

What's God Got To Do With It?: Examining the Role of Religious Beliefs in the Secular Discipline of Mennonite History

By Sandra Borger, Simon Fraser University

Abstract: As a starting point for my work on Canadian Mennonite women this article examines various approaches to the issue of religion in modern historical works. It addresses the historian's dilemma of recognizing the sincerity of religious convictions while also analyzing their implications, and asks whether it is possible to fulfil one's responsibility as an historian while simultaneously recognizing the legitimacy of a religious group's faith and the role it plays in their daily lives.

My thesis will examine constructions of gender and ideas of community in the Mennonite female population who moved from their rural homes in the Fraser Valley to the city of Vancouver in order to find jobs as domestic workers. Even though they were the most unlikely of candidates, these young unmarried Mennonite women were able to provide for the economic survival of their families during the Great Depression. After Mennonite families escaped persecution in Russia during the Russian Revolution, they incurred large debts when traveling to and settling in Canada. A priority for these immigrants was to quickly repay these debts to their sponsors. One avenue that was open to them was to send young unmarried women into the city of Vancouver for domestic work. During this time, wages for domestic workers were decreasing in Canada, enabling an increasing number of Canadian families to hire domestic help. Mennonite women, known for their conservative lifestyle and reliable work ethic, found jobs in the Vancouver labor market without difficulty. To ease their transition into the paid workforce, these young women relied on the services of the many Mennonite girls' homes located throughout Canada. These female-run organizations provided advice for finding work, mediation between employers and the young women, a network of social support, and, ultimately, a place of refuge for women who suffered various forms of abuse in the workplace.

Most of the existing literature on Canadian Mennonites focuses on immigration and survival. I intend to ask new questions and provide a new perspective to this subject by exploring the way gender influenced the experience of the female members of this community as they made the daunting move into urban areas. Did the move from a prairie farming community to a large city redefine Mennonite womanhood or did the

continuing familial ties with the Fraser Valley act as a conservative force in constructing identity? Did the Bethel Girls Home act as a vehicle for change or did it reinforce pre-existing identities and gender expectations?

Given my thesis topic, it is unsurprising that theories on gender, labor and immigration have been central to my research. What I did not foresee, however, was the centrality of religion in organizing these women's lives. Perhaps one of the reasons why religion did not immediately present itself as an important factor was its absence from any of the sources I consulted during my preliminary research. These gaps in the scholarship have motivated me to tackle the historiographical issue of religion in this paper.

This paper will examine various ways historians have engaged with religion. First, I will provide an overview of the broader methodological frameworks that historians have utilized to examine topics on and related to religion. I will then consider the state of academic research on Mennonite women and discuss the approaches taken in relation to religious issues. To conclude, I will illustrate the ways in which pre-existing methodologies and the idea of agency through negotiation will be used in my Masters thesis. It is my hope that the reader will be convinced that religion is needed to understand the experience of Mennonite women and that it not only needs to be addressed, but must also be taken seriously as a legitimate motivating factor in the lives of historical players in the twentieth century.

Emile Durkheim was one of the first Western thinkers to consider the impact that religions had on history and society. An early twentieth-century liberal-humanist, Durkheim advocated the need to scientifically investigate religion. His explanation of religion conforms to the functional approach and he states that:

When a man lives a religious life he believes he is participating in a force which dominates him, and which at the same time, upholds him and raises him above himself. Thus strengthened it seems to him that he is better equipped to face the trials and difficulties of existence.¹

Durkheim believed that religious convictions were not rational, but were shaped by people's need to deal with the complexity of their lives - it was constructed out of a need to explain the hardships of life. Labeled functionalism, this secular approach to religion caught on quickly and continues to influence the social sciences today.

¹ Quoted from W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories* (London, 1984), 304. See also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York, 1954).

Conversely, several anthropologists during and after the Second World War approached religion as a social fact.² Anthropologist Evans-Pritchard explained that since the researcher cannot possibly know if the belief system of those that they study is true or not, they "cannot take the question [of theology] into consideration."³ Utilizing a positivist epistemology, researchers viewed the beliefs and practices of various religions as facts in and of themselves.⁴ Discussions as to whether or not they were factual had no place in the scientific study of societies. They were held as truths because they existed in the minds of those people that were being studied.⁵

The difficulty with this approach is that it is inspired by a scientific method of research, which relies heavily on empirical observations.⁶ But how do we measure and analyze religion? The religious beliefs of individuals are not part of their spiritual fabric only when they attend religious services or perform religious ceremonies. Just as with racial identity or sexual orientation, this aspect of one's life is an ever-constant element of identity and consciousness. Similarly, how can a historian measure a person's religiosity? If one individual attends service every week but does not live according to the Bible, and another individual attempts to strictly follow religious teachings in their daily life but does not attend service at all, which one is more religious? Furthermore, how can a scientist gather evidence in matters of religion when faith is

² Dipesh Chakrabarty disagrees with the historical methodologies that consider societies to have existed before religions and, therefore religion to be created by societies. Rather, Dipesh argues that religion and society are coeval aspects of human life. His approach, instead of understanding religious figures as human creations, provides for the existence of gods. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2000).

