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Farms, Faith and Foibles: A Meditation Three Years After Submitting Seven Points on Earth

ROYDEN LOEWEN

That a book titled *Mennonite Farmers* was awarded the Wallace Ferguson prize may have baffled members of the CHA who rightfully might link this prize to a book with a somewhat broader theme; it certainly surprised me. I am, nevertheless, deeply honoured with this award and now with this chance to reflect on the book. Certainly, it is pertinent to ask, what do the terms "Mennonite" and "Farmers," as well as "global," "place" and "sustainability," that appear in the subtitle, offer a discussion set in global history generally, and agricultural and environmental history in particular? For whatever reason, in the various reports and reviews on *Mennonite Farmers* to date, it is the term "Mennonite" that has generated more discussion that any other of the terms within the title and subtitle. Moreover the linkage of religion and sustainability has been of particular interest. I address this concern in both the first part of this reflection, written before the CHA session on *Mennonite Farmers* at York University on May 29, and the second part, written after hearing Brian Froese and Andrew Watson's comments in that session.

Part I

I admit that the title *Mennonite Farmers* wasn't my idea; it arose from readers' reports in the adjudication process; I had wanted the title to be "Seven Points on Earth," the title of the SSHRC Insight research program, highlighting the breadth of the project and its comparative global dimensions — seven far flung places, seven grad students, seven languages spoken, and seven forms of farming. I reasoned that the subject of "Mennonite" in this book pointed to more than its religious content. In much of my writing the subject of Mennonites has served as case study related to a variety of questions, including those of gender, ethnicity, diasporic identity, community-nation relationships, and now with *Mennonite Farmers*, the intersection of environmental and agricultural themes, and the dialectics of local place and global forces. In a way, Mennonites serve as a useful case study in rural history quite

simply because, in their global diaspora, they have been disproportionately rural; not until the 1970s, for example, were there more Mennonites in cities in Canada than on farms or villages. Their migrations to the Russian Empire and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then farther to Siberia and Central America in the early twentieth century, were almost exclusively as farm settlers. Then, too, when Mennonites joined the modern missionary movement in the nineteenth century, they often employed the strategy of the Christian farm village, evident to this day. Given this history of transoceanic diaspora and global missions, the Mennonites have become a global community and present the possibility of a comparative global study of agriculturalists at the local level in the context of industrialization.

And yet the religious component of "Mennonite" seems to have captured the attention of readers. Johns Hopkins University Press, and one of the readers in the adjudication process, said the proposed title "Seven Points on Earth" was vague, not descriptive, somewhat useless; now, *Mennonite Farmers* was catchy and evocative, and I knew University of Manitoba Press, the Canadian publisher, would agree. Perhaps the literary renaissance of nationally acclaimed writers in Canada — Rudy Wiebe, Di Brandt, David Bergen and Miriam Toews, and many others — have generated this interest. Perhaps it's that the most audacious of Mennonites, the horse-and-buggy folks who live just a good hour from Toronto, and a similar distance from Johns Hopkins' berth in Baltimore to Amish-rich Lancaster County, have captured the popular imagination of urban masses appreciative of themes of simplicity, place, and closeness to nature. Certainly, the book is about Mennonites as religious practitioners; the subjects are members of religious organizations, including those not named Mennonite, specifically the Old Order Amish, the Brethren in Christ, the Doopsgezind, the German Baptists, and the Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa. Each of these groups once were called "Mennonite" or today are affiliated with global Mennonite institutions, such as the Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee. Moreover, each of these groups have encountered ideas of ethics-based Anabaptist religion — nonviolence, simplicity, charity, close-knit community — that often work dialectically with agriculture, shaping it in particular ways, even as farming itself shaped the contours of the faith. And given the sectarian nature of Anabaptism, these Mennonite farmers are also remarkably diverse. They include highly mechanized and pesticide-based mega farms of

over 10,000 hectares in both Manitoba and Siberia, deeply committed organic agriculture in both Friesland and Iowa, small holdings on church-owned lands in both Matabeleland and Java, and horse-and-buggy communities in both Bolivia and Iowa. Despite this diversity, faith does matter in this book. Indeed, faith's messy link with the everyday seemed to intrigue the adjudicators.

