

## *Misadventures at MennoDiscuss*

Mennodiscuss.com

On September 29, 2005 Swartzentruber joined a conservative Mennonite blog titled MennoDiscuss. He sent an introductory statement with links to his "Pop-Mennonite" online exhibit. Within 24 hours his introduction and links were removed with the following notice, "[This post has been removed due to linking to inappropriate content. -Hans]". The following is the dialog that transpired over the couple of weeks the thread ran before the site administrator locked it down.

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/01/05] Be warned folks, this art exhibition contains items of questionable nature, especially for kids. Please do not link to <http://swartzentruber.com/> on MennoDiscuss.com. It contains inappropriate material. I removed it entirely as some forum members pointed out things that I hadn't noticed. Thank you to those that did. Everyone please feel free to PM, IM, or email me any concerns you may have about inappropriate material. [Hans Mast: Site Administrator. Location: Catlett, VA. Age 17]

**The Artist:** [10/01/05] Explain please!

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/01/05] Nude sex depictions such as this are not appropriate. [Site Administrator]

**The Artist:** [10/02/05] It seems as if the images have been processed out of context-these two images must be considered together. Passion and Regret. It was my objective to show two foolish youth involved in a passionate moment, soon to experience regret. I sketched the couple looking very adolescent to distance the image from the erotic or provocative. The images are narrative and the theme is a biblical and Mennonite stance on fornication. Descriptions of fornication are throughout scripture in ways that are very difficult to explain to children. I don't believe anyone viewing and reading these two images should feel threatened or fail to see the authorial intention in regard to premarital sexuality. The first image must convince to make its predecessor convict. I find it difficult to think anyone finds this or any other images in this collection erotic. MennoDiscuss is a wonderful opportunity for a critique of the online "Pop-Mennonite" exhibition. Hans, I request that you replace my introductory information and link. It is the first contemporary art collection to make Mennonite culture its platform. The purpose of this form is discussion and you have done wonderful things to provoke discussions with your questions such as "Was Jesus a Liberal?", "Is Rock Music Evil?" "Christians in the Military" and "What kind of Mennonite are you?" I will commit to you to give prayerful responses to any of the work that your readers find offensive. It would also be wonderful to hear responses of images that spoke to you in a positive way. I would not object to you placing some sort of "parental guidance warning" on the link if you feel it prudent. Respectfully,

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/03/05] I have considered what you have said. I have asked advice from 3 other members of the forum. I have also asked advice from my father. All have had the same response: "No way!" I agree. It doesn't matter what nice words you put with such images, it's

still wrong. I am pretty certain that 95%+ of the forum feels the same way. I see little for you to gain by advertising here or receiving "feedback", in light of this. It is also something that I would not want a link to for people to give "feedback" on. Like one of the people I got advice from said: "It's like a minister showing everyone a *Hustler* magazine on Sunday morning to show people it's wrong." It's just the wrong way to do it. I ask that you not post any more links to swartzentruber.com on this forum. If you do, I will need to deactivate your account. Thanks for your cooperation! [Site Administrator]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/12/05] I love art and appreciate expression... I myself do quite well at both... but thank you Hans for using some discretion in this case. I've seen the gallery... and it leaves some questions unanswered about the underlying intent of the artist. [Stoltz13: Joel Stoltzfus, Lewisburg, Pa.. Age 26. East District Mennonite Church, works at Sherwin-Williams, loves sports and sporty cars.]

**The Artist:** [10/13/05] This is a blog for themes that relate to Mennonites in regard to faith and culture. What heresy do you perceive in the "Pop-Mennonite" collection of art, music and text that would require a shunning of the exhibit and possibly the artist? This deserves a clear answer. Artistic intention is always questionable in work. (i.e. did the hymn writer pen the song for fiscal gain or devotion). Fortunately for viewers of this collection I contextualized an authorial interpretation to make decoding the images easier. How do we as Christians / Mennonites deal with a difference of opinion? And, if there is a difference of opinion-what is that difference? Stoltzfus, am I to believe that you took issue with all of the images and that none of the text added clarity in your mind? Since the link was removed many of you have probably not looked at the artwork. Thanks for taking time to address these concerns.