³ Matthew Engelke, "The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on 'The Inner Life,'" *Anthropology Today* 18, no. 6 (December 2002), 4.

⁴ Similarly, Clifford Geertz argues that "there is nothing unempirical about describing the way in which religious belief appears to the believer. In fact, not to do so is to shrink from carrying empiricism into realms where... the researcher feels lost and threatened." He too believes that the scientific method of data collection is unproblematic for carrying out anthropological studies of religion. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven, 1968), 99.

⁵ Fenella Cannell further explains this type of methodological approach by stating that "religious phenomena... may be described in detail, but must be explained on a basis that they have no foundation in reality, but are epidemics of 'real' underlying sociological, political, economic, or other material causes." In this case, researchers do not carry out analysis on what the religious beliefs mean to the individuals who hold them, nor do they hold these beliefs as valid; rather, anthropologists attempt to translate the religiosity of individuals into a secular narrative. Fenella Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, 2006), 3.

⁶ Talal Asad likewise notes in his work that "it is the old empiricist prejudice to suppose that things are only real when confirmed by sensory data." Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore, 1993), 7.

intrinsically internal? Even if a religious person tried to explain their religious beliefs, there does not seem to be accurate words to describe otherworldly experiences and translate them into a secular narrative.

While Durkheim's ideas on functionalism continued to be influential, focus shifted in the 1980s and 1990s from religion as an individual coping mechanism towards an understanding of religion as a tool of social control. This type of approach is associated with the popularity of studies on post colonialism and relationships of power. For example, Ranajit Guha shows how historians writing about the Santal *hool* uprising of 1855 were unable to come to terms with the confessions of rebels. The rebels maintained that they acted in obedience to a divine command. Rather than accepting this assertion as a truth, historian Sukrakash Ray diminishes the faith statements of the rebels, deeming them to be an "elaborate propaganda device."⁷ Likewise, Guha discusses how previous historians had viewed religious prayers and sermons as ways to mobilize groups against their oppressors in times of adversity. Leaders infused their speeches with religion, using it to remind their followers of a higher purpose and inspire them before battle.⁸ It was believed that middle class leadership was able to play upon the so-called superstitious beliefs of the peasantry. By describing their activities as sanctified, leaders were able to gather the support of those who may otherwise not have participated in political movements.

The problem with this methodological framework is that it disregards the possibility that leaders believed in the religious tenets they invoked. It is plausible that pre-revolt religious ceremonies were viewed as necessary to the cause of the rebels; going into battle without God's support was perceived as a dangerous endeavor. This approach does not allow space in modern historical research for the serious consideration of the religious beliefs of leaders.

Actions of faith have been regarded by other academics as instruments of power. James C. Scott claims that "the major forms of domination have presented themselves in the form of a metaphysics, a religion, a worldview."⁹ Scott claims that slave owners would place emphasis on certain parts of the Bible that offered legitimization of the practice of slavery. These historians see religion as a tool used by a dominant group to exert power over a subordinate group.

⁷ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, 1994), 363.

⁸ For example, see C.L.R. James' discussion of voodoo before the Haitian Revolution. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York, 1989), 87.

⁹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, 1990), 115.

Similarly, Foucault identifies religion as a means of identifying normal and unnatural sexual behaviors. Foucault argues that to be a good Christian one has to follow the Scriptural regulations imposed on the body. At the same time, one has to confess his or her sexual sins by participating in the "infinite task of telling... as often as possible, everything [including]... the most numerous and searching details."¹⁰ By having to discuss sexuality and put it into words, individuals are made aware of the rules and restrictions imposed on them. For Foucault, sex is a construction just as gender is a construction. Its only purpose is to create norms and maintain power relations, and religion is the preferred tool used to create and sustain sexual norms.¹¹

However well-articulated these theories are, they still approach religious issues using the rational/irrational framework. Many religious practices do not necessarily align with the "normal desires" of a Western, capitalist, humanist identity.¹² For instance, some scholars have had difficulty reconciling religious groups' *willing* sacrifice of personal desires or needs with our modern-day society that prizes individual rights and freedoms. Subsequently, these methodological frameworks endeavor to rationalize the presence of religion in societies, viewing it as a means of social control used to impose dominant interests upon inferior members of society. This approach does not allow for the possibility that religious beliefs are real, nor do they provide agency for the individuals whose actions are shaped by their faith. These theories pit religion against freedom, denying the possibility that religion can be experienced outside of political, economic or social power structures.

