

## Unto the Third and Fourth Generation: The long shadow of my grandfather I.P. Friesen

Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need (Psalm 79:8).

### I. Multi-generational trauma

Perhaps there are genetic reasons for the number of cases of psychological illness on my mother's side of the family: depression, schizophrenia, hospitalizations, and even suicide. But I believe that they are due at least in part to the religious conflict experienced by my mother's father (my maternal grandfather) I.P. Friesen (1874-1952). This religious conflict was a result of his rejection of the teachings and practices of the Old Colony Mennonite Church,<sup>1</sup> and his attempt to find a substitute for this religion and yet remain a Mennonite. It continues to affect even his grandchildren.

Both my mother's family and my father's family had significant disagreements with the Old Colony Mennonite Church. I am very grateful that both sides of my family freed themselves from its authoritarian rule. But on my mother's side, there was a continuing dark side to the fundamentalist evangelical religion that I.P. Friesen substituted for Mennonite teachings.

William James distinguished between called "healthy-minded" and "morbid" individuals (the sick souls, the melancholy and depressed). Healthy-minded individuals are "once-born" in contrast to the "twice-born" religion of the morbid-minded. Healthy-minded individuals, like Emerson or Walt Whitman, are optimistic and look at the good in the world. They are not introspective:

...they do not look back into themselves. Hence they are not distressed by their own imperfections yet it would be absurd to call them self-righteous; for they hardly think of themselves *at all* (James 1985, 73).

They are childlike, and see God as Kindness and Beauty in romantic and harmonious nature. In his biography of James, Robert Richardson contrasts this with the morbid-minded:

...healthy-minded individuals are optimistic; they find more goodness and happiness than evil and sadness in life. Morbid-minded individuals, on the other hand, are far more sensitive to the darker side of life. They have lower thresholds of pain, fear, and misery, so it takes smaller amounts of disorder and evil in the physical world to throw their internal, emotional worlds into depression (Richardson, 77).

In general, my father's side of the family tended towards healthy-minded religion, and did not emphasize emotional religious conversion. They were content with the more "progressive" Mennonite tradition as exemplified in the Rosenort Mennonite Church<sup>2</sup> in Rosthern,

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Reinland Mennonite Church, first established in 1875 in Manitoba. The church was known as "Old Colony" because it was founded by immigrants from Chortitza, the first or oldest Mennonite colony in South Russia. See Redekopp, Alf. (2004): "Reinlander Mennoniten Gemeinde (Manitoba)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. [<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/R4575.html>], accessed June 18, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The Rosenorter Church was organized in the Rosthern district by Elder Peter Regier, who had immigrated in 1893 from the Rosenort church in West Prussia (now Suchowo, Województwo Pomorskie, Poland; it is the area of the

Saskatchewan, which was led by “Bishop” David Toews after 1913.<sup>3</sup> This progressive wing later became part of the “General Conference of Mennonites.” It is therefore distinct from the Old Colony Mennonites, from the Mennonite Brethren,<sup>4</sup> from the Old Mennonites and from the Amish.<sup>5</sup> I believe that even the beliefs of this “progressive” Mennonite church have a tendency to cause religious melancholy and depression.<sup>6</sup> But this story centers on the religious conflicts of I.P. Friesen, and the long shadow that he cast on his family. And he certainly tended towards the morbid side that emphasized the evil in the world and the continual need for conversion and forgiveness.

I will refer to my grandfather as “IP,” since that is the rather grandiose way that he referred to himself—by his initials alone. Perhaps he was emulating JP Morgan, one of the wealthiest men in the world in the early 1900’s. IP had a very successful hardware business in Rosthern. He certainly tried to act the part of a wealthy man. He always dressed in a suit and tie, even at home. And there is a story about him trying to impress Old Colony Mennonite villagers in Saskatchewan by driving around in his new Reo automobile. In 1906, a young girl in one of these villages was frightened by IP’s “horseless carriage,” which she described as having “huge balls of light which stuck out at the front sides.”<sup>7</sup> As he rode around the villages, IP’s brother George would sometimes write out a cheque for five thousand dollars; IP would set it aflame and then use the burning cheque to light his cigar. He wanted to give the impression that he literally had money to burn. The very fact that he owned an automobile was a provocation to the Old Colony church, which considered owning a car to be grounds for excommunication.<sup>8</sup> But, he was excommunicated for a different reason—sending his children to public school.

IP was a successful businessman. But operating a business in a town was itself contrary to the

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Vistula delta that the German novelist Günter Grass writes about). The first congregation of these Prussian immigrants was in Tiefengrund (Epp 1962, 87). The Rosthern church was built in 1903. See “Rosenort Mennonite Church Group,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia*, online at [<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/R67455ME.html>]. So this Rosthern church was not founded by Mennonites who had immigrated from Russia, unlike the Old Colony Church.

<sup>3</sup> Mennonites do not have an Episcopalian kind of church polity; there are no bishops. Rev. David Toews (1870-1947), who was Chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, was given the title ‘Bishop’ in order to impress the Canadian Pacific Railway, which facilitated the emigration from Russia to Canada of more than 20,000 Mennonites during the 1920’s. David Toews married Margaret Friesen, daughter of Abram Friesen, a minister, one of the Prussian Mennonites (Epp 1962, 87).

<sup>4</sup> The Mennonite Brethren had their beginnings in Southern Russia in 1860. They are distinct from the Old Colony Mennonites (my family) who immigrated to Canada in 1874-80. There were no Mennonite Brethren immigrants to Canada in the 1870’s (Dyck 290).

<sup>5</sup> The Old Mennonites and the Amish were of Swiss-South German descent, and did not come from Russia. They were called ‘Old Mennonites’ in distinction from the “newer” groups that split off from them in the U.S., such as the Reformed Mennonites and the General Conference. See Harold S. Bender and Beulah Stauffer Hostetler (1989): “Mennonite Church (MC),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M46610ME.html>], accessed June 18, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> J. Glenn Friesen: “Mennonite Theology and Psychological Depression,” (forthcoming)

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Marlene Friesen: “A Godly Inheritance,” the history of her grandmother, Elisabeth (Friesen) Kroeker [<http://agodylinheritance.com/agi/2-twins.html>].

<sup>8</sup> My paternal great-grandfather J.A. Friesen [my father’s paternal grandfather] was excommunicated for owning a car. Even his riding a bicycle caused church censure.

teachings of the Old Colony Mennonite Church. We can see this from what happened to my great-grandfather Johann Driedger,<sup>9</sup> as set out in a fascinating article by Leonard Doell (Doell 2009). Driedger had a business at Clark's Crossing, Saskatchewan. In 1910, because business there was slow, he took several loads of goods to the town of Osler, 18 miles away. But there was a snowstorm, and customers did not come. So he had to store the merchandise in a building that he owned in Osler. The building and its contents were destroyed in a fire; the neighbouring store, owned by Jacob J. Heinrichs, also burned down. Both Driedger and Heinrichs claimed insurance coverage under the Mennonite *Brandordnung* (Fire Insurance Organization). But this fire insurance did not cover Mennonites who operated businesses in railway towns; the church discouraged contact with non-Mennonites. Because they nevertheless made an insurance claim, both Heinrichs and my great-grandfather Driedger were excommunicated from the Old Colony Church. They were not allowed to enter the sanctuary of the church. If they did, the rest of the congregation would leave, resulting their being there alone. My father Menno J. Friesen remembers the story that even in a severe winter blizzard, Driedger was not allowed inside the church. Other church members were banned from dealing with either Driedger or Heinrichs. The ban was so effective that Driedger had to abandon his store at Clark's Crossing. He bought another store in Osler, but it never did well because of the ban (Driedger 2000, 77). In 1914, Heinrichs sued the elder of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, Rev. Wiens for damages caused by this excommunication. On September 21, 1916, after two and a half years of litigation, Heinrichs was awarded \$1,000 damages for conspiracy resulting in economic loss. This is a good example of how Canadian law played a role in assimilating the closed and communitarian Mennonite community to the individualistic and capitalistic ideas protected by Canadian law. Another example is how Canadian rights of property given to Mennonite immigrants as separate homesteads undermined the community's right to build on such land, as they had done in Russia.<sup>10</sup>

But let's return to IP. I am not the only one of his grandchildren to believe that we are affected by IP's religious struggles. For most of his life, my cousin Dennis Bueckert struggled to make sense of IP. In his twenties, Dennis wrote a biography of IP as his honours thesis in journalism, and he continued to revise this biography until his death at age 57. It is a wonderful, almost myth-like account of the IP family history, full of irony, a mix of cynicism and praise. Dennis quotes from IP's personal diary, where IP recorded his struggle with depression. For a time, I had an excerpt of this biography on my website, but Dennis asked me to remove it because he was embarrassed at how long he was taking to finish the project.<sup>11</sup> I know from my conversations with Dennis that this biography of IP caused him a lot of anguish; when I met with Dennis a few weeks before he took his life, he was still trying to complete it, and he was still trying to understand the impact

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<sup>9</sup> My father's maternal grandfather.

