

Inhabiting Paradoxical Identity: How Kenneth Burke Saved Me

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Rhetoric, I affirm, offers a chance to negotiate the compartments of my identity so that I am always aware of that consubstantial self at the root of my being with a sense of integrity.

I was 19 when I first hid behind my Mennonite identity. My family was living in northern Indiana, working under a missionary visa for a parachurch organization, and I was kicking around the local Walmart one afternoon in early 2002 when two men in fatigues struck up a conversation with me (about euchre, of all things). I don't recall the exact time of year, but it was late in the year. The dust of September 11 was still in the air and the gears of the American war machine were turning in the direction of Iraq. Eventually one of the men point-blank asked me if I would consider joining the military. "No," I responded, "I'm Mennonite." I remember thinking how odd my answer was: never mind the fact that I'm *Canadian*, or that I opposed the war, or that I opposed violence in any case. It was because I was *Mennonite* that enlisting in the American armed forces was out of the question. Why didn't I just say "Sorry, I'm not an American citizen"?

Looking back, this episode seems less like hiding behind my Mennonite identity and more like mobilizing it. Not yet introduced to rhetorical language, I had no idea what I was negotiating was the flux and flow of my rhetorical self. I knew I occupied a different ideological space from others, but had no conscious sense of what it meant to invoke language to symbolically connect and disconnect as needed. I was certainly aware of a “human barnyard” of sorts, but had no vocabulary to describe how one might survive the flurries and flare-ups without irreparably compromising my position. It just felt, at the time, like hiding.

As I become aware of how we use the complexity of our identities for different rhetorical purposes, and as I’ve learned of rhetorical identity formation and negotiation, I’m more gracious with my 19-year-old self’s willingness to invoke a nuanced part of my identity. This memory makes me suspect I give precedence to my Mennonite identity far more than I do my Canadian one, though I consider both important components of myself. It’s not that I don’t think of myself as Canadian, but more that my Mennonite identity better explains my positioning in the world. My path to becoming a Canadian-Mennonite rhetorician has been about learning how to inhabit the boundary spaces where those identities intersect, acknowledging the paradoxes, dwelling in them, and exploring their nuances to inform my scholarship.

Being “Mennonite” is just as complex a thing as being “Canadian,” a condition resulting from diverse migration narratives that invoke both ethnic and religious traditions. The migration of Mennonites to Canada came via two streams. The first wave—Swiss Mennonites, colloquially known as *Pennsylvania Dutch* (my ancestry traces through this group)—came in the wake of the American Revolutionary war, leaving the Pennsylvania settlement established by the first Mennonite refugees to North America at the end of the seventeenth-century. The second wave—the “Russian Mennonites”—came in three smaller streams (1870s, 1920s, and 1940s) from what is now the Ukraine, leaving behind a remarkable history of wealth and prosperity that collapsed with the Russian Revolution.^[1] Being

“Mennonite” in Canada then means speaking to either an ethnic or religious tradition (and often, both). These two threads reveal the Mennonite “identity crisis,” a “split between a narrative of a religious community expanding around the globe, on the one hand, and a narrative of two related ethnic communities migrating to North America, on the other” (Zacharias 2).^[2] For some, Mennonite identity involves ancestry. For others, it involves adherence to a particular religious practice. For many, it involves both.

Mennonite religious identity has primarily been informed by a commitment to discipleship based on the paradoxical call to “be in the world but not of it,” derived from John 17.^[3] This call to separation from “the world” has contributed to the long and troubled history of the Mennonites, for it paradoxically demands a degree of separation from the cultural and national spheres Mennonites have geographically inhabited. When separation depends on maintaining distinct cultural practices such as language and dress it is one thing; it is quite another when that separation is ideological and requires that Mennonites refuse to participate in mandatory military service, or follow requirements of public education (such as teaching English in school).^[4] Occupying such marginalized space has made Mennonites adopt sophisticated rhetorical positions, at once engaging with the “outside” world to negotiate for tolerance and understanding while also firming up from within the boundaries that maintain separation.

But what does this mean for *my* identity? What does it mean to *be* Canadian but not *of* Canada, if such a thing is possible? Can one reconcile being both ethnically *and* religiously Mennonite while also being Canadian? If being Canadian were merely a matter of geography it would be one thing, but I cannot accept such a restricted identity. Being Canadian, for me, involves a liberal attitude towards diversity, a commitment to religious freedom and tolerance, individual rights, and democratic participation—tenets associated with Canada’s stereotypically inclusive and idealized ideology. At the same time, I have publically affirmed the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, a doctrinal position stated at baptism declaring first allegiance to God “that takes precedence over obedience to any other social and political

communities” (75). In a time of peace such a position hardly causes tension, but for my grandfather’s generation this meant negotiating for alternative service in the 1940s rather than conscription into the Canadian military. I was never discouraged from singing the national anthem in school as a child, and do so gladly now, but I would not swear an oath of allegiance to or agree to take up arms in defense of my country. I participate in the public discourse of the academy and engage in the liberal arts, yet while I affirm the rights of the individual and welcome the differing views around me I cannot affirm or “celebrate” the official position Canada takes towards topics like human sexuality, abortion, or doctor-assisted-death. Does such positioning compromise my identity as a Canadian? As a Mennonite? Is it tolerable to hold such a position?