Recently, academics have taken strides towards seriously studying religion. In her book *Anthropology of Christianity*, historian Fenella Cannell criticizes anthropologists for their exaggerated resistance to "taking seriously the religious experiences of others."¹³ Cannell's work on the conversion of colonized Philippino peoples explores issues of power and domination, and is valuable to our understanding of the voluntary conversion of a colonized people. Cannell explains that the

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume One, An Introduction* (New York, 1990), 21.

¹¹ Joan Scott similarly argues that religious symbolism has been used to establish and maintain women's oppression. Relationships of power are based in perceived differences. In Christian religions, perceived differences can be transformed into concrete symbols such as Eve and the Virgin Mary. Both of these Biblical women can be used to promote 'appropriate' gender norms for women: femininity that values submissiveness and patriarchal power. Consequently, Eve's guilt in committing the original sin has been used throughout history to legitimize women's subordination. Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999), 43.

¹² Asad, *Genealogies*, 13.

¹³ Cannell, *Anthropology*, 3.

"mass conversion of the Philippines... [took] place through the mechanisms of attraction exerted by the idea of heaven," hence challenging earlier scholarship that claimed that religion was imposed by a dominant group.¹⁴ Cannell provides agency to the Philippino people by showing that religious beliefs were not forced upon them, but rather that they felt a spiritual connection to the ideas of Catholicism and truly believed in and identified with the religion they adopted.

Likewise, in her work on female genital cutting of Sudanese women, Janice Boddy investigates not only the Western reaction to this practice, but also local perspectives on its religious importance. Westerners believed that older women who argued against the ban of female genital cutting were doing so because they "wanted others to suffer as they did... [they were] ignorant, obstinate, [and] brutal."¹⁵ Boddy, however, disputes this opinion. She maintains that the pharaonic operation is closely tied to the Islamic beliefs of Sudanese women, as well as to cultural practices that dictate that female genital cutting is important for familial honor and modesty.¹⁶ Using an approach similar to Cannell's, Boddy presents the religious beliefs of the Sudanese women as legitimate motivators of cultural practices.

Within the field of Mennonite history, there is confusion with regards to religious beliefs. Even though this group is identified first and foremost by its religion, no work seriously considers the way religion has shaped the lives of Mennonites. While Mennonite historians have not necessarily ignored religion, they have made little attempt to provide room in their research for considering what religiosity actually means to

¹⁴ Cannell, *Anthropology*, 159. Philipinos understood the afterlife as a continuation of life on earth, where the troubles and debts from one's lifetime were unavoidable. Therefore, Philippino people willingly converted to Christianity because of the promise of an afterlife, which would allow them to shed their lives and live in happiness and equality.

¹⁵ Janice Boddy, *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan* (Princeton, 2007), 173. It is interesting to note, however, that this religious freedom does not extend to Christian missionaries in Sudan during the late 1800s and early 1900s. It seems that acceptance of religious belief is more easily obtained when the religion at stake is subordinated or non-Christian. Perhaps because Christianity has been the religion of the colonizing West, it is difficult to understand the actions of Christian organizations or individual missionaries as motivated purely by religious beliefs rather than being inspired by a desire for power and domination. See for instance Boddy's discussion on various sects of Christianity fighting for souls: Boddy, *Civilizing Women*, 56. Even the language that has been employed by Boddy in this work is politicized and criticizes Christianity. Most notably, her discussion of the crusades ignores the fact that more contemporary Christians do not consider them a high point in the history of Christendom. The author views Christianity as being inextricably linked to power.

¹⁶ Janice Boddy, "Continuing the Anticircumcision Crusade," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (March 1991), 15.

the Mennonites. Most historians of the field focus on providing a chronological or thematic historical narrative that does not leave space for a comprehensive discussion of their beliefs. Therefore, the history of this religious minority does not comprehensively discuss the values that bind them together. It is a history of a religious group that leaves out their beliefs.¹⁷

Scholars who study Mennonite women and religion can generally be accused of two major faults: ignoring religious beliefs and using them to explain oppression.¹⁸ In the first instance, the omission of religious beliefs is problematic since religion is what binds Mennonite women together. There is a tendency to separate individuals from their beliefs. Religious beliefs come to be seen as cultural practices that are imposed upon individuals, rather than something to which they voluntarily adhere.¹⁹ Furthermore, when a historian does discuss religious beliefs and how they affect women's experiences, there is no analysis provided. In many cases, Mennonite religion is understood as the source of the patriarchal family structure, but there is no explanation of why this is the case. Historians could, for example, explore the specific Biblical passages that shape family structure, but few have done so.²⁰