<sup>10</sup> For a more complete discussion, see Harold Dick: Cultural Chasm: 'Mennonite' Lawyers in Western Canada, 1900-1939," *Lawyers and Vampires: Cultural Histories of Legal Professions*, ed. W.Wesley Pue and David Sugarman (Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing, 2003). Dick discusses my grandmother's nephew Elmer Driedger (1913-85), one of the first "Mennonite lawyers." Dick points out that Driedger married a non-Mennonite, and was perhaps not as Mennonite as has been claimed. Driedger, from the "healthy-minded" side of the family, became an expert in constitutional law and legal drafting. His text on statutory interpretation (Driedger 1983) has become the legal work that is cited most frequently by the Supreme Court of Canada (Fodden 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Bueckert: "We Children Alone." Copyright held by his estate, which has declined to make the manuscript available.

made by IP on his family. Dennis used to tell me what was said by another one of our first cousins: “The blood of I.P. Friesen runs like poison through my veins.”

Those would seem to be harsh words. For IP had been elected a minister in the Rosenort Mennonite Church in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. IP became an evangelist, whose preaching resulted in 1100 members leaving one Mennonite Church in order to form another one, the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church, which later became the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC).<sup>12</sup>

But although IP may have inspired and helped other people to find peace with God, he himself was a very troubled man. He suffered from depression and from extreme religious melancholy. He was obsessed with sin and death, fears of damnation, and the belief that the eye of God is always upon us all. He battled with the Old Colony Mennonite Church. And he feuded with Bishop David Toews in the “progressive” Mennonite Church. And as we shall see, although he intended to do the right thing, IP’s religious conflict resulted in both psychological and physical abuse of his children, including my mother.

The impact that a person can make on succeeding generations is a theme that can already be found in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Some psychologists claim that our neuroses often come from the unfulfilled quests and dreams, not only of our parents, but of our grandparents. C.G. Jung said that conflicts and tensions are sometimes passed on from grandparents. David Sedgwick summarizes Jung’s views:

When speaking of ‘unlived life,’ Jung ultimately wonders ‘how much of the blame really rests with the parents.’ He mentions the ‘ancestors’ and the concept of ‘original sin,’ then warns that the parents are themselves ‘children of the grandparent’ (1931g, p.43). His conclusion is that, via psychic infection mediated by participation mystique, ‘neurotic states are often passed on from generation to generation, like the curse of Atreus (Jung, 1926, p. 78). Thus the origins of illness may lie farther back in time. By the same token, Jung also speculates that the source of the child’s healthy individuality may also lie with ‘the grandparents and the great-grandparents, who are the true progenitors’ (1931g, p. 44).<sup>14</sup>

The grandparents and great-grandparents “explain the individuality of the children far more than the immediate and so to speak accidental parents” (Jung 1954, 44).

Jung made these statements even though in his case, all of his own grandparents had died before he was born. *Participation mystique* is the idea of a pre-existing unconscious identity between the child and his parents, a mental state of non-differentiation and identity, an “a priori identity of subject and object.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Rudnerweide Mennonite Church was founded in 1937, and became the EMMC in 1959. See historical note regarding Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference at [[http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives/holdings/organizations/EMMC\\_fonds.htm](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/archives/holdings/organizations/EMMC_fonds.htm)], retrieved June 18, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 20:4; 34:6,7. Jeremiah 31:29-30.

<sup>14</sup> David Sedgwick: *Jung and Searles: A Comparative Study* (Routledge, 1993), 56. The reference at 1931g is to Jung’s “Introduction to Wickes’ The Inner World of Childhood,” (*Collected Works*, vol. 17). And the 1926 reference is to “Analytical Psychology and Education,” also in Vol. 17. The House of Atreus refers to the Greek myth of Tantalus. Because of his actions against the gods, a curse was passed down through generations.

<sup>15</sup> Sedgwick, 34, citing C.G. Jung: *The practice of psychotherapy*, p. 295: “The collective unconscious is a natural and universal datum and its manifestation always causes an unconscious identity, a state of *participation mystique*.”

For Jung (1911-12/1952, 1944), the entire unconscious is represented by the image of the mother, so a person in a state of 'participation mystique' is, in effect, still in the mother (Sedgwick 35).

Pathology in children does not only come from the parent; it is frequently the parent's own illness. (Sedgwick 56, citing works from 1926 and 1931). Jung refers to these inherited complexes as 'imps', which are unassimilated lumps rolling about in the child's unconscious:

...the imp; inherited units like lumps rolling about in their unconscious which they never assimilate at all. They are like a ship with a heavy cargo, which does not roll as long as it is in quiet water, but when it gets into the swell of the ocean, the cargo begins to roll too and it becomes exceedingly dangerous (Jung 1997 I, 1181).

In my own life, I carry these unconscious burdens of my mother and her father IP. But there was also a conscious burden placed upon me. I was born two months after IP's death. My mother found his death most traumatic. My Aunt Amy remembers having to comfort my mother from her unrestrained weeping; did my mother's grief cause intrauterine stress? After IP's death, my mother changed her previously "worldly" lifestyle in order to honour his beliefs. She stopped drinking any alcohol, and she made a vow to God that she would no longer use lipstick. But in a legalistic interpretation of her vow, my mother allowed herself to use crayons instead of lipstick. And she began to try to live in accordance with her IP's religious ideals. My sisters Dawn and Sharon, who are 6 and 8 years older than me, remember this abrupt change in my mother's life. And when I was born, my mother tried to dedicate me to God. The nurses in the Catholic hospital where I was born told her that only I could make such a choice. Later, my mother told me that I would replace IP as a great evangelist and writer. So she consciously placed on me the burden of fulfilling IP's dreams.

There is both a positive as well as a negative side to this shadow of IP cast upon my life. I will begin with the positive—his opposition to the Mennonite church, and his spirit of adventure. These have helped me to be critical of my own traditions, and have given me the enjoyment of travel to exotic places.

## II. Mennonites and the Public Schools issue

IP was born July 6, 1873 in Rosengart, an Old Colony Mennonite settlement near Chortitza, South Russia. The Mennonites had been in South Russia since the time of Catherine the Great, who had encouraged them to immigrate to Russia from Danzig, Southern Prussia (now Poland). Catherine the Great had granted the Mennonites certain privileges, such as the right to educate their children in their own way, and the right to refuse military service. Beginning in 1860, Russia sought to remove some of these privileges (Abraham Friesen 2006, 10). Many Mennonites decided to emigrate from Russia to Canada, where they hoped that their religious rights would be recognized. IN the same way that they had moved from the Netherlands to Prussia, and from there to Russia, they would now go to Canada, seeking a place where they could form their own society according to their religious beliefs. Later, when Canada turned out not to be the utopia that they had imagined, thousands of Mennonite families (about 8,000 Canadians) moved again to Mexico, Bolivia and Paraguay.

Mennonites were encouraged to immigrate to Canada because they had received a promise from the Canadian Government:

The fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded to the Mennonites without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever; and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools. [A copy of this letter is on my website]

This promise is given by letter dated July 26, 1873. It is signed by John Lowe, Secretary for the Department of Agriculture. He would be the equivalent of today's deputy minister for Immigration. The letter was affirmed by an Order-in-Council of August 13, 1873, signed by Prime Minister John A. MacDonald and Governor-General Lord Dufferin. But the Order-in-Council has significantly different wording:

... that the Mennonites will have the fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles, and educating their children in schools, as provided by law, without any kind of restriction or molestation whatever (Ens 1985).

There is a difference in wording between "by law afforded" and "as provided by law." The second wording would appear to allow laws to change regarding education.

Already in Russia, the Old Colony Mennonites had set up their own education system for their children, up to the age of twelve or thirteen. They continued this practice in Canada. The curriculum was reading, writing and arithmetic; the texts were a primer (or *Fiebel*), the Catechism<sup>16</sup> and the Bible. Instruction was in German. The only education that the teachers had was their own education as children (Alan Guenther, 5).

IP's family immigrated to Canada in 1875, when he was two years old. The family travelled by ship and then by rail, landing in Fargo, North Dakota. After one year in North Dakota, they traveled north on the Red River to Emerson. In Manitoba, they built an earth hut in Rosenort. IP grew up in Manitoba, but after his parents died, he moved to Rosthern, Saskatchewan, where many Mennonites had settled in 1892.

In Rosthern, Mennonites had always voted against getting a public school. But in 1899, an Englishman built a flourmill in the town. With the votes of his construction workers, he achieved a majority vote to set up a public school. In other Saskatchewan towns like Hague and Osler, the boundaries of the election district were arranged to get a majority vote for public schools. Bill Janzen describes this:

The boundaries were drawn so as to include much land owned by people in nearby villages but not the villages themselves, thus gaining their tax money but not their opposing votes.<sup>17</sup>

What makes the story interesting is that, although IP came to Canada partly because his family wanted the right to educate their children without state interference, it was IP who played a prominent role in removing the Mennonites' right to educate their children. IP was one of the first Mennonites to send his children to the public school in Rosthern. This resulted in his excommunication from the Old Colony Mennonite Church. IP did not want to be excommunicated, because he believed that he would lose customers for his business. So he tried to voluntarily resign from the church. He visited the elder of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, Rev. Jacob Wiens. IP

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<sup>16</sup> I have the 1927 *Catechism* (14<sup>th</sup> ed.) given to my father by my grandfather in 1930: *Katechismus oder Kurze und einfache Unterweisung aus der Heiligen Schrift*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Winnipeg: Rundschau).

<sup>17</sup> See Bill Janzen: "The 1920s Migration of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Area of Saskatchewan to Durango, Mexico," *Preservings* (2006), online at [http://www.plettffoundation.org/Preservings/Preservings\\_2006.pdf](http://www.plettffoundation.org/Preservings/Preservings_2006.pdf).

later told government officials:

I begged and prayed Mr. Wiens more than I ever did any man for any favour (cited by Janzen 2006, 66).