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/13/05] Nudity and sex in art is inappropriate in my opinion and in the opinion of 100% of the forum members I asked about it. Motive matters little if content or actions are wrong. I won't categorically say that your art is wrong (Judge not, lest ye also be judged). I simply say that most of us here at MennoDiscuss (including the more liberal elements of MennoDiscuss) believe that it is inappropriate and we believe it is not in the interest of this forum to link to that art. [Site Administrator]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/13/05] I was able to quickly find the content in question. I have several questions.

1. Why do you find it necessary to use nudity and sexual content to express your message?
2. What is the reason you are semi-spamming this board to drive traffic to your website?
3. What compels your obsession with sexual content and nudity?
4. Would you feel comfortable walking the Holy Father God through your art exhibit?

[Operation Freedom: Richard Miller. North Carolina. Ex-Mennonite]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/13/05] I'm going to have to go with Operation Freedom on this one. I think that a message could just as easily have been shared without nudity. In fact, in reviewing your material, the nudity and grotesque images turned my stomach. I couldn't find (with a very open mind) any glory to God. [Raun Schrock Location: Monticello, GA. Computer tech. South Atlantic Conference. Age 24]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/13/05] Don, I have been giving your questions some serious thought over the past few days. I've also taken the time to review the pages in question, and read different reviews about your display. My question is this. Because the purpose of this display is to generate discussion within the Mennonite community, could there not have been a more appropriate way to present these question? Coming from a old order Mennonite heritage, you understand the Mennonite way of life, (as claimed by your reviewers, and demonstrated in the artistic details). As you recall your days growing up, do you not recall the sense of protection and propriety that is within the Mennonite community? Or have you re-constructed the Mennonite culture to be some sort of back-woods, hiding from reality type of people? The subjects in your art speak of the world rushing and attempting to drag the Mennonites along. (I'm thinking specifically of the piece titled The Last Veiled Feminist) As I viewed that selection, as well as others, I felt as though I was the subject, and these paintings are ripping and cutting away at what I hold dear and believe. Several of the painting (*Mennonite Jesus* and others) I view as an outright mockery of things that are Holy. As the author of this exhibit, I'd like to ask you, what is your goal for the Mennonite church as a result of this exhibit? Is it to make it stronger? Or, is it to shred away all the things that makes us unique in this world? Would you like to see more holy kissing at communion, or less? As was already noted, the purpose of this forum is to provide a place where discussion can happen, and ideas can be exchanged. What makes this forum different from other forums is we intend this to be a place of growth, where our participants can learn and grow. I understand and respect you desire to raise some of these questions. You are certainly more than welcome to ask them. However, according to the terms of our registration agreement, we as moderators and administrators have the right to remove links or content, which violate the terms of the agreement. By linking to content of a sexual-explicit nature, the terms of our agreement were violated, and we had remove the link. [DaveBurkholder. Location: Reading, PA. Architecture Student]

**The Artist:** [10/14/05] *Mennonite Jesus: A Publisher's Perspective*. Though the work is animated and dramatic, this collection is not a lampoon of Mennonite culture. But, *Mennonite Jesus* is a satire of how individuals attempt to conform Christ into one's own worldview. That, my friend, is a "mockery of things that are Holy." Christ was not Mennonite, and a demand by a Mennonite publishing company to alter the historical Christ, to make him more palatable for Mennonite consumption, goes beyond offending our gentle "sense of protection and propriety." When titling the work it was suggested to me that most Mennonites would have disagreed with the Mennonite publisher and art director who mandated the short hair and lack of mustache. I would disagree in that all of us often fail to see the holiness and majesty of the true Christ and attempt to box God into something we can better understand. I still opted to add *A Publishers Perspective* to the title.

