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THE GERMAN LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND THE FAITH

A Foreword

The topic assigned to me as listed in the printed brochure reads: **The German Language and Faith and Culture**. I did not feel entirely comfortable with that wording and so I have taken the liberty to adjust it to: **The German Language, Culture and the Faith**.

From my anthropological/linguistic perspective, language and culture are intimately related. Thus, I see this study conference as interested in examining how this twosome of language and culture has impinged upon our Mennonite Brethren (hereafter MB) faith rather than how the German language and our faith influenced our culture.

Introduction

In the fall of 1959, my home church in Yarrow, B.C. was engaged in a bitter debate about whether it would be permissible to use the English language in its worship services. A majority of the elders who held power in the church felt that if the church abandoned the High German language--the language of our fathers--(forgive their male chauvenism! This was still well before the heyday of feminism) as its language of worship, it would also lose the essence of its faith.

On the other hand, the younger folk, whose children already preferred to speak English and who were desirous of bringing non-German-speaking spouses, in-laws, and friends to church, felt that unless English, the language of almost everybody's everyday activity, also became the language of worship, all talk about evangelism and church growth was a farce. They feared that even

the next generation of home-grown children of MB homes would be lost to the church, if nothing were done about moving towards English as the language of worship.

Prophets of doom on both sides of the language issue were forecasting the demise of the MB church, if their point of view would be rejected. Feelings were running so high, a major explosion seemed imminent and inevitable.

After another one of many such tense and difficult meetings my brother-in-law, then the pastor of the Yarrow MB Church, drove to Seattle where Anne and I were engaged in graduate studies at the University of Washington. My brother-in-law felt that he just had to get away from the local scene where the atmosphere seemed poisoned by tensions over the language issue.

As luck would have it, I had just made what to me was the most interesting discovery. In the lowest basement of the library at the university, there was a large assembly of crates of library materials pilfered from German libraries at the end of WWII. The University of Washington was one of six American universities which had become depositories for such materials. Most of the crates were only partially unpacked and everywhere there were piles of uncatalogued books and pamphlets scattered on the floor. On one of these piles I discovered an old (1759) Lutheran Church pamphlet containing a report by a Lutheran minister who had just completed a preaching tour in the heavily Lutheran Vistula Delta area of Danzig. After preaching in a number of the churches of his own denomination, he got the bright idea of also preaching in some of the Mennonite Churches there.

He appealed to the Mennonite Church authorities for permission and precipitated a major problem for the church leadership. In his report he described how the Mennonite Ohms "elders" met over a stein of beer in a tobacco-smoke-filled room to discuss his request. The Plattdeutsch-speaking Ohms not only refused his request, they delivered their refusal in the form of a stinging attack on the High German language. In the words of the Lutheran pastor: Lass den fremden Prediger mit seinem schwarzen Rock und seiner stolzen Teufelssprache predigen wo er will, aber nicht in unsern Gemeinden "Let this strange preacher with his black frock and his proud devil's-language speak where he will but not in our congregations."

The language struggle in Yarrow demonstrated how in exactly 200 years a Mennonite Church was completing a full language circle. In 1759 the Low German was "God's language" and the High German was "the proud devil's-language," and in 1959, the High German, the former "devil's-language," was now "God's language" and English was now filling the slot of the "devil's-language."

Until I began working seriously on this paper I had always considered the preceding episode merely a very unnecessary repetition of an identical mistake due to a lack of history consciousness. However, my research and preparation for this paper have convinced me that the German to English-language shift among the MB's involved not only an unnecessary struggle, but consequences that were of far-reaching import.

The package mentality

In an article "The Heart of our Heritage," John Howard Yoder deplores that many Mennonites have a "cultural package" mentality

in which "the German language and non-resistance, farming and believer's baptism, hard work and simple faith, form an indivisible package...."¹ Thus Yoder calls Mennonites to reflection and clear thinking in order to separate what is central from what is peripheral to their Mennonite/Anabaptist heritage. He lists six items² which to him are the essence of our heritage. His list of essentials does not include the German language.

If one approaches the language issue from an intellectual or theological perspective, Yoder, of course, is correct--the German language is not central to Anabaptist thought. However, as has been pointed out by Hall,³ reason and systematic theology often are not really decisive in a person's adherence to a given religion or his changing to another religion. People have a need to feel "at home" and the source of that feeling often defies reason and theology.

Some anthropological and linguistic insights relating to the "package mentality"

I now want to point out several anthropological and linguistic insights in order to elucidate how the maligned "package mentality" operates and why it must be reckoned with if we want to understand the resistance to change in regard to the German language, and why this did not apply to the Borscht/Zwieback culture that went along with it.

Language and culture are intricately interwoven, because language provides the labels for the "chunks of reality" a given culture recognizes (See Fig.1.) Thus Dell Hymes says:

The interrelation of language and other aspects of

culture is so close that no part of the culture of a particular group can properly be studied without reference to the linguistic symbols in use.⁴

Once such a "labeling" grid has been established by a culture, however, this grid begins to function as a filter, predetermining what may be recognized and what should be ignored in the world outside. Even more serious, if the "reality" of a given culture is given ultimate value for one reason or another, then it will function as a set of distorting glasses which see all other views of reality as inferior or wrong.