Instead of being a member of the Old Colony Church, IP wanted to join the “progressive” Rosenort Mennonite Church in Rosthern. This church had shown an interest in higher education. David Toews, who would later (1913) be ordained as a minister of the Rosenort Church, had been a teacher; in 1905, he helped to establish a Mennonite high school in Rosthern.<sup>18</sup> In 1909, this high school was incorporated by the province as “The German-English Academy.” Toews was principal of the school until 1917. The school was intended to train Mennonite teachers, and to preserve the language and culture of the Mennonites. It later became Rosthern Junior College.<sup>19</sup>

While still a teacher, Toews visited Rev. Wiens to ask about IP’s situation. But Rev. Wiens stood firm: once one was baptized into the Old Colony Church, a person could not be released, but only excommunicated. Rev. Wiens had reminded IP of the fact that when he was baptized, he had promised to be faithful to the teachings of the Old Colony community (Doell 2009). And so IP was excommunicated. This resulted in his being shunned by other members of the Old Colony Church. They were no longer to do business with IP. Even other family relatives were not to eat at the same table with him.

IP wrote to the Saskatchewan Government, asking the government to intervene, begging for “British justice and fair play.”<sup>20</sup> IP said that the vote for his excommunication had not been fair, and the question of his expulsion had not been properly framed for the congregation. He also suggested that if the government would take action, it “would make a lot of friends in this District for the forthcoming election” (cited by Guenther 2009).

IP was not the only one to write to the Government seeking such help. So did Jacob J. Friesen (not related), who wrote to the Education Minister in 1908,

As I am one of the excommunicated Mennonites I think it very necessary to tell you briefly my experience in this matter and hope that it might stir up the Government.... I lived in Warman until last spring and my business connections were principally with the members of the so-called Old Colony Church; and as I had two boys of school age I was sending them to the public school in Warman,...As soon as the leaders of the Old Colony church got notice of my steps they excommunicated me and forbade all the members to have any more dealings with me. The consequence was that I had to give up my home, my business, and everything for the sake of giving my children a better education (cited by Janzen 2006)

Premier Scott of Saskatchewan responded to IP’s letter:

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<sup>18</sup> Such high schools [called *Zentralschulen*] had been established by the Mennonites in Russia. The chortitza Zentralschule was established in 1842. The Russian government encouraged such secondary schools in order to teach Russian. But Russian instruction was not given in Chortitza until 1871, shortly before many of these Mennonites emigrated to Canada. Krahn, Cornelius (1953): "Chortitza Zentralschule (Chortitza, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, [ <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C46523.html> ], accessed June 18, 2011..

<sup>19</sup> My paternal grandfather John C. Friesen was a major benefactor of Rosthern Junior College. He was undoubtedly disappointed when I only attended Grades 9 and 10 and completed my high school elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup> This is from my family’s recollection of the events.

This species of tyranny cannot possibly be permitted to continue if the Government can find available means to stop it (cited by Guenther 2009).

The Saskatchewan Government set up a Commission of Inquiry. Hearings were held in Warman, Saskatchewan on December 28 and 29, 1908. The Commission heard from more than a dozen excommunicated people, and also interviewed Rev. Wiens and other Old Colony leaders. These leaders relied on various Biblical texts to support their right to teach their children, as well as on the letter from the Canadian Government granting them the privilege to educate their children.

David Toews testified at the Commission of Inquiry:

Our Church [the Rosenort Mennonite church] believes in public schools and *progress* all along.

In contrasting his church with the Old Colony, Toews said,

We are favouring public schools, *progressive* schools, and they [the Old Colony church] don't believe in them. We believe in voting, and they forbid it (cited by Guenther 2009).

Later, Toews expressed his belief that the Old Colony church was persecuting people like IP:

That very same congregation who wishes to wear the martyr's halo and is affirmed through articles such as the one mentioned, practices persecution in the most heartless manner, and in the practice, desires that the government guarantee to leave it in peace while it treats its individual members in a manner that is against the spirit of Christianity. Our Canadian form of government is a perfectly fine one. No one is disturbed in his religious views; all communities enjoy full freedom. But surely it is also the duty of a government to see that the individual has freedom regarding the education of his children as well as other aspects of faith. When complaints come, it has the duty to at least investigate; and that is what has happened till now (cited by Guenther 2009)

The Commission asked Rev. Wiens how he had obtained his position with the Old Colony Church. The congregation had elected him. Wiens said that he had invited IP to convince him from the Bible that public schools were permitted. The verses relied on by Wiens to support the Old Colony position were 2 Tim. 3:15 and Deut. 6:6-7. IP testified as to his frustration with Wiens:

He takes a verse that didn't relate to that at all. How can a person convince him? (Guenther 2009).

The Commission suggested to Rev. Wiens that this was a matter of interpretation of the Bible. Janzen says that the Old Colony ministers thought there could only be one interpretation—they believed that the teaching of the church was the plain, obvious meaning of the text.

Only the men in the Old Colony Church were permitted to participate in the decision to excommunicate members. This excommunication was also understood to eternally bar the excommunicated person from heaven. But IP testified that he no longer believed that the church had the power to send him to hell.

The Commission of Inquiry did not really solve the issue. The Commission threatened to take away the right of Old Colony ministers to solemnize marriages if they did not accept public education. But this threat was not carried out. No steps were taken until after World War I. At that time, the new premier of Saskatchewan, W.M. Martin, decided to close all German schools. Saskatchewan passed the *School Attendance Act*, which made public education compulsory for all



children between 7 and 14. Parents who did not send their children to public school would be fined. Bill Janzen describes how this affected his family in Saskatchewan, who wanted to continue with the German language private schools:

Both Neuanlage, where my father grew up, and Blumenheim, where my mother grew up, were among those that were fined. For Neuanlage, for 1920, there were 231 fines resulting in the payment of \$2,250.00. For 1921 the total for Neuanlage was \$3,178.00. For Blumenheim, the respective totals were just over \$1000.17 (Janzen 2006).

The Government of Manitoba also challenged the Mennonites' rights to educate their children in their own church schools. In 1919, the Manitoba Court of Appeal convicted a Mennonite, John Hildebrandt, for failing to send his children to public school. The court held that the Mennonites could not rely on the promise given to them by the Canadian Government when they came to Canada. The Federal government had no jurisdiction in education. Under the *British North America Act*, education was an exclusive area of jurisdiction for the provinces (Ens 1985). The Federal Government had not had any right to make the promise that it had made to the Mennonites, regardless of whether the promise had been "by law afforded" or "as provided by law."

As a result of the statutes requiring parents to send their children to public schools, many Mennonites moved from Canada to Mexico, Bolivia and Paraguay, hoping they would be able to educate their children there without state interference. Janzen reports that in March of 1922, six chartered trains, carrying about 5,000 people, left Manitoba for Mexico. Many thousands also left from Saskatchewan, for a total of about 8,000 people.

Ironically, this exodus of Mennonites from Canada came at about the same time that there was a second wave of immigration of Mennonites to Canada from Russia. Unlike the Old Colony emigration to Canada in the 1870's, these Mennonites had allowed their children to be educated in Russian schools. They were therefore a more educated group than the Old Colony Mennonites. On arrival in Canada, they also introduced a certain amount of outside culture into Mennonite life. For example, these Russian immigrants from the 1920's introduced four part harmony singing, whereas the Old Colony church sang in unison, led by a *Vorsänger*—someone who stood in front of the congregation to lead them in a very nasal and harsh style of singing (Rempel 1950; Berg 2002). That is how the Old Colony Mennonites had sung in their churches in Russia (Hildebrandt 1981). No instruments were used in the Old Colony churches to accompany the singing. My paternal grandmother Katherina (Driedger) Friesen got in trouble with the Old Colony Church for playing a harmonica.

### III. Other difficulties with the Mennonite church

There were other difficulties with the Mennonite church. In the 1920's, IP's brother Henry was defrauded of \$5,000 by a recent Mennonite immigrant from Russia named Isaac Braun. The "progressive" Rosenort Mennonite Church took sides against Henry, and supported Braun. Even David Toews, who was then a minister in the Rosenort Church, took Braun's side. There was a very lengthy series of trials, which I have described elsewhere (J. Glenn Friesen 2010). During those trials, both IP and David Toews testified. In his testimony in 1926, IP was cross-examined by the defence lawyer Bonnar:

Bonnar: Your brother, H.P. Friesen, occasionally gets into trouble, doesn't he?

IP: I suppose so, and so do others.

Bonnar: I don't.

IP: Then you're lucky, Mr. Bonnar.

The lawyer then asked IP whether he had ever been expelled from the Mennonite Church. IP replied he had not, although there were some people who believed that. Now why would IP deny his excommunication? That evening, one of IP's children overheard how the defence was going to use this incorrect answer to try to discredit the Friesen family's testimony. The next morning, IP asked the court for permission to correct his evidence. He said,

I don't think I explained fully enough, and I would like to do so now because people may get a wrong impression. The reason was that after I joined the Rosthern branch of the Mennonite Church the Old Colony Mennonites sent me a letter saying they excluded me from their membership, because I joined the other Church. Now if that means I was expelled then I have been.

