3 (Fall 2018), 299. See note 38 below.

Kroeker's *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* and Gingerich Hiebert's *The Architectonics of Hope*, Elizabeth Phillips concludes that,

I cannot help but note an unfortunate commonality between these two volumes, which is an indictment of our common discipline of political theology as much as it is a criticism of these two authors' work. Kroeker engages with Paul, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Eric Voegelin, Plato, Isaiah, Augustine, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Wendell Berry, Chaim Potok, Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer, Michael Sattler, John Howard Yoder, Oliver O'Donovan, Karl Barth, and Michael Ignatieff. Gingerich Hiebert engages with Carl Schmitt, Johann Baptist Metz, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Howard Yoder, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Nathan Kerr. There are ways in which we must commend the sorts of breadth and diversity exhibited in these interlocutors. However, there are obvious aspects of diversity that are entirely absent even in such a long list of thinkers, including gender and ethnicity. Reading these two books in close succession, I felt distinctly like a female outsider listening in on a conversation between men, for men (with the important exception of Kroeker's co-authored essay with Carole Leclair). These authors, and most of our male colleagues in political theology, must work harder to seek out, listen to, and engage with the voices and work of women and others excluded from these conversations, both historical and contemporary.³⁵

Phillips's critique is admittedly of the entire discourse of political theology, and so it bears noting that she does not necessarily assert that the problems she raises are unique to the works of Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert. Rather, Phillips draws attention to the fact that sources and influences are deeply important, and she notes an important lacuna in both the broader discourse and the works of Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert: where is the engagement with thinkers and theorists who are not men?

However conspicuous this absence may be, this suggestion alone does not yet constitute a sufficient feminist critique of political theology

35. *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92 (Oct. 2018), 600-602. See also the 2018 American Academy of Religion symposium on Kroeker's *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* and Gingerich Hiebert's *The Architectonics of Hope*, published in the *Conrad Grebel Review* 36.3 (Fall 2018). The issue includes responses to both books from Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, Elizabeth Phillips, and Paul Martens, as well as responses from Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert. Phillips's response, "Apocalyptic Anabaptism and Political Theology" (283-288), draws upon the review quoted above, and the responses by Kroeker and Gingerich Hiebert address Phillips's critique by both acknowledging its importance and pointing to their present and future engagement with women's voices (Gingerich Hiebert names Chantal Mouffe, Catherine Pickstock, Grace Jantzen, and Gillian Rose; and Kroeker points to Marguerite Porete, Simone Weil, Julian of Norwich, Annie Dillard, and Miriam Toews).

(Mennonite or otherwise), but instead identifies an area in which the discourse ought to grow. Given that there already exists a rapport between the Mennonite theological tradition and feminist theology, this study now turns to the work of Lydia Neufeld Harder as one Mennonite and feminist resource for Mennonite political theology.

LYDIA NEUFELD HARDER'S MENNONITE FEMINIST THEOLOGY

In her recently published essay collection, *The Challenge is in the Naming: A Theological Journey*, Neufeld Harder recapitulates much of her longstanding work on the relationship between Mennonite and feminist theologies. Divided into sections on vocation, hermeneutic community, method, ethics, vision, power, dialogue, wisdom, ministry, and discernment, the collection implicitly follows the famous feminist dictum "the personal is political" by contextualizing many of its sections and essays with the inclusion of personal stories and biographical confessions. Alongside the works of Carol Penner, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Barbara Graber, and Malinda Berry (to name only a few), Lydia Neufeld Harder's theological writings, and the personal journey that intertwines with them, seek to set up a mutual confrontation and dialogue between Mennonite theologians and feminist theologians.

