

The Evolution of Mennonite Sexuality: How John Howard Yoder Got Away With It

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Abstract

In recent years, it's been made clear that sexuality is an important conversation in the circle of Mennonites around the world. Discussions of sexual morality, homosexual relationships, and sexual violence are plenty. If one knows anything about Mennonite dress, it's clear that sexuality, both pure and impure, are thought to be implied by how one chooses to dress themselves. Youth, in any culture, are seemingly always stuck in the center of the conversation of sexuality and sexual curiosity. It's clear that in the years between about 1890 and 1930, the youth of the Mennonite community were treated no differently, though in years prior to 1890, it is unclear exactly how much of a focus there was on the youth and sexuality. Enter here a few men who had a thing or two to say about sexuality and how Mennonite circles should approach the discussion in a Bible-influenced way. Sexual roles, in the home and in the church, changed and men were seen to be at the top of the pyramid in all things, even sexually. With modernity came the conversation on purity and the man's role in the relationship to decide what that means. In the course of this paper, the transition from free-will and love to clamp-down and white prayer caps will, hopefully, give insight into how a horrible misconduct, such as that done by John Howard Yoder, could possibly have happened under the dome of Anabaptism, seemingly without recourse.

Sowing Their Wild Oats

Just like any other group of young folk in America, the youth in the Mennonite circle in the late 1800's were sexually curious, and acted upon such curiosity. While the Mennonite youth were probably not getting busy in the back of mom and dad's Cadillac, Mennonite youth would spend time partying, drinking, and committing "social impurities" before settling into church membership and marriage (Hurst, p. 131), later on in young adulthood. And, until Menno Simon

Steiner and Daniel Kauffman stepped onto the scene, each individual, parents, or families would make their own judgment on sexual conduct and behavior of the youth (Hurst, p. 134). But church leaders put an end to freedom to explore. Steiner specifically, in his sermons, condemned dancing and movies, as they promoted sexually promiscuous thoughts [and actions] (Hurst, p. 117), and even courting was put under scrutiny. B. Charles Hostetter stated that Mennonites encourage dating and courtship, but that these things should be done at the proper age and under the right conditions (p. 43).

To put into perspective the promiscuity of the time, in 1913, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, there were twenty-seven reported prostitution houses. This is a well-known, Mennonite town today, and one visiting from outside might never imagine that such an establishment had ever existed. But instead of having remorse for the fact that someone in the community ran such an establishment, John E. Hartzler instead lamented that the girls involved could have been good “wives, mothers, and useful citizens” (Hurst, p. 157). This, of course, was not a common, or at least documented, occurrence in the Mennonite circle of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. The youth simply acted upon their sexual inclinations like any young American would. Those parents who encouraged their children to explore the world, and even those who condemned the act, stated that the youth were simply (or unfortunately) sowing their wild oats.

Modernity would take a toll on what little freedom the Mennonite youth might have experienced. For with the turn-of-the-century film industry and seemingly nation-wide change in sentiments toward sex, the Mennonite church experienced a clampdown on sexuality in all forms, as well as enforced sex roles in the church and the home.

The Church’s Interference

Sexuality was explicitly addressed by Mennonite Church leaders at the turn of the century (Hurst, p. 88), and Protestant revival methods were adopted by Mennonite evangelists to keep the youth in check (p. 132). It seemed as though the Church thought the best way to enforce these rules was to establish dress-code in relation to spirituality, especially for women. In fact, between 1910 and 1920, uniform dress was used by Church leaders to measure a member's spirituality (Hurst, p. 179). Apparently, not everyone complied with the dress code, if spirituality were put under question. But beyond overall dress, the enforcing of wearing the white prayer cap had been initiated much earlier in the 1900's. The woman's prayer cap was important to the church in order to address the need of having something publicly visible with which to show that women are below men, namely that women are willing to submit to male authority (Hurst, p. 93). Hartzler sponsored humble dress for women as ordained by God at the differentiation of sex roles during Creation, and went further to connect a man's immoral behavior to women's sinful dress (Hurst, p. 155-6). Daniel Kauffman, later, reprinted and commented on an article in "The Farmer's Guide" published in 1912, on preachers involved in sexual immorality and cited women's indecent dress as a major cause of men's moral failure – but Kauffman dismissed excusing men and their own lust by blaming women, though he gives no positive credit to women in his comments (Hurst, p. 158-9).