That "clarification" is hardly truthful, either. IP had been excommunicated, and the reason was not just that he had joined another church. This collateral issue had nothing to do with whether or not Henry had been defrauded by Braun, but it shows how difficult it was for Mennonites to tell the truth. Indeed, several of the trial judges commented how they had never heard as much perjury as they had in these trials, from all parties. This is a severe indictment of the Mennonites, who prided themselves on not taking oaths because they always told the truth.

Braun was ultimately held guilty of fraud, and deported to Russia, where he died in Siberia. IP's brother Henry was vindicated, but some people in the Mennonite church continued to believe that he was guilty. Perhaps this was because of the relative wealth of Henry and IP. Their attempt to assimilate into Canadian life, with its individualism and desire for personal success did not sit well with those Mennonites who believed it was more important to have communal goals and a simple farming life (See Dick 2003).

#### **IV. Travel and Adventure**

IP loved to travel. Every year he took his entire family for a three or four month vacation to Long Beach, California. His children were simply taken out of school, in the belief that they could catch up on their studies later. This is odd, considering the obstacles that IP had to overcome in order to send them to public school in the first place. It shows that for him, travel trumped education.

IP's grandest travel adventure was to the Holy Land in 1910. He later wrote a book about it, entitled *Meine Reise nach Palästina* [My Journey to Palestine] (I.P. Friesen 1910). He made the trip alone, leaving his home and family on January 2 1910; he returned three and a half months later. He records his thoughts as he left the front steps of his house. Would he come back safely? He speaks of leaving his family behind to travel over the sea with its depths [*Untiefen*], through fog and storm, the trains, the bridges, the frequently dangerously changing weather, sickness and so on. He recognized that this was a trip that not many people could take. In the Foreword to the book, he says, "Although not everyone can take a trip to Jerusalem, we can all take the pilgrim's journey to the Heavenly Jerusalem."

He traveled by train from Saskatoon to Winnipeg, St. Paul, Chicago, Niagara Falls, Montreal (where he got his Turkish visa), and then to New York, where he boarded the ship *Arabic* with 400 other passengers.

On board the ship, he wrote poetry. The book contains some poems, including one about standing on the deck, looking at the wake of the boat, and at the waves. He thinks that the waves sing such a song in the endless sea, and so why should he not also honour God? There was a great storm that made everyone seasick. The waves were so high that the propeller of the ship came out of the water. They passed a wrecked ship, a “three-master.” They could not get near enough to see whether anyone was still alive on this ghost ship, but it made “a melancholy impression.”

The ship reached land, and they visited Seville and Cadiz in Spain. Then Algiers, Malta and Athens, where he visited the Acropolis and Mars Hill. The ship then sailed through the Dardanelles to Constantinople (Istanbul). In Istanbul, he was amazed at the jewels at Topkapi Palace. He says that he would never have believed there could be so many jewels in the whole world. He expresses interest in Islam, and the way that the Moslems prayed. From Istanbul they traveled to Smyrna (Izmir), from where they visited Ephesus, where he was impressed with the temple of Diana. Then they went to Beirut, which he says does not have much for tourists to see. He was impressed with the temple at Baalbek in Lebanon. They then traveled to Damascus and finally arrived at Jaffa in Palestine. They took a train to Jerusalem. IP describes the smells of Jerusalem: baking and frying, rotten vegetables, Turkish sewers. The city “did not smell like a Parisian perfume.” He visited the Mount of Olives and the Grotto where Jesus prayed. He says that here “The visitor seems to be alone with his thoughts.” At the chapel of the ascension, IP was impressed with the “...marvelous echo. A song appears to go away and then to come back.” They went to Jericho, and to the Dead Sea, where he bathed in the water. And he visited Bethlehem on the way back to Jerusalem. He does not appear to have visited the Galilee area. IP was aware that places mentioned in the Bible may not be exactly where they are said to be, but they were nearby and that was good enough for him.

In Cairo, IP found the pyramids to be much higher and more slender than the photos suggest. At first he was scared to climb up the 400 feet of the pyramid, but he finally got the courage and was taken up by some Arabs. They told him not to look down or he might get dizzy, and of course he did look down and felt very dizzy. They then wanted *baksheesh* to continue leading him. He said he would deal with that at the bottom of the pyramid. Coming down the pyramid, his guide wound part of his turban around IP to keep him safe and then suddenly exclaimed that IP had torn the turban and that IP would have to pay for a new one. IP said that he knew the trick, and that the same tear must have been used hundreds of times. He refused to pay.

The tour went next to Italy and he visited Rome. He says that St. Peter’s is a labyrinth of rooms. He wanted to see the Pope, but that did not work out. Another passenger did get to see the Pope, and IP relates the man’s story.

IP visited the ruins of Pompeii. Then they traveled to Monte Carlo, where IP gambled on red in roulette, and lost. He watched other people losing their money. Some of them were expressionless; others were crying, and had apparently lost everything. He notes that a cemetery was nearby, with the bodies of sixty suicides.

IP reached England, from where he was to catch a ship back to Canada. His ticket was good for return on the White Star Line, but “unfortunately,” the *Titanic* was still being built, so he came back on the *R.M.S. Baltic*. Over the years, he exaggerated this story. I grew up in the belief that he had missed a train in England, and so had missed the *Titanic*, thus being saved from shipwreck by the grace of God. Only when I did the historical research was my family convinced that this miraculous escape was not true.

When he came back to Canada, IP presented a slide show that he toured around the Saskatchewan countryside. IP was assisted by his brother George, who had not been on the trip. IP and George dressed in Arabic costumes that IP had purchased. Posters were printed and admission was charged.

#### V. IP's conversion

The idea of a very emotional religious conversion experience is foreign to the Russian Old Colony Mennonite heritage. Mennonites had been of the view that one was born into the community, and then as an adult, a decision was made to formally join the church and to be baptized. But conversion of those outside of the church was rarely practiced. This was partly because of the compromises that the Mennonites had had to make in order to survive. During their time in Prussia, they were given protection by princes, but they were not allowed to proselytize. Similarly, when they emigrated from Prussia to Russia, Catherine the Great granted them many privileges, such as the right to educate their own children. But there was a condition to these privileges: the Mennonites were not allowed to proselytize. They could not seek converts from among members of the state Russian Orthodox Church (Abraham Friesen 2006, 4, 9).

However, some Russian Mennonites experienced a religious awakening when immigrants from Prussia arrived in Russia in 1835; these immigrants had been influenced by the Moravian Brethren, Lutheran Pietists, Plymouth Brethren, and German Baptists. This group came to be known as the "Mennonite Brethren." In Russia, they were centered more in Molotschna than in the "old" colony Chortitza. In 1860, 18 families formed a new congregation. The civil authority invoked Article 362 of Penal Code of 1857 against the Brethren. The Mennonite Brethren were regarded as a secret society, since they held religious meetings not sponsored by established church. But on March 5 1864, the government recognized that they were still considered Mennonites (Dyck 280-283). The Mennonite Brethren believed in evangelism, and they believed that salvation that needed to be personally experienced by each individual (Guenther 1995, 8). The Brethren emphasized an emotional overenthusiasm, a "fröhliche Richtung" (joyous direction). They excommunicated those who did not participate; even greeting a relative on the street was considered to be fellowship with the world (Dyck 286). They had disputes with the Old Colony Mennonites in Russia, who were concerned that such evangelism would result in their privileges in Russia being revoked.

IP seems to have had several religious experiences. When he was 16, a friend drowned; this made a deep impression on him. And when his father died, IP wrote a vow and placed it on his father's forehead; he promised to consecrate his life to God. IP's mother had been very devout. IP remembered his mother, who would put him to bed and say, "Child don't forget to pray. Think of the fact that God always sees you, even when you are alone" (Rempel 1950, 49).

But IP's most dramatic conversion experience came during one of his vacations in California. In 1917, a minister from Russia, presumably a member of the Mennonite Brethren, was conducting a service in the home where the Friesen family was staying. IP asked the minister to pray for him. The minister asked IP to kneel down right there. IP was seized with fear and cried out, embarrassing his wife. IP struggled for many hours. He thought he had lost all hope of salvation; in his memoirs, IP says that the gates of hell opened. The minister prayed with him for several hours and then left to catch a train; he missed the train and returned to pray some more. He then left IP alone again. After midnight, IP's wife came into the room and asked him, "Is it still so

dark?" At that moment, everything became bright. IP finally found peace and knew that he had been saved.<sup>21</sup>

In later years, IP took his family to hear the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. She was conducting dramatic worship services in Los Angeles, and in 1923 she set up the megachurch, the Angelus Temple. It held 5,300 people and was filled to capacity three times every day. She preached against dancing, motion pictures and parties as "velvet" covering the "claws of sin." She illustrated her sermons by dressing in costumes, using multiple voices, and sometimes descending by hidden wires from the Temple balcony. She danced and acted on the stage, or sat down at a piano to sing. Faith healing was a part of the service. She saw no contradiction in her use of show business, claiming that she would not hesitate to use the devil's tools to tear down the devil's house. She described her own conversion experience as a shaking of the whole body "from the toes up." She compared the Holy Spirit to an electric current. She believed that fulfillment came through ecstatic experience. But then her life had its own scandal, as dramatic as her preaching had been. In May, 1926, she disappeared after swimming north of Venice Beach. At first she was believed to have drowned. Then her mother received a ransom note signed by "the Avengers," threatening to sell the evangelist into "white slavery" if the sum was not paid. A month later, she stumbled out of the desert in Mexico, claiming she had been kidnapped, drugged and tortured. But the evidence didn't match her story; it was more likely that she had spent the time with a lover. Several witnesses saw her at Carmel with a lover during the period. She suffered a nervous breakdown in 1930 (Gardella 1985; Cf. Wikipedia entry).