We could illustrate the simple differences in cultural labeling with the German Ecke, English corner. This unit-chunk of reality in English and German is divided into two in Spanish with esquina "an outside corner" and rincon "an inside corner."

We can illustrate the filter function of a language/culture grid with a Japanese example. The Japanese treat the sound of rain and that of the cicada beetle as linguistically meaningful and so they store this information in the language area of the left hemisphere of their brain. Westerners, on the other hand, treat both of these sounds as noise and store them in their right hemisphere.⁵

The integration of culture

In her book: Patterns of Culture, Ruth Benedict points out that culture tends to be an integrated whole.⁶ Wissler, on the other hand, suggests that there are nine cultural universals⁷. We can combine these two insights--Wissler's cultural universals and Benedict's culture patterns--and thus construct a model of

culture integration using a wheel as the image. Usually one of the cultural universals forms the axle and the remaining universals then function as the spokes of the wheel (See Fig.2.) This model allows us to suggest that if you remove any one spoke from that wheel, you have seriously weakened the integrity of the wheel as a whole. If you remove the axle, however, you destroy the entire wheel.⁸

Another model that could provide insight into the integration of culture traits is that of the structure of the atom in which the individual valences of the atom's structure represent individual culture traits. This model allows us to suggest that peripheral traits can be changed readily without serious consequences to the basic structure, but if one removes a more central trait or a core value, one can often precipitate major reshaping in a culture's integration. Like with the axle of the wheel, the removal of the nucleus destroys the whole structure (See Fig.3.)

Ralph Linton,⁹ under the influence of British anthropologists like Malinowski¹⁰ and Radcliffe-Brown,¹¹ introduced the concepts of culture traits, trait linkages, trait bundles and their functions. We could illustrate these concepts by comparing the function of stone axes in various cultures. Different cultures may employ stone axes as one of their culture traits, but when one looks a little bit more closely at each of these cultures, one finds that the function of this artifact can be very different from culture to culture because the trait is attached to different trait bundles. In one culture the axe is an implement for getting firewood or for clearing land for farming;

in another culture it is an implement used for making other artifacts like dugout canoes; in a third culture it functions as a weapon of war; and in the fourth it is merely a ceremonial object indicating authority.

The more intimately linked a trait is to a given trait bundle, the greater the consequences of its removal from that bundle will be.¹²

An equivalent way to speak about trait bundles is in terms of cultural themes. Thus Naroll says:

By a theme is meant a leading idea used as a spine or bus to organize an ideology through association. In North American culture, for example, a central theme is democracy; in English culture, fair play; in French culture, elegant style; in classical Chinese culture, filial piety.¹³

Themes that are important to MB's would include conversion, evangelism, separation from the world, piety, etc. In the past the latter two were intimately linked to the German language as the succeeding sections will show. 

In an integrated culture, even the simple substitution of one trait for another, in spite of the fact that the two may appear to be relatively equal to an outsider, can often produce some very drastic or unexpected consequences. Thus, for example, when missionaries came to the Yir Yoront of Australia and began to sell steel axes to them to replace their stone axes, the entire culture of this people suffered upset.¹⁴

Prior to the missionaries' arrival only successful older adult males were in the economic and social position to acquire a

stone axe. The acquisition of such an axe was a prerequisite for becoming an adult male and being acceptable as a marriage partner. A person could acquire a stone axe only through trading, because there was no suitable stone in Yir Yoront territory. This trading involved not only the tribe nearest to the Yir Yoront, but had to be carried on through a series of intervening tribes until it finally reached the tribe which had the appropriate stone quarries for making stone axes. Thus for a man to acquire a stone axe meant accumulating sufficient and proper goods for trading. It also meant establishing trusted trading relationships with members of neighboring tribes, so that the goods could be passed through several hands until finally the Yir Yoront male received the desired stone axe in exchange.

Then the missionaries arrived and began selling cheap steel axes. Soon the whole trading pattern between the tribes was upset. Within the tribe itself the male identity was destroyed and the male/female balance was upset, because even women could now acquire their own steel axes. In this case a simple substitution of a steel axe for a stone axe precipitated a total disruption of not only a culture, but also of its relationships with neighboring tribes.

German language linkage in MB religion and culture

On the basis of these and other anthropological insights, it is now possible to pose some crucial questions: What was the function of the German language in Mennonite religion and culture? Did it function as a peripheral or a central trait? To what other traits was it closely linked? Together with what other traits did it form trait bundles? When it was lost, what kinds of

cultural/ideological changes did it precipitate?

