

## **In Defense of Shunning: Form-of-Life in Plain Anabaptism and Decolonizing Movements**

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I begin with two points of clarification about my title “In Defense of Shunning.” First, I am mostly against shunning, even if I don’t want to rule it out. I do not have three cheers for shunning or even two cheers. A more fitting title might be: “A modest affirmation of shunning under some circumstances.” Second, by shunning I simply mean the exclusion of someone or something from community life. Shunning can range from members of a conservative Anabaptist community excluding a former member from communion and social life for breaking the community’s covenant to members of a social movement excluding from economic and social relationships the products or stock or services of a company or institution whose practices or leadership are regarded to violate the principles of the movement—a practice otherwise known as boycotting. So, to further update my title, this presentation might more precisely be described as: “A modest affirmation of exclusion under some circumstances.”

### FROM TOLERANCE TO PENITENCE

My basic premise for not ruling out exclusion as a practice of faith comes from the critique of liberal tolerance expressed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1947 book *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. In this work, written in the aftermath of World War II, they show how individuality is expressed in liberal societies as improvisations or variations on Enlightenment subjectivity; that is, a sovereign subject distinguished from and in control of nature who also aligns with the cultural, political, and economic systems of capitalism. Within this system, the individual—however they distinguish themselves—is “tolerated only so long as (their) complete identification with the generality is unquestioned,” the “generality” meaning the

system of mass culture by which the market-based order of capitalism appears natural and given.<sup>1</sup> To put this more directly, toleration in liberal societies is based on a premise of functional individualism within a transactional society, even though such toleration is made to appear through popular culture as a universal condition supplied by constitutional guarantees.

In church congregations that have assimilated to liberal market-based societies, we often see this embrace of the sovereign individual in policies of inclusion whose purpose is to achieve justice or equity among individuals. Policies of inclusion typically make some version of the claim that “everyone is welcome here” and may offer a list of specific kinds of differences that the congregation seeks to include, a list that usually seems to echo non-discrimination clauses crafted by human resources professionals: gender, race, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. The similarity between church inclusion policies and equal employment protection confirms the assimilation of the church to liberal tolerance: in theory all differences are welcome; in actuality, only individuals capable of functioning amidst such differences as sovereign subjects within a market-based social and cultural system are welcome. Horkheimer and Adorno quote Immanuel Kant to describe such sovereign subjects as those capable of understanding “without the guidance of another person”; in other words, those guided by reason.<sup>2</sup>

A recent remarkable work of journalism describing the disintegration of an inclusive Anabaptist congregation in Philadelphia illustrates the limits of liberal tolerance built around the sovereign Enlightenment subject. Eliza Griswold documents the decision of a Brethren in Christ congregation named Circle of Hope to move beyond the mere inclusion of individuals from racial and sexual minority groups toward changing the practices and habits of the church toward greater social justice and equity—to not merely witness against racism outside the church but to repair its distortion of life within the church, for example.<sup>3</sup> This challenging process led to

significant conflict, to the breakdown of relationships among pastoral leaders, to the exclusion of the founders of Circle of Hope from congregational life, to the congregation being forced to leave the Brethren in Christ denomination, and eventually to the collapse and closing of the congregation.<sup>4</sup> A central experience of this process of change and repair at Circle of Hope was penitence—the discovery of unintended harm and the struggle to repent of such harm by individuals who had good intentions but who discovered they did not have sovereignty over their actions.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, in this process of change and conflict, many Circle of Hope members experienced themselves no longer as sovereign subjects but as penitential subjects.

