

Anabaptism contra Philosophy

Maxwell Kennel

ABSTRACT

This article begins with a recapitulation of the author's previous work on philosophy in the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions, and then provides a reconceptualized vision of the relationship between the two that connects Anabaptism and philosophy without fixing either in place. The core of the essay argues that the complex and contextual mediations between oppositions that characterize Anabaptism (neither Catholic nor Protestant, yet indebted to both) and Mennonite critiques of violence (challenging both passivity and violent action) provide philosophically important resources for moving between and beyond entrenched dichotomies and essentialist distinctions. After three critiques of the Mennonite misrecognition of philosophy, the essay concludes with the suggestion that autobiographical and connective forms of recognition (rather than abstraction or dissociation) provide a way forward for the discourse on Anabaptism and philosophy.

Introduction, Recapitulation

What does the Mennonite world have to do with philosophy, and what do the Anabaptist movements and Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century have to do with the philosophical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and its many afterlives in modernity and postmodernity? These have been some of my research questions since I was a student at Conrad Grebel University College, and so it is fitting to explore them in the pages of this special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. As a young scholar of Anabaptist history and Mennonite theology—before entering the interdisciplinary world of Religious Studies during my doctoral studies—I was surprised to find that few in the tradition had engaged seriously with philosophies and philosophers, and more surprised to encounter resistance to the idea that Anabaptist and Mennonite epistemologies were philosophically significant.

But as I looked through the archive of theological and historical Anabaptist and Mennonite texts, I encountered a minor tradition of philosophical, humanist, existentialist, and secular thinking that has much to offer theologians, historians, philosophers, critical theorists, and interdisciplinary thinkers.

For example, Robert Friedmann's 1958 manuscript, *Design for Living*, stands out as a unique bridge between Anabaptist theologies and philosophical approaches to ethics, especially its ascending values of regard, concern, service, and love that are simultaneously legitimated by both secular and religious sources.¹ Recent approaches to pacifist epistemology and ontological peace represent even more significant engagements by Mennonites with philosophical themes and thinkers, and these conversations prompted my study "Mennonite Metaphysics?" where I traced the history of Mennonites and philosophy. I concluded the article by calling Mennonite theologians to consider that the critique of violence might serve to bridge Christian and secular paradigms and even point a way beyond this division entirely,² for there are many ways that the boundaries between secularity, religion, and Christianity are upheld by violent, forcible, and coercive means.

More recently I reformulated this call in an entry update for the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, where I conclude with a similar call for pluralistic forms of interdisciplinarity in the discourse on Anabaptism, Mennonites, and philosophy.³ The complex history of Mennonites and philosophy has sometimes involved an affirmation of philosophy's value (in the work of J. Lawrence Burkholder and Robert Friedmann), alongside contrasting approaches to philosophical ontologies and epistemologies (between A. James Reimer and John Howard Yoder), that leads up to recent work by scholars and literary figures who challenge straightforward approaches to Mennonite identity (Grace Jantzen, Travis

¹ Robert Friedmann, *Design for Living: Regard, Concern, Service, and Love*, ed. Maxwell Kennel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

² "Mennonite Metaphysics? Exploring the Philosophical Aspects of Mennonite Theology from Pacifist Epistemology to Ontological Peace," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91 (2017): 403-421.

³ Maxwell Kennel, "Philosophy," in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, April 2020. <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Philosophy>

Kroeker, Grace Kehler, Casey Plett, and Miriam Toews).⁴ Still more recently, in a contribution to a 2021 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*, I argued that Mennonites would do well to look outside of Christian theology and toward the philosophical works of posthumanist scholars in order to better understand technological life in this century.⁵ As I argue in my book *Postsecular History*, the prefix ‘post’ should not be used to indicate movements of overcoming where one gets past the past, but rather complex entanglements and mediations that reflect the apportioning of meaning and value in and by periodizing terms like past, present, and future, or Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and postmodern.⁶ For Mennonites who are concerned with technology and its posthuman futures, the answer cannot be to double-down on theological foundations and ignore the works of philosophers and critical theorists who have long worked on these topics, for the worlds that Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians seek to understand and embody are already enmeshed with political, philosophical, and secular ideas and practices.

Elsewhere I have outlined my research program in this area under the term “Secular Mennonite Social Critique” where “secularity” refers not to atheism but merely to the world apart from theological capture, “Mennonite” is an identity and set of values that anyone ought to be able to claim for themselves, and “social critique” refers to a mixture of suspicious and sympathetic attempts to understand and challenge the status quo.⁷ In brief, my argument in that chapter is that neither theological ideal-type investment in the tradition nor historical detachment from normative readings of it are sufficient for understanding or furthering the distinctive critique of violence that characterizes the Anabaptist Mennonite constellation of identities. In that project I critique both recent movements in Mennonite theology that withdraw from articulating distinctive identity markers and disciplinary patterns in Anabaptist history that withdraw from normativity and critique

⁴ Maxwell Kennel, “Secular Mennonites and the Violence of Pacifism: Miriam Toews at McMaster,” *Hamilton Arts & Letters* 13.2 (2020).