Speaking of the function of the German language in Mennonite culture in general, John B. Toews says:

Historically the school transmitted most of what the colonists understood as "Mennonite." All the important things pertaining to life patterns and piety were derived from the school and found expression in the German language. In everyday life the majority spoke Low German. On Sunday they read Luther's Bible, sang High German hymns, heard High German sermons and uttered High German prayers. "If we are conscious of our peoplehood" a reader wrote to Friedensstimme "the use and the understanding of the German language is essential. Correct German thinking, correct German feeling, correct German speaking will always be a blessing and also promote correct Christian thinking and action."^[16] ¹⁵ In the context of his day the correspondent was right. All ideas relating to Mennonite peoplehood, especially in their religious dimensions, were linguistically German....

At the turn of the century pro-Germanism was a basic feature of Mennonite culture and religion. This implied a contact with Germany along these lines but did not mean a political or nationalistic identification with Germany.^[20] Mennonites attending a special conference at Schonwiese (1908) heard Pastor Meyer from Sarata argue "that in the future the schools will be and remain what they have always been, the guardians and transmitters of true German being, German fidelity (Treue) and true Christian piety."^[21] ¹⁶

If Toews is correct in his analysis, then there was a very intimate link between the High German language and Mennonite culture and Mennonite religion in Russia. When he says that the High German language, the language of the school, transmitted everything "Mennonite," he is probably referring primarily to culture though the schools did also teach religion. Quoting Friedensstimme he adds that the German language was fundamental to Mennonite consciousness of their peoplehood. They could not conceive of their identity apart from the German language. And, because the schools also taught religion, we can thus add that most religious knowledge received by children came through the

High German language. In church the High German Bible, High German hymns, High German sermons, and High German prayers were essential to worship¹⁷ and thus High German used in church and school produced--so the people thought--"true German being, German fidelity (Treue) and true Christian piety."

We thus see that the German language was considered the most essential trait in both the cultural (educational) and the religious bundles of traits.

The High German language was also the avenue par excellence for the entry of new information into the MB milieu. Thus John B. Toews says:

Historically, German culture provided an outlet for the serious intellect of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Devotional, often pietistically inclined, literature had supplied the needs of the serious pilgrim since the 1840's. German literature, evangelical theology, hymns of special importance, and educational philosophy were regularly imported by German students after the 1870's. This accumulated cultural-intellectual treasure provided a much-needed reserve when russification intensified during the 1890's. As the pressure increased, so did the resistance. The colonists were not yet ready to adopt Slavic culture, and the abundance of things German provided the materials needed for a reassertion of their minority identity. In retrospect we can see that the Russian Mennonites of the early twentieth century began a conscious cultural-intellectual journey in the direction of Germany.

For many the new learning was so abundant and overwhelming that the knowledge of their forebears' spiritual quest was forgotten or seemed irrelevant. During the first decade of the century the majority of Mennonite teachers possessed little or no past to relate to. They knew of the German literary giants, the educational philosophers and methodologists, the theology of German and Swiss Bible schools and seminaries....¹⁸

I think Toews rightly concludes that because all this material was in German, it seemed so "Mennonite" that the people just accepted it indiscriminately, often to the point of

undermining their Anabaptist heritage.

That the High German language functioned as a very central trait even among Canadian MB's can also be seen by the bitterness of feeling engendered by the German/English language debate described in the introduction. Many older people wrongly believed (so I then thought) that German was an integral part of their religion and their piety. We can illustrate this with an anecdote.

A very important minister in my home community of Yarrow, once said, Ich kann es mir ueberhaupt nicht vorstellen wie ein Mensch sich auf Englisch bekehren kann "I can't even imagine how it would be possible for a person to be converted in the English language."

So closely linked did the German language remain to Mennonite identity for the Mennonites who remained in Russia that Peter Rempel reports a present-day Mennonite minister there admitting that visualizing a Russian-speaking Mennonite Church was possible "only with some hard thinking"¹⁹

It is interesting to note that the High German language and "Mennonite" ethnicity sometimes outweighed even the MB's favorite and distinctive theme, namely conversion.

In the latter 30's, early 1940's the evangelistic expression for young people in our MB communities involved teaching in interdenominational daily Vacation Bible Schools in non-Mennonite communities during the summers. Often these summer experiences led to continuing weekly Sunday School teaching or even regular church services during the rest of the year. I remember how after a very successful summer of daily Vacation Bible School teaching

in the Pitt Meadows area, our "prayer band" continued to visit the converts and to conduct worship services and Sunday School there. After two years we were able to bring to our home church in Yarrow some sixteen or twenty persons ready for baptism. The church debated long and hard about what to do in this situation, and in the end it baptized a German-speaking couple of non-Mennonite origin and several descendants of Mennonites with recognizable Mennonite surnames such as Froese, Wiens, etc. but who could no longer speak German. All the other converts, however, were advised to go to an English-speaking Baptist Church in the Pitt Meadows area. Thus "Mennonite" descent or High German-speaking capacity turned out to be essential qualifiers for baptism. Conversion alone was not enough.