IP's conversion had immediate effects in his own life. He tried to pay back money to the railway company for failing to declare the true ages of his children when buying tickets for the annual trips to California. He donated large sums to charity. His large Rosthern family home was eventually donated to the church; it became a senior citizens' home. He helped pay for a leprosy hospital in India.<sup>22</sup> And he supported other missionary projects. Perhaps most dramatically, he stopped being a businessman and became an evangelist.

On November 23, 1919, both IP and his son Isaac I. Friesen ("Ike") were elected as evangelists in the Rosenort Mennonite Church in Rosthern; IP was forty and Ike was nineteen. IP was elected as minister in the Rosenort Church in 1923.<sup>23</sup>

IP had a very charismatic and emotional way of preaching. He probably picked it up from listening to Aimee Semple McPherson. IP imported this kind of emotional preaching into Mennonite life in Canada. He preached without using notes, and many people believed that he had memorized the whole Bible since he was able to quote from it so extensively. His style of preaching was also very hypnotic.

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<sup>21</sup> From Heppner 1987, as well as family oral history and IP's own written reminiscences, as related to me by my cousin Dennis.

<sup>22</sup> Mennonite Missions to India were started by the Mennonite Brethren. The mission was started there because they found the mission to the North American aboriginal people to be too difficult. Rodolphe Petter suggested in an 1898 article that India would be a better mission field than the "fruitless and meaningless work among the Reds" (Cheyenne) (Juhnke 1979, 17).

<sup>23</sup> Rempel, John G. and Richard D. Thiessen. "Friesen, Isaac P. (1874-1952)." Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. October 2008. Web. 07 July 2010. <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/F7546ME.html>.

IP style of preaching was also very hypnotic. A sample can be found here.<sup>24</sup> He is speaking in High German, although with an accent that native speaking Germans will find odd. This is the kind of German I grew up listening to in church, whereas at home, we spoke Low German. Low German is still spoken today by many thousands of people, not only among Mennonites in North America, but also in Mexico, Paraguay, as well as about 60,000 people in the north of Germany.

The sermon in the sample provided is on the theme of “Totensonntag”—Sunday of the dead (Sunday before Advent), when the church remembers those who have died. It is commonly celebrated in Lutheran churches. I doubt that it is observed in Mennonite churches today. In the sermon, IP refers to those who have predeceased him, such as David Toews. And IP warns that we must be prepared for our own death. Jesus is knocking, knocking on our door and we must let him in if we are not to be lost.

As already mentioned, IP’s revival meetings resulted in the formation of a new denomination, the Rudnerweide Mennonite church. In 1934, four ministers<sup>25</sup> from the Sommerfeld Mennonite church in southern Manitoba had attended an extended series of revival meetings led by IP. These revival meetings resulted in these four ministers being excommunicated, since they tried to make changes in the Sommerfeld church, such as holding evening services. About 3,000 Mennonites joined the four ministers in starting the new church in 1937 (Guenther 1995, 15). In 1959, this church became the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC). In Saskatchewan, several areas that had been inspired by IP’s teaching, such as Grünthal and Chortitz also formed a Rudnerweider church (Guenther 2009).

IP’s emphasis on personal conversion and evangelism has some roots in the Mennonite Brethren tradition, by which he himself had been converted. But there were other North American influences, too, like Aimee Semple McPherson. IP had sensed there was something wrong with the Mennonite Church. But the religion that he embraced was individualistic American fundamentalism. Bruce L. Guenther has written about evangelicalism as a “virus” that invaded Mennonite communities, making some congregations almost indistinguishable from “a generic kind of North American evangelicalism.” He suggests some reasons that Mennonites like IP embraced evangelicalism:

Among other observations about the relationship between evangelicalism and Canadian Mennonites, the major themes that emerge include: (1) evangelicalism’s biblicism, relationship to pietism and incentive for mission created a natural compatibility with certain Mennonite groups; (2) evangelicalism facilitated and accelerated the pace of Canadianization among Mennonite immigrants. By prioritizing points of commonality as “essentials” that transcend all other differences or distinctives, it became a potent force for theological and social homogenization. Along with other influences evangelicalism sometimes weakened the ability of Mennonite denominations to retain their unique distinctives. (3) Evangelicalism attracted members from traditional Mennonite groups by simultaneously offering a spiritual and cultural emancipation, and retaining intact a certain suspicion and reticence towards “the world”: it served both as an emancipating (and modernizing) influence and as a conservative force. (4) The influence of evangelicalism

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<sup>24</sup> Excerpt from I.P. Friesen Sermon on Totensonntag, at <https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=alb85jQdjDY&list=MLPT>

<sup>25</sup> Isaac A. Hoepfner, Gerhard J. Froese, Peter S. Zacharias and Wilhelm H. Falk.

mediated and even legitimated certain North American cultural values that mitigated against Anabaptist communitarian emphases (Guenther 1995, 3).

Guenther says that many Mennonites believe that the theological emphases of evangelicalism “unwittingly propagate cultural values (e.g., individualism, consumerism, nationalism). On the other hand, Guenther says that evangelicalism was not the only conduit for such ideas, and that Mennonites found ways of being materialistic without evangelicalism (p. 20).

Evangelicalism certainly helped IP to assimilate culturally into mainstream Canadian life, whether the issue was that of public education, or owning an automobile, or being a merchant. IP’s emphasis on sin and salvation was at the expense of the traditional Mennonite beliefs of pacifism, which he did not emphasize that much. And it was at odds with the communitarian Mennonite emphasis; for IP, conversion was an individual decision, and the fact that one was born into a Mennonite tradition—or had even been baptized as an adult—had no bearing on whether one’s soul was eternally saved.

## **VI. Poetry**

IP published two volumes of poetry, entitled *Im Dienste des Meisters* [In the Service of the Master].<sup>26</sup> There is no date given, but they appear to have been written around 1930/31.<sup>27</sup> As for IP’s poetry itself, it is pretty bad.<sup>28</sup> The rhyme scheme and words are little more than doggerel. The content is extremely pietistic, with large doses of religious melancholy. Here are a few examples:

### **Aus schwerer Zeit [In difficult times]**

Die Lieder, gedichtet in Trübsal und Schmerzen,  
Gedanken, gesammelt in dunkelster Stund’,  
Die trösten gewöhnlich auch ander Herzen,  
Die auch so zerrissen, so blutig und wund’....

[Hymns composed in affliction and sorrow  
Thoughts collected at the darkest hour,  
Usually comfort other hearts  
That are also so torn, bloodied and wounded.] [Vol. II, 5]

### **Gott sieht es [God sees it]**

Gott schaut von lichten Himmelshöhen,  
Hernieder in dies Tränental,

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<sup>26</sup> I.P. Friesen: *Im Dienste des Meisters* (Constance, Germany: Christliche Verlagsanstalt). I have not been able to determine when this publisher commenced business; it was still in operation in the 1990’s.

<sup>27</sup> See Wilhelm Kosch (1991): *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon das 20. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: K.G. Saur Verlag), 11. The Mennonite Encyclopedia Online gives a date of 1910, but this seems unlikely, since that is prior to IP’s dramatic conversion [<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/L5842ME.html>].

<sup>28</sup> At IP’s funeral, reference was made to his poetry. The comment was made, “he was no Schiller.” This offended the family, who thought it a needless insult.

Er kann die Seinen immer sehn  
Die müden Kämpfer allzumal...

[God looks down from Heaven's height  
Below into this vale of tears  
He always sees those who are his own  
The tired fighters all together...]

Consistent with his “morbid” religiosity, the poems emphasize our sinfulness in this world, the need to repent, and to save our souls.

The Foreword to Volume II says,

Wie oft habe ich sie in meiner Seelsorge getroffen, diese betäubten, von Unglück und Jammer heimgesuchten Menschenkinder! Denen möchte ich in den Versen Trostwörter zurufen. Und solchen, deren Seele nach Gott und nach Frieden schreit, möge dieses Buch ein Führer sein hin zu den rettenden Jesus-armen. Und die Gleichgültigen, die mit dem Heil ihrer Seele spielen, als ob sie tausend Himmel zu verscherzen, tausend Ewigkeiten zu verlieren hätten? Möchte es ihnen aus diesem Buche entgegenschallen: Eile und errette deine Seele!

[How often I have met such people in my care of souls—these distressed children of men, haunted by unhappiness and sorrow! May these verses of mine call out to them words of comfort. And for those whose soul cries out to God for peace, may this book be a guide to the saving arms of Jesus. And for those who are indifferent, who gamble with the salvation of their soul as if they have a thousand Heavens to frivolously forfeit, a thousand eternities to lose? May he hear from this book: Make haste and save your soul!]

He warns that we are not to be spiritually *gleichgültig* or indifferent. We must have a religious intensity. My mother certainly followed this advice; she frequently quoted Rev. 3:16: “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” In her view, God detests indifference more than outright opposition.

Several of his poems are polemics against this indifference. Here is the beginning of one such poem:

**An Gleichgültige [To the Indifferent]**

Lacht und scherzet, Menschenkinder,  
Und verschwendet eure Zeit,  
Spottet nur, ihr frechen Sünder  
Über jene Ewigkeit  
Leugnet nur den Schreckensort,  
Tausendmal die Hölle fort. (Vol. II, 72)

[Laugh and joke, children of men,  
And waste your time.  
Merely mock your shameless sins.  
Then throughout all eternity  
Continue to deny a thousand times  
That place of terror that is hell.]