⁵ Maxwell Kennel, “Violent Inclinations,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 39.2 (Spring 2021): 118-134.

⁶ Maxwell Kennel, *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁷ Maxwell Kennel, “Secular Mennonite Social Critique: Pluralism, Interdisciplinarity, and Mennonite Studies,” in *Anabaptist ReMix: Varieties of Cultural Engagement*, ed. Lauren Friesen and Dennis Koehn (Basel: Peter Lang, 2022).

altogether. My approach to these problems is to articulate a form of social critique that proceeds from distinctive Anabaptist and Mennonite values while taking up a world-affirming and secular position that resists, mediates, and reformulates the distinction between Mennonite insiders and outsiders.

One of my goals in this work is to turn the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition outward toward more serious and sustained engagements with public discourses and academic disciplines that might challenge and complement it, while spurring an introspective turn toward a reconsideration of the deeper philosophical, ontological, and epistemological consequences of pacifism and nonviolence. What does it mean to reject the use of force, coercion, and violence not only corporeally (in terms of bodies and actions) but also metaphysically and ontologically (in terms of how we conceptualize the world and our relationship to it)? This question both arises from and leads toward the relationship between Anabaptism and philosophy.

Reconceptualization, Advance

In this essay, I hope to deepen the connection between Anabaptism and philosophy by arguing that the tradition provides resources for unique and critical mediations between entrenched distinctions that limit our ways of thinking about religion, politics, and the legitimation structures of western thinking. In doing so, I hope to reconceptualize the relationship between the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition and its philosophical and secular insiders and outsiders, most of whom have not yet received adequate attention or analysis. As I suggest in the introduction to a special issue of *Political Theology* on the topic, Mennonite political theology is at its best when it turns outward and *toward* its feminist, philosophical, secular, and literary minority traditions in interdisciplinary and pluralistic ways.⁸ But this approach to the relationship between Anabaptism and philosophy cannot be undertaken when those in the Christian theological tradition fear that philosophical or secular forms of life will displace their ideas and practices.

In my recent book *Ontologies of Violence*, I attempt to undertake this kind of interdisciplinary work by reconceptualizing the concept of violence itself, while drawing from the work of French philosopher Jacques

⁸ Maxwell Kennel, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Mennonite Political Theology," *Political Theology* 22.3 (May 2021): 185-191.

Derrida, Mennonite political theologians, and the late writings of feminist philosopher and ex-Mennonite Grace Jantzen. I argue that the concept of violence itself is best defined as the violation of value-laden boundaries, and furthermore that any ontology or epistemology of violence needs to reckon with the problem of displacement wherein the assumption that differences will always lead to enmity, antagonism, and competition ends up creating the very problems it fears.⁹ Extending from this idea to the juxtaposition of theological Anabaptism with philosophical ways of knowing, it seems essential that this or any interdisciplinary inquiry cannot proceed in a good way if it is defined by the fear of displacement, which assumes that difference is dangerous.¹⁰

This essay proceeds from the idea that scholars can take up theological and philosophical methodologies and perspectives without the assumption that they will inherently conflict, and furthermore that inquiry in the Social Sciences and Humanities ought to exceed the bounds of specific disciplines when they limit our ability to think through social problems. This form of critical interdisciplinarity can help us to understand the themes in the title of this essay, “Anabaptism contra Philosophy.” We could begin by asking if this joining term “contra” implies only difference or sheer contradiction? But this question is already a problem because Anabaptist Mennonite identities and the traditions of philosophy are both so interiorly diverse and complex that to place the two in dialogue in the abstract seems irresponsible—irresponsible in the sense of not responding to the ways that these names (“philosophy” and “Anabaptism”) are imperfect attempts to capture the uncapturable. There are so many philosophies and philosophers that the term philosophy is already dishonest when it is used in the singular rather than plural form, and there

⁹ Maxwell Kennel, *Ontologies of Violence: Deconstruction, Pacifism, and Displacement* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

¹⁰ See Audre Lorde, “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), 12. She writes: “The above forms of human blindness [racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia] stem from the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals.” This idea also animates the work of Grace Jantzen, most especially in *Violence to Eternity: Death and the Displacement of Beauty, Volume II*, ed. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy (London: Routledge, 2009), 19.

are so many Anabaptists and Mennonites that to singularize such an identity seems violent—in the sense of violating the complexity and multiplicity of what names only ever attempt to name. So how can we use these names—“philosophy” and “Anabaptism”—without contravening the best antiviolent and peaceable aspirations of the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition?