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] I'm not taking a position regarding rightness or wrongness of picturing Jesus in a Mennonite form (in light of historical accuracy), but I believe each of us has a mental picture of what God looks like. You seem to find it odious. Are not the Mennonite publishers doing exactly what you hold dear: exercising the freedom to portray things the way one chooses??? Would you then take umbrage against persons of African heritage making Jesus black? I don't find that offensive at all, and I've seen art prints like that. I see it as simply finding a human way to identify with God. Additionally, you will never convince me of any Spiritual connection to the naked little boy sitting on a commode, peeing.

HUH??? I saw it and laughed (apologies)...thinking "this guy ought to apply for an NEA grant. And then I see that's exactly what happened. Your expressions mixing faith with the grotesque seem to fit right in with the Madonna/elephant dung, crucifix in urine, et al. Sometimes there is no other answer than that the "emperor has no clothes." No matter how you describe it, it is what it is. Call me unenlightened. [Valerie Martin. Location: Maryland. Age 33]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] Look Don, I'm really not into playing cute little games. I've seen your gallery and I've read your explanations. But am still left with nagging questions of your intent. You say your work is not a "lampoon of Mennonite culture," to that... well... I'm a skeptic. One can describe a pile of dung a rose, but it would still be excrement to me. So, I will continue this dialog but only to give you a chance to speak for yourself... Having seen your work titled *Excommunication*, I have a few specific questions...

1. In your view was you dad's excommunication fair?
2. How has your view of the Mennonite church been altered since your father's excommunication?
3. Do you harbor any resentment against the conservative Mennonite church that could be an influence in your art?
4. What is your intent... would you rather see the conservative church gain from your work or lose?

[Stoltz13: Joel Soltzfus, Lewisburg, Pa. Age 26. East District Mennonite Church, works at Sherwin-Williams, loves sports and sporty cars]

**The Artist:** [10/14/05] Excellent questions. Do I hold resentment? As I reflect on my experiences I can't think of anyone. I don't question their faith or sincerity. Various scriptures are used by churches to make decisions in these situations. (Matt. 18:15-22; John 20:21-23; Gal. 6:1-2; Deut. 19:15. Eph. 4:15; Matt. 18:15. 1 Cor. 5:3-5. 2 Cor. 2:5-11. Matt. 5:14-18; Rom. 2:21). I've talked with other Anabaptists who have been in similar situations, Hutterites, Amish, Mennonite, etc. One minister said Christianity is the only religion that kills it's sick. As an adult Christian with some life experience behind me I think it is always best to err on the side of grace over judgment.

My ancestry, earliest spelling found in a family Bible from the early 1700's, have had early connections with the Mennonite church. I'm descended of the first Amish bishop to the States. My father loves the Mennonite church and continues to attend faithfully. I have no resentment and, in many regards, I will always be Mennonite. This image is one of the more autobiographical paintings. This is as close a depiction as I can structure that expresses the shame I went through as a child. I've heard people identify with it, but I know many of you cannot.

Let me ask you a question. If I did a slide show of my work at your church for the adults, what do you think your conservative church might gain or lose from processing this work? What images would they find compelling and agreeable, and what images might they not relate to?

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] Don, Okay, so you showed us the intent behind your one picture, Could you show us your intent behind the display? For some reason, you seem to be avoiding the questions we are asking. What is your goal for the exhibit? What do you want to happen as a result? Where do you think Mennonite culture should head? In your drawing Pop-tart, you depict the Mennonite family standing back in helplessness and horror as their son becomes

corrupted. While this reaction may be synonymous with your Mennonite experience, it is a reality that many in this current generation are purposing to avoid. I (as well as many on this forum) am committed to being an active force in the world around me. We will not go along blindly with everything that comes along. [Dave Burkholder. Architecture Student. Reading, PA.]