#### PENITENCE AND SHUNNING IN MENNO SIMONS

Such a penitential subjectivity is intrinsic to radical transformation that goes beyond liberal tolerance and runs deep in Anabaptist history and theology. Perhaps the most extensive development of a theology of penitence in the Anabaptist tradition can be found in the writings of Menno Simons. Dutch Mennonite pastor and scholar Sjouke Voolstra rightly argued that “true penitence” was at “the core” of Menno’s “program of practical Christianity,” which sought to sanctify “both the individual and society,” thereby offering a more radical idea of “Christian freedom” than is expressed in the “secularized world” of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Menno developed his understanding of excommunication and shunning within this framework of true penitence, establishing the purpose of the ban to bring about repentance and restoration to the community of faith.<sup>7</sup> For example, Menno argued that the point of the ban was not to shame the person to whom the ban was applied but rather to “win the erring and stray brother back to Christ again,” who ideally is grateful rather than ashamed for having been shown

their error.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Menno claimed that “true evangelical excommunication is an express fruit of unfeigned love, and not a rule of hatred...”<sup>9</sup>

The most dramatic example of the ban’s use as a practice of penitence—as far as I know—comes not from the life and teachings of Menno Simons, but from Jakob Amman, the Swiss Anabaptist leader whose conflict with Bishop Hans Reist led to the Amish schism in 1693. Seven years after the mutual banning by the two emerging groups—the Reistians and the Amish—over differences of opinion about the practice of the ban and shunning, Jakob Amman, wrote a letter of confession in which he not only removed the ban against the Reistians, but also placed himself and his group in the ban, stating that, “we confess that the ban also applies to us, and for this reason we do not stand apart from the church without guilt.”<sup>10</sup> Although this letter of confession did not end up healing the schism, it did clearly lead to penitence in ways that reflected Menno’s hopes for the use of the ban.

In his later writings on the ban, Menno also acknowledged that the ban was a key practice for maintaining the integrity of the church itself, as he put it, “the walls and gates” protecting the church community and the “new reality in Christ” that the church represented.<sup>11</sup> Even with this view of the church’s integrity in mind, Menno nevertheless stressed that the primary goal of the ban was to support the faithfulness of believers who, he acknowledged, were “weak vessels” easily swayed by the “gentle breeze of deception” and “polluted with the pernicious, ugly life of the wicked.”<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Menno seems to have acknowledged that the ban and shunning could be used in the context of political witness, although he did not develop this idea in a significant way. For example, in his debate with Gellius Faber, Menno claimed that Christian rulers who used the sword to enforce the virtues taught by the church, to protect or expand territorial power, to “shed

human blood by their wicked warring and tumult,” should be excommunicated from their churches, rather than supported and flattered by the church’s pastors.<sup>13</sup> Because Menno’s political theology did not assume the intrinsic incompatibility of magisterial authority with Christian discipleship, his appeals to magistrates to put aside lethal violence while supporting the most vulnerable in society took on the form of a genuine public witness. With this political theology in view, Menno’s suggestion that violent and unjust Christian rulers should be banned invites the possibility that communities of faith might exercise ecclesial authority not only to encourage the personal mending of life and the social integrity of the church, but also as a practice of public witness.

#### ANABAPTIST RULES AND FORM-OF-LIFE

Anabaptist practices of excommunication and shunning, such as those envisioned and implemented by Menno Simons, can be understood in terms of the account provided by Italian social theorist Giorgio Agamben of rules followed by monastic communities. Such communities adopt a list of rules representing a form-of-life that exceeds the logic of legal systems enforced by judicial coercion and violence, even if the implementation of such rules can frequently reflect juridical frameworks.<sup>14</sup> Typically, as in traditional Anabaptist communities, the rules of the community are enforced by the sanction of excommunication rather than by the threat of imprisonment or execution.<sup>15</sup>

A form-of-life delineated in monastic rules functions best according to Agamben when expressed as an artful and adaptive practice rather than a legalistic adherence to an obligation—a set of habits upon which to improvise for the sake of practicing such common goods as poverty and humility.<sup>16</sup> Members of a rule-following community promise to follow the rules—not as a

legal requirement but rather to support a common life that transforms the individuals who participate in this life.<sup>17</sup> The subject here is not the sovereign subject of reason alone but rather a penitential subject of a nonconformist community, a subject that submits to communal guidance in exactly the way that Kant opposes for the sovereign subject of a liberal society.