Until we clarify and contextualize what exactly we are comparing when we discuss Anabaptism contra philosophy, we cannot escape the problems of abstraction and representation. Indeed, the conceptual relationship wherein one name stands in for something multiple and diverse is a key philosophical problem that requires careful thinking about exemplarity (specifically, the question of what specific thing represents what general category), just as the relationship between the individual and the community requires careful thinking about the complexities of identity and belonging (as in the question of how individuals fit in, represent, and critique their communities). So, it makes sense that problems of representation would also be problems for any rapport between Anabaptism and philosophy.

For my purposes, I use the word “philosophy” to refer—for better, and certainly for worse—to the western philosophical tradition which traces its lineages from the ancient Greeks to the Enlightenment, and into modernity and postmodernity where its foundations become radically (and rightly!) questioned by those who reject monolithic interpretations of philosophy. Interior distinctions abound within philosophy—analytic Anglo-American philosophy is distinguished from continental European philosophy, and the recognition of global philosophical reflection continues to unfold—and its many facets are not unlike the schisms and sectarian divisions that we see in Protestant Christianity.

On the other hand, I understand the constellation of Anabaptist and Mennonite identities in terms of its key values and stated principles, from voluntarism, the rejection of coercion, critiques of the state, the formation of alternative and utopian communities defined by mutual aid and the community of goods, and the desire for revolutionary and restitutionist reform, to the emphasis on following Jesus Christ (discipleship), the various critiques of violence that underpin pacifism and nonresistance (such as the critique of redemptive violence), and the paradoxes of radicalism and

dissent.¹¹ I see the Anabaptist vision, the spirit of the Radical Reformation, and the Mennonite peace witness as forms of life that emphasize a unique critique of violence that both includes and exceeds institutional capture by the denominations of the church and the disciplines of the university. Anabaptist and Mennonite identities are diverse and multiple, and today it is controversial to define them in any singular way, and yet I believe that it is defensible to claim that the tradition is defined by a disposition of antiviolence that is informed by a pacifist interpretation of Jesus Christ and the gospels.

Between, Beyond

Anabaptist and Mennonite identities also exceed the distinction between secularity and religion both because our present ideas and anxieties about religion do not map directly onto the sixteenth century Anabaptist groups, and because not all contemporary Mennonites consider themselves to be practicing adherents of Christianity. For example, the complex identities of philosophically inclined or secular Mennonites are often expressed in literary ways that stand apart from academic or ecclesial institutions.¹² For instance, we can look to a question that frames Ronald Tiessen's novel *Menno in Athens*, which narrates the travels of a young Mennonite on the islands of Greece. The novel stages what is likely the first sustained literary-philosophical encounter between Mennonite and Greek thought, and

¹¹ For a helpful historical summary see John D. Roth and Steven M. Nolt, "The Anabaptist Tradition," *Reflections* 13-14 (2011-2012): 10-27. On the polemical character of the historical term "Anabaptist," Michael Driedger writes that "Today it is common to use 'Anabaptist' as a value-neutral or even positive descriptor for the great diversity of adult baptizing groups in the broad 'Mennonite' community" but cautions that this contemporary use of the term "makes it difficult to analyze both the hatreds aimed at continental baptizers and the attempts by adult baptizers to defend against these hatreds and name themselves." See Michael Driedger, "The Year 1625, the Dutch Republic, and Book History: Perspectives for Reframing Studies of Mennonites in Early Modernity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 97.1 (January 2023), 13. Indeed, the normative and contested character of naming is reflected in historical transformations where names are attributed, rejected, accepted, and reclaimed in contextual ways that lead from historical Anabaptism to the contemporary Mennonite reception and the reappropriation of the Anabaptist name.

¹² See, for example, the fascinating and textured representation of Mennonite identity in Jonathan Dyck, *Shelterbelts* (Wolfville, NS: Conundrum Press, 2022).

in a key moment, the narrator asks his father a question: “If you have the proclamation of a truth in one case that is considered divine revelation, and the same proclamation is found in another culture, must we assume that one is divinely inspired and the other not?”¹³ Indeed, this kind of question defines much of the personal and scholarly encounter between religion and secularity as well as greater conversations about pluralism and exclusivism.