**The Artist:** [10/14/05] (Mennonite audience) It is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the unique qualities of our old order culture. "Pop-Mennonite" sets aside time to discuss how we have assimilated into popular culture. How has it been a positive experience and where have we given up traditions for something far less valuable. As we reflect on our past dogmas we must seek wisdom in approaching the controversies that face the post-modern church. (non-Mennonite viewers) Our culture at large is absorbed in triviality. Most materialistic Americans are keeping scores with large mortgage payments and wide screen televisions. Even our nation's poor are preoccupied with frivolity. Metaphorically, our spirituality is comfortably compartmentalized into something about the size of a commercial. What can we learn about faith and community from a critique of conservative Mennonite culture? This was a group who attempted very deliberately to make all daily activities and rituals holy. Was the overall objective honorable and worthy of consideration?

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] I was able to quickly find the content in question. I have several questions. 1. Why do you find it necessary to use nudity and sexual content to express your message? 2. What is the reason you are semi-spamming this board to drive traffic to your website? 3. What compels your obsession with sexual content and nudity? 4. Would you feel comfortable walking the Holy Father God through your art exhibit? [Mike Fisher. Mennonite/Beachy Mennonite. Mennonite School Teacher/Grocer, Bedford, PA. Age 27]

**The Artist:** [10/14/05] Nudity is used in several pictures in this collection. Typically, it suggests vulnerability. In two pictures it deals with sexuality. Scripture spends much time, and a whole book in the *Old Testament*, dealing with human sexuality. While there are certain biblical stories I do not read to my children, God has given us this text for direction. I understand and respect your interest in avoiding explicit material. Popular culture bombards us with its warped version of human sexuality-voyeurism and adultery. Christians and the Mennonite church cannot simply bypass the topic of sexuality. It's part of our sinful nature (Classic Ditty) and it is a beautiful gift to be practiced according to God's guidance. I present the work for your critique. The work discusses my conversion and coming of age. This collection is an open examination of real people. The question was asked, did I reconstruct "Mennonite culture to be some sort of back-woods, hiding from reality type of people." Anyone examining the work can see it is honest and straightforward. People typically critique art based on style and theme. Stylistically, my work has developed under the influences of surrealism, regionalism, and pop art. In art school I worked under a Disney animator. During graduate school I studied under a Chicago Imagist and numerous contemporary artists. My style has always been melodramatic, even when living in a Mennonite farmhouse. I do understand that most Mennonites have not been exposed to contemporary art and it's difficult to jump passed modernity and into a contemporary exhibit. In the nature of post modernity, the work is rather Socratic. There were so many different directions I could have gone with this work. Its one thing for a preacher, storyteller, or singer

to lyric these narratives, but how does a visual communicator cover these various topics. I'm basically constructing compositions from approximately ten themes for 24+ images. I would like to think that other Mennonite artists might take off where I left off and bring these issues into their studio.

I seek dialog, not traffic. Traffic does not seem to be an issue. If this were true I would have moved away from MennoDiscuss once my link was removed. This whole exhibit is about a developing worldview based on faith in God, Mennonite theology, and culture. Since many of the paintings pose questions, I think it would be a wonderful experience to walk through the exhibit with the Holy Father. If you find the work erotic then I believe it would be detrimental for you to stroll through the exhibit-it was never intended to be sexual stimulating. I met with a small group of mature Mennonites and commented that the work had been called obscene. Their response was affirming in that they did not find the work erotic and it was all created in proper context.

