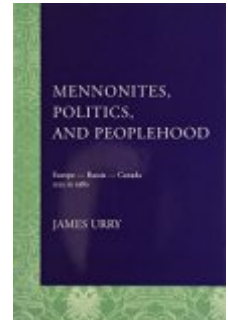


James Urry. *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe--Russia--Canada, 1525 to 1980.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. xv + 400 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-88755-688-3.



Reviewed by Marlene Epp

Published on H-Canada (April, 2007)

The descriptive phrase, "the quiet in the land," has often been used to characterize the Mennonites, an ethno-religious Christian denomination with a membership of about 1.5 million worldwide and approximately 130,000 baptized members in Canada (Census figures are 190,000). The descriptor relates to Mennonites' perceived historic withdrawal from interaction with culture and politics outside their communities, to their agriculture-based economy, and also to their overall obedience to the structures from which they nevertheless withdrew. It was originally applied to the Anabaptists (the Mennonites' religious ancestors) when their movement went underground to escape severe persecution in mid-sixteenth century Europe.

In his 2006 book, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood*, James Urry discounts this characterization as applied to Mennonite political non-involvement, and indeed concludes by suggesting that Mennonites were, and are to varying degrees, in fact the "Loud in the Land." A Reader in Anthropology at New Zealand's Victoria University at Wellington, Urry has written extensively about

the history of Mennonites in Russia and Canada; most notably, his study of Mennonite communities in Russia, *None But Saints* (1989), was a landmark analysis of their first century of settlement there (1789-1889).

In this recent detailed and carefully researched study, Urry explores the numerous ways in which Mennonites have acted and thought "politically" throughout their history, depicting them as less separatist and nonconformist in their dealings with the state than they are commonly portrayed. Furthermore, he also emphasizes that they used political institutions and wielded political power internally, to create a cohesive and controlled Mennonite community, or "peoplehood" as he calls it.

The book ambitiously covers a long chronological period, from the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement in the early sixteenth century to the very recent past of 1980. Urry traces the activity of those Mennonites who migrated from Germany and the Netherlands to Prussia in the seventeenth century, to south Russia in the eighteenth century, and then in several waves to Canada be-

ginning in the late nineteenth century. During their various sojourns in these diverse settings, Mennonites exhibited political astuteness as they resisted the normative civil behavior of citizenry in a given territory, negotiated with local and national governments for religious and cultural privileges, and as they gradually exercised direct political power by voting and running for political office.

Urry starts off his survey in part 1 by observing that, despite the sixteenth-century Anabaptists' "strict separation of church and state" they nevertheless "confronted and challenged" (p. 18) the power of both institutions in their religious beliefs that included a rejection of infant baptism, refusal to swear oaths, and unwillingness to wield the sword for the state. As the early religious movement developed, the growing adoption of confessional statements was an indication, Urry argues, of the creation of "a disciplined, conforming community backed by the use of force" (p. 32). He also demonstrates how urban, "bourgeois" Mennonites of northern Europe, especially those who were educated and engaged in trade, industry, and commerce, were "eager to enter polite society and play a role in civic affairs" (p. 75).

By the late seventeenth century, European Mennonites had learned the art of negotiating *privilegia* with lesser nobles and also absolute rulers, that included such provisions as protection from prosecution, legitimization of their unique faith and practices, and special economic rights, in return for which the Mennonites, in varying degrees, offered obedience to the state. The pursuit of such *privilegia* would see Mennonites through their migration and settlement in Russia and later Canada. Possessing unique rights and privileges as a distinct religious and cultural group within the Russian empire allowed Mennonites to create a semi self-governing "commonwealth" as it has been described, within which religious and political power were wielded sometimes in tandem with each other. Alongside the

development of internal political acumen (and also internal conflict), in part 2 of the book Urry notes how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mennonites in Russia, particularly the estate-owning and merchant class, increasingly held political office within municipal and district regions. The Russian Revolution, of course, changed Mennonites' relationship with the state dramatically and their former privileged status began to disintegrate; the response of a large number of Mennonites was to migrate, a process which itself demanded a political negotiation with the new Bolshevik regime.

