

# Foreword

MARC GOPIN

This extraordinary volume on Mennonite peacebuilding is significant for a number of reasons. The focus on history is crucial. Religion and peacebuilding is best understood by looking at its deepest structural roots in history. In particular, what we always want to understand is how religion and peacebuilding emerges out of a religion's history intact. For example, many religious traditions begin with deep nonviolent roots, but they do not end up that way. It is hard to imagine Jesus and his immediate disciples being the spiritual foundations of the Crusades, with all their torture, mass murder, and forced conversions. But this is the reality of history. The same is true for the legacy of many other prophets and founders.

Menno Simons did not give rise to an entire religious sect of peacebuilders by any means, and there is no sanctification here of Mennonites as such. But there is a remarkable trajectory between Menno's pacifism and today's Mennonite peacebuilders. That needs study and understanding in its historical, anthropological, and theological roots. This volume provides that, and it matters greatly to the future of religion and peacebuilding, because if we want to analyze where religion at its root goes right and where it goes wrong, then we must look carefully at history and texts in their details.

Roughly speaking, as an outside observer, it certainly looks as if there is paradoxical serendipity at play here. The powerlessness and vulnerability of the Mennonite community, their subjection to persecution, scarred them physically and emotionally. At the same time, the powerlessness kept intact the most demanding psychological stringencies of nonviolent spirituality. It is not easy to keep a religion nonviolent once it has temporal power over people's lives and their resources. But the separation from mundane state and police power kept Mennonite nonviolent political ethics

in an incubator. It was an incubator that would one day flourish not just as pacifism, but something much more crucial for the future of the planet—religious peacebuilding, especially as it is embodied in some of the great exemplars of the Mennonite contribution, Lederach, Zehr, Schirch, Kraybill and many others. We must understand this evolution as if we were looking at the microscopic roots of a cancer cure. So history is one of the great contributions of this volume.

The other great contribution is the analysis of fragmented diversity in Mennonite peacebuilding. I am struck as an outsider by the fact that the Mennonite community is not only a tiny fraction of the global community, but a fraction of the Christian global community. Furthermore, within the Mennonite community, peacebuilders are a minority. And yet this volume deliberately welcomes the analysis of a great diversity of styles and methods within this tiny community. This is striking to any veteran student of religion and conflict analysis and resolution. Many religious institutions and thinkers write extensively and voluminously about interfaith dialogue and peace, and yet sometimes one senses in every sentence a tone of imperialism, triumphalism, and even totalitarianism. “We have the answers, the answers are with us, and we are one.” And then you know why that theological interpretation tended to get too many people killed. Yet here, among proven peacebuilders, one senses an indulgence in fragmented diversity. Therein may lie another secret of Mennonite nonviolence and why its contribution has been so outsized statistically given the small number of Mennonites globally.

An indulgence in fragmented diversity is a marker of humility, as I have pointed out in my own Mennonite writing, and humility—making space for the Other (a) in the world and (b) in one’s consciousness seems to be a central gateway on the road not to Damascus but to “Do no harm.” There is no decent peacebuilding without the bedrock of (a) humble “Do no harm,” and (b) making space for the Other. Both of these Taoist-like traits, nonviolence and humility, which also emerge from some of the great Abrahamic roots in the Old and New Testaments, and rabbinic and Sufi traditions, make for a powerful foundation of advanced peacebuilding for our large and complicated planet that has become overrun by the human race.

These are just a few of the excellent characteristics of this highly erudite, well-fashioned volume that should be studied by any student of conflict analysis and resolution today who wants to move the field in the best direction possible.