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Symposium Review: Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age—John P.R. Eicher

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Book Review Symposium

Review of: **Eicher, John P.R. 2019. *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.**

Review 1: Kenneth Burkholder
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In his book *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age*, historian John P.R. Eicher chronicles the stories of two Mennonite colonies transplanted during the rise of nationalism. As the introduction makes clear, though, the book is more than a mere record of history; it aims to show how “mobile populations fashion collective narratives as nations, religions, and diasporas.” The book can therefore be understood on two different levels. It acts as a straightforward history from 1874 to 1945, of the migrant Menno Colony’s (from Canada) and the refugee Fernheim Colony’s (from Russia) inception in Paraguay. As an explanation, it also attempts to, through the microcosm of the two colonies, “uncover the insecurities and ambiguities that accompanied the formation of modern nation states, which was the largest and most destructive experiment in the history of social engineering.”

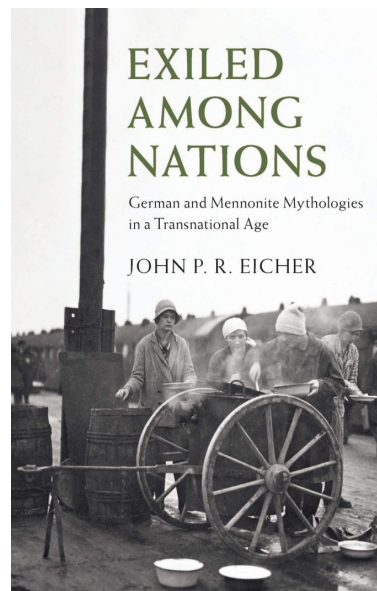
Exiled among Nations opens with an extensive introduction that lays out both the major people groups and the ideas that are the lens of the author. After summarizing the origins of Anabaptism in general and Mennonites in particular, the introduction zeros in on Russia’s Mennonites, from which both Menno Colony and Fernheim sprung. As Russia began modernizing under Alexander II in the 1860s, homogenizing efforts such as educational programs and military conscription pushed some Mennonites to migrate to North America. The threat of cultural and religious assimilation by way of a nationalizing mold followed them, however. In the 1920s, Canada enacted its own

education reforms, spurring 1,800 individuals—who would form Menno Colony—to voluntarily migrate to the Gran Chaco region of Paraguay. At roughly the same time, Mennonites were fleeing Communist Russia after being labeled kulaks and purged from their villages; some 1,500 refugees were settled in the Chaco region with help from the German government and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

The introduction goes on to set important themes of the book, the most obvious being the tension between the colonists’ attributes (both internally and externally perceived) of “Mennoniteness” and “Germanness.” The author notes, “Germanness [...] is a nebulous concept used to define a nebulous category of people, and one which was highly susceptible to revision.” Mennoniteness is a similarly shifting concept, as Mennonites did not have a systematic framework for codifying beliefs; cultural expressions of the faith came “from the bottom up,” from the *Gemeinde* (the local community). Forces both within and without the colonies sought to define, mold, and otherwise use these attributes for their purpose.

A related theme is the misunderstanding brought about by nationalist labels. For example, the Mennonites of Russia practiced Germanic culture not because they wanted to maintain a link with Germany but rather to maintain a link to their ancestors. Overall, the colonists were more concerned with the local community than any larger external entity, whether it be Paraguay, Germany, a German National Socialist (Nazi) organization, or the MCC.

A third theme is the idea of analyzing history through “mythologies.” The author writes that, “nations and religions exist as mythologies that are arranged as narratives over time.” Mythologies (curated narratives) are adopted or rejected based on how they resonate with a group-lived reality. One way of using mythologies analytically is to compare competing narratives to the dominant



narrative: “The center is illuminated from the periphery.” This view suggests an underlying truth can be teased out from competing group narratives and is the premise on which this book is built.