But sex roles in the Mennonite Church weren't the only ones to be affected by the turn-of-the-century attitudes toward sexuality. Turn-of-the-century sexual roles in the overall American workforce helped to push Mennonites to clarify the role of man over women and children (Hurst, p. 107). And, during times of call to the American woman's suffrage, the Mennonite Church leaders re-emphasized the woman's role as nurturer in the home (Hurst, p. 147). It cannot be ignored that America's drive for sexual equality leaked into the Mennonite

circles. The desire was specific to men and women's roles in community projects, the workforce, and the church, of course. Theron Schlabach said that distinct sex roles emerged with modernity, and Mennonite wives no longer held church and work roles with their husbands (Hurst, p. 103). And Mennonite sex roles were articulated when men wished to be more involved in their communities (Hurst, p. 103), leaving the home behind.

Moving the focus of blame away from women, Steiner was openly involved in advocating for men to take control of their sexual desires. He encouraged men to protect their seed, rather than waste it by abusing sex (Hurst, p. 62). But, Steiner's lectures on sex were focused on male strength and health, rather than male purity or morality (p. 73). The importance of the male presence in all things family, church, or community became a wide-spread idea. After all, the push from the church to establish a baseline for sexuality was focused on the understanding of the role of male over female (Hurst, p. 92). Consequentially, it seemed that women were less eager to make the transition to marriage from courtship than were men due to many reasons, one of which being the dependency they would have on their husband for their well-being (Hurst, p. 75), but also, quite possibly, the stress of fulfilling rightful roles as a wife to a husband, and what that meant the woman would have to sacrifice.

Alpha-Dog Literature on Purity

As sex roles in the Mennonite circle became more apparent, literature started to change, speaking of purity and the importance of male authority. There were also a growing number of testimonies from women who suffered under such a patriarchy, as new as it was at the time. Mennonite women in married relationships with men who had been sexually immoral, or sexually abused, prior to the relationship started to think that it was all their fault. One woman's husband's past started to reflect on her as if she were doing wrong in the relationship, but she

believed that this was okay and blamed herself, sometimes, too (Epp-Tiessen, p. 6). Another woman testified that she was treated poorly when her church found out that her husband was sexually inappropriate with church members – the woman’s husband said to her, mockingly, “You’re the good innocent wife and I’m the bad guy” and, “You’re as guilty as I am!” (Epp-Tiessen, p. 12).

That is but a taste of the pressure women were under to submit to the patriarchy they were being forced into. Of course, there were testimonies from Church leaders and important men in the community. Though, positivity was rarely granted to women. D.D. Miller and George R. Brunk rejected both master-slave relationships between men and women, as well as the concept of overall sexual equality (Hurst, p. 167). It seems implied, then, under the consequently enforced leader-helper paradigm of male-female sexual relationships, that it was expected of men to take lead of sexual interactions and women to need to submit to that leadership (Hurst, p. 167). Kauffman here reiterates Hartzler’s sentiment that distinct roles of male and female in society were intended by God from the time of Creation, continuing on to quote from the Book of Titus on the role of a woman as housekeeper, and of man as the head of household (Hurst, p. 168).

Sexual purity thus takes root in the literature in Mennonite circles, surviving well into the 1940’s and 50’s, and still today. Mostly, these publications encourage sexuality as a commitment in marriage, and no sooner. A publication in 1957 aims entirely at encouraging youth to protect their purity in the name of God. B. Charles Hostetter, one who spoke out against the youth sowing their wild oats, tells youth that love has a natural course which leads to intimate sex relations, but that this should only be done by those who are married (p. 53), and later reiterates by saying that unrestrained love and intimacy is for married people (p. 84). And, since the Bible

encourages people to get married (Hostetter, p. 42), sex under marriage is a covenant to be kept with God and God only. This sentiment is also held by the Commission on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, who stated that Christian marriage sex is more important than physical passion or biological necessity – it's a dedication of man and woman to each other and their completeness together (p. 24), continuing later by saying that the creativity of love-making uses biological differences as a means of mutual joy-giving and more complete union through becoming one flesh, as the Bible states (p. 25).

It's clear, both in today's society and throughout history of the church that sexual immorality does occur, and sometimes unfortunately is committed by those we would not expect. Kauffman's testimony that it was the fault of the ministers themselves and not of the dress of women speaks for this occurrence, even in the early 1900's. Mary Mae Swartzentruber expresses the sentiment that temporary expulsion [from the church] of people that have offended would seem necessary in order to right the wrong (Epp-Tiessen, p. 51).