In her introduction to the volume Neufeld Harder draws out the leitmotif of "naming God," emphasizing her persistent return to the work of naming throughout her scholarly career, ministry, and personal life, and suggesting that the serious task of naming has real social consequences.³⁶ In the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur she finds a hermeneutic challenge that has the courage to listen to the biblical text and its meaning, but the humility to avoid raising names for God up unto a metaphysical pedestal, as if names could fully capture God (or anything else).³⁷ Neufeld Harder looks to Ricoeur for a kind of naming that names while bearing the burden of its own self-suspicion and self-critique. Seeking revelation and attempting to search out traces of God in the world, Neufeld Harder articulates her scholarly vocation in continuity with her personal piety and her life experience. Commensurate with the title of her book, for Neufeld Harder, naming is courageous because we only have the courage to face challenges if we find terms that help us *come to terms* with our experience. Struggling with "polarities and dualities that often seemed beyond reconciliation," Neufeld Harder turned not only to theological resources, but also to epistemology, ontology, and hermeneutics, and the works of Christian political theologians like Jürgen

36. Lydia Neufeld Harder, *The Challenge is in the Naming: A Theological Journey* (Winnipeg, Man.: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2018), 15.

37. *Ibid.*, 18.

Moltmann and Christian feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.³⁸ The epistemic role of naming features heavily in Neufeld Harder's work as she calls for greater attention to dialogue and dialectic in the Anabaptist Mennonite hermeneutic community, and greater engagement with feminist voices.³⁹ As Neufeld Harder draws on Ricoeur, language—and the naming it performs—not only “explains and describes, but also inspires and manifests,” mediating both biblical and social texts.⁴⁰

Although language is limited and inadequate, for Neufeld Harder the challenge of naming is the key problem for hermeneutic communities. If one does not have a name for an experience, then that experience will remain mysterious—not mysterious in a good and rich and beautiful way, but in a dark and potentially silent and sickening way. The challenge of naming that Neufeld Harder undertakes in her work is partly to counter the challenge of silence.

One resource that this focus on clear and direct naming gives the Mennonite political theology project is that the simultaneously theological and political act of naming moves beyond the aspiration to merely describe the world and toward the normative critique of oppressive and dominating social structures that often constitute it—not least of which is patriarchy. It is no coincidence then that Neufeld Harder asks the challenging question: “Is there something in the theology of Yoder that allowed him to justify his abuse?”; and she recalls attempts by herself and others to break the silence about Yoder's abuse as far back as 1991.⁴¹

The political theology of naming that Neufeld Harder sets forth in different ways throughout *The Challenge is in the Naming* and in her earlier work, *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark*, plainly displays the fact that names have power. Names possess power, names are powered, and naming very often occurs under conditions of enmity as a mix of empowering some and disempowering others. Whoever gets to make the names or set the terms of the conversation has the power to direct the discussion toward their interests.

Neufeld Harder's work also reveals that the inverse is true. Silence also holds power. Silence is also powered. Whoever gets to cultivate silences by deciding when the conversation falls silent, or whoever actively silences others, holds real power. For Neufeld Harder both silence and naming are animated by power in ways that are not merely abstract, but also personal.

38. *Ibid.*, 30 and 47.

39. *Ibid.*, 50 and 56.

40. *Ibid.*, 59.

41. *Ibid.*, 111.

The challenge of naming is to address these entanglements of description and prescription, of speech and silence, with names that can never fully capture what they name. For Neufeld Harder the challenge of naming is simultaneously theological (naming God) and political (naming social problems addressed by feminism).

This theopolitical confluence of the mysterious inability of names to capture God and the critical task of naming political injustices in the hermeneutic community of the Christian church has made Neufeld Harder's work an important resource for a new wave of Mennonite feminist theologians like Kimberly Penner and Susanne Guenther Loewen, who take up Neufeld Harder's combination of feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and Christian hermeneutics of obedience.⁴² While Penner combines a feminist recovery of the erotic body with a Mennonite ethic of discipleship, Guenther Loewen addresses the violence of the cross through a combination of Mennonite peace theology (J. Denny Weaver) and a feminist emphasis on solidarity with the oppressed (Dorothy Sölle).⁴³ Both Penner and Guenther Loewen take up aspects of Neufeld Harder's conjugation of Mennonite theology and feminism, but like Neufeld Harder, neither self-consciously work under the title of political theology despite the theological and political substance of their work.