In the context of this inquiry, however, we can put the question in another way: If there are resonant values that connect Anabaptist and Mennonite identities with other secular or philosophical forms of life, then why would we dignify or attend to one at the expense of the other? The stakes of this question are high because it concerns the relationship between one complex and diverse tradition and its many others and outsiders. We ought to consider how Mennonites and Anabaptists treat those who are outside their bounds because this is the real test of whether the peace church traditions are who they say they are. Will those who stand outside of the tradition be treated in ways that accord with the critique of violence and pursuit of peace and justice that defines much of its interior? Or will violence be inscribed in subtle discursive ways as Anabaptists or Mennonites make instrumental use of philosophy or quietly suspect secularity of heresy?

In answer to the question of how representatives of Anabaptism and philosophy ought to relate to each other, I propose, very simply, that the way forward for this dialogue is to fully dignify the similarities and differences between the two, and to do so without the comforts of syncretistic unity (where the two are collapsed into each other) or the paralyses of irreducible difference (where comparisons and connections are prohibited). I first want to refuse the desire to simply fold Anabaptist and philosophical ideas into each other when similarities arise. Even when we do find striking resonances between Anabaptist and philosophical ideas, as Tiessen does throughout his novel, there will always be real and irreducible differences between the two that cannot be subsumed into unity without violating the dignity and uniqueness of both parts of the encounter. This reductive approach is present when Mennonite theologians use philosophies and philosophers for their own purposes, without acknowledging that the philosophers they cite and quote would not agree with their values or aims. But also, in reverse, I want

¹³ Ronald Tiessen, *Menno in Athens* (Thunder Bay, ON: Pandora Press, 2022).

to refuse the desire to see differences as solely irreducible and incomparable, a tendency that is often motivated by disciplinary gatekeeping where scholars prefer to avoid engagement with those outside of their specialized fields (even when their research topics and questions are resonant).

No, there is no need to avoid or prohibit engagement with philosophy because it is so very different from Anabaptist or Mennonite theologies. We should be able to think apart from the desire to collapse difference into sameness *and* the desire to make differences irreducible or incomparable. It is better to find a third way to define the term “contra” in “Anabaptism contra Philosophy” that is not between but beyond these two bad options. In the spirit of both sixteenth century Anabaptism’s simultaneous refusal of and indebtedness to Catholicism and Protestantism, and contemporary Mennonite attempts to get outside of the dichotomy between passivity and violence, I propose a third way that neither stands between nor entirely exits the supposed poles of Anabaptist thought and the philosophical tradition by dignifying their similarities while keeping a porous boundary between them that allows us to see their differences.

Both/And, Neither/Nor

This requires critiquing and disinvesting in rigid oppositions between: religion and secularity (by becoming both postsecular and postreligious); theology and philosophy (by becoming interdisciplinary); church and world (by acknowledging that this is an ideal-type distinction); liberalism and conservatism (by challenging liberal progressivism, conservative reaction, and the desire for neutrality); and so on—for none of these framing distinctions are adequate to the complexities and entanglements of this life. In the context of such distinctions, Anabaptist and Mennonite identities and epistemologies become philosophically significant because of their unique mediations between oppositions.¹⁴ Sixteenth century Anabaptism was a social *and* religious movement whose followers were *both* indelibly influenced by the Catholic church-state establishment and the mainstream Protestant reformers, *and* radically different from these two options in ways that mediated between them, negated them both, and sought to change the

¹⁴ I develop this claim in detail in *Ontologies of Violence*, Chapter 2.

social order.¹⁵ So too, in very different ways, with Mennonites who sought to oppose both political passivity and violent reaction by articulating pacifist “middle ways” or “third ways” that challenge the notion that violence solves violence.¹⁶

It is this both/and, neither/nor structure that is philosophically significant, and it represents a significant opportunity for thinking philosophically about Anabaptist and Mennonite identities and for bringing the insights of the tradition into philosophical and secular conversations. However, the value of philosophical Anabaptism hinges on the precise character of the mediations that would ensue from such a rapprochement. Some forms of mediation between the poles of common conceptual oppositions only reaffirm and entrench their structurally opposed character by seeking to “hear both sides” of poorly formed or even violent distinctions. Popular efforts to mediate between oppositions—both abstract and concrete—often dignify political and popular narratives of resentment and reaction or remain neutral on matters that call for justice, action, or accountability, all in the name of avoiding the perceived moral compromise of choosing a side. But there is no moral purity or neutrality to be found in this world, only complex complicities and tensions between idealism and compromise that may become emancipatory.

It is better to match mediation between social and conceptual oppositions with a strong commitment to antiviolenent action and a sharp refusal of both neutrality and polarization. This is the radical promise of a philosophically informed Anabaptism or Anabaptist-influenced philosophy. Indeed, such an approach has already been articulated in preliminary ways throughout the history of the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition. For example, Mennonite pastor and peace worker Edgar Metzler published a pamphlet in 1968 called “Let’s Talk about Extremism” in which he radically reframed the social and political oppositions of his time and argued for a critical approach to what we now call polarization by articulating a set of

¹⁵ See Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. 3rd Ed. (Thunder Bay, ON: Pandora Press, 2001) and Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson (London: Routledge, 1996), 6.