German language and separatism

With what other traits was the German language linked? In the earlier quotation from John B. Toews, several linkages were mentioned: (1) Mennonite consciousness of their peoplehood, and (2) as the basis of Mennonite piety. Elsewhere Toews adds: (3) separation from the world. Of this he says:

German (both Low and High German--the present writer's emphasis) reinforced ethnicity daily, while High German, associated with a good deal of importation from Germany, assured an ongoing religious and cultural identity. Together with the German Catholics and Lutherans in Russia the Mennonites thought in terms of Auslands-Deutschtum (literally "Germans abroad"), and viewed themselves as in a type of diaspora looking toward Germany for the sustenance of their identity. In doing so, they tended to view the surrounding Slavic world as inferior to the Mennonite-German heritage.²⁰

This linkage between the German language and separatism is even more strongly expressed by James R. Jaquith in his study of

the Mennonites in Mexico:

I would underscore the following points: (1) that Mennonite culture generally is not comprehensible except in terms of the theme that I here call apartness; (2) that world Mennonites reflect a broad range of degrees of conservatism (by which I refer to the divergence between ideal and behavioral culture vis-a-vis apartness); and, (3) that the Chihuahua group is by this measure probably the most conservative of all Mennonites....

Hochdeutsch is the ritual language. This is consistent with the fact that Mennonite sacred writings (principally, the Luther Bible and the Maertyrer-Spiegel) are written in High German. Mennonite boys and girls attain some command of the language in their own schools which have no connection with Mexican schools and which are defined primarily as religious institutions for the inculcation of the ritual language.

In ideal culture terms, apartness demands that the language of host societies not be used since such use is ipso facto intercourse with "the world." Given the historical facts, however that (1) Mennonites have never lived in real isolation from other people and (2) their farming economy necessitates continuous buying and selling relationships with non-Mennonite host societies, all men learn informally to command sufficient of the host language to conduct these operations....

...I shall conclude by observing that traditionally language has been exploited by Mennonite leaders to perpetuate apartness.²¹

Looking back today it seems to me that the German language and separateness were two traits that were most central to Mennonite and MB cultural integration and that separateness, as Jaquith concludes, was largely achieved by maintaining the German language and avoiding the language of their host countries, thus limiting the amount of meaningful contact the average person of the German-speaking ingroup could have with the non-German-speaking outside world.

J.A. Toews points out that High German was not the first language used to foster Mennonite separatism.

In Prussia their conservatism and resistance to change

are also seen in the fact that the Dutch language was retained in the worship services for over 200 years in their new environment. After 1750 the congregations gradually shifted from the use of Dutch to German in their public meetings.^[1] Had the Mennonites emigrated to Russia some fifty years earlier, they would in all probability have continued to speak the Dutch. It would have been well if later generations in Russia (and even in Canada and the United States) would have reminded themselves that the change from Dutch to German was mere historical coincidence, and that the German language had not always been an integral part of their Anabaptist heritage (italics mine). The constant identification of true Mennonitism with German language and culture created serious problems for the faith
....²²

Of the MB in particular he adds:

The worship services of the Mennonite Brethren underwent a marked change during this period. The earlier pietistic emphasis on informal sharing and devotional talks gave way to an emphasis on more systematic teaching and preaching. The members of the congregations seemed to be "hungry for order! and for lectures!"^[4] This change was accompanied by a change in language (although not without struggle) from the Low German dialect to High German in the public worship service. In the midweek Bible study hours (Bibelstunden) and smaller fellowship meetings, the Low German remained the preferred medium of communication. One of the most popular and powerful preachers of this new era was Christian Schmidt, whom the Brethren affectionately called "our Wuest" or "our Spurgeon."²³

Several factors Toews mentions should be underscored here.

First, that Dutch (while living in Low German Prussia) and Low German (while living in German-Polish Danzig) had earlier functioned as the language barriers supporting separatism.

Second, that the resulting separatism was physical and based on a communications barrier rather than a spiritual/ideological one.

Third, that the introduction of High German by the MB's as language of worship, introduced a serious split between daily life and religious life, something that has dogged MB's for many succeeding decades to come.

A.H. Unruh, writing on MB history, also voices strong concern

for separatism but, writing in High German he discusses it only in spiritual terms, seemingly completely unconscious of the role the German language played in maintaining it.²⁴

Other scholars have likewise recognized the importance of separatism to Mennonitism, and like Unruh have failed to note its linkage with the High German language.^{25,26,27}

J.A. Toews adds several worthwhile observations about the German language:

In Russia, two factors tended to promote the close association, if not identification, of German culture and Mennonite faith: the geographic and social isolation from the Russian people, and the aversion to identify with an inferior Slavic culture. The availability of German devotional and educational literature, moreover, helped to strengthen the link between German and Religion (Deutsch und Religion). According to several Mennonite historians, the Mennonites of Russia were linguistically and culturally German, and their literature had strong overtones of German culture and German national life with which the Mennonites had acquired a strong feeling of kinship.^[3]

This identity with German culture was threatened by the "russification" policy of the Imperial government which began in 1870. The desire to preserve the German language was, among others, a motivating force that brought the Mennonites, including the Mennonite Brethren, to America in the 1870's. This is sometimes overlooked in the analysis of motivation for emigration. A brief survey of the "language question" in the MB churches of the United States and Canada may be helpful in understanding this historic problem in the brotherhood.²⁸

Thus not only was the German language considered a defense against "russification," its preservation became a prime motive for MB emigration in the 1870's, especially to the USA.

