

Study Guide

## ***MennoFolk: Mennonite and Amish Folk Traditions (2004)***

By Ervin Beck

### **A. To the Instructor**

1. This study guide consists mainly of discussion questions related to individual chapters. They are designed to be adaptable for all age groups and various classroom situations. I would be very happy to receive a summary report of any discussion of any part of this book, as well as new, related examples of the folk traditions considered in this book. I will be happy to clarify anything in the book and discussion guide or answer any question you might have. 574-533-8163 [ervinb@goshen.edu](mailto:ervinb@goshen.edu)

2. The very best way to teach anything about folklore is to ask students to interpret examples that they collect from their own communities. *Folklore field work* can be a complicated matter, but for purposes of this study, students can simply be asked to bring in examples that they have obtained recently from acquaintances. A helpful guide for such work to be carried out by elementary and high school students is the workbook by Betty J. Belanus, *Folklore in the Classroom*, available at a low price from the Indiana Historical Bureau in Indianapolis. Older students will benefit from the classic textbook by Jan Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, published by Norton, as well as his many fascinating books about urban legends, including *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* and *The Choking Doberman*. My second book *MennoFolk2: A Sampler of Mennonite and Amish Folklore* (Herald Press 2005) offers seventeen examples of collected and interpreted materials from Mennonite and Amish sources.

### **B. Discussion Questions for *MennoFolk***

#### **The book as a whole**

1. After reading most or all of *MennoFolk* you should have some notion of what is meant by *folklore* or *folk culture*—although both terms are sometimes difficult to define. What in your life has been communicated to you *orally* or by *customary example/imitation* in informal, *face-to-face* situations (i.e., not in the classroom or by mass media)? And what degree of historical depth, or *tradition*, does that knowledge represent? Can you identify the *kinds* of materials or values that come from your folk culture? Are they more or less important than the knowledge and values that have come to you from *academic* (classrooms) or *popular* (mass media) culture? Overall, how important are *folk traditions* in our high-tech culture?

2. Whenever possible, try to contribute an example of your own to the materials discussed in each chapter, and try to relate your example to the point/s made in the

discussion and analysis in the chapter. Best of all, describe fully the situation in which the example came to you. *Who* passed it on to you? *Where, when* and *why*? With what other people present? What *meaning* or *purpose* or *significance* did the example carry in the context where it was passed on? (Notice that the examples in the book are *not* given in their *context* of transmission. Context always controls the meaning and significance of folklore, which, considered out of context, might seem merely frivolous or trivial.)

3. One time I was asked by a church to give a Sunday morning sermon based on the Mennonite stories he knew. I pointed out that most would be funny, joking stories, but they said that would be all right. So I gave the sermon-of-stories one Sunday morning. (After five minutes, one couple got up and left the auditorium.) At the end of the presentation I read Ephesians 5:27 as the "text for the day." If you were asked to give a sermon based on the materials in this book, which would you choose? (The larger question, of course, is the extent to which these folk materials help create and sustain a religious community.)

### **"Introduction"**

1. The book often makes the claim that Mennonite and Amish folk traditions are somehow unique—derived from the peculiar history, beliefs and experiences of these people. Find examples that could be used by people in other cultures, or that probably came to Mennonites and Amish from other cultures. Have you heard some of the stories, or similar ones, told by non-Mennonites? What does it take to make an item of folk culture truly *Mennonite* or truly *Amish*?
2. Most of the materials in *MennoFolk* were gathered from middle-aged people, or older, a generation ago. How *current* are these materials today? What different items of the same type are circulating? Or what *variants* (i.e., items that are basically the same, but with differing details) are known to you? Most important, what do the differences that you observe suggest about changes in Mennonites' experiences through the years?
3. To how many different *folk groups* do you belong? Consider these types of folk groups: by age, by gender, by region, by association, by vocation. Do you think, or feel, that you belong to an *ethnic* folk group also? Re-read the paragraphs that discuss Mennonites as an ethnic-religious folk group. If you are Mennonite, do you have a sense of *being different* from members of other ethnic and religious groups? Enumerate some of those differences and try to find them present in Mennonite folklore.
4. If you have attended any of the meetings or programs of "MennoFolk," the music festival, can you identify some elements of *tradition* ("we always do or say so-and-so") that are emerging in the group's experience and therefore contributing to their becoming a folk group?

### **Chapter 1, "Stories and Functions"**

1. Tell a story of your own and explain which one of these *functions* it serves best.
2. Consider any one story in the chapter and decide whether it serves more than one *function*.
3. The fourth *function* is especially open to debate. Do stories that challenge the perceived norms of a community serve to preserve those norms through the (Freudian) principle of compensation? Or do they serve to challenge and change those norms—hence, change the culture—instead?
4. Do you agree with the suggestion (p. 29) that Mennonites tell few stories involving supernatural elements?

## **Chapter 2, "Inter-Mennonite Ethnic Slurs"**

1. The chapter poses this paradox: Why do Mennonites tend to condemn the telling of ethnic jokes (about African-Americans, Jews, Polish, etc.) but seem not to hesitate to tell and enjoy jokes about other Mennonite and Mennonite-related groups—especially those groups that are more conservative? Is telling ethnic jokes always wrong?
2. Ethnic jokes exploit popular stereotypes of social groups. Consider the stereotypes that the Mennonite jokes embody in this chapter. In your experience, to what degree are those stereotypes present in Mennonite or Amish communities?
3. If you have Amish friends or live near an Amish community, have you ever heard an Amish person tell a joke about members of another social or religious group, especially Mennonites?