It appears to me that Agamben's interest in monastic rules and form-of-life is driven by his concern that liberal democratic societies based on the valorization of individual autonomy end up undermining social and political freedom through the fetishization of the individual. One way this undermining of social freedom happens is through the invocation of emergency measures proposed to protect individuals—or at least a particular biocentric conception of individual stripped of social and cultural meaning, what Agamben calls “bare life.” It is this reduction of human life to bare life that Agamben was concerned with in his controversial criticism of public health measures imposed during the COVID pandemic that mandated social isolation for the sake of protecting the merely biological life of individuals.<sup>18</sup> From within this framework of concerns, conservative Anabaptist communities that resisted such public health measures appear to illustrate the power of communal solidarity against juridical authority mustered on behalf of the protecting the merely individual, or a data set of individuals.

The resistance of Agamben, along with conservative Anabaptist communities, to state regulatory regimes, including public health regulations, requires interrogation. For example, might temporary subjection to social isolation measures count as a kind of improvisation on a communalist rule of life—distancing from one's neighbor for the sake of caring for their well-being, suspending the rules for the sake of following their direction? If so, perhaps Agamben can be criticized for adhering in an overly absolute way to the rules implied by his theoretical habits of hostility to governmental states of exception, just as happened in many Anabaptist

communities during the pandemic and continue into the present with vaccine resistance in traditional Mennonite communities currently contributing to a measles outbreak in the U.S.

Nevertheless, one specific way in which Agamben's argument about the pandemic has been vindicated in the United States is the state of emergency declared by the current administration in the name of the threat to the merely individual posed by anyone whose cultural particularity defines them as less than or more than a sovereign individual, whether they be immigrants with or without documents, or people who claim marginalization or discrimination as part of their identity or history. Within the emerging cultural and political system instituted by the current U.S. presidential administration, the only form of the individual that may be acknowledged, whether in employment or history, is the sovereign subject of reason—without any guidance or support or advantage, even if such a claim of merely individual merit is cover for outrageous instances of unjust and even illegal advantage and privilege. It is in resistance to such a militantly individualistic form of bare life that Anabaptist forms of peaceable and thriving communal life might require rules that include shunning.

#### ANABAPTIST REPAIR AND CARE OF LAND

To explore this possibility that Anabaptist forms of life require a rule of life to avoid assimilation to a merely liberal or even militant politics of individualism, I now explore the urgent need to repair our relationships with land, with indigenous communities, and with colonized and exploited ecosystems and their creatures—as outlined by Sarah Augustine in her book, *The Land is Not Empty*.<sup>19</sup> Given that such repair involves resistance to the projects of colonization and extraction that are organized around and support the sovereign subject of Enlightenment reason, it appears necessary through spiritual and cultural formation to cultivate

an alternative experience of being a human person. Here Menno Simons supplies, as we have seen, a valuable account of a penitential subject, whose regenerated selfhood is grounded in the social and personal capacity to persistently amend life in accordance with the discovery of sin and harm—both intended and unintended, both personal and communal.<sup>20</sup> Such a penitential subject aligns well not only with the invitation found in the Christian gospels to live according to the deep and dawning reality of the divine rule, at peace with God and neighbor, but also, as Sarah Augustine has explained, the ancient indigenous wisdom of conforming to the web of life that surrounds us and holds us. As Augustine describes it, this web of life discloses the Reality of our human embeddedness in a closed system of mutual dependence and challenges the myth of the self-reliant individual at the center of the dominant culture in so-called developed nations.<sup>21</sup>

Communities who seek to repair their lives and relationships and practices to comport with care for all the mutually dependent creatures—both present and future—within this closed ecological system will need to not only change their hearts and lives but develop rules for a common life in support of such change—both to make visible the “new reality in Christ” to which the church bears witness and to engage credibly in public debate and protest on behalf of decolonizing the systems and institutions of global capitalism that are still organized around unsustainable practices of extraction and exploitation, including the predatory abuse of both land and creatures.