Toews also points out that the preservation of the German language continued to be a matter of deep concern to MB's in America:

The preservation of the German language was a matter of deep concern among early Mennonite Brethren in America. At the third convention held in 1881 in Nebraska the brethren

passed a resolution that "every congregation elect a man to plan and promote week-day schools (Wochenschulen)."^[4] Two years later Bernard Pauls urged the delegates to do more to "preserve and promote the German language." Consequently it was recommended that teachers who have a command of both the German and the English languages be appointed for the district schools in order that "one hour every morning and one hour every evening can be devoted to instruction in German...."^[5] 29

Elsewhere we point out that the Canadian MB Conference actually maintained a committee charged with the preservation of the German language.

Did the loss of the German language precipitate any changes?

Today in Canada and the United States, the German language has largely been replaced by English. Has this substitution--as in the case of the steel axes--caused any significant adjustment in MB ideological and theological themes? I want to suggest that the MB's have undergone some radical losses and changes. Here's my summary:

Identity concerns

If the historians and sociologists we have quoted in this paper are correct, and their assessment that the German language functioned as a highly-valued central trait in Mennonite identity in general and that of the MB's in particular, then the loss of that language should have precipitated some kind of identity crisis and it has! Both the MB Herald and the Christian Leader have been running articles on MB identity concerns, like: "BORAC Grapples with MB Identity and Fragmentation."³⁰ Many individual MB's and whole MB families, no longer finding enough meaning in their MB identity, just left the church and joined the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Evangelical Free Church, various evangelical Baptist Churches, etc. and today entire churches and

district Conferences are struggling with the Mennonite name. Should they keep it? Is there any value in it? Many MB churches have demonstrated that they see little value in it by relegating their Mennonite identity to small letters underneath a Bible Church or Community Church label in large letters. It is interesting to note that this crisis did not develop in the generation that experienced the language shift. It came in the generation following. (In Canada about 25-30 years after the German language was abandoned; and in the US, where a government decree terminated the use of the German language in the church during World War I, questions about retaining the Mennonite name began to surface in the early 1960's or about 40 years after the actual language shift.)

In socio-economic terms, the loss of the High German language removed the separating barrier between the MB's and the surrounding social milieu. The maintenance of the German language had required relatively self-sufficient communities like the more or less homogeneous Mennonite farming communities of the past. In the 1930-1940 era there were at least 6 or 8 such communities in the Fraser Valley alone. Today there isn't a single more or less solidly Mennonite community left in this area. Most of the MB's are today living in urban or at least urbanized centers and few are involved in agriculture, most are engaged in business, trades and professions.

In the USA more or less homogeneous Mennonite farming communities maintained themselves for decades after a government decree forced the shift from German to English as the language of

worship. This may in part account for the delay in the identity crisis there.

First, the loss of the German language, especially when coupled with the many opportunities for education in English-speaking North America, quickly led to a shift from rural agriculture to urban professionalism. This shift has been more rapid in Canada than in the USA.

Secondly, this shift has produced a major rise in affluence. MB's it seems, now have a strong vested interest in the middle-class status quo, often to the point of being willing to defend it with a sword.

We can point out several striking consequences which this rapid rise in affluence has occasioned: (1) the loss of traditional Mennonite emphasis on simple life style, (2) the rapid professionalization of the pastoral ministry and the consequent loss of most aspects of the priesthood of believers, and (3) the greater feeling of "at-homeness" in Middle Class America and its emphasis on "me first." This is evidenced in how MB churches today spend their money. In the pre-WWII period MB churches usually spent less than 10% of their church income on themselves; today 80% seems like a conservative figure.

Another area in which the larger MB stake in the existing economic pie is manifesting itself is in the more frequent resort to courts of law to protect one's assets and in the increasing number of Mennonite money lenders who resort to foreclosure to protect their financial interests.

Delbert Wiens has already pointed to an additional social factor which aided and abetted the rapid acculturation of the

MB's to the surrounding North American milieu. In their earlier enculturation of their children, the MB's, as did other Mennonites, had emphasized unquestioning conformity to the in-group. This very emphasis sowed the seeds which predestined them to later lose a large part of their heritage, because as soon as the solidly Mennonite communities gave way to Mennonites living and working among and freely communicating with non-Mennonites, their past socialization emphasis to conform to the milieu around them, quickly caused them to become like the non-Mennonite world around them.³¹

Many MB Church leaders, seeing the beginning of this rapid acculturation, saw in the High German language the last major bulwark for the preservation of the faith. Thus if one looks at the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference yearbooks, one will find that from 1950 to 1962 there are annual reports from the Committee on the nurture of the German language.³²

In theological matters also some interesting shifts have taken place. The conversion emphasis which led to the birth of the MB Church, and which has remained one of the church's strongest intra-Mennonite distinctives, now functions as an open door tempting many MB's to abandon not only their Anabaptist distinctives, but also, as we have already said, the Mennonite name. Thus many MB churches today feel much more at home in the American evangelical mainstream than they do in Anabaptist circles. One can foresee that if the current trend continues, eventually many individual MB churches will become absorbed into mainstream evangelicalism. This has already happened to countless

individuals and families.