John Howard Yoder's Escape

It seems that either church leaders did not share Swartzentruber's sentiment, or could find no way to appropriately carry out the punishment when word got to colleagues and Church officials about John Howard Yoder's sexual experiments, which involved influencing and taking advantage of women and men alike to partake in sexually questionable acts for decades. Steiner, in his sermons on sexual morality, claimed that the strength and control that men possess come from the preached understanding of the manliness of God and the sexual preservation of the kingly Jesus (Hurst, p. 65). And, historically, men felt they held the power to claim authority over women in sexual matters (Hurst, p. 99). D.D. Miller and George R. Brunk's ideology of the leadership of men in sexual relationships is well reflected in Yoder's unclear intentions. Though,

it can be said, that what Yoder did to all of those women and men was not in line with B. Charles Hostetter's encouragement to young men to treat their lady friends in a way that they would want their sister or daughter to be treated (p. 68). But perhaps Yoder had never had a chance to read Hostetter's imploring essay on purity, and in any case, perhaps Yoder's sister served him no moral apprehensions for his actions.

While the history regarded in this paper only goes back as far as 1890, it is clear that while Mennonite ideas of sexuality started out just as every-day as that of other American families, the country-wide sexual sentiments which emerged at the turn of the century drove Church leaders to enforce a strict structure on sexual morality, with the man as the masthead. Throughout this essay, an attempt has been made to make it clear how the authority of male over female became of greater consequence as the Mennonites moved through the 1900's, even so far as to imply that the man has the say in most situations, even sexual, and the woman must silently comply. In this way, it has become clearer how John Howard Yoder was able to get away with his immoral acts carried out through decades. Not only was he, indeed, a man, but also was a revered member of the Church and held important office in theological and educational realms. This sheds light on how Yoder might have expected to get away with something of such a scale as his self-entitled "experiments" without so much as a genuine slap on the hand from the Church. Yoder was out-manipulating people who wished to confront him and provided his own theological rationalization for his sexual misconduct (Shenk, 2013).

Yoder was finally confronted when his behavior became evident to colleagues and administrators of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, or AMBS, but attempts at reconciliation were ineffective, and Yoder was asked to leave in 1984 – in 1992, he submitted to a disciplinary process with Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (Koontz, Shenk, & Slough,

para. 3). But prior to this, the hurt was allowed to fester among victims of Yoder's behavior, and his theology was allowed to spread. Many influential church leaders were sending Yoder all over the world even while AMBS leaders implored for Yoder to not be used as a resource (Shenk, 2013). Ted Koontz, of AMBS, is quoted saying:

“The women who experienced sexual and power abuse by John personally have far too long been sidelined (along with others who were directly abused by other church leaders) and are rightfully at the center of our concern. I nevertheless am aware the hurt caused by John's behavior was and is far-reaching. That circle of hurt includes some who carried major responsibility to work at stopping his abusive behavior, who were unsuccessful, and who were burdened by weight of that failure (Shenk, 2013).”

By looking at Yoder's behavior, how long it continued, and the fact that it took so long for his actions to be reprimanded, it becomes clear that there was very little intention, originally, to reprimand Yoder at all. While actual intentions cannot be stated, as few have spoken about Yoder's misconduct as far as his punishment goes, it is easy to infer, from the history of Mennonite sex roles, that drive to correct this horrible behavior was at least minimal in the beginning, and only when victims and concerned colleagues spoke out did anyone do anything to remedy the situation. This still has not been done fully. Sara Wenger Shenk, president of AMBS, has stated that she desires transparency and truth-telling about Yoder's misconduct, for past healing to be acknowledged, and future healing to happen (Shenk, 2013). Shenk and other head members of AMBS faculty wish to grow and continue to lead and educate, keeping in mind Yoder's misconduct and how it has and will affect those who were victimized and those who hear of it. In the faculty statement from 2012, Koontz, Shenk & Slough tell us that: “We commit ourselves as faculty of AMBS to ongoing healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation in God's

beloved community, while acknowledging that not everyone fully trusts Yoder's repentance" (Koontz, et. al., p. 3, para. 1).

AMBS has come a long way since the initial occurrence. But there is plenty more to be done. It seems as though a rethinking of sexual theology and morality must be done by church leaders and members alike. The structuring done at the turn of the 20th century laid down a path for hurt, immorality, and manipulation as well as a means to write it off as experimental freedom. John Howard Yoder was able to get away with the violation of too many people and the church was behind him to the end. For a church and community so focused on peace, love and brotherhood, it seems odd that such acts were able to pass without recourse. AMBS certainly seems to be moving toward reconciliation for their community, and much has been revealed in written testimonies of John Howard Yoder's misconduct. In the future, readers of Yoder's "experiments" will hopefully be given the truth they deserve to hear – that church patriarchy paved the way for sexual violence – and be assured that this will change for the better.

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