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] "mature Mennonites"-The non-too-subtle implication here is that those who would term the work obscene are immature Mennonites. I am afraid I might possibly be among the immature. [Mike Fisher. Mennonite/Beachy Mennonite. Mennonite School Teacher/Grocer, Location: Bedford, PA. Age 27]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] One of the saddest things I've noticed in the new "contemporary" culture, is the idea that nobody can have any secrets or flaws. Celebrities everywhere love nothing more than to go before public with all their dirty laundry. When I viewed your gallery, that is what I felt you were doing with the Mennonite culture. Is the Mennonite culture perfect? No. Are their imperfections? Yes! Are we, by God's grace, working on them? I hope so. Does the church face different pressures in the post-modern era? Absolutely. How do we face that pressure? That's something we bat around every day on this forum. As far as whether it is erotic or thought provoking, the simple fact remains that in some of the pictures, there are naked bodies participating in sexual activity. If I were found to be viewing these pictures on the college computers, I would lose my computer privileges, and that's at a secular college. Apparently even the world has a standard of decency that they ascribe to. As far as being a religion "that kills its sick", if that were the case here, this conversation would not be happening, we would've banned you upon discovering the contents of that link. However, in the spirit of Christian love and unity, we are allowing you to present your discussion. I guess you could say we are erring on the side of grace. [Dave Burkholder. Architecture Student. Reading, PA.]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] wouldn't touch most of this discussion with a ten-foot pole, but ..... "One minister said Christianity is the only religion that kills it's sick". I think I understand where Don is coming from with that comment and if I do understand correctly than I'd have to agree with it. There are times when discipline such as excommunication does more harm than good. Times when it is not warranted. There are times when excommunication is carried out as a way to address a symptom of a problem, which isn't even spiritual. In those cases, it's a tragedy. And even if there is a spiritual problem, is it always right to cut these people off from us? Jesus associated with people that most folks I know would steer clear of. (And I'm as convicted by that knowledge as anyone else might be.) [peaches1224: Evanna, 29, Mother/ homeschooler, Location: Delaware]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] "Don, if your dad wasn't excommunicated for obvious sin... then you have my deepest and truest sympathy... But even so, if your art work is nothing but an attempt to get back at the community that brought hurt to you or your father, then you are most definitely as guilty as those who brought hurt to you. I don't know your heart and would like to think that you aren't just making a vindictive statement to smear mud in the face of the tradition you claim to respect. You say you seek dialog... are you sure you don't just seek attention?" [Stoltz13: Joel Soltzfus, Lewisburg, PA . Age 26. East District Mennonite Church, works at Sherwin-Williams, loves sports and sporty cars]

**The Artist:** [10/14/05] Dave, the "Pop-Mennonite" work has been and will be on exhibits at various colleges. Your comment about it not being appropriate even in a secular university is disputable. I challenge you to submit the collection of art via link to your media center at your program in Reading and let me know what response you receive. The work is not indecent and, as stated before, should be processed in context. You say this blog has demonstrated graciousness in allowing me to hold dialogue with the various Mennonites who hold membership here. This is partially true. It is difficult for readers to resist holding me in contempt when they see "[This post has been removed due to linking to inappropriate content.]" instead of my original introduction. This does not provide an equitable exchange of ideas. Anyone who truly spends time viewing the work and reading the text can see this work is not slanderous or vindictive. If anything, the work biases toward the traditional old order viewpoint. For example the Mennonite woman in *The Last Veiled Feminist* has the protection of the angels, and the security of tradition symbolized by the rocking chair. In Pop-Tart the boy has moved away from the spiritual admonition of his Mennonite family in exchange for Disney frivolity. Mike, the text I sent did not have mature in bold. It was used as a descriptive to clarify that my discussion was with individuals that were not "New Converts, and more along the line of Menno Guru or Skilled Preacher. My apologies that you took offense.

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/14/05] Remember that I didn't remove your post at first sight. Indeed I read it and moved on. Only when I received numerous complaints from members of this forum did I reexamine it in detail (I had not seen the offending artwork the first time, as I had looked at only a sampling) and concurred with their objections. [Site Administrator]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] Don, have you considered doing a depiction of African Americans eating fried chicken and watermelon, or Chinese people cornering a cat, or Jewish men stealing money from a poor widow...because that's how your depiction of conservative Mennonites comes across... I doubt you would receive the warm welcome you have received here! [Stoltz13: Joel Soltzfus, Lewisburg, PA. Age: 26. East District Mennonite Church, works at Sherwin-Williams, loves sports and sporty cars]

