Surprising friends of modern ways

Have Mennonites influenced the course of modern history? That is the question taken up in a new book on Anabaptists in Europe over the past 500 years.

In contemporary North America, where Old Order Amish and other plain peoples often provide the most visible face of the Anabaptist movement, we might guess that our religious tradition has, on balance, been a force for antimodernism. References to buggies, bonnets and barn raisings provide a popular shorthand for those who have chosen to live outside modern society.

It may come as a surprise, then, that most of the writers in European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity over Five Centuries: Contributors, Detractors and Adopters portray Anabaptists as either contributing or adapting to modernity’s rise. The volume’s 19 chapters, written by historians from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Ukraine and the United States, were originally presented at a 2010 conference at Bethel College in North Newton, Kan.

While one section outlines instances of European Mennonites detracting from modernity, this is easily the smallest. The only chapter to consider the Amish appears in the “contributors” category, showing how in 19th-century Germany farm families helped revolutionize agricultural and educational standards.

Among the volume’s achievements is the recovery of an older literature that placed Anabaptism not in the wake of modernity but at its crest. In 1895, for example, the Austrian Marxist Karl Kautsky identified the violent Anabaptists of Münster as admirable forerunners of communism. Less than a decade later, in 1904, the sociologist Max Weber claimed nearly the opposite in his book, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, which categorized Anabaptists among the world’s best capitalists.

Yet another reading emerged in 1944, when the Mennonite leader Harold Bender wrote in The Anabaptist Vision that “the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation.”

That historical writers could credit the early Anabaptists with founding multiple contradictory political ideologies signals how challenging it can be to define modernity in the first place.

Which is more modern: communism, capitalism or American democracy? While this question defies easy solution, it does point to an insight about how scholars long thought about modernity’s origin. They believed it to have emerged during the 16th century.

Until the 1980s — when historians instead began placing modernity’s advent 200 years later, during the European Enlightenment — the Reformation appeared as the pivot point between the medieval and modern periods. This logic held that Anabaptists, as key Reformation players, must have had a hand in shaping modernity.

Over the past three decades, however, many scholars have come to see the Reformation as part of the late Middle Ages, in turn giving Anabaptism a premodern or even antimodern status. This shift has proven challenging for scholars of the Reformation, who once held authority to comment on the course and nature of modernity.

Historians of Anabaptism, arguably, have had it ever worse, given that this once prominent movement — powerful enough in the 16th century to generate imperial edicts, wholesale battles and more than 1,000 martyrs — had by the 18th century transformed into “the quiet in the land.” As formulated by the volume editors: “Were Anabaptists only relevant to European history for fewer than 20 years almost five centuries ago?”

This fascinating question is never completely answered. Most chapters focus on how Mennonites thought about issues of progress and change within their own communities or how they achieved modest influence in wider regional contexts. Perhaps the strongest case for Mennonite significance can be made about the Netherlands, where during the Dutch Golden Age entrepreneurs and church boards helped normalize wealth accumulation as a means of praising God and providing for congregational poor. A century later, some Mennonites could be found at the fore of the Dutch Enlightenment, founding improvement societies, printing revolutionary texts and even serving in patriotic militias.

Further to the east, in Prussia and the Russian Empire, Mennonites’ modernist contributions appear spottier. During the 19th century, the Mennonite population along Prussia’s Baltic coast faced increasing pressure to perform military service — long considered a hallmark of modernity. While nonresistant leaders successfully negotiated