¹⁶ For a recent expression that extends Walter Wink’s “third way,” see Hyung Jin Kim Sun, *Who Are Our Enemies and How Do We Love Them?* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2020).

epistemological distinctions between open and closed ways of thinking about social problems.¹⁷ Against simplistic, selective, black-and-white, fear-based, or destructive ways of thinking about the world, Metzler advocated for alternatives to authoritarianism and nationalism, conceptualized non-reductive approaches to dialogue across lines of difference, and promoted ways of responding to social change that resisted reactivity and resentment. Had Mennonites in the 1960s and 1970s taken to this distinctive approach rather than John Howard Yoder's politics of Jesus, it is possible that Mennonites today would have richer resources to draw on to address the present culture wars.

Careful and contextual yet incisive and critical mediations between established conceptual and political oppositions are sorely needed in our present social landscape where dominant distinctions provoke reactive doubling-down, conflict averse avoidance, and the retrenchment of all-too-simple divisions. It is time to acknowledge that simple distinctions between insiders and outsiders, singularizing approaches to church and world, reductive representations of philosophy and theology, and the strictures of the religious-secular distinction are no longer adequate for understanding, explaining, or critiquing what we see in the world (if they ever were!). Nowhere is there to be found a theologian without philosophical influence, or a philosopher who does not rely upon concepts with a religious history, or a churchgoer without a secular life, or a non-religious person purified of all religious influence. We are not this or that, we are always both and neither, and nowhere except in the realm of ideal-types is there a pure identity without contradictions and enmeshments.

Three Critiques

Beginning from the assumption that these terms—religious and secular—do not name stable phenomena but instead are conceptual tools that are used and abused for diverse purposes, I want to critique the imposition of enmity, suspicion, and competition onto relationships between Anabaptism and its

¹⁷ Edgar Metzler, *Let's Talk About Extremism*, Focal Pamphlet Series No. 12 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1968). Online edition, *Anabaptist Historians*, ed. Maxwell Kennel, (January 2021), <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2021/01/07/edgar-metzlers-lets-talk-about-extremism-1968/>.

many others, most especially philosophy. One manifestation of this ontology of displacement that I want to resist is found implicitly in the ignorance that many Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians have shown regarding the worlds outside of Christian theology. I use the term “ignorance” here not to attack positions different from my own, but to name the specific and identifiable forms of misrecognition and nonrecognition that characterize how some Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians turn a blind eye to philosophical and secular thinkers who could otherwise become great partners and allies to think and engage with. Below I provide three examples of the tendency to ignore philosophy on the part of some Anabaptist and Mennonite theologians and then develop my greater claim that the future of the Anabaptist encounter with philosophy ought to both mediate between and refuse simplistic distinctions. I believe this critique is important for showing how some Mennonite scholars ignore those outside their discourses and disciplines at the direct expense of their own stated values.

First, I see this ignorance in some forms of Anabaptist political theology. For example, the fascinating new edited collection *Anabaptist Political Theology After Marpeck* focuses on an historical Anabaptist figure who was highly engaged in the civil society of his time (Pilgram Marpeck, an engineer), and yet the book is framed in a way that avoids similar engagements.¹⁸ Nowhere in the chapters of the book or its apparatus is any acknowledgement that the discourse on “political theology” is anything but a Christian pursuit. This way of presenting the book’s stated subject matter ignores large areas in the conversation on political theology that do not consider themselves to be contributing to the aims of Christianity. For example, the Political Theology Network has gone to great lengths to present the paradigm of political theology as a pluralistic and interdisciplinary resource that challenges the distinction between religion and secularity and seeks to understand secularization from an interdisciplinary perspective.¹⁹ So why would Anabaptist political theologies use the term “political theology” without signalling that this term is not solely determined or

¹⁸ *Anabaptist Political Theology After Marpeck*, ed. J. Denny Weaver, Gerald Mast, and Trevor Bechtel, C. Henry Smith Series no. 13 (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2022).