The rest of the book is organized into six chapters. Chapters one and two detail how Menno Colony and Fernheim came to be. The author contrasts the experience of the two colonies, balancing Menno Colony’s voluntary acceptance of “searching for an earthly Zion” against Fernheim’s fate being foisted upon them by outside actors such as German nationalist groups and aid organizations like the Mennonite Central Committee. The distinction somewhat manifests an idea the author introduces in chapter one: the tension between “separatist” Mennonites (those who see Christian faith and living as inextricable, thereby forbidding compromise) and “associative” Mennonites (those who understand “Mennoniteness” to lie in “essentials” which can co-operate with nationalist ideals). The two mindsets are represented by Menno Colony and Fernheim (and to a greater extent, MCC), respectively.

Chapters three and four span the years of 1930-1939. The colonists began the work of settling into and understanding their new country, interacting with Paraguay’s people and government, learning to work the land. By all accounts, it was “a time of bitter testing, a time when we could scarcely understand our Father in heaven.” Besides the realities of everyday life, the colonists wrestled with how to identify themselves (and by extension understand their relationship to their present lot): were they now Paraguayan Mennonite Germans, Germanic Latin American Mennonites, or some other combination? Resolving their identification was of interest to many outside groups, not just the colonists themselves.

Chapter five is titled “Peanuts for the Fuhrer.” The title alludes to peanuts that Fernheim grew and distributed to the German “homeland”; a small sack reportedly made it to Adolf Hitler. The story illustrates the zeitgeist in Fernheim during National Socialism’s rise: it was getting harder to parse Germanness from Mennoniteness. For some (both inside and outside Fernheim), the colonies represented the concept of *Auslandsdeutsche*, Germans who lived abroad but still embodied the “folk” spirit of Germany. Depending on one’s viewpoint, this was a good or bad thing. Fernheim wasn’t sure where it landed; Menno Colony had

already decided the question was a moot point. It involved concerns from outside their own colony and therefore was no concern of theirs.

The crux of chapter six and the book is the event on March 11, 1944: 60 armed Fernheim colonists with Nazi sympathies “violently confronted” several other colonists in the middle of the night. While relatively mild as riots go, the incident did reveal the depth of schism and anxiety surrounding Fernheim. Hopes of a “repatriation” into Germany and Eastern Europe were fading and with it Fernheim’s “emancipation from the Chaco.” The riot was born of frustration and ambiguity of the colonists’ situation. In its aftermath, Fernheim made peace with its lot and accepted a “new and permanent life in the Chaco.” Fernheim would be refugees no more.

Eicher ends his work with a brief conclusion, pondering nationalism, history’s arc (or lack thereof), and humanity’s need to impose narrative onto events. His concluding words:

[T]he Menno Colony wished to escape progress by journeying to a lonely wilderness where they could reassert their “eternal privileges” and their opposition to nationalism. Likewise, the Fernheim Colony wished to escape history through a flight to the future and their messianic deliverance to a Nazi-controlled Europe. Yet the past could not be reassembled into the present, nor could the present give rise to a future of the colonies’ choosing. Neither group found exactly what they were looking for in the Chaco. They found themselves, they found each other, and in doing so, they created something new.

With a title like “Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age,” I expected a certain amount of heady interpretation and I wasn’t disappointed. What I hadn’t expected was how much I would enjoy it: the book, while extensively researched, is quite readable. The author intertwines difficult concepts, straight history, and interpretative explanation in a seamless fashion. While not an easy book, it rewards careful reading.

As a twenty-first century Conservative American Mennonite, I found I could relate to the colonists’ views, the pressures within and without. Even though only distantly related through time and spiritual heritage, I felt I understood Menno Colonists’, Fernheim colonists’, the MCC agents’,

and maybe even the Fernheim Nazi sympathizers' actions. I think that's a third way this book can be read: as a parable to understand our own time as Conservative Mennonites. The problems they wrestled with—identity, sojourning versus citizenry, how to live out the Christian faith in real life—are problems Conservative Mennonites still wrestle with.

Perhaps expeditiously, Eicher declines to delve into the Christian faith aspect of the colonies. Aside from showing how Menno colonists understood their existence in terms of the Bible, the subject never comes up at all. That is my one reservation with the book. I think the colonists' story can only be understood by considering faith; indeed, many of the questions that arise while reading the book can only be answered in the light of faith. While it is no doubt true in many cases, I'm suspicious of the idea that we as humans impose narratives (and therefore meaning) on our existence; the idea hints that human narratives are the sole source of meaning. Surely for us to be able to impose meaning, Meaning existed beforehand? That's better answered by someone wiser than me. At any rate, the book introduced me to some (not so) distant cousins, and I thank the author for that.