When we look at the MB's in regard to the peace stance per se--one of the original Mennonite distinctives which MB's have consistently reaffirmed--we see that loyalty to this Anabaptist bedrock has been greatly weakened, and in many cases, totally lost.

In general, except for individuals, I think it is correct to say that support for the peace principles has seriously eroded in most MB congregations.

This erosion of the peace stance has progressed to the degree that today in Western and Central USA, it seems to me, many MB's probably would feel more drawn to Moral Majority and Militarism than even to mainstream evangelicalism. On the other hand, in recent decades some individuals in MB leadership have begun to take a firmer peace stance, but the congregations by and large still show little interest in and demonstrate little loyalty to it.

Both John B. and J.A. Toews have already pointed out, that the Mennonites in Russia felt themselves to be superior to their Russian neighbors.³³ This was not the case in North America. Here Mennonites had a deep desire to be accepted by the nationals of the host country. Here is a personal testimony:

I remember when World War II began, and we were still German-speaking, how deeply many of us young people felt the need to be accepted by the English-speaking people around us. As a result, I must confess, I and many others had a strong attraction to serve in the non-combatant corps rather than to be CO's. To a large extent, I think this was also due to the fact that we had received only very inadequate teaching in these Anabaptist fundamentals.³⁴

In fact the short-cut to outside acceptance often involved

the abandoning of the peace stance, because entering military service was one of the most visible ways to demonstrate the rejection of Mennonite separateness.

The non-resistant peace stance was linked to German-language-based separatism in still another way. As long as Mennonites leadership was able to discourage the rank and file from mastering the languages of the host countries in which they lived by operating their own Mennonite schools, Mennonites did not identify their lot with the lot of that country. They just weren't involved in the struggles of their host countries, because they did not "feel" themselves to be a part of these countries. They saw themselves as a people apart!

However, when English replaced German in North America, the identification of Mennonites, including MB's, with the destiny of the country of their residence suddenly mushroomed. Today many MB churches are proud to display their patriotism by flying the country's flag in their sanctuaries. One of our pastors in California told me confidentially that one Sunday when some college students had surreptitiously removed the American flag from their sanctuary, a number of families, members of the church, noting the absence of the flag when they entered the sanctuary, just turned heel and withdrew from the MB Church forthwith.

At this point, I want to suggest the Selbstschutz (self-defense force) of South Russia and today's MB militarism in America arise out of different roots.

First, in the case of the Selbstschutz after WWI some German army officers who had remained with the Mennonites actually

sparked the idea of the development of such a self-defense force. Here it was the German language and the German connections which made the temptation too strong even for many MB's to resist. In America, however, it has been the more or less complete identification with the nation and its destiny that is providing the pull towards militarism.

Secondly at the historic All-Mennonite meeting in Lichtenau, Molochnaya (June 30-July 2, 1918) the seeds of today's divided church were sown, when the conference there reaffirmed traditional Mennonite peace principles but at the same time refused to censure the Selbstschutz movement, saying that the matter of participating or not should be a matter of individual conscience.³⁵ This voluntarism in regards to peace, is, of course, still plaguing us today. Especially in the USA many MB churches are almost split right down the middle between the supporters of peace and the supporters of war. The church as such is thus completely immobilized and unable to speak out about fidelity to its historic peace stance.

The importance of the German language vis-a-vis the non-resistance ideals can also be seen in connection with the history of Mennonites in Germany itself. Unlike the MB's for whom conversion was an additional separating distinctive trait, the non-revival Mennonites in Germany who used High German in their homes and worship, felt no distance between themselves and their German non-Mennonite neighbors. In consequence they just flowed with the political currents of their day. In a speech delivered in Kohlhof (June 7th & 8th, 1986) Diether Goetz Lichdi reported

that there have been no Mennonite conscientious objectors in Germany during both World Wars and that only in the past three decades after World War II, under the influence of North American Mennonites, have Mennonites in Germany begun to reconsider the peace option.³⁶

Another minor point possibly deserves mention. This involves the Low German/High German split in Mennonite life. In Russia, as John B. Toews has already pointed out, the MB's used Low German in their daily life and High German in their church life. In a sense this meant that a unique division was introduced between their daily life and their church life. Eventually it seems as if for many worshipers the use of the High German language, rather than the content of the worship, was the major source of their blessing.

When English became the language of MB worship, it had already largely replaced Low German as the language of daily intercourse, especially outside of the home. Thus when English began to function as both the language of daily life and of church life, a unique opportunity arose to integrate the two spheres. However, on the basis of their early training for conformity, which Delbert Wiens recognized, the integration of religious values into daily life did not occur, but a more-or-less blind conformity to the consumer society around them developed and serious erosion of many Anabaptist values took place.

Conclusion

A casual reading of this paper may leave the impression that I am decrying the loss of the German language. Far from it! I am

merely trying to throw some anthropological light on how the German language functioned as a culture trait in Mennonite and MB culture.

I think the study shows that while MB's were stating their ideals of separation from the world in biblical and spiritual terms, in reality, the expected evidence of such a separated life were fidelity to the German language and visible conformity to group behavioral mores of the closed communities in which they lived. Furthermore, the real control mechanism for enforcing separation from the world was the German language barrier and not internalized personal conviction about the value of the separated life. In fact, High German was not the first language used in this way. We have already quoted J.A. Toews who pointed out that Mennonites have used language in this way for at least 400 years. First they used Dutch as the barrier in Low German Prussia, then they used Prussian Low German as the barrier in High German-speaking Danzig and finally they used Low German and High German as the barrier against the national languages in Russia and in America.

I have the confidence however, that if the MB's can be helped to understand what has happened to them in culture-change terms when they lost the German language and why the loss of this language has produced such serious and far reaching consequences, then they will also be ready and willing to take the necessary remedial steps to correct any resulting problems and to take the requisite thought and action that will assure that proper value is attached to each of the truly fundamental traits and characteristics of the Anabaptism they say they cherish.

As an aid in such a rethinking, I would like to propose consideration of the following questions:

1) If North American MB's were in error when they attached "ultimate" value to the German language in the past, now that they have lost it and have replaced it with English, have they properly revalued what they consider essential Anabaptist fundamentals?

2) If one language, the English, has replaced both High German (the language of MB worship) and Low German (the language of everyday communication for MB's) have the MB's achieved a concomitant greater integration of Anabaptist values into everyday life? If not, what steps should they take to achieve such an integration?

3) If the Mennonite in-group language has traditionally functioned as a barrier against the world around them which spoke a different language, what is the current MB's basis for believing in and maintaining a life separated from the world which speaks the same language they do?

It is my hope and prayer that this paper and this study conference as a whole will provide encouragement to the MB Church as a body and to its members individually, to take a hard look at themselves and at their Anabaptist past. It is my prayer that as a result of such heartsearching their vision of what the separated church of Jesus Christ should be in the world be clarified, and that their life in Christ be revitalized so thoroughly that they could truly be the "salt of the earth" which their Anabaptist forebears were during the time of the Reformation.

Jacob A. Loewen

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 Yoder, John Howard, "The Heart of our Heritage," in Christian Leader, 5 July 1966, p.3.
- 2 Ibid., pp.4-5 where he discusses the following as essentials: (1) meaningful membership, (2) redemptive fellowship, (3) material sharing, (4) borderless fellowship, (5) reasonable worship (Rom.12:1-2), and (6) Costly discipleship.
- 3 Hall, Edward T., The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, p.63ff.
- 4 Hymes, Dell, Language in Culture & Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p.456.
- 5 The Function of the Brain, on Public Television Sept/86.
- 6 Benedict, Ruth, Patterns of Culture. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1946.
- 7 Wissler, C., Man and Culture. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1923. Lists the following as cultural universals: (1) speech, (2) material traits, (3) art, (4) mythology and scientific knowledge, (5) religious practices, (6) family and social systems, (7) property, (8) government and (9) war.
- 8 Loewen, Jacob A., Culture and Human Values. Pasadena: Wm. Carey Library, 1975, pp.xi-xii, provides us with a practical application of this model with the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador.
- 9 Linton, Ralph, ed., Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940.
- 10 Malinowski, Bronislaw, "Culture," Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 1931.
- 11 Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., Structure and Function in Primitive Society. Glencoe, Ill.: Frec Press, 1952.
- 12 Bouma, Donald H., Anthropology and Missions. Grand Rapids: International Publications, Calvin College, 1957, p.10 says:

... that in some parts of Africa the fear of evil spirits is linked to yard and street cleanliness. Evil spirits are believed to hide behind scattered garbage in the village; therefore, villages must be kept scrupulously clean to prevent evil spirits from hiding there. When missionaries Christianized these people and disabused them of the evil spirits/garbage-linkage, these villages became dirty and are today known as "dirty Christian villages."

- 13 Naroll, Raoul, The Moral Order: An Introduction to the Human Situation. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983, p.144.
- 14 Sharp, J. Lauriston, "Steel Axes for Stone-Age Australians," in Practical Anthropology, Vol.7, 1960, pp.62-73.
- 15 Footnotes in the original of the quotation have been placed in [] square brackets.
- 16 Toews, John B., Czars, Soviets & Mennonites. Newton, Kansas: Faith & Life Press, 1982, pp.41-43.
- 17 In 1963 the author was preaching in a Menno Colony Church one Sunday in Low German. When the leader unexpectedly asked him to close the meeting in prayer he prayed in Low German. A deadly hush fell over the congregation and the elders whisked the visiting preacher into the "elders room" and asked solemnly whether he had blasphemed by addressing God in Low German in prayer?
- 18 op. cit., pp.45-46.
- 19 Rempel, Peter, "Church in Soviet Union must become truly 'Russian Mennonite' to survive," in Mennonite Reporter, Dec.23.1965, p.7.
- 20 Toews, John B., op.cit., p.7.
- 21 Jaquith, James R., "Language, Ideology and Change Among Mennonites in Mexico," in Katunob, (a newsletter--Bulletin on Mesoamerican Anthropology) Vol.4, No.4, Dec.1967 (issued July 1969), pp.1-2,19.
- 22 Toews, J.A., A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Hillsboro, Kansas: MB Publishing House, 1975, p.14.
- 23 Ibid., p.70.
- 24 Unruh, A.H., Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde. Winnipeg, Canada: The Christian Press Ltd., 1955, p.338, says:

Im Blick auf den moralischen Niedergang der uns umgebenden Welt tut es Not, auf entschiedene Absonderung von derselben zu dringen. Die Gemeinde Jesu Christi hat nie den Beruf noch Auftrag gehabt, Reichsgotteszustaende in diesem Zeitalter auf Erden herbeizufuehren. Wir haben's in noch keinem Dorfe oder keiner Stadt dahin gebracht, Reichsgotteszustaende zu schaffen! Unsere Gemeinden koennen schon ihres unbiblischen Personalballastes wegen schwer "gehoben" werden. Hier gilt das Wort: "weniger waere mehr" und das Wort Spurgeons: "es waere besser, mehr zu tun, indem man weniger taete!" Wir leben in unseren Gemeinden noch zu wenig in den Richtlinien der Gemeindeordnung Pauli in 1. Kor.5 und Jesu in Matth. 18. Mangelnde Klarheit darueber,

dass es nicht nur Trennung der Welt auf sittlich moralischem Gebiete gilt, sondern auch Trennung von der bloss religioesen und philosophischen Welt um uns und unter uns, ist schuld daran, dass manche ernste Hebearbeit in der Gemeinde wenig Erfolg hatte. Das ist das Verhaengnisvolle unserer Lage, dass, wie schon oben gesagt wurde, der Feind Gottes ins "Haus Gottes" selbst eingedrungen ist, also sich schon in unserem Lager befindet. "Die ganze Geschichte zeigt," sagt ein grosser Ausleger, "dass sich nicht nur moeglicherweise, sondern ganz gewiss die schlimmsten Feinde der Gemeinde Gottes an ihrem eigenen Busen naehren." Gott gebe uns, als der einen Gemeinde Gottes, klare Absonderung von der Welt und probeechte Reinbewahrung in der Welt!....

- 25 Vogt, Roy, "The Impact of Economics and Social Class on Mennonite Theology," in Loewen, Harry, 1980, pp.138-139, says:

Traditionally, the Anabaptist-Mennonite practice of withdrawal or separation from "the world" is rooted in the biblical notion of nonconformity. It is directly related to the scripture passage in Romans 12:1,2: "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."^[2]

The radical dualism between God and the world can be resolved only, as Robert Friedmann has observed, "if the Christian withdraws to his island, that is, to what he considers a partly realized kingdom of God, where there is no more hatred and violence but only brotherly sharing and peaceful togetherness."^[4]

This anti-world, "retreat to an island" ideology, has led H. Richard Niebuhr to characterize Anabaptism as a radical type of "Christ against culture" theology, and John C. Bennett to declare that the Mennonite ethic is in essence a "strategy of withdrawal."^[5]

- 26 Driediger, Leo, "Fifty Years of Mennonite Identity in Winnipeg: A Sacred Canopy in a Changing Laboratory," in Loewen, Harry, 1980, p.125, says:

Anabaptists were so preoccupied with creating a biblical theology and a believers community that in the beginning they paid little attention to their Germanic culture since they were an indigenous part of their cultural milieu they were unaware of its influence.

- 27 Friesen, John, "The Relationship of Prussian Mennonites to German Nationalism," in Loewen, Harry, 1980, p.62, says:

The early Danzig and West-Prussian Mennonites were a

separated people. Not only were they culturally different from the people among whom they lived but they lived by a different set of values as well.

28 Toews, J.A., op.cit., p.324.

29 Ibid., p.32.

30 "BORAC grapples with MB identity and fragmentation," in Christian Leader, June 25, 1985, pp.16-17 and MB Herald, July 5, 1985, p.22.

31 Wiens, Delbert, "Old Wine," The Canadian Mennonite, April 18, 1967.

32 Toews, J.A., op.cit., pp.207 and 328.

33 Toews, John B., op.cit., p.7.

34 A personal testimony by a young MB of draft age in 1940.

35 Toews, John B., op.cit., pp.82-84.

36 Krauss, Wolfgang, "German Mennonites Review Peacemaking Efforts of Past 30 Years," in Mennonite Reporter, Sept.1, 1986, p.1.

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