Not being indifferent means constantly fighting against temptation:

**In Anfechtung [In Temptation]**

O Feind weich' doch von meiner Seite,  
Und bleib' nicht länger in der Näh,  
Noch hast mich nicht zu deiner Beute,  
Weil ich bei meinem Heiland steh:  
Du kannst mir meine Sünden zeigen,  
Die in der Ferne, weit zurück,  
Du kannst mich tief darniederbeugen,  
Daß ich beschämt zu Boden blick'. (Vol. II, 73)

[O Enemy: get away from my side  
And stay no longer near  
You still don't have me for your booty,  
As long as I stand near my Saviour:  
You can show me all my sins,  
Those in the distance, far behind.  
You can make me bend down deep  
To look to the bottom in my shame...]

In IP's view, a person could never be certain of salvation; one must constantly resist temptation. Even on their deathbed, some of IP's children were still not sure of their salvation.

Some of IP's poems are just about his love of nature, like this one on Lake Louise (Alberta):

**Lake Louise**

"Lake Louise", bergumschlungen  
Und von Felsen eingekreist;  
Wie den Höhen abgrerungen,  
Und vom Gletschereis gespeist.  
Hoch erhaben liegst du da,  
Märchenhaft in grün und blau. (Vol. II, 5)

["Lake Louise," surrounded by mountains  
And circled all about by rocks  
That were wrested from the summit  
And then fed by glacier ice.  
Elevated high, there you lie,  
Like a fairy tale in green and blue...]

He concluded that only God could have created a wonder like that that. And that is his general tendency when writing about nature—to make a sermon out of it, instead of just experiencing it. In other words, there was always a didactic or polemical purpose to his writing.

Some poems are polemics against others, such as "Der Modernist," which declaims against modernism's robbing us of the Bible through its clever words.

In November 1937, IP sent copies of this poetry to the German Kaiser, who was then living in exile in the Netherlands. The Kaiser acknowledged receipt, and sent a photo of himself to IP (see

letter). Why did IP send his poetry to the German Kaiser? His family had not lived in Germany. Remember, IP came to Canada from Russia in 1895, where his family had lived for about a hundred years. What was the connection to the Kaiser? Only the German language, which had been preserved by the Mennonites throughout their various migrations. But why write to a deposed Kaiser? That shows a lot of insensitivity to the many Canadians who had lost their lives fighting the Kaiser in World War I. And it showed insensitivity to the increasing German hostilities in 1937, and the threat of a new war. Many Mennonites, being pacifists, did not participate in either war. But surprisingly, almost as many Canadian Mennonites volunteered for combat in World War II (7,500) as claimed conscientious objector status (7,543) (Epp 1962, 331).

Does sending this poetry to the deposed Kaiser show some sympathy with the German cause? At the very least, it indicates an inability to distinguish between the German heritage of the Mennonites and their religion. Even the German heritage is questionable. Epp has shown how Mennonites changed their self-identity from Dutch to German depending on what was politically convenient. In 1915, Russia enacted property liquidation laws for Germans living in Russia. The property was to be sold in 8 months, after which the banks bought the property for 10% of its value. Mennonites sent a delegation to St. Petersburg to document their Dutch ancestry. They denied any German ancestry insisting that “in our veins is not a drop of German blood.” Epp says this was extreme.

For generations the Mennonites had taken their cultural and educational nourishment exclusively from German sources. In Prussia, after the division of Poland, and in Russia they had always been considered as Germans and they never voiced any opposition. The Low German dialect, in common social usage, at this time also had only remote resemblance to the Dutch language (Epp 1962, 29-30).

When German troops occupied Russia in World War I, they restored order after the Bolshevik revolution. Mennonites were sympathetic to this occupation; they then claimed German identity and promised to seek German citizenship. Encouraged by German soldiers, some Mennonites formed a self-protection [*Selbstschutz*] league against anarchists like Nestor Makhno (Urry 2006, 138; Epp 1962 35). In Canada, before World War II, Mennonites sympathized with the Germans, who had helped with Mennonite emigration to Canada. There was support in some Mennonite newspapers for the Nazis (Urry 2006, 197-99; Epp 1962, 525). Herman Neufeld, editor of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, published Hitler’s full speech to the Reichstag, which presaged his attack on Poland and the outbreak of WWII (Urry 2006, 203). Mennonite meetings were held in Canada on the theme of “Deutsch und Religion” [German and Religion]. Epp says there was an emphasis on German origins: “If one partook of German culture one was obviously endowed with German blood.”

The best in religious, intellectual, and cultural life was traced back to German sources. This led to an identification of Deutschtum with virtue and the ennobling qualities of character (Epp 1962, 322).

The German consul placed recruitment notices in Mennonite papers on behalf of the Reich. Mennonites had sympathy with the Reich because it was anti-Communist. Some Winnipeg Mennonites participated in brownshirt demonstrations. Some Mennonites purchased short-wave radios to listen to Hitler speeches (Epp 1962, 323-4). But in 1940 when a Canadian Order-in-Council required registration on Aug 19-21 of all aliens whose racial origin was either German or

Italian, C.F. Klassen informed the RCMP that Russländer Mennonites were “for the most part of Dutch stock” (Epp 1962 325).

In any event, the German language was important to IP. But it was more than that. My mother told me that the IP family rather admired the German cause, and would eagerly listen to the German broadcasts.

## **VI. Abuse of his Children**

IP and his wife Catherine Harder had six children: Isaac I. [Ike], Catherine [Tena], Helen, Hilda, Alice, and Louise. All of the children were influenced by IP’s severe and melancholy outlook, including his fear of losing God’s favour, and his belief that we must evangelize everyone around us.

I have already mentioned that IP and David Toews disagreed with each other. Perhaps this was because Toews received more attention and praise from the Mennonites, especially since as “Bishop” in charge of immigration from Russia to Canada, he had saved so many Russian Mennonite families; IP had initially opposed this immigration from Russia. IP sent a letter denying any personal obligation with respect to the contract committing the “Mennonite Church of Canada” to pay for the transportation debt of the first 3,000 immigrants. IP also believed that new immigrants would not be exempt from military service (Epp 1962, 122). David Toews also sided with Isaac Braun, who defrauded IP’s brother Henry of a large sum of money. The civil and criminal trials relating to this matter divided the Mennonite community and divided the Toews and Friesen families (J. Glenn Friesen 2010). IP was so embittered against David Toews that he disapproved of the marriage of his daughter Catherine (Tena) to David Toews’ son Benno; this resulted in Tena’s nervous breakdown. She had to be hospitalized at the mental institution in North Battleford, where for a time she believed that she was Catherine of Orange.

As already mentioned, 1919, both IP and his son Isaac were elected on the same day to be evangelists in the Rosenort Mennonite church. Father and son were preachers together. But Isaac seemed to recognize that perhaps there was more to be learned than just the simple evangelical faith. Isaac spent most of his life collecting one religious degree after another. He received a B.A. in 1927 and a Master of Education in 1934, both from the University of Saskatchewan. He attended Dallas Theological Seminary (1936-37), Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (1937-38, 1943) where he obtained a Bachelor of Divinity, Winona Lake School of Theology (Master of Theology, 1956). In 1947, he was one of the first four teachers at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg. He later became President of the College, a position he held for 8 years. The family always believed that Isaac was not appreciated at CMBC. Indeed, when he left, he felt he had been forced out. Whether this is true or not, he did have disagreements with the rest of the faculty; he wanted CMBC to be more evangelical. During his time at CMBC, he attended summer school at New York Biblical Seminary, Garrett Biblical Seminary, Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in New York, Concordia Seminary and Lutheran Seminary. He did further studies at United Seminaries Toronto (1959-60), London Bible College (1963-64), and finally the University of Basel, Switzerland (1968-71), where he earned his Doctor of Theology degree.<sup>29</sup> Isaac’s doctoral thesis was entitled *The Glory*

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<sup>29</sup> This information is from Archives Canada  
[[http://www.archivescanada.ca/english/search/ItemDisplay.asp?sessionKey=999999999\\_142&l=0&lv=1&v=0&coll=0&itm=229286&rt=1&bill=1](http://www.archivescanada.ca/english/search/ItemDisplay.asp?sessionKey=999999999_142&l=0&lv=1&v=0&coll=0&itm=229286&rt=1&bill=1)]

*of the Ministry of Jesus Christ: Illustrated by a Study of 2 Cor. 2:14-3:18* (Basel 1971). The renowned theologian Oscar Cullman was one of his thesis supervisors. Isaac said that glory is the visible manifestation of God in the world; it is seen not only in Christ, but also in Christ's followers, giving them the power to overcome "the power of sin" and the "demonic world of darkness," as well as freedom from the fear of death. When I was at l'Abri in Switzerland in 1970, I visited my Uncle Ike, who was then completing his doctorate in Basel. I saw the many books in his shelves. I asked him if he had read a certain book, and he took it down and noted his underlining, and only then confirmed that he had read it. In our discussion, he said how much the problem of evil still continued to bother him. Why is there evil in the world? He was obviously not content with the simple answers given by his father IP.