Review 2: Nathan N. Zook
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John P.R. Eicher's book *Exiled Among Nations: German and Mennonite Mythologies in a Transnational Age* is focused on two historical Mennonite groups in Paraguay. Yet, it speaks to a number of issues relevant for contemporary plain Anabaptists including the difficulties in sustaining a pan-Mennonite identity, the constant pressure for local congregations to become engaged in wider societal struggles, and the desire of outsiders to frame the narratives of a confession's insiders.

Even for a Mennonite such as myself who loves interacting with people from across the Mennonite spectrum, this book makes clear how difficult it is to develop a sustainable pan-Mennonite identity. If two groups that relocated to neighboring colonies in a remote area of Paraguay to flee oppression in the same era cannot find a common identity, how can we expect modern Mennonite groups to reverse the prospect of continual fracturing and see one another as fellow laborers together in Christ

rather than rivals or even completely different faiths?

Although the book does not go into extensive detail on particular distinctive congregational practices, the Menno Colony would probably be viewed as more conservative and the Fernheim Colony as more liberal. The Menno colonists are strongly identified as being separatists. They are not looking to associate with or obtain rights as citizens of earthly kingdoms. They make appeals to governments when their religious convictions are infringed upon but are not too concerned about how they are viewed by these governments. Their motivations for leaving tsarist Russia and later Canada are to preserve their ability to provide a faith-based education for their children and avoid military service.

The Fernheim colonists, while being people of a confessional Mennonite faith, are descended from Mennonites who did not feel the need to separate from the Russian system of education in the nineteenth century. The book does not give evidence that they were targeted by the Soviet government for their religious beliefs. Although enforced atheism under Stalin was a reason for the persecution of many Christians, this book does not give details to indicate that this was the reason for the ostracism of the Mennonites. Instead, the Stalinists' primary concern seems to have been their economic "kulak" class. Basically, Stalinism viewed established country peasants as a threat to collectivization of agriculture. The Mennonites had to go. With the aid of MCC, the refugees relocated to the Fernheim Colony in Paraguay.

One would think that two neighboring colonies, both consisting of German-speaking Mennonites and seeking to follow the same Bible, would have much in common. However, any connections remained very loose. Even though today's Christian climate glorifies ecumenical endeavors, difficulties are apparent even within similar faith traditions. Some liberal Mennonite may be quick to distance themselves from their more separatist, conservative Mennonite namesakes. More conservative Mennonites may not even view liberal Mennonites as "real" Mennonites. While some pan-Mennonite identity can be seen in disaster or humanitarian relief efforts, it is becoming more and more common for smaller groups to form their own institutions as opposed to supporting broader, established organizations.

Both colonies in Eicher's book faced their own splits later that were tied more to economic lifestyle than to confessional issues. Some Menno colonists wished to return to Canada and some Fernheim colonists moved into other parts of Paraguay. The initial upheaval resulting in the formation of the Menno and Fernheim colonies did not lead to immediate stability. As can be seen in modern Mennonite fellowships, when long-term affiliation ties have been broken, it becomes easier to continue separating and fracturing.

A second broad theme in Eicher's book that relates to modern plain Mennonites is the pressure for local congregations to become engaged in wider societal struggles. For the Mennonites who exited Canada, there were always two options: to accommodate the state's educational demands or fight for democratic rights as citizens. The Menno Colony's formation resulted from the Mennonites choosing a third option – leaving Canada's system entirely and not choosing to identify as citizens in an earthly democracy. Today's Mennonites that emphasize two kingdom theology espouse a third way as well. They avoid the entanglements of politics on the left or on the right and maintain a consistent witness reflecting the time when "Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36a).

While we would expect the separatist Menno colonists to take this stance, it is heartening to see that many Fernheim colonists also avoided the temptation to align themselves with Nazi Germany against their Stalinist oppressors. Nevertheless, as illustrated by the photo in Eicher's book of a Fernheim colonist tending to her swastika-shaped garden, it is obvious that the pull of political entanglements was still present. Some Mennonites in the past decade have felt the pull of Trumpism as well as the call to engage in political anti-racist action. While looking like opposites on the American political spectrum, two kingdom believers (a.k.a. separatists) know that both the political left and the political right are the antithesis of nonresistance to evil and the focus on building Christ's not-of-this-world kingdom.