By contrast, some historians have placed religion centre stage, arguing that Mennonite communities utilize religion as a method of gender oppression. Much like Scott or Foucault, these writers describe religious beliefs and activities as a means of social control. While I do not completely discredit these views, these writers appear to suggest that those who receive religious instruction are denied any agency. Religious

¹⁷ See for instance Andreas Schroeder, *The Mennonites: A Pictorial History of Their Lives in Canada* (Vancouver, 1990); Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940* (Toronto, 1982), and Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa, 1994).

¹⁸ This is not true of all Mennonite historians. For an enlightened article on Mennonite women that seriously considers their religious beliefs while showing gender-based tensions, see Kimberly D. Schmidt, "Sacred Farming, or Working Out: The Negotiated Lives of Conservative Mennonite Farm Women," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001), 79-102.

¹⁹ For example, Marlene Epp writes about immigrant Mennonite widows after the Second World War and the inter-faith marriage restrictions that are imposed on Mennonite women. These restrictions are labelled as (regulations on) morality and cultural tradition, rather than Mennonite religious practices. See Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto, 1999), 104.

²⁰ Conrad L. Kanagy and Leo Driedger, "Changing Mennonite Values: Attitudes on Women, Politics, and Peace, 1972-1989," *Review of Religious Research* 37, no. 4 (June 1996) 342-353.

instruction, these arguments suggests, is a way to subordinate women in society. But, where do the beliefs of the women fit into this picture?²¹

For outsiders - and even occasionally for insiders - the consequences of enforcing religious doctrines may seem harsh, unfair and oppressive. However, we must consider the place of good intentions on the part of those who do hold power. Community elders may sincerely believe, for example, that modern fashions are frivolous and take away an individual's ability to dedicate themselves to God, which can lead to a life of sin and, subsequently, to damnation. What if historians understood Mennonite actions in this way? Would they still dismiss these kinds of actions as gender oppression, or would they understand these actions as stemming from a genuine concern for one's eternal well-being? When realities such as these are approached taking religious beliefs seriously, one can better comprehend the reasoning behind seemingly grievous actions.²²

As this paper demonstrates, approaches to the study of religion have evolved since Durkheim. In my own research, I have been torn between two opinions. First, I do not want to make the mistake that so many historians before me have made, explaining away religion as a tool of power. I feel that it is important to understand that the lived experiences of the Mennonite women I interview are shaped by their religious beliefs, and that, for them, God is not an abstract tool of the powerful, but a real authority to be obeyed. The choices they made and their work ethic were directly linked to their spiritual beliefs and were not necessarily forced upon them. As a religious individual, I can understand making certain choices based on faith.

My political and feminist self, however, cannot allow issues of gender to be cast away and left unexamined and unanalyzed. Especially in the case of the research I will undertake, the discrimination and subjugation that Mennonite women experienced was a direct consequence of their gender, and was legitimized using Scripture and the tenants of their faith. To ignore the repercussions of their beliefs, no

²¹ See Linda B. Arthur's work on Mennonite women and codes of dress. Compliance with Mennonite dress code is explained as "required... strict conformity is equated by the Holdemans with religiosity, compliance to strict codes of behavior is demanded." The dress code is interpreted by Arthur as a method of control, rather than an expression of religious practice. This article does not allow for the possibility that a woman might voluntarily choose to adhere to these codes of conducts because of her religiosity. Linda B. Arthur, "Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women's Bodies in a Mennonite Community," *NWSA Journal* 10, no. 2 (1998), 77.

²² See also Talal Asad's discussion of European powers attempting to transform the rest of the world into a European system. Asad, *Genealogies*, 12.

matter whether interpreted as justified through Biblical reference, would seem irresponsible. Where does this leave me?

The answer can be summed up in one word: negotiation. Similar to feminist historians that have come before me, I cannot ignore gender oppression. However, I will also in no way discredit the faith of the Mennonite women that I interview. I will attempt to show how they managed to negotiate their lives as best they could *within* a religious framework that did indeed create unfavorable conditions and restrictions for women. I was initially worried that by taking the religious beliefs of the Mennonite women at face value, I would be somehow participating in and perpetuation gendered oppression. However, after much research, I have come to a conclusion similar to historian Janice Boddy who states that "understanding a practice is not the same as condoning it."²³

²³ Boddy, "Continuing the Anticircumcision Crusade," 16.