MENNONITE POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND FEMINIST CRITIQUE

In more general terms, political theology (Mennonite and otherwise) is in the midst of a confrontation with the similarly normative and emancipatory project of feminist critique.⁴⁴ Phillips contributes to this critique by pointing out the lack of women's voices in the discourse. But in order for Mennonite political theology to take feminist critique seriously, those who write under its name must not only read and cite the works of women and feminists; Mennonite political theology must also allow the feminist critique of patriarchal power to call its very foundations

42. See Kimberly L. Penner, "Mennonite Peace Theology and Violence against Women," *Conrad Grebel Review* 35 (Fall 2017); and Susanne Guenther Loewen, "Re-baptizing Mary: Toward a Mennonite-Feminist Re(dis)covery of the Mother of Jesus," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016).

43. See Susanne Guenther Loewen, *Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver* (Ph.D. dissertation, 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. dissertation, Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology, 2016).

44. I use the term "feminist critique" both to span the distance between theological and political manifestations of feminism, and to refer to feminism as a kind of critical project that necessarily engages in negative value judgments concerning the dominating and oppressive forces of patriarchy. See *Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

into question, going deeper than the selection and use of source material. Taking seriously the work of Neufeld Harder begins to address this problem in a necessary but not sufficient way. Although Neufeld Harder does not self-consciously write in the discourse of political theology, her challenge to engage in naming in ways that reflect a critique of power resonates deeply with the concerns of many varieties of political theology. If political theology aims to challenge structures of legitimacy that combine theological and political concepts, then Neufeld Harder's challenge to name both God and patriarchy is indeed a kind of political theology.

However, Neufeld Harder does not necessarily contribute to Mennonite political theology in the way that Phillips calls for because her philosophical sources—however much they may place her within the bounds of traditional political theology—are the very sources that Phillips thinks that the discourse should move away from, in order to hear more women's voices. This is not to say that because Neufeld Harder uses sources like Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Habermas she is “not feminist enough”—that would be to fall into a kind of gatekeeping behavior that other feminist critics have critiqued.⁴⁵ It does, however, suggest that in order to take feminist critique seriously, Mennonite political theology must listen to more Mennonite voices like Neufeld Harder's.

Recent critiques of the “pacifist neglect of the theological issue of power,” and questions like “Is Christian political theology too conservative to undermine sexual violence?” will not be adequately addressed if Mennonite political theology continues to ignore the wider discourse of feminist critique beyond Christian theology.⁴⁶ It stands to reason that if the institutional power of the church and its Christian theology are part of the conservative tendency in some political theologies that perpetuate patriarchal violence and abuse, then it will be voices from outside the Christian tradition who have the resources necessary for its remediation.

Mennonite political theology is already well-positioned to resource feminist critics from outside of Christian theology, for part of the disciplinary constitution of political theology is a posture of openness not

45. The figure of the feminist “killjoy” is often used to avoid hearing the claims of feminist critique: “hearing feminists as police is a way of not hearing feminism” (p. 2). Although the image of the policing feminist is often used as an avoidance strategy, this does not mean that “real” or “true” feminism is moderate and easy to hear. See Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

46. These questions are asked by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 156-159; and Traci C. West, “Is Christian Political Theology too conservative to undermine sexual violence?” Political Theology Blog, Oct. 29, 2018. —<https://politicaltheology.com/is-christian-political-theology-too-conservative-to-undermine-sexual-violence/>.

only toward thinkers who are self-avowedly secular, but also toward those who elude the very boundaries between religion and the secular that political theology seeks to complicate. The work of feminist philosopher of religion Grace M. Jantzen provides an opportunity for the discourse of Mennonite political theology outlined above to allow feminist critique to cut to its heart, rather than merely revise a few of its premises.