In comparison to the word Mennonite, the other words in the title seem less controversial. A simple consensus among reviewers seems to be that food security is a worthy and unproblematic topic of concern. In my own daily corpus of reading — a paper copy of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and online editions of the *Washington Post*, the *BBC World News, The Guardian,* the *Eon* magazine, and *The Economist* — agriculture easily rises to the top tier of concerns: food security, environmental care, precision agriculture, and healthy food. As Principal Investigator of the current SSHRC-funded "Transnational Flows of Agricultural Knowledge project," as a member of the Manitoba Organic Alliance, and as a southeastern Manitoba farmer whose son Sasha relied on knowledge gained from his newly minted PhD on precision agriculture to plant our hemp this spring, I am aware of the immensely complex world of evolving agriculture, that begs for historical analysis. Reviewers simply seem relieved that agricultural history is being written.

The words in the subtitle, "a global history of place" seem almost equally unproblematic. The place of *Mennonite Farmers* as a global story seems surprisingly well accepted. At conferences where I have presented on the "Seven Points on Earth" project, attendees were often intrigued by a story that engaged these distinctively local places around the world. Encountering farmers in each of the seven places has certainly been a highlight of my life. And the curiosity continues to this day. Within the last months I have found life-giving social exchanges with folks from these disparate places: WhatsApp messaging with Danang in Jepara about Javanese *nrimo ing pandum,* surrender; speaking in Low German on the roadside at our farm with immigrant farmer David Penner of Central Russia about cutter bees, honey hives, and Putin; dropping in on an Amish grandfather in Iowa talking about weed control in organic soybean fields, a man with 92 grandchildren all apparently happy to pull mustard plants. And the concept of "place" matters, especially on our farm since my retirement from the university; within the last month I sold organic wheat to feed neighbour Val's chickens, apologized to farmer Phil for overlooking

him and selling first cut alfalfa from SE 32-7-4E to "jackass" Ron instead, brought a coffee to truck driver Hannah, shared farm equipment with Mark and his kids Jake and Isaac, hired Josh to disk and harrow, and asked agronomist Margaux about seeding hemp before June 1. These southeastern Manitoba residents are Indigenous, Paraguayan, British, French-Canadian, Ukrainian and Mennonite, but they all belong to one rural space. And it's rural space that inevitably draws positive and curious responses, especially, it seems, from academics imbedded within urban centres.

These are the patterns of responses I saw not only in the readers' reports of *Mennonite Farmers*, but also in the reviews that have begun to filter in (and that I confess to reading, curious to know if what I intended to say was received in that way). Those focused on environmental history or even the messiness of rural history are often straightforward endorsements, while those asking religious questions point to certain tensions. I appreciate Leo Chu's commendation in *H-Environment* that *Mennonite Farmers* shows a "remarkable attempt" in its comparative reach, but especially that it achieves a certain "cross fertilization between environmental and agricultural history," a high bar in fields that strangely stand so far apart. Of course, I am flattered that Linda Ambrose's review in the *Canadian Historical Review* likened the book to a "buffet table laden with hearty dishes prepared by a …. rural cook," but even more moved with the observation that the book reveals the ironies and intricacies imbedded in quotidian life. It's a similar observation to Molly Rozum's in *Prairie History*: a book of foibles and contradictions with so-called egalitarians allowing for class, no-till chemical-dependent farmers championing earth worms, and searchers of "religious freedom" asserting "sovereignty over Indigenous spaces." These contradictions are met a bit more critically in journals of religious study. In his insightful review in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Raymond F. Person cites *Mennonite Farmers* as equivocating on just "what Mennonite means" in the global context, and suggests that my assertion that the "stories in this book relate to…all farmers" is contradicted by a following statement that "'lived religion' play[ed] a 'crucial role' in their 'everyday environmental relations.'" More theoretically, Joe Wiebe notes in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* that the book has strengths *and* weaknesses, and suggests that I have uncritically employed a "notion of stewardship" that reflects "settler contexts," meaning that I have, in a way, essentialized community and sustainability.

By happenstance these very concerns directed my thinking in a recent return to the Seven Points on Earth research materials. In a session on global Mennonite agriculture at the European Environmental History Association in Bristol in June 2022, with Ben Nobbs Thiessen on Mennonite clear-cutting in Bolivia, Josh MacFayden on Mennonite flax farmers in Canada, and David Moon from the UK commenting, I revisited the interviews for Matopas in Matabeleland and Margorejo in Java, about 20 in either place. I realized in this process that even by invoking the term "hybridity" I was pushing an agenda of North American Mennonite environmentalists who search for signs that traditional Anabaptist teachings on nonviolence were extended to the land. The Mennonite rice-producers of Java may not reflect what Clifford Geertz observed as an almost universal nature-appeasing *Slamatan* practice in Java, but they do reflect a nature-based fatalism, *nrimo ing pandum,* an idea introduced to me by local historian Danang Kristiawan. The vegetable gardeners and cattle herders in Matabeleland may no longer overtly divinize the environment, but they nevertheless reflect an animistic-inclined appreciation for "sacred geographies," as described by Terrance Ranger, or *abantwana benhlbathi,* (children of the soil) as analyzed by Professor Eliakim Sibanda. I realized that having identified this hybridity, I also needed to account for disparate ways that religious hybridity expressed itself, but more importantly acknowledge that the cultural stuff of environmental concern in these communities of the Global South resides in animism, even as Christian thoughts on "dominion" and "nurture" and "yieldedness" were introduced. Much more could be said, but questions of religion and land seem to hold unfinished business.

Part II

This question of religion and land also seems at the centre of Froese's and Watson's reviews presented at the 2023 annual meeting of the CHA. Certainly, these two scholars differ remarkably, Froese's writings encased within church history methodology and Watson's arising from an expertise in environmental history, with a specific track record on sustainability itself. Yet for both, religion in this story seems the most unsettling. Neither seems to have a great concern about the underpinning methodology of the book, the deliberate mix of written and oral source materials, or the global comparisons of specific places. In fact, they are rather laudatory in this regard.

Froese begins his review with a comment on the cover photo of a peanut farmer mired in a rain-drenched field in the shadows of the Bolivian Andes, and hints that there is something about a "Mennonite" agriculture that is also stuck in the mud. True, the image seems of universal interest, one signaling titanic contestation between humans and nature where technology is unleashed with dogged determination. And yet Froese moves quickly to religion, a query that he understands goes to the heart of the cultural matrix that directed these farmers. Are these farmers intentionally "Mennonite" in their approach to the land, or Mennonite by identity, people who farm as they do with reference to national cultures, specific state apparatuses, climate, and market? Froese asks how to account for what seems to be a remarkable lack of theological pondering by these farmers. It is true that they speak easily of religion — creator, saviour, church, peace — but less often about land as divine, nature as spiritual, or humans as environmental custodians. The fact is that Mennonites are famous for being indifferent theologians, as only in the last fifty years have they developed an academic verve for such discourse, debating alongside Protestant, Catholic and even Muslim thinkers. But this very anti-doctrinal trait may well define these farmers as "Mennonite", a people who for 500 years have emphasized religion as an enactment, not as a source of debate.

This notion relates to Froese's second question about how one can say that the most visible of Mennonite groups — the Amish of Iowa or the Old Colonists of Bolivia, for example — can farm small acreages, rely on horse-and-buggy transportation, embrace organic agriculture, practice an astonishing level of household self-sufficiency, and yet, as scholars have recently pointed out, possess no environmentalist ethic. I return to what is "Mennonite" about all this: their faith may teach nonviolence and communitarian wholeness, but this as a social rather than an environmental imperative, meaning that Amish or Old Colonist faith only indirectly affects the environment. Of course, Froese is right that, even then, Amish and Old Colony action on the land is religious; it's just that, unlike other religious movements, the Mennonites have not often spoken about the spiritual qualities inherent in the land. Froese remains bewildered by how many of the Doopsgezind in liberal Netherlands can be so libertarian, openly hostile to the environmental policies of the Hague or Brussels. The answer comes back to that hiatus of philosophy and land, and to the stubborn Anabaptist separatism that can stir some Mennonites

to farm in rural spaces in order to be apart from the seeming curse of urban consumption and alienation. The same separatism puts them at odds with high-modernist state apparatuses that would cajole farmers to produce according to scientific dictate rather than to folk wisdom and inherited knowledges.

And thus, I return to my initial confusing assertion that this book is not really about defining a Mennonite agriculture, rather it invites us to enter into Mennonite spaces and to appreciate the stirrings that shape the quotidian impulse of these communities. This is also why I tried to avoid much mention of unifying organizations — such as Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee — that do link many of these communities in some fashion. Instead, in this book I wanted to grapple with the messy-mindedness of the farmers, not the safe contours of organizational structure. Certainly, the structures would have brought order to the chaos, but it would have obscured what farmers believed about space and what they mused about with regard to sustainability.

Watson also begins his analysis with questions having to do with religion and agricultural sustainability, despite his expertise in quite a different field than Froese's; he even wonders about how salvation fits into this constellation of ideas. Why, for example, does farmer Marlin Miller distrust environmentalists and their chatter about climate change even as he insists that all farmers must leave divinely created land in better shape than when they took it over? Watson asks why some definition of sustainability, even Marlin's, is not provided at the outset, serving as a metric by which to measure actions on the land. The answer of course lies in my intention to invite the readers to experience phenomenologically the everyday tensions and hopes of these farmers: to engender an empathy with these farmers even as they confront their own conundrums and obstacles, their joys and anxieties, as they work within both the benign and capricious rhythms of nature.

I agree with Watson that sustainability is a process, not "truly" achievable. I do not think any of the farmers quoted within these pages would consent to such an idea, for every farmer wonders, second guesses, and doubts that their approach is beyond reproach. And yet they would all assert, as Marlin does, even poetically, that the land must remain unblemished, able to produce, and sustain the local community. It is only that their visions on how to reach this bar differ rather significantly. This same relative approach to land also shapes the defining terms of the Mennonite faith. Simplicity, for example,

is a value that early sixteenth century Anabaptists, including Menno Simons, the namesake of the Mennonites, heralded. But, like the word sustainable, simplicity becomes rather complicated, as farmers are buffeted between forces such as urbanization, which they cannot control, and landedness, which promises that they do assert control over something. So, simplicity is defined with reference to technology in some regions, but as an imposition on time and space in other places, and as soil care that dismisses concerns about profit margin in others. An achievement of simplicity may then not be something Mennonites can vaunt. However, it is something that they speak about: it is perhaps less a practice than a question they grapple with. Thus poverty, which forces a certain simplicity on the poorest of these farmers, may not be simple at all, but an anguished response to the global economy and continental suffering, a desperate desire to make the hurt disappear, and a pathway to the simple joys of fresh air and clean water. And within these quiet moments of working outdoors, within the rhythm of the seasons, the great and sudden moments of history that Watson asks about, the kind of events that structure most textbooks, are diminished in importance. In times of deluge or drought, who cares that the nation is at war or commodity prices have collapsed. Perhaps oral history does determine the narrative flow somewhat, because we did ask about the everyday contours of life over the sudden ruptures of time, and in oral history the interviewer is always that third subject, as the experts of this methodology argue. But this approach still seems more able to unlock the phenomenological than does an events-based approach. Oral history takes us into the everyday matrix of these communities and here, Watson, like other reviewers referenced above, asks how these farmers are distinctive from non-Mennonites farmers, and expresses some discomfort that an answer is not readily forthcoming. The fact is that Mennonite farmers in these seven places variously have Calvinist, Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, or secular neighbours who all talk about identical things — pest, weeds, yields, fertility, global markets, farm household labour, and, of course, rain!

This takes us to the codicil I offer. While the subjects of the book may be Mennonite, they serve as a case study I know well in order to address larger questions, in this instance, questions of sustainability and place. As noted above, this book is "Mennonite," not only in that it evokes questions of how religion relates to the environment, but also because it taps into a global social network I developed from my work as Chair in Mennonite Studies. That network consisted of community

leaders who took me to the farmers and to regional academics who offered their scholarly guidance. Put more simply, I think of this book as a history of Mennonite farmers, not a Mennonite history of agriculture. Thus, when the narrative presents farmers facing the simple challenge of economic and social sustainability, I don't really think the book "veers off" course, as Watson suggests, and nor would I agree that the narrative somehow demonstrates that "religion…has…slowly eroded over the course of the twentieth century." It was, after all, a century in which Bolivian Old Colonists sacralized the steel wheel, the Amish flourished in Iowa, religiously conscious organic farmers in Manitoba and Friesland came into being, and the deeply rooted religious hybridity in Matabeleland and Java prevailed. I kindly disagree with Watson and assert that there indeed is a "sustainable" approach here and even a "salvation" of sorts; it's just a matter of not focusing on either as an end in itself; it's all about process.

Watson says that the comparative nature of the book has allowed the contradictions in this story to become apparent; Froese writes that microcosms of the seven points have clarified a global perspective. I can't ask for greater endorsements. More importantly, these observations point to the future, when environmental history might yet more systematically embrace agriculture, when religious studies might concern itself with the cosmologies of farmers, when local history understands its place as integral to the global community. I'm inspired by the directions a collective concern for faith, foibles and farming might yet chart.

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