¹⁹ Political Theology Network, Points of Unity (2019), <https://politicaltheology.com/political-theology-network-points-of-unity/>

owned by Christian theologians? Apart from two gestural quotations to Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, there are no philosophers cited in the volume despite the central place of philosophy in political theology, and even more conspicuously, there is no engagement with major (and often controversial) figures in the discourse on political theology such as Giorgio Agamben, Vincent Lloyd, Beatrice Marovich, and Adam Kotsko. Showing awareness of the existence of secular political theologies should be a natural consequence of Anabaptist and Mennonite methodologies because recognition and attention are origin-points of both peace and violence. Yet it is rare to see Anabaptism represented in the broader conversation on political theology and uncommon to see Mennonite theologians take up the rigorous distinctions of critical political theology.²⁰

Second, I see the tendency to ignore philosophy and secularity in some Mennonite feminist theologies. A few years ago, in an article on “Mennonite Political Theology and Feminist Critique,” I challenged feminist theologians in the Mennonite tradition to consider how secular feminists might be both a resource and challenge for their work.²¹ This past year, Susanne Guenther Loewen generously responded to this challenge in her own excellent contribution to a special issue of *Political Theology*. Although she presented Mennonite feminist theologies in a comprehensive way that will surely help the discourse, her article still limits to a footnote any consideration of Mennonite feminists who do not see themselves as Christians.²² In light of this decision, I wonder more generally why Mennonite feminist theologians do not actively seek out potential secular allies who do not share their theological convictions but who might share their social values? Why not cite or intentionally form bonds of solidarity with philosophers like Diane Enns,²³ literary figures like Miriam Toews, or ex-Mennonites like Grace

²⁰ One exception can be found in Elizabeth Phillips, “Anabaptist Theologies,” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

²¹ Maxwell Kennel, “Mennonite Political Theology and Feminist Critique,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93 (July 2019): 393-412.

²² Susanne Guenther Loewen, “The Personal is Political: The Politics of Liberation in Mennonite-Feminist Theologies,” *Political Theology* 22.3 (2021): 192-210.

²³ See, for example, the brief reflections on Mennonite life in Diane Enns, *Thinking Through Loneliness* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 90, 96.

Jantzen, when they are also engaged in deep critiques of patriarchy? Why not engage directly with Judith Butler's recent turn toward nonviolence, or Erin Wunker's and Sarah Ahmed's "feminist killjoy?"²⁴ In some ways, it is not my place to criticize Mennonite feminist theologies because of how imbricated in patriarchal power my subject position remains. But I also feel fortunate to have had generous feminist dialogue partners with whom I have given and received criticism of this kind.

Third, I see this ignorance of philosophy and secularity in theologies that present Anabaptist and Mennonite identities as only, ideally, or normatively Christian—as if there were not Mennonites who retain their Mennonite identities in rich and meaningful ways after exiting the institutional church.²⁵ This invalidating presentation of Mennonite identity again proceeds as if certain scholars or individuals who bear a complex or negative relationship to the tradition do not exist. An example of this limited way of defining the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition is found in the work of Jeremy Bergen. In his recent book chapter in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision*, Bergen presents Anabaptism in a solely Christian light. He writes programmatically that "The Anabaptist tradition ought to be regarded as a reforming movement within, and for the sake of, the (capital-C) Church identified by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic," and that "Anything that might characterize Anabaptism as distinctive... [a term he later problematizes and frames as a gift] ought to be distinctive specifically in relation to other Christians and be oriented toward the unity and integrity of the church."²⁶ To this I say, no. Not only were there many ways that the sixteenth century Anabaptists sought to radically reform all of society (beyond the contemporary Christian/secular distinction), but there are many who understand themselves to be heirs of the Anabaptist tradition but do not see that identity as something that exists for the sake

²⁴ See Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2021), Erin Wunker, *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* (Toronto: BookThug, 2016), and Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2017).

²⁵ See, for example, Janis Thiessen, "'It's a hard thing to talk about': 'Fringe' Mennonite Religious Beliefs and Experiences," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 213-233

²⁶ Jeremy Bergen, "The Ecumenical Vocation of Anabaptist Theology," in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, ed. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron A. Penner (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 103.

of the church. For example, Daniel Shank Cruz's approach in both *Queering Mennonite Literature* and his latest book *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times* promotes Anabaptist and Mennonite-informed values like community and mutual aid, without endorsement of the capital-C Church.²⁷

Another striking example of an Anabaptist theology that misrecognizes philosophical secularity and secular Mennonite identity is Layton Boyd Friesen's book *Secular Non-Violence and the Theo-Drama of Peace*. In it, Friesen continues the tired pattern of seeing secularity as a direct and essential threat to Christianity. For Friesen, when Mennonites exit the church but retain a commitment to nonviolence, there is something fundamentally lacking. He writes that "To the extent that the Mennonite pacifist ethic is not a theological ethic, it will fail to provide a coherent wisdom for how to live in this world."²⁸ I contend that this is patently false, and I ask: Why not recognize and acknowledge that the Anabaptist tradition has deep and rich secular afterlives in the present that deserve just as much consideration and dignity as its theological inheritors? For example, we can look to the entire conversation about "Mennonite/s Writing" and ask: Why not see this discourse as a coherent wisdom and legitimate expression of Mennonite identity that faithfully follows the spirit of Anabaptist radicalism and dissent by standing at a distance from the established church? What would it mean to repent and turn from such a myopic vision of Anabaptism, and instead listen to ex-Mennonites, near-Mennonites, and non-Mennonites (to echo the theme of the 2015 issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*) and their social critiques?