In Canada (part 3 of the book) Mennonites were drawn into municipal politics early on since, at least in the early years of settlement in the late nineteenth century, they predominated in electoral districts in which they represented the majority population. The introduction of various pieces of public school legislation at the turn of the century caused friction among Mennonites and also with the government, as some Mennonites held close to the *privilegia* that granted them the right to autonomy in parochial education. It became increasingly clear, especially during and after the First World War when Mennonites were briefly disenfranchised and prohibited from immigrating to Canada, that a relationship with the state based on a set of mutually agreed upon special privileges was a thing of the past. In Urry's words: "If Mennonites wanted their voices heard, they would have to participate in the democratic processes, obtain their demands through the ballot box, or submit to the will of the majority" (p. 183).

Even while Mennonites, especially the large immigrant group that arrived in the 1920s and more so after the Second World War, became more active in mainstream democratic politics, Urry also describes the discomfiting political aberrations that occasionally surfaced. These included individuals who advocated the creation of a remotely located and self-governing "German"

Mennonite state, or those who published "radical expressions of support for the Nazis" (p. 199) in Canadian Mennonite newspapers during the 1930s.

The latter two chapters of the book are devoted primarily to an interesting discussion and analysis of Mennonite involvement in party politics, mainly in the province of Manitoba. Urry traces the increasingly active voting patterns of rural and urban Mennonites, and also profiles the growing number of Mennonites who ran for political office, at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels up to 1980. At the end, Urry offers solid evidence to counter "Mennonite apolitical claims," proposing that, "even if the Quiet in the Land only whisper, their words possess major performative potential in political realms" (p. 256).

Readers interested in the Swiss-origin, Pennsylvania-German Mennonites concentrated mainly in Ontario, may wish that a parallel study would exist for this historic ethnic branch of Mennonitism. Although this group includes the horse-and-buggy Old Order Mennonites who continue to abstain from voting, and other more "separatist" streams of the religion, there is comparable evidence of Mennonite political activity in North America well before the Russian Mennonite examples offered by Urry. These include Swiss Mennonites holding public office in early Pennsylvania, when rules of governance reflected the pacifism of governor William Penn, and in nineteenth-century Ontario, where a Mennonite became the first reeve of the city of Waterloo when it was incorporated in 1857 (the same individual entered the Ontario legislature in 1867).

Because the category Mennonite encompasses a pluralism of subgroups--possibly fifty identifiable groups in Canada alone today--it is inevitable that a study such as Urry's cannot address the wide range of political responses that exist across the Mennonite continuum. This continuum might be described as a range between separatist non-involvement to involved engagement with the

various political spheres that exist outside the Mennonite church and community. Since his interest is in those individuals and groups that were active politically, indeed those most likely to be so involved, Urry says little about those Mennonites, albeit a smaller percentage, that eschewed external political involvement and continue to do so. Readers should thus be mindful that Urry's thorough and well-written survey does not include all Mennonites. Also, because the Canadian focus is on Manitoba, there is much less attention given to politically active Mennonites in other parts of the country, especially Ontario, although Urry does pay some attention to the fascinating few cases of Mennonites associated with left-wing political parties and movements in Saskatchewan and also ideologically opposite movements in Alberta.

My own father, a leader in the Mennonite community and mentioned by Urry in the book, ran (unsuccessfully) for federal political office several times. Throughout this time, he repeatedly had to defend, for many Mennonites that is, his decision to enter the political arena. As a student at a Mennonite undergraduate college at the time, I recall the animated debates among my classmates on the question, "should a Mennonite be in politics?" While this is an interesting question to consider for the purpose of dialogue and debate, Urry has soundly demonstrated that the point is, perhaps, a moot one.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Marlene Epp. Review of Urry, James. *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe--Russia--Canada, 1525 to 1980*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13034>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.