GRACE M. JANTZEN'S CRITICAL GENEALOGY OF VIOLENCE

Jantzen's late work in her partly-posthumous trilogy *Death and the Displacement of Beauty* provides a critical genealogy of violence, exploring the roots of contemporary violence in the ancient Greek and Roman world, in Judaism and Christianity, and in the modern habitus. Although Jantzen grew up in a Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren congregation, her scholarly work was not Mennonite in orientation, but rather reflected a broad secular, philosophical, and political interest that eventually led her to join a Quaker meeting. In the final years of her life Jantzen embarked on a project spanning ancient Greek and Roman thought, Jewish and Christian theology, and French philosophies of postmodernity. The project was called *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*. Of the planned six volumes, three have been published. *Death and the Displacement of Beauty* provides a philosophical and theological genealogy of violence, critical of the Western obsession with death and its corresponding displacement of beauty. Using the term "necrophilia" to name the simultaneous fear and love of death within Western cultural consciousness, Jantzen resists both the denial of the world and the hatred of the body, positing instead new and more positive emphases on beauty, desire, and human flourishing. Although she published only the first volume of the project during her lifetime, Morny Joy and Jeremy Carrette have edited two further volumes for posthumous publication, resulting in a trilogy that consists of *Foundations of Violence*, *Violence to Eternity*, and *A Place of Springs*. Spanning the "classic" texts of Western civilization, while remaining sharply critical of their canonizing influence, Jantzen critiques Homeric, Platonic, Christian, Modern, and Postmodern texts from a feminist perspective.⁴⁷

In her trilogy, Jantzen draws attention to the presence of both beauty and violence in the world, and she critiques the ways in which violence is made beautiful in service of repressive political regimes and violent ways of thinking and knowing. Although she writes that "violence is ugly,"

47. Grace Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence: Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, vol. I (London: Routledge, 2004); *Violence to Eternity: Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, vol. II, ed. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy (London: Routledge, 2009); *A Place of Springs: Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, vol. III, ed. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy (London: Routledge, 2010).

Jantzen avoids simplistically dividing the world into things that are violent and things that are beautiful, focusing instead on the aesthetic ambiguities of violence and their political uses.⁴⁸

To understand the ambiguities of violence more clearly, Jantzen distinguishes between mortality and natality. While much of Western thought has focused on mortality and oriented itself toward death based on its inevitability, Jantzen seeks a reorientation of attention toward “natality,” the fact that we all have been born, and can create new things. Powerfully, she states that although we may very well die alone, no one can be born alone, suggesting that a focus on natality might open up new forms of sociality that could counter the violence endemic in the dominant focus on mortality.⁴⁹

Jantzen’s feminist position not only foregrounds natality as a paradigm for critiquing the male obsession with death, but she also analyzes the gendered nature of violence. For Jantzen, the fact that men are statistically more violent than women challenges the naturalization of violence.⁵⁰ Against the obsession with death that has afflicted Western thought from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, through the Jewish and Christian traditions, to modernity, Jantzen’s work undercuts the ways in which the fixation on death takes the form of both attraction and revulsion.

Although these comments only begin to describe Jantzen’s substantial work, they do indicate ways in which Mennonite political theology can benefit from thinkers who are more secular, philosophical, and political. By looking to Jantzen, or other thinkers like her, those interested in Mennonite political theology will find a body of work that is politically entangled (as in the work of Reimer), refuses the possessive desire for control by taking up new economies of power (as in the work of Kroecker), critiques the beatification of violence and apocalyptic (as in the work of Gingerich Hiebert), and critically names patriarchal violence (as in the work of Neufeld Harder).

This is not to say, however, that Jantzen is an ally to the various projects of Mennonite political theology—her work cannot be confined to the service of a confessional tradition since it calls the very basis of the Christian tradition into question. Jantzen’s work is far more concerned with the creative potential for flourishing and new life that characterizes natality than it is for the maintenance or revision of an existing theological tradition—for it is the foundations of the Western tradition itself that she calls into question when she identifies the deep link between the obsession

48. *Ibid.*, I, vii.

49. *Ibid.*, I, 6 and 37.