A third theme in Eicher's book relevant to modern plain Mennonites is the awareness that if we do not clarify our identity, outsiders will be happy to do it for us. The resulting identities will probably be unidimensional. The Third Reich would have been happy to emphasize the German-ness

of the "Russian" Mennonites. MCC would have been equally as happy for both colonies to commit wholeheartedly to a transnational movement of Mennonites. Nationalist Paraguayan leaders were happy to have European settlers taming the wild wilderness. None of these identities fully embraced the complexity of these Mennonites. Yes, they had lived in Russia, but they spoke German. They spoke German, but many of them saw this as a tool to maintain local unity.

I appreciated Eicher's readable book and found his findings thought-provoking given my personal identity as a social scientist and a Mennonite pastor. The book left me hoping for a sequel. I want to learn more about what happened to the colonies in the post-1945 period. As a modern-era Mennonite living in a highly individualized world, I am also left wondering how individual identity aligns with group identity in these colonies, especially for children born into the communities who do not remember Canada or Russia. The sociological concept of "intersectionality" emphasizes that multiple group identities can shape an individual in ways that a single group membership cannot. A German-speaking Mennonite living in Paraguay with familial roots in Russia and Canada will be very different than a Mennonite in the same congregation lacking one or more of these ties. Anabaptists have emphasized a community of believers. Yet, even though we share the same Bible, the same Savior, and the same historic faith tradition, other competing identities may ultimately shape how we view ourselves.

Author's reply: John P.R. Eicher
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I warmly appreciate the detailed summary and thoughtful analysis of my book, *Exiled Among Nations* that Ken Burkholder and Nathan Zook provided to the *Journal of Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies*. Both reviewers homed in on the two kinds of history I hoped to tell: A "straight history" of the colonies' sojourns across four continents and a more theoretical analysis of how groups of all sizes—from small religious communities to entire nations—adopt and discard collective identifications to create group narratives, which they then use to interpret the world to themselves and to others.

With this book, I wished to convey that humans live inside stories, large and small. We must appreciate the power of these stories because they are the reasons why people think and act in particular ways, even if those ways seem strange or offensive, such as Menno Colony's refusal to accept Canadian public schooling or Fernheim Colony's embrasure of Nazism. Such all-encompassing stories ("mythologies," in other words) are so ephemeral that humans often fail to see in "real time" how and why we are creating them. To many, the rhetorical skills humans use when creating group narratives feels less like an artistic or creative venture and more like recording the transcript of reality or simply "following the path" of tradition. As individuals and groups, we often cannot get outside our own "subject positions" (which *feel* very real and objective indeed!) to see the narratives that we create and live inside.

Storytelling is an essential human art, but a curious thing about many Conservative Anabaptist groups is an inherited skepticism of the power and value of art. For instance, when Menno Colony colonists sang hymns in church, they did not sing harmoniously, since they believed doing so would make some individuals feel proud of their artistic abilities. Likewise, Conservative Anabaptists are also often hesitant to write books about themselves or their communities out of a concern that doing so might elevate the individual as a spokesperson for the group. Yet Menno Colony colonists nevertheless had faith that their actions represented the faithful continuation of the Biblical *story* of Jesus's disciples.

This is not a "gotcha" observation. Rather, it is an encouragement for faith communities to both recognize the power of Biblical *story* and the power of their own storytelling, however obvious, objective, or merely "following the path" of tradition that storytelling process may seem. In any case, we must remember that a tradition's path always ends in the present. It is up to us to "keep the story going." The Bible, therefore, is less a static set of rules to be followed and more a dynamic narrative to lose oneself in and to.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1, ESV). If God is the Word, then God is the story, and faith in God is faith in a story. It is not mine to

say which Christian story most closely aligns with God's story in the past, present, or future, but it is the task of all Christians to hope, "with fear and trembling," that the stories we tell about ourselves and our communities resembles it enough to be forgiven by God that it does not resemble it fully.

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