

IN THIS ISSUE

In the world of academic scholarship, revision is the lifeblood of our work. New cultural and political realities continually prompt us to ask fresh questions; the discovery of additional sources forces scholars to revise assumptions that had once seemed clear; the evidence to which we appeal can always be interpreted in new contexts; and our methodological and disciplinary frameworks are always being challenged and refined.

To the cynic, this constant process of revision can make scholarship seem like a hopelessly subjective enterprise—a gathering of endlessly shifting perspectives in which everything is merely an opinion and nothing is ever certain. But most of us recognize that our pursuit of Truth—be it in history, religion, philosophy, or any other discipline—is always, and necessarily, incomplete. The models we use to interpret the past frequently conceal as much as they reveal. Instead of making claims to describe the past “as it actually was,” in the words of the German historian Leopold von Ranke, it is more helpful for us to think of our work as a “continuing conversation” (or debate), as we seek to deepen our understanding of reality from new perspectives and amid changing circumstances.

This issue of *MQR* offers readers a window into the revisionist nature of Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship. The issue opens with my essay on the practice of church discipline among the Swiss Brethren that complicates conventional understandings of church-state relations in the seventeenth century. Traditionally, many historians of “confessionalization” have argued that European states augmented their power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by co-opting the moral authority, religious discipline, and ecclesiastical structures of the territorial church. This pattern also unfolded in Switzerland, where the city states of Zurich and Bern strengthened control over outlying villages by taking over local morals courts (*Sittengerichten*). The Anabaptist movement—which experienced significant growth in Zurich and Bern during the seventeenth century—challenged this process. Not only did Anabaptism offer villagers a religious basis for rejecting the traditional symbols of state authority such as the oath and the sword, but its strong emphasis on congregational discipline also provided a means of retaining control over local morality at a time when the *Sittengerichten* were being co-opted by central authorities.

Walter Sawatsky, who has spent a lifetime of study and work among Mennonites in the former Soviet Union, offers a panoramic survey of the struggle to restructure Mennonite community life during the Soviet era.

Sawatsky's narrative presses beyond the traditional focus on the "golden years" of the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth between 1870 and 1914 to trace points of continuity and discontinuity through the Stalinist purges and into the 1980s. He also runs against the grain of traditional scholarship by shifting the geographic focus from the Ukraine to the scattering of the Mennonite community into regions like Krygystan. Although formal community structures had mostly disappeared by the end of the 1930s, Mennonites in the Soviet Union, he argues, retained a clear sense of church as a "priesthood of all believers."

Is there an Anabaptist epistemology? **Christian Early**, a professor of philosophy and theology at Eastern Mennonite University, brings a fresh perspective to this question in a far-reaching essay on the philosophy of religion. Modern philosophers have tended to define religions in terms of their "essence"—those distinctive ideas or convictions produced under specific historical circumstances that can be accepted or rejected as a matter of personal choice. Early proposes instead a theory of religion rooted in "practices." In his understanding, religious practices or habits are significant not because of what they mean propositionally, but because of what they do—they "lamine" inner and outer worlds, open spaces for personal and communal life, and create identities that are grounded in stories. Early's essay, rooted deeply, if not always explicitly, in Anabaptist-Mennonite sensibilities, outlines a new approach to the philosophy of religion that merits careful attention.

We saved the liveliest expression of revisionist scholarship for last. During the course of the twentieth century, a vigorous debate has unfolded over Menno Simons's conversion, his theological antecedents, and the nature of his relationship to the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster. Clearly, Menno was instrumental in re-establishing Dutch Anabaptism after 1535 along pacifist and moderate lines. But when and how he came to this position is far from clear. One particular debate has focused on a tract, *The Blasphemy of Jan van Leiden*, which refutes the violent and apocalyptic teachings associated with the debacle at Münster. Since the only extant published version of the tract is dated 1627, it is unclear exactly when he wrote the tract (or even if he wrote it); and the nature of his relationship to the thought of Melchior Hoffman and Bernhard Rothmann is also a source of much debate. In this issue, four scholars of Dutch Anabaptism offer varying perspectives on these, and related, questions. I am deeply grateful to **Willem de Bakker**, **Helmut Isaak**, **James Stayer**, and **Piet Visser** for engaging the debate in such a robust way. Let the conversations—and the revisions—flourish!

– John D. Roth, editor