**The Artist:** [10/15/05] Explain please!

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] I'll let you figure it out...[Stoltz13: Joel Soltzfus]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] I don't exactly relish sticking my nose into this, but... I'm a little uncomfortable with the ad hominem nature of some of this discussion. We'd do well to keep

our discussion to the material, rather than attempt to discredit the author. Or am I missing something? [Eugene Friesen. Age 19]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] Seems to me that as a Swartzentruber (rather than Deng Xienshen or Levi Finklstein), Don is much better qualified to discuss Amish/Mennonite society than any of these other systems to which he is not native. Also, Joel. Didn't seem to be too warm of a welcome in my opinion. Seems awfully confrontational. I think you owe Don an explanation (as a token of your warmth). [Dale the Rabblrouser]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] I stand by what I said... it's not a personal attack, I'm simply questioning the nature of his artwork... if anything his art work is a clear attack on Mennonite culture. I have grown up in a Mennonite home and lived in those surroundings for the past 26 years, my church is my family... If I see someone on the outside attacking that family I will stand for what is right. Anything taken personal I apologize for... but I will not pander to someone who seeming has an agenda. [Stoltz13: Joel Soltzfus, Lewisburg, PA. Age: 26. East District Mennonite Church, works at Sherwin-Williams, loves sports and sporty cars]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] Let's lay down whether he is attacking Mennonites for a moment. Doing so falls into the trap he is deliberately setting. And in my personal opinion, there is much in the Mennonite churches I have been around that is indefensible. So, let's cut to the chase... This man's art is not Christ-like by any stretch of the imagination. It is obscene and vulgar. It is sinful. He has gotten far more leeway here then 99% of the Mennonites I have ever met would have given him. And yet he is complaining. Guess what? I will stand up and based on the Holy Word of God, call sin for what it is. And his art is sin. I am not interested in debating whether his art is acceptable or not. By God's standards it is sin and that is good enough for me. And just because some other people who cannot recognize sin thought it was great does not change that one bit. They are just as deceived as Don is on this issue. Everyone here has been gentle and longsuffering with Don. But that is not good enough for him. I may get flamed mightily for this. Go ahead. I simply am not going to participate in beating around the bush anymore. There is a time to be gentle and longsuffering. And the posters on this thread definitely were that. There also comes a time to call sin for what it is. I think that time is here. [Operation Freedom: Richard Miller. North Carolina. Ex-Mennonite]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] modesty and clothing are about much more the eroticism...there are many Americans that are physically unattractive and could walk around butt naked and no one aroused...this does not eliminate the need for clothing that has been around since instituted by God a couple of thousand years ago...unfortunately contemporary artists and otherwise, seem to fall into fairly predictable channels among which nudity is quite prevalent...just curious don, would you pose nude to make a statement...how about when you are 80 and none would be aroused???? [Josh Good. Location: NYC. Age 28]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] Count me as trying to figure out why we should be giving Don a warm welcome to start with? His purpose here is to promote his sinful art. He has defined himself by that. [Operation Freedom: Richard Miller. North Carolina. Ex-Mennonite]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] I didn't know if I should say anything, but something really, really

disturbed me at a spirit level when I saw that art. A few thoughts I immediately had:

1. Sexuality is a beautiful, sacred thing, given as a gift from a God of beauty and order. To be portrayed as something grotesque and unchecked is a shameful abuse. The same goes for the other pieces of chaotic, grotesque images.
2. The Bible contains stories that can be often disturbing and seem to be too graphic to be appropriate, but all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, instruction, etc. We aren't God and cannot pretend to assume we know everything that's best for people to know (or see) for their "betterment". (did that make sense?) Just because God uses different situations/tactics doesn't mean we are free to do the same.
3. As you may notice, God also didn't include any pictures in the Bible to go along with any of those "graphic" stories. (Which, I may add, are nothing compared to what that art portrayed) The mind of man is shamefully prone to all sorts of evil imaginations (lustful, to be specific in this case) and graphic, inappropriate art depicting things that appeal to the most common weakness is going to cause stumbling far more than lifting up. I hope this made some sense. It's taken me a while to put it into words.

[Imnotayoder: Sara Redmond.. Born Baptist-Mennonite convert. Florida. Age 19]

**MennoDiscuss:** [10/15/05] Amen to both Imnotayoder and OperationFreedom. All that is profitable has already been said and then some. I am locking this thread. [Site Administrator]