50. *Ibid.*, I, 28.

with death and the production of patriarchy, even within the Christian emphasis on salvation at the expense of flourishing and abundance.⁵¹

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Although the critique of power has long been a part of Mennonite political theology, the problem of power persists in the discourse in ways that are not easily resolved. While Mennonite thinkers like those summarized above want to retain a critique of redemptive violence, there is little consensus on how violence ought to be resisted in ways that do not repeat violence in turn. Feminist critique further calls this problem into question by pointing to the ways in which many forms of pacifism and nonresistance prepare the ground for the abuse of power, particularly the abuse of women by men.⁵² Reimer, Kroeker, and Gingerich Hiebert each go some way toward addressing this deeply theological and political problem in ways that would be easy to miss if we were to confine feminist critique to the identification of their limited sources.

For Reimer, Mennonite political theology means no longer avoiding ecclesial entanglement with secular, public, and civil life. This means that Mennonite political theology ought to be ready to hear voices from those spheres, considering not only those who can provide helpful resources for understanding power, but also those who are calling for accountability before authorities beyond the church. For Reimer it is not enough to call the church home, but it is also vital to find oneself at home among others with different normative and descriptive visions of the world. Perhaps one such home for the already interdisciplinary field of Mennonite political theology will be with feminist friends, understanding of course that what plays out in the home has long been the concern of both feminist critics and those in political theology.

For Kroeker, messianic political theology is not only done amid the entanglements Reimer describes, but it must also see clearly the limitations of these institutional spheres. No ecclesial, civil, political, or social institution can achieve, contain, or possess the divine mystery without falling into the coercive and educative forms of violence that Kroeker's work rejects. Kroeker's messianic political theology resists forms of empowerment that would seek sweeping curative solutions to problems such as patriarchy, and instead calls for a new economy of

51. *Ibid.*, II, 206-209.

52. See especially, Carol Penner, *Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women* (Ph.D. dissertation, St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, 1999). Here it also bears noting that these gendered divisions may restrict further inquiry into ways in which the gender binary itself is often reproduced by violent coercion. See Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2018).

power altogether: a messianic materialism that resists the very possessive desire that defines patriarchy.⁵³

Gingerich Hiebert also calls into question the ways in which reason is used as an ordering force and opposes the ways in which the desire for safety and security are so easily coopted by those who would justify the use of violence in the assurance of those ends. The logic of patriarchy so often proceeds in this way, by justifying violent orderings of political and domestic life by men with an appeal to the safety and security of women and children.⁵⁴

Rather than a decisive synthesis, in light of the conversation with feminism narrated above, perhaps an evocative and recapitulating question for those invested in articulating a Mennonite political theology after Yoder might be: How can a theological tradition that is entangled with the secular political world take up a messianic posture that does not use things like beauty or apocalyptic to justify coercive ordering power, but engages in a challenging practice of naming that can incisively critique the hidden social violences that endure in our lived experiences of theological and political spaces? Composite questions like this one provide one way forward for the conversation on Mennonite political theology, but only if they avoid giving answers too soon, foreclosing answers entirely, or covering over the real and uncomfortable contradictions between the present state of Mennonite political and theological inquiry, and feminist critique.

If the voices of Reimer, Kroeker, Gingerich Hiebert, and Neufeld Harder enjoin those who converse in the name of Mennonite political theology to ask how we can better understand the entanglements of theology and politics without seeking to coerce the world into order, while still critically naming the patriarchal violence that endures, then the future of this conversation may lie outside of the comfortable distinctions critiqued by each author summarized above. Jantzen's work helps to break the molds that have formed around these questions, challenging each of these authors to give more serious consideration to the ways in which violence can inhere in their thinking. Jantzen's work challenges

53. See Kroeker, "Messianic Theology and Apocalyptic Political Economy," *Conrad Grebel Review* 36 (Fall 2018), 303.

54. Mennonite feminist nonconformity has taken many forms, both popular and scholarly. See the theopolitical exploration of the reformulation of Mennonite peace theology in terms of household economics and cooking in Malinda Berry, "Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship" *Conrad Grebel Review* 34 (Winter 2016), esp. 68-69. Berry's shalom political theology not only attends to the ways in which Doris Janzen Longacre's *Living More with Less* cookbook is a unique expression of Mennonite feminist political theology, but also looks outside the Mennonite community to advance the conversation on pacifist epistemology by resourcing Marshall Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication.