There are many examples of Anabaptist communities today committed to such a common life that expresses the “new reality in Christ” beyond individual autonomy.<sup>22</sup> The example I want to highlight, however, is the picture of life on an Old Order Amish farm, as drawn by Amish farmer David Kline. Before Kline was ordained to the ministry and eventually to the office of bishop he wrote and published several books of creative writing about the natural systems and

creatures that he observed on his farm in Holmes County, Ohio. Kline’s writing displays the kind of attentiveness to the “Reality of our human embeddedness” in the web of life that Sarah Augustine is urging on us. Kline’s books provide a nearly encyclopedic account of the creatures and plants that share the soil of his family farm—from black-eyed Susans and dandelions to dragonflies and butterflies to meadowlarks and red-tailed hawks to muskrats and moles to spiders and to burr oaks and crabapple trees. In Kline’s account of life on his farm, the human activities of his family and friends—from gardening and crop-farming to milking cows and raising chickens are part of a large and thriving network of life full of marvels and delights during every day of every season of the year.

Toward the end of one of his books entitled *Scratching the Woodchuck*, Kline acknowledges that the diversity and joy of life on his farm is made possible by Amish restrictions on energy use; as he puts it, by “the fact that we stayed with horse-farming and animal traction when the rest of the society switched to fossil fuel traction...”<sup>23</sup> Kline then reflects on the thriving villages and farmers’ markets in Holmes County, Ohio that prosper despite the building of a Wal-Mart nearby, a reality that he attributes to “the horse.” He relates an experience of taking his eggs to sell at the weekly Mt. Hope auction and being annoyed at first to see cars with license plates from several counties away. “Why, I thought, do they have to bring their eggs all this way to flood our market? Then I realized that their small towns and markets are gone, and my heart softened. Welcome friend, we are delighted to have you here.”<sup>24</sup>

Kline does not mention that one of the reasons small towns in Holmes County are thriving is because of the tourism industry that has taken root there to generate profit from public interest in Amish life and culture—often obscuring the convictions and community rules by which the Amish form of life is made possible. Nevertheless, Kline accurately shows how the

exclusion or restriction of tractors from the Amish form of life makes the specific welcome he offers possible, a welcome based not on individual capacity but on mutual dependence—a welcome that cannot be sustained without shunning.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 154.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.
- <sup>3</sup> Eliza Grizwold, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024), 112.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-11.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-23.
- <sup>6</sup> Sjouke Voolstra, “True Penitence: The Core of Menno Simons’ Theology,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (July 1988), 387-400.
- <sup>7</sup> Gerald J. Mast, “Community: Menno’s Peaceable Assembly and the Lord’s Supper, 1544-52, Part 2,” *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* (October 2024), 101-02.
- <sup>8</sup> Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 458.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.
- <sup>10</sup> John D. Roth, trans., and ed., *Letters of the Amish Division* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 1993), 109.
- <sup>11</sup> Verduin, 962-67.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 968.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 726-27.
- <sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013), 34-35.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-58,
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.
- <sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Pandemic as Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 26-33.
- <sup>19</sup> Sarah Augustine, *The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2021), 139-63.
- <sup>20</sup> Gerald J. Mast, “Confession: Menno’s Penitential Piety and the Foundation of Jesus Christ.” *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* (January 2024), 20-24.
- <sup>21</sup> Sarah Augustine and Sheri Hostetler, *So We and Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2023), 54-59.
- <sup>22</sup> For a collection of stories about Anabaptist communities practicing distinctive forms of common life, see Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi, *Faith in Full Color: A Tapestry of Anabaptist Stories* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2025).
- <sup>23</sup> David Kline, *Scratching the Woodchuck: Nature on an Amish Farm* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), 195.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96.