Recognition, Engagement

In face of these limitations, a greater question is: Why do theologically oriented Anabaptists and Mennonites struggle to engage with secular and philosophical thinkers without either using philosophy for their own purposes or anxiously returning to a set of rigid foundations in face of a

²⁷ Daniel Shank Cruz, *Queering Mennonite Literature: Archives, Activism, and the Search for Community* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2019), and *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2023).

²⁸ Layton Boyd Friesen, *Secular Nonviolence and the Theo-Drama of Peace: Anabaptist Ethics and the Catholic Christology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 11.

perceived secular threat? When contemporary Mennonites cite Menno Simons' favourite verse, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11), it bears considering what work the image of a foundation is doing in relation to those who do not share the same foundations. Do those in the Anabaptist or Mennonite tradition conceive of such a foundation in Christ as something to anxiously return to in the face of perceived threats, or does founding oneself or one's tradition on a peaceful figure like Jesus of Nazareth mean divesting from all institutional and structural investments that would cause such an anxious return? I use economic language of investment and divestment here because it bears considering what exactly it would cost those in the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition to engage more fully with philosophical and secular thinkers.²⁹ I contend that it would cost Mennonite theologians nothing worth saving to engage with the work of philosophers and secular political theologians without subsuming them into theology or seeing them as lacking or irreducibly different.

In the absence of the fear of difference, the Anabaptist and Mennonite values of peace and justice and concomitant critique of violence—whether rooted in theological foundations or not—can serve as a bridge to span the divide between Anabaptism and philosophy and between secular and Christian representatives of the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition. This bridge threatens to collapse, however, when Christian fragility causes a retreat to first principles rather than a true form of recognition and connection across lines of difference. It costs Anabaptists and Mennonites nothing to read, listen to, dignify, acknowledge, engage with, and cite philosophers and their philosophies—except perhaps the feeling of security one receives from believing that one possesses the truth. But there is no real threat lurking around the corner that would destabilize Christian convictions or institutions if secular and philosophical perspectives were fully recognized, dignified, and given voice inside, outside, and alongside the Anabaptist tradition. In fact, the real threat to Anabaptist and Mennonite values is found in the act of ignoring the other and in the damaging forms of non-recognition that are

²⁹ For a more in-depth exploration of economies of investment, attention, and desire, see Travis Kroeker, *Empire Erotics and Messianic Economies of Desire*, J.J. Thiessen Lectures 2013 (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite Univ. Press, 2016).

used to keep the line between religion and secularity stable.

It is the politics of recognition that is at the core of my argument for an antiviolent form of interdisciplinary connection between Anabaptism and philosophy. I wonder: Is there not a form of implicit enmity and epistemological violence in the desire to maintain hard boundaries between disciplines and discourses like Christian theology and philosophy or religion and secularity? On one hand, these boundaries are important when we want to identify real and contextual differences in languages, approaches, values, and assumptions. At the same time, when these distinctions become weight-bearing investments that protect their users from uncomfortable truths or internal contradictions, then they prevent the kinds of mutual recognition that motivate their positive uses. The real problem underneath this distinction between differences we should dignify and differences that become self-reinforcing is the subtle violence of non-recognition. Alexander García Düttmann's approach to recognition can help us here. He states:

Someone wants to be recognized as this or that because he or she [sic] claims to be this or that... Recognition must consequently establish and confirm an identity. By constituting and authenticating an identity, recognition is meant to incorporate a contingent I into the community of a deeply rooted We, a We firmly anchored and clearly positioned. The one who recognizes is both a witness and a producer. He belongs to a presupposed community or society which must first be formed by recognition. But recognition never forms such a society or community, given that the very moment it tries to unite what it produces and what it witnesses, what it produces in what it witnesses and what it witnesses in what it produces, it must indicate its own splitting into reception and spontaneity, confirmation and establishment, witnessing and producing.³⁰

Düttmann thematizes recognition by showing how it is essential for identity while also showing how recognition performs a paradoxical task of uniting what cannot be united. So, too, with the disposition of recognition

³⁰ Alexander García Düttmann, *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate (London: Verso, 2000), 3.