My journey into rhetoric and the productive examination of this national and ethnoreligious tension is marked by three men: Wiebe, Frye, and Burke. I read Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many* as an undergraduate, and it was like having a spotlight shone on an unilluminated question lurking in the back of my mind. Here was a novel, a piece of literature written by a *Mennonite*, that critically engaged with the question of what it truly meant to be a Christian and to be a Mennonite and to be a Canadian. Wiebe’s seminal work, published by McClelland and Stewart in 1962, follows Thom Wiens, a young Mennonite on the Canadian prairie in the 1940s struggling to reconcile the scriptural imperative to “love your neighbour as yourself” with the strict boundaries of his Mennonite community that, adhering to the scriptural call for separation from the world, actively separated itself from its neighbours. When I later read Frye’s concept of the “garrison mentality” as a thematic concern in Canadian literature and identity it was as though he was speaking exactly to *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Frye writes of the garrison as “a closely knit and beleaguered society, and its moral and social values are unquestionable. In a perilous enterprise one does not discuss causes or motives: one is either a fighter or a deserter” (226). This so perfectly explains the root tension in Wiebe’s text, and the broader Mennonite condition in

general. There is a tendency to the either/or—you are either *in* the world or *of* the world—rather than to the both/and quality of “being in the world but not of it.”

And then there’s Burke. When I came across him it was as though everything clicked. Despite how hard he was to parse, Burke’s “grammar,” particularly his pentad and the concept of circumference, provided a method by which I could productively examine the ethnoreligious and national tensions I’ve been describing. The concept of circumference is useful in examining the “being in the world but not of it” paradox; being *in* the world involves definition within a narrower scope, while not being *of* the world involves definition within a broader—Burke would say “supernatural”—scope. I also found Burke’s concepts of identification and consubstantiality stimulating and productive. This notion that “insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B” and that “[t]o identify A with B is to make A ‘consubstantial’ to B” spoke to my desire to use language well, to connect with others from whom I was separated by so many degrees and creatively engage across the gaps that necessarily distinguish us from others (*Rhetoric* 20–21). Burke welcomed paradoxes that closely paralleled the “in the world but not of it” dictum: “there is nothing abstruse in the statement that the offspring both is and is not one with its parentage,” he notes, “yet two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an ‘identification’ that does not deny their distinctness” (*Rhetoric* 21).^[5]

To a certain degree, are not all of us inhabiting some unaccustomed earth? Canadian-Mennonite poet Di Brant writes of Mennonites in Canada:

We’ve also had to come to understand our own othernesses in the face of so many other othernesses around us and discover they add up to a recognition of surprising sameness. We were sent into exile from our homelands? So were millions of others. We suffered large-scale traumas in our past? So did most of the peoples of the world. We worked hard to hold on to a local sense of

KYLE GERBER

communal and spiritual practices and some semblance of family and tradition, despite volatile geographically and economically displaced and rapidly changing lives? So did everyone. (127)

Rhetorical scholarship, for me, is a means to communicate across the various compartments of my life, to perceive and mobilize the kinds of commonplaces Brandt names; it is the potential for consubstantiality that allows me to, if not reconcile, productively co-exist within the multiple identities I necessarily inhabit; to be both Mennonite and Canadian and not live in some binary opposition; to manage to be in the world but not of it, and not to see this as some irreconcilable dichotomy. And truthfully, is this not quintessential Canadian reality? With multiculturalism as a central Canadian motif, like everyone else my search for my whole self means coming to terms with a hybridized identity. These terms may at times exist in tension with each other, yet our responsibility, our power, as the symbol-using-animal is to negotiate this wrangle in a way that enables us to realize the full potential of Canada as the quintessential pluralist Barnyard.

Works Cited

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[1] These diverse groups are all inheritors of the Anabaptist tradition, a post-reformation collection of Christians that arose in sixteenth-century Europe and found themselves subject to state persecution because of non-resistance and nonconformity, especially their insistence on baptizing adults and refusal to baptize infants.

[2] The CBC's recent mini-series *Pure* involves a phenomenal conflation of several of these threads, misrepresenting everything from the ethnic traditions to the modes of transportation to styles of dress and dialect. Where the CBC has missed an opportunity to illuminate the nuances of Canada's rich religious mosaic, a generous viewer will recognize such misrepresentation as an unfortunate result of the "Mennonite" category being more complex than many recognize.

[3] A parallel transformative principle is in Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

[4] More recently, ideological separation has come in the form of attitudes towards human sexuality and the definition of marriage.

[5] Burke writes that his *Rhetoric of Motives* "must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure...the War" (23). Perhaps I connect with Burke because the notion of the Human Barnyard seems to fit so well with the stereotypically agrarian Mennonite culture, revealing the power of symbolic induction, as we all negotiate our own human barnyards as best we can.