Reimer's image of living in the two homes of the church and the political world by calling into question the very basis of both. Jantzen resists the sometimes idyllic image of being at home in both the church and the world that Reimer suggests, drawing attention instead to the ways in which the institutional failure to address and redress patriarchal violence makes both religious and secular homes unlivable for many. For Jantzen, many forms of both modern secularity and Christianity are built upon a violent and death-dealing habitus. Christianity very often accepts a violent God who educates "his" people punitively, and secular modernity very often accepts a governing masculine rationality that covers over natality and attachment to others, with a stifling obsession with mortality and detachment. In this way, Jantzen's work questions how Reimer's Mennonite political theology can speak of home to those who have experienced these environments as inhospitable.

Jantzen's work also calls into question Kroeker's critique of possessive desire, for she may ask: How can a suffering servant posture contribute to the empowerment of women? Although neither Kroeker nor Jantzen understand disempowerment or empowerment in simple zero-sum terms, Jantzen would doubtless be suspicious of any movement of dispossession that would not include a counter-movement of creative critique. Where Kroeker wants to avoid taking power in coercive and dominating ways, instead advocating for a messianic materialism that incarnates a different economy of power, Jantzen wants to avoid patriarchal disempowerment of women by taking up the creative potential of natality. How these two desires might be put in further conversation is an open question, and one that Gingerich Hiebert's work also joins in its rejection of economies of power that are reducible to the friend-enemy distinction characteristic of Carl Schmitt's political theology. Jantzen may well ask how conditions of enmity restrict the conversation on empowerment and disempowerment, leaving the discourse defined by struggles for rhetorical or epistemic power as if it were a scarce resource that could not be shared. Questions like these suggest further points of challenging contact between feminist critique and the diverse representatives of Mennonite political theology outlined above.

CONCLUSION

This study began by describing the breadth of the discourse on political theology, citing works that range from normative defenses of politically engaged Christian theology, to historical accounts of the influence of religion on secular modern concepts, to critical works that identify the ways in which modern power uses theological tools to serve its own aims.

The broader discourse of political theology is a big tent venture that—at least in principle, if not in practice—includes diverse voices under its banner. At its best, Mennonite political theology will do this as well by not only reading and citing feminist sources, but also by allowing both self-consciously Mennonite voices and voices from outside of ecclesial bounds, like Jantzen's, to call into question deeply held values of the discourse. The *problems* that arise between Mennonite political theology and feminist critique include the questions of whether power can be exercised without violence and whether pacifist rejection of violence can truly address abuse. The *prospects* of the encounter are found in the opening of the conversation further in order to invite in and listen to voices yet unheard from thinkers who are secular, philosophical, and political, and from those who cannot be held by discursive boundaries such as these.⁵⁵ Indeed, it may be these outside figures who have the resources to more fully understand the ways in which power is exercised.

Jantzen's is one such voice, for she challenges the limited sources of Mennonite political theology, rejects the violence that underpins both Christianity and secular modernity, and calls out for deeper inquiry into the challenge of naming power in places where it has long been hidden.

55. Elsewhere I explore the history of philosophical Mennonites, and the ways in which the mystical Anabaptist notion of the Gospel of All Creatures helps to refuse modern divisions between church and world. See "Mennonite Metaphysics? Exploring the Philosophical Aspects of Mennonite Theology from Pacifist Epistemology to Ontological Peace" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91 (July 2017), 403-421; and "The Gospel of All Creatures: An Anabaptist Natural Theology for Mennonite Political Theology," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 37 (2019), 365-380.