I am proposing for the relationship between Anabaptism and philosophy. Some forms of misrecognition instrumentalize the other, as in the case of theologians who take up philosophical ideas and use them for Christian purposes in ways their philosophical originators would not recognize. On the other hand, there are forms of nonrecognition that occur when we turn away from and refuse to recognize and dignify adjacent identities. For example, when theologians proceed as if all Mennonites see themselves as Christians or when theologians define the secular in terms of absence and lack, rather than a form of life with positive values, then deep misrecognition has occurred. But Düttmann's insight is deeper still because it also shows us that the communities who engage in recognition—both producing identity and witnessing it—are never fully unified or whole. Recognition “tries to unite what it produces and what it witnesses,” but it ultimately reflects our split and alienated character. We are not one. We are not whole. And we do not agree. Better to acknowledge these social facts and then undertake the difficult work of forming deep bonds of solidarity and social bonds of public trust across lines of difference, rather than taking refuge in fantasies of unity, or, as Miranda Joseph calls it, “the romance of community.”³¹

So, if the paradoxes of recognition are the problem for the dialogue between Anabaptists and philosophers, then what are the solutions? I suggest that the first solution is to cultivate richer and more generous practices of recognition; not recognition that self-assuredly gives the other the gift of attention, and not recognition that ironically prides itself in its vulnerability and patience, but a form of recognition that is mutual enough that it could leave behind the shorelines of theological and historical comfort for a very long time, and set out on the seas of secularity without the promise of return. This form of recognition would allow Anabaptists and philosophers to engage with each other's ideas without anxiety, agenda, or suspicion. Rather than seeing recognition in competitive terms—where identities in the marketplace of ideas are pitted against each other as if we can only pay attention to one thing at a time—we need to challenge the reactive and zero-sum ways we conceive of attention itself. As I argue in *Ontologies of Violence*, the first step toward a rapport between secular and religious critics of violence

³¹ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Univ. Press, 2002).

is to challenge the idea that difference will always lead to displacement. We lose nothing by engaging fully and openly with that which is different from us, and we gain a deeper sense of our own identities and communities when we do.

But the way forward on this front is more difficult, because our response to difference is conditioned not only by our theologies, histories, ontologies, or epistemologies, but also by our psychologies and biographies. As Christian Early and his colleagues note (following the work of John Bowlby) our attachment relationships determine our ability to form peaceable bonds that do not respond to differences with fear or reactivity. As Christian and Annmarie Early write in their introduction to the fascinating and underappreciated volume *Integrating the New Science of Love and a Spirituality of Peace*, “the fundamental way that humans (and other animals) deal with stress is through social connection, not competition.”³² Although this statement is phrased descriptively, it is surely a normative claim that connection ought to be valued over competition. So, the question for the conversation between Anabaptism and philosophy should be: what stands in the way of real connection? Christian and Annmarie Early argue that there are deep resonances between Anabaptist peace theologies and the psychology of attachment, and I agree. If the notion that difference is dangerous is what keeps Anabaptists suspicious of philosophy and secularity, then the solution is not to fine-tune our theologies or double-down on our foundationalism, but to examine the deeper reasons why we react to differences as if they will displace us. On this theme, I have found insight in my partner’s field of practice as a therapist and I look to the therapeutic framework of Internal Family Systems therapy for help in trying to understand the desire to partition and divide what is really entangled and connected.³³ I gesture outward to this world outside of Anabaptism and philosophy in conclusion because I think that the stakes of the relationship between disciplines and identities like Anabaptism and philosophy are best understood by looking inward at the reasons why we construct identity and otherness in the first place.

³² *Integrating the New Science of Love and a Spirituality of Peace: Becoming Human Again*, ed. Christian E. Early and Annmarie L. Early (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 5.

³³ See my “Religious Studies & Internal Family Systems Therapy,” *Implicit Religion* 23 (2020): 293-304.

This is why it is so meaningful that the first lecture in the Anabaptists and Philosophy Roundtable lecture series by Diane Enns was autobiographical, for how else do encounters between Anabaptist traditions and philosophy occur than in life? If the present essay seems very personal, with its many self-citations and persistent defenses of particular liminal identities, it is only because the encounter between Anabaptism and philosophy is always, in some way, personal. One way forward for the discourse ought to involve such an acknowledgement, for it is the desire to cleanly separate scholarship from the lives of the ones who produce it that blinds those who perpetuate and receive it from the fact that all knowledge is produced from specific social locations. This does not prohibit philosophical abstraction that attempts to work with general, metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological categories, but it ought to condition such reflection and influence the mediation between particularity and generality, perhaps using the models provided by Anabaptist ways of mediating between oppositions that move away from simple either-or distinctions and toward careful and contextual neither-nor negations, both-and affirmations, relations of critical indebtedness to tradition, and movements of freedom beyond entrenched oppositions.

Maxwell Kennel is a Senior Research Associate at the Dr. Gilles Arcand Centre for Health Equity at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and the Director of Pandora Press.