## **Chapter 3, "Origin Tales and Beliefs"**

1. Carry out this informal experiment: Identify something in your church, community or family that seems to be either very bizarre or so outdated as to be almost irrelevant. Then ask a handful of people what its origin is—where, when, why did it come about? Compare the answers you receive. You could hope that one of the answers includes a brief narrative, or *origin story*.
2. Do you find any other evidence that Mennonites still bear a *martyr complex* today, i.e., a sense of being discriminated against or even persecuted? Tell the story/s that illustrate your claim.

## **Chapter 4, "Trickster Tales"**

1. If you live in a historic Mennonite community, do any members recall a prominent plain-coat preacher about whom *trickster tales* were told? Do any old men in your church recall having experiences similar to J. C. Wenger and others while wearing the plain coat?
2. What do you think of the *Mennonite Lie*? Is it alive and well today in your community? Should it be condemned in practice?
3. Is there a person in your church—today or earlier—who has a reputation for acting in a foolish, laughable, maybe even offensive way? How does your community regard that person? With affection? With condemnation?
4. Have you heard teaching in your church about "letting your yea be yea and your nay nay," that is, speaking directly and honestly? Does your church still teach against swearing an oath? What would you say is the standard in your church community regarding truth-telling? Swearing an oath? Using profane or obscene language? Using euphemisms for profane or obscene speech? Have you heard any stories, or *cautionary tales*, that teach against bad speech?

### **Chapter 5, "The Reggie Jackson Urban Legend"**

1. Some other popular *urban legends* are about the vanishing hitchhiker, grandmother's corpse on the car roof, the skiing accident, the hook, etc. Tell your version of one of them and explain why it has not circulated very much as an inherently "Mennonite" legend.
2. The chapter gives a rather optimistic assessment of Mennonite social attitudes, based on evidence from the tellings of the Reggie Jackson story. The details are subject to varied interpretation. What less hopeful evidence about Mennonites' social attitudes do you find in their use of this urban legend?
3. Is it true that Mennonites are perhaps too obsessed with "rubbing shoulders" with world-famous people? What other such stories have you heard about Mennonites meeting the rich and famous? What do those stories suggest about Mennonites, who have historically seen themselves as "being in but not of the world"?
4. Who are the persons in your community with reputations for knowing a lot of stories and telling them well? Is there a *folklore conduit* at work in your own area? That is, how do stories tend to "travel" from one person or group to another? You might try an experiment of finding (or making up) a "true" story, telling it to several friends, and then tracing its circulation in your community. How does it change in the re-telling, and what do those changes reveal about your community's beliefs, values, and preoccupations?

### **Chapter 6, "CPS Protest Songs"**

1. Interview or invite to your discussion group a Mennonite man who was in Civilian Public Service during World War 2—or in alternate service during the Korean or Vietnam war. What indignities did they endure? How did they handle them—by silence or protest? Were songs like these ever sung in their groups of conscientious objectors? Or what were the strongest objections that they ever uttered publically or formally?
2. The chapter suggests that the MennoFolk music festival might want to revive the singing of these songs, and make them truly "Mennonite" folk songs. Which of them might have relevance to social and political situations today? Or, since folklore is always changed somehow by people who perform it, how could some of the lyrics be changed to make the songs fit today's situations?
3. How resistant would the younger generation in your community be if a compulsory military draft were re-instated, even if it offered alternative service assignments for religious conscientious objectors. Would the young people cooperate with the selective service system, or resist the draft—even to the extent of going to jail?
4. Do you like these songs? Or are they too aggressive or offensive for Mennonite sensibilities?

### **Chapters 7 and 8, "Painting on Glass" and "Family Records"**

1. These two illustrated chapters on folk art raise the question of the role of *art* or *beauty* in folk cultures. Look at the illustrations and try to enumerate a number of features that apparently create beauty and value for the people who make and use them. How does the art of these examples compare with your own ideas of what is beautiful? Is the sense of what is beautiful *universal* (the same everywhere) or *relative* (depending on the culture)?
2. Study Mennonite *plain* taste, as found on the page in Chapter 7 that shows the Ressler's and two plain buildings. Does what you see there represent old-fashioned or modern design? Explain. (One person, at least, should try to prove "modern.") Now find the item pictured in Chapter 7 that is the most *fancy*, in your judgment. Is there a way of reconciling these two opposites in traditional Mennonite and Amish cultures? That is, is there a way of explaining how these opposite kinds of art show that the cultures are integrated and whole, not dualistic or schizophrenic?
3. If you were to order a family record for yourself, for a couple getting married, or for a family with a new baby, which *design*—as illustrated in Chapter 8—would you choose? Why?

### **Chapter 9, "The Relief Sale Festival"**

1. If you have ever attended a Mennonite Relief Sale, try to describe the kind of *spirit* that prevails during the event. Compare and contrast that spirit with the spirit found in a religious worship service.
2. How do you regard the emphasis on spending money, buying things and eating food that characterizes the relief sale? Do you side with critics of the sale? Or do you defend the relief sales against their critics?
3. Should relief sales become more standardized, following guidelines from the central office of MCC? Should the sales be changed so that they appeal more to non-Mennonites? Do sales give the non-Mennonite public an accurate, attractive image of who Mennonites are and what they stand for?
4. Do relief sales *change* Mennonite culture with their unorthodox values? Or do they *stabilize* it by serving as a privileged moment of freedom from orthodoxy?

=====