In 1974, Isaac died of a heart attack right in the middle of giving a sermon. He referred to 1 Cor. 15:17. "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain." He then smiled and sank to his knees. I suppose that is a pretty dramatic way to leave this world. Some of his siblings did not have as easy a death, but died in terror, believing that their sins had not yet been forgiven. My cousin Dennis told me of how his mother, my Aunt Hilda, suffered in this way. The shadow of IP continued to haunt her even on her deathbed even though her life had been as saintly as could be expected. Hilda had deferred marriage at the request of IP, who wanted her to stay in the family home in Saskatoon. And after IP's death, she moved her family back to the family home to look after IP's widow, although Hilda's husband continued to work out of Moose Jaw.

What about my own mother, Alice? How did her father's religious melancholy affect her? I should first say that my mother was a beautiful, highly intelligent woman who loved language, drama and art. I owe a great deal to her encouragement of any talent I had in those areas. She taught school for a while, but was forced to leave that job when she had children. Undoubtedly, this lack of outside employment is one factor that needs to be taken into account. But it is also very clear to me that my mother suffered from mental depression. She was never diagnosed; in her final years, she suffered from dementia, and she was given medication, including some antidepressants. I have never seen her as happy as she was in those otherwise desperate final years.

My mother's illness was clearly related to unresolved issues with her father, IP and with his religious conflicts. The idea of mental illness was a taboo topic in our house. My mother did not allow any talk about her sister Tena's experience in the mental hospital. IP passed away in 1952, but my mother and all of her siblings continued to revere him. They spoke constantly of things that they did with him, of what he had told them, and of his constant admonitions to save their souls. My mother frequently referred to her wonderful childhood, the beautiful home that had been built by her father, with the ceramic hearth that warmed the kitchen, the living room where no one was allowed to enter except on Sundays, the majestic staircase, the separate bedrooms of IP and his wife Catherine, and IP's study, where the children were not allowed to enter when IP door had closed the door and was busy writing.

For my mother, no one else could ever measure up to IP. My own father certainly could not; my mother did not let him physically touch us or show any affection to us children. She accused my father of incest (an absurd idea, strongly denied by my sisters); she became enraged when my father Indian wrestled with my brother or when he massaged my sister's cold foot after she had swum in the very cold water of Waskesiu Lake. My mother's behaviour points to some kind of physical abuse by her father IP.

In 2006, my father finally told me what had happened, and it makes sense of my mother's horror

of sex and of the physical body. When my mother was a little girl, she and her family were on one of their many vacations to Long Beach, California. My grandfather took my mother to a doctor, where he watched as she was given a clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris).

I was dumbfounded. This is something we hear of today in relation to women in Africa. But what my father told me made sense; it explained so much of my mother's troubled psyche, including her mistrust of men and her simultaneous idolization of the father who had abused her in this way. I am sure that in her mind, this was not abuse, since her father had acted from religious motives. But isn't that the worst kind of abuse, where it is justified by the belief that what you are doing to a child is morally right? We must remember that this occurred *after* IP's spectacular conversion.

I did some research. The practice of removing the clitoris is referred to in early Greek medical texts. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Avicenna (Ibn Sena 937-1037) recommended using the knife to excise the clitoris (Callaghan 2001, 211). The modern practice of clitoridectomy in the Western world was popularized by the 19<sup>th</sup> century British gynecologist, Dr. Isaac Baker Brown. In 1858, he said that most women's diseases were caused by nervous excitement, particularly the excitement caused by stimulation of the clitoris. His "cure" was to remove the clitoris with scissors. He wrote about this in his book *On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy, and Hysteria in Females* (Brown 1866). The word 'hysteria' itself is related to '*hysteros*' or womb. He describes the procedure of clitoridectomy at p. 17:

The patient having been placed *completely* under the influence of chloroform, the clitoris is freely excised either by scissors or knife—I always prefer the scissors. The wound is then firmly plugged with graduated compresses of lint, and a pad, well secured by a T bandage. A grain of opium is introduced per rectum, the patient placed in bed, and most carefully watched by a nurse, to prevent hemorrhage by any disturbance of the dressing.

Baker was disciplined in 1867 by the London Obstetrical Society, but his ideas became very influential in the United States. Many physicians there continued the practice, like the doctor who operated on my mother.

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943), who was the staff physician at Battle Creek Sanatorium, is well known for inventing corn flakes.<sup>30</sup> What is not as well known are his views on sex and clitoridectomy. He invented corn flakes in 1844 as a bland food to decrease sexual stimulation, just as the Presbyterian minister Sylvester Graham (1794-1851) had earlier invented Graham wafers for the same purpose. The idea of eating bland foods to avoid sexual stimulation can also be found in Hindu yoga, with its distinction between pure *sattvic* food, and stimulating *rajasic* food, which includes most spicy foods, coffee and tea, eggs, garlic, onion, meat, fish and chocolate. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that too much *rajasic* food is said to cause excitement and to stimulate the passions.<sup>31</sup> When I was at Canadian Bible College in 1970, one of the instructors warned us boys in the dorm against putting black pepper on our food, since that would lead to sexual stimulation. I laughed at the idea. I have always enjoyed spicy food; and my knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* has not prevented me from enjoying the tasty curries of the subcontinent.

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<sup>30</sup> The marketing was by his brother, William Kellogg, and there was a long legal battle between the brothers.

<sup>31</sup> See the *Bhagavad Gita* 17.9: "Foods that are too bitter, too sour, salty, hot, pungent, dry and burning are dear to those in the mode of passion. Such foods cause distress, misery and disease."

But Kellogg was not content with merely bland food. He believed that other measures needed to be taken to prevent masturbation. He wrote a book, *Plain facts for old and young: embracing the natural history and hygiene of organic life* (Kellogg 1877, 1891). For boys, he recommended tying their hands together to prevent masturbation, covering the sexual organ with a cage, or even circumcision without an anesthetic. He said “the brief pain attending the operation will have a salutary effect upon the mind, especially if it be connected with the idea of punishment, as it may well be in some cases” (p. 295). For more “refractory” cases, he recommended sewing up the foreskin:

...we have become acquainted with a method of treatment of this disorder which is applicable in refractory cases, and we have employed it with entire satisfaction. It consists in the application of one or more silver sutures in such a way as to prevent erection. The prepuce, or foreskin, is drawn forward over the glans, and the needle to which the wire is attached is passed through from one side to the other. After drawing the wire through, the ends are twisted together, and cut off close. It is now impossible for an erection to occur, and the slight irritation thus produced acts as a most powerful means of overcoming the disposition to resort to the practice. (p. 296)

And for women, Kellogg recommended clitoridectomy:

In females, the author has found the application of pure carbolic acid to the clitoris an excellent means of allaying the abnormal excitement, and preventing the recurrence of the practice in those whose will-power has become so weakened that the patient is unable to exercise entire self-control (p. 296).

Many doctors in the U.S. continued to use clitoridectomy as a “remedy” for masturbation. Kirsten Bell refers to Holt’s 1936 medical references text, *Diseases of Infancy and Childhood*, which “recommended cauterization or removal of the clitoris for girls as a cure for masturbation” (Bell 2005).

Gardella says a clitoridectomy was performed as recently as 1948 for a “cure” for habit of masturbation in a five-year old girl (Gardella, 60). Other writers say the practice continued well into the 1960’s. Bell cites the Christian coming-of age manual, *On Becoming a Woman* (1951, reprinted 1968) as continuing to recommend it:

There are teenage girls who, impelled by an unwholesome curiosity or by the example of unscrupulous girl friends, have fallen into the habit of manipulating these sensitive tissues as a means of excitement. This habit is spoken of as masturbation. . . . There is an anatomical factor that sometimes causes irritation about the clitoris and thus encourages a manipulation of the delicate reproductive organs. . . . Oftentimes the remedy for this situation consists of a minor surgical operation spoken of as circumcision. This operation is not hazardous and is much to be preferred to allowing the condition of irritation to continue (cited by Bell, p. 132).

Some medical insurers in the U.S. continued to pay for the procedure of clitoridectomy until 1977 (Robinett 2006). My mother was not the only one to have suffered this kind of abuse. It has been estimated that tens of thousands of women were given clitoridectomies in the U.S.

Learning of my mother’s abuse at the hands of doctors and fundamentalist ministers allowed me to sympathize with her. It also saddened me. It represents such a dualistic view of the human condition—the view that the body is evil and must be overcome.

Clitoridectomy is not part of any Mennonite teaching. Nor is it necessarily a part of the American fundamentalist religion that IP picked up in California, although it was associated with some Christian groups at that time. But evangelicals certainly continue to have difficulties with coming to terms with sexuality and their bodies. Frank Schaeffer, son of the evangelist Francis Schaeffer, has recently written about this issue, including the shocking information that his father beat his mother (Schaeffer 2011).

## **VII. Continuing Religious conflict**

My mother did not have to worry about being shunned by the Mennonite Church as her father had been. But the fundamentalist religion that IP substituted for the Old Colony Mennonite Church *had its own kind of separations*. It separated us children from our own father. Because my father did not believe in mom's kind of religious fundamentalism, we had to pray for his soul every night. During these evening prayers, we also had to ask each other for forgiveness for what we had done that day (even if we couldn't recall doing anything even remotely bad). This fundamentalist religion also separated us from our own bodies. We children were not allowed to bathe naked, but always had to wear some clothing in the tub. Our own bodies were alien, something to be ashamed of. And she enforced her views on others, too. Before he died, my cousin Dennis told me of how when he was a child, my mother had spanked him "very hard" for running through the sprinkler in his backyard without any clothes on.

We were also separated from others. My mother personally selected the friends I was allowed to associate with; most of the town was not deemed good enough for us to associate with. We were not encouraged to visit my father's side of the family, because they did not share the same religious beliefs. She was convinced that my paternal great-grandfather was a follower of Swedenborg, an eighteenth century mystic.<sup>32</sup> So a lot of our time was spent visiting her mother (my grandmother), who lived in Saskatoon with her daughter Hilda and my cousins. We were also separated from "worldly" culture. We were not allowed to have a television in the house. I was not allowed to read comic books. We could not listen to popular music. And so we lived a remarkably isolated and closed life. Although it was the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we lived as if we were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

My mother's fundamentalist beliefs were also expressed in other ways. She argued with the local Mennonite minister for not being sufficiently evangelistic. She kept us children occupied with church activities several nights a week—junior choir on one night, "Children's Hour" on Thursday evenings, and on Sunday we had to attend both morning and evening church services. If we squirmed or made a commotion, she pinched us really hard, or she would spank us once we got back home. If sports activities interfered with these church activities, the church got priority. My father had purchased some beautiful cottage lots at Emma Lake, but my mother did not permit a cottage to be built, since this would keep us from going to church on Sunday.

My mother's attitude towards money was very ambivalent. She would tell us how her father IP had given away so much of his wealth, and that "money was the root of all evil." And yet she

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<sup>32</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a Swedish scientist, philosopher and Christian mystic. His followers formed The Church of the New Jerusalem. Some early Mennonite immigrants to Canada did join that church. An example was Gerhard Ens, one of the first Mennonite immigrants to Rosthern, who became a member of the provincial legislature (Alan Guenther). My great grandfather Johann A. Friesen was intellectually curious and did read his books, but never became a member of that church.

herself received regular income from an annuity purchased for her by her father. IP had also given her and each of her siblings a quarter section of land, from which she received income. So IP had not given away all his property. She had bitter disputes with my father about whether it was right to be a merchant, and yet she was only too happy to shop at the wholesalers. In her view, it was not right to be concerned about such worldly affairs as business. You can see how IP's conflicts with Old Colony Mennonite attitudes towards business surfaced again in my mother.

Mom took us on "holidays" to Indiana every year. We travelled three days by train, sitting upright in coach class, from Saskatoon to Winnipeg to St. Paul to Chicago to Winona Lake, Indiana. Winona Lake is one of the places where her brother Isaac had studied (Grace College and Theological Seminary). It was also home to the "Billy Sunday Tabernacle." Billy Sunday had been a famous evangelist and Winona Lake became known as "The World's Largest Bible Conference." We attended three weeks of evangelistic meetings run by Youth for Christ and by Moody Bible Institute. I had to endure up to two altar calls every day. The floor was covered in sawdust, so there was literally a "sawdust trail" to be followed up to the front. Usually the hymn "Just as I am" was sung by the choir during that time. These emotional appeals to save our souls put enormous emotional pressure on us young children. My mother, not one to be indifferent in her faith, would tell the owners of the grocery store in Winona Lake to stop playing secular music on the radio.

As children, we were never good enough; we had to continually repent. Our greatest fear was that Jesus would come again and rapture all the believers, leaving us behind because we had somehow become backslidden unbelievers. We also feared that communists would take over the land, that we would be tortured, and that we would be required to give up our faith. We wondered whether we would be strong enough to resist. It is not surprising that we had such fears, since the two books that Mennonites carried with them throughout their migrations were the Bible and *Martyrs' Mirror*, which is a gruesome record of the tortures that Mennonites had endured throughout the centuries. And of course, the Mennonite immigrants from Russia told of their sufferings in Russia.

My mother referred to her brother Isaac as a "perpetual student." She admired his extensive studies, and held him up as a model for me to follow. I suppose I have done my best to accumulate degrees, too. And part of the motivation for my studies has certainly been the same kind of religious restlessness that drove him. Like him, I recognized that there was something wrong with the tradition in which I grew up, and my studies were part of a long journey of spiritual exploration. This quest included my Mennonite past, Quakerism, Francis Schaeffer's Reformed Presbyterianism, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Christian Reformed Church, Herman Dooyeweerd's "Calvinistic" philosophy, the Anglican Church (both evangelical and high Anglican), Roman Catholicism, east-west inter-religious dialogue, and Jungian psychology. The result has not been a synthesis of these different traditions; it has rather been the surprising discovery of a mystical Christian theosophical tradition at the root of many of these traditions, allowing me to integrate their insights in a way that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. Dooyeweerd's reformational philosophy is neither original nor Calvinistic, but is based on Jacob Boehme's Christian theosophy, as elaborated by Franz von Baader. This same tradition inspired George Fox, founder of the Quakers. It also inspired some contemporary Catholic theologians in their attempts to overcome scholastic dualism. C.G. Jung was aware of and relied on this same tradition.

But I do not find this tradition in my Mennonite/Anabaptist heritage. Nor is it in the evangelicalism that IP substituted for that heritage. In my view, both traditional Mennonite views and evangelical piety contain various dualisms that are dangerous to our psyches. They teach (1) a dualism between



body and soul, where the soul is to be saved and the body devalued, and where pleasure is to be avoided; this is a spirituality that turns away from the world. (2) a dualism between God and humanity (where God is seen as absolutely other from his creation); (3) a dualism between our self and others (this is the individualism encouraged by evangelicalism); and (4) a dualism between ourselves and the world around us; we are to be separate from the secular and “worldly” influences, take no part in politics, and avoid professions like law. But such separateness relies on the work of princes and governments to do that work for the Mennonite, who is then granted a “privilege” to live under that protection. My Anabaptist heritage is not the “simple faith” it often claims to be, nor does it go back in an unbroken line to the early church. It is as sectarian as other denominations, and it is involved in its own politics and power struggles.

I continue to respect the Mennonite ideal of community and of service to others. The foreign relief operations of the Mennonite Central Committee are some of the best and most cost-effective. But this is partly because it relies on the self-sacrifice of so many volunteer workers. Such a volunteer spirit goes against the individualism and self-interest that are so prevalent in North American society. But these ideals also have the danger of producing in some of the Mennonites a kind of martyr complex, where self-denial leads to an inability to experience pleasure in life. Furthermore, such an ideal of service to others works only when there is a supporting community. As Mennonites gradually become assimilated to society, such community ideals are in danger of disappearing.

The Mennonite belief in pacifism is another noble ideal. But in my view, it does not work that well in practice. Some evil needs to be resisted by force. But I speak as a lawyer, and any Mennonite who becomes a lawyer finds himself or herself in a conflict with Mennonite ideals (Dick 2003). My family’s history of conflict with the Mennonite Church shows the need for the rule of law to overcome authoritarian control of a community. And is not the practice of shunning itself a form of violence against those who have been labeled outsiders? Furthermore, the Mennonite teaching of pacifism, and its perfectionist ethics, leads to internalization of conflict; this repressed shadow side comes out in unexpected and often violent ways. If it is not violent towards others, it is violent to our own selfhood, and this is reflected in the prevalence of melancholy and depression among Mennonites. But I will write about that in a separate article.

The Mennonite idea that we should not swear oaths, but always be truthful is another great ideal. But in practice, it is sometimes difficult to tell the truth, as the Friesen-Braun trials showed. The judges there said they had not seen as much perjury as occurred on both sides of that trial. Mennonites believed that they were telling the truth but were insufficiently critical of their own capacity for self-deception. We need the critical apparatus of cross-examination to separate different views of what occurred.

Finally, adult baptism, another key Mennonite/Anabaptist doctrine, sounds good in practice. Why shouldn’t people choose whether or not to join the church instead of being baptized as infants? But this very idea of “choosing” for oneself carries with it the Protestant bias towards rationalism—that we can make a personal decision on rational grounds based on concepts that we read in the Scriptures and interpret for ourselves. Adult baptism also leads to religious insecurity; it can lead to a continual fear of losing what we have voluntarily accepted.

I continue to appreciate my German heritage, including the low-German language, but I distinguish it from my spirituality. I am grateful for my heritage of choral music and of four-part congregational singing, but I have been able to separate this cultural heritage from my religious

faith. For even this four-part harmony was not originally part of the Mennonite heritage, but was added on by Mennonites who had partially assimilated to Russian culture. And the borscht and other ethnic food that I enjoy is also just a reflection of some of the many wanderings of the Mennonite people, whether from their hundred year sojourn in Russia or their missionary activities in other countries.

All of this has allowed me to resolve, at least for myself, the religious conflict that so burdened my grandfather IP and that he passed on to his children and to us grandchildren. I recognize that some members of my family and some of my relatives will disagree with my conclusions. Some of them still find comfort in ideas of which I have been critical. I do not intend any disrespect. But I need to tell my story.

I hope that this article will allow others to recognize how their own lives have been shaped by the religious conflicts of their parents and grandparents. We do not need to blame them; they did the best that they could in their specific historical circumstances. But a certain questioning of our past is necessary if we are to become whole. That does not mean an endless skepticism, but rather coming to terms with our past, and if necessary, finding new spiritual foundations.

Of course, those who are uncritical of their tradition will say that they agree with it because it is the truth. I recall a member of a congregation being astounded when I said that church theology can cause depression. How can that which is true be harmful? But that assumes that the tradition's teaching is true. In our heart, the center of our being, we know when that is not the case. When we experience a dualism, we know that something is wrong. There are alternative views of how we can relate in nondualistic ways to God, to our selfhood, to others, and to the world.