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OF CARICATURES AND THE FAITH

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In his essay describing "Mennonites, Free Methodists, and Liberal Education," (*Faculty Dialogue*, Fall-Winter 1986-87, No. 7, pp. 83-94), John K. Sheriff acknowledges that his purpose will be to draw a "caricature, the way each (group) appears to persons outside the group." He also observes that while his knowledge of Free Methodists is rather extensive and varied, his reference group for the Mennonites is primarily one Mennonite college and one local congregation. Nonetheless, he consistently refers to each group as if he were speaking for the whole.

My experience is something of the reverse of Professor Sheriff's: whereas I am deeply rooted in the Mennonite community, my experience of Free Methodism is limited to one five-year stretch of active participation in a wonderfully alive Free Methodist congregation in a university town. Thus my primary thrust will not be to critique his depictions of Free Methodism, though it is my perception (based on my limited experience) that Sheriff rather overstates the case when he says, "Methodists are preoccupied with the things of the spirit....Their religion is otherworldly." In contrast to them he finds that Mennonites "are basically concerned with the things of the flesh."

Rather, my perception was--as, in fact, still is--that much more unites Free Methodists and Mennonites than divides us. My vantage point is necessarily restricted, but I found intriguing the essay (in the same issue of *Faculty Dialogue*) by Samuel L. Dunn and Joseph Nielson in which they articulate "The Theology and Practice of Wesleyan Higher Education." In his essay Sheriff writes, "According to Methodists, Christ didn't choose a people, he chose individuals, one by one." Dunn and Nielson, however, place much more emphasis on the community: describing biblical authority, they write, "Many Wesleyans tend to approach the Scriptures with the view that the community of faith has primacy over the Scriptures. That is to say, the community of faith authorizes, legitimizes, protects, and interprets the writings of the canon." Many Mennonites would agree. Other significant ideas from their essay would further imply the commonality of Wesleyan and Mennonite beliefs:

1. "Creeds do not play significant roles in Wesleyan practice."
2. "These social mechanisms are viewed as necessary and appropriate; however, they must function in a framework of social justice which has as its goal the full development of the human potential. The dual emphasis on social holiness and social justice has been prevalent in Wesleyan circles from the time of Wesley himself."

Actually, replace "Wesleyan" with "Mennonite" in the above statements and one could, I suspect, find wide support for them within the Mennonite community.

But my major purpose is to respond to Professor Sheriff's thesis concerning Mennonites. Sheriff is right, I believe, when he calls Mennonites a this-worldly people. We tend to be practical, pragmatic, and hard-working; and perhaps our primary symbol (as he suggests) is food--although traditionally I should have thought it was the good soil itself, as something more durable than the food which is here and then gone. But this may be mere quibbling over details.

Further, as Sheriff writes, Mennonites are indubitably concerned with "service, peace, justice." But he is not writing for any branch of the church when he says, "You will never hear them using words like 'conversion' or 'getting saved.'" This Mennonite kid heard many "altar" calls and uncounted revival meeting appeals to be saved. And he had a good share of (Wesleyan?) guilt to provide impetus to respond.

Revival meetings are no longer as common as they were in the fifties, but some Mennonites are still concerned about the unsaved. The Mennonite Church (formerly "Old" Mennonite) adopted in 1985, 10-year goals to double both the number of members and the percentage of giving. A recent year (1986) of *Gospel Herald* (the official church publication) included twelve essays on missions, evangelism, and church growth, and--by way of comparison--eight essays on nonresistance and peacemaking.

Mennonites are a this-worldly people, Sheriff argues. Fair enough. But then he says, "The incarnation and resurrection of Christ are taken by Mennonites as symbols of God's breaking into history through the community of the church." As symbols! Or again, "They believe in God only as manifested in human acts." Perhaps these words accurately reflect Sheriff's perceptions of Mennonite beliefs, but they are hardly universally accepted. Rather, many would say that the incarnation and resurrection are evidences of God's breaking into human history. Remove the incarnation and resurrection as space-time events and one has--it seems to me--a truncated faith without any essential supernatural component. No wonder that Sheriff writes that Mennonites really do not believe in prayer or miracles." Why bother with prayer if we believe in God "only as manifested in human acts"?

So why am I as a Mennonite educator distressed by Sheriff's depiction of the Mennonite *Weltanschauung*? In brief, I believe that lacking any meaningful supernatural component our faith loses its core, our faith community loses its power, and our education loses its distinctiveness.

A strong Catholic believer, Flannery O'Connor, once said that if she believed the Eucharist to be only a symbol, she would say, "To hell with it." Being a Mennonite, I have less articulate and forceful words about a truncated version of the faith. But I do believe that those who draw caricatures, even those reflecting "an outsider's view," need to take care lest their sketches be so one-dimensional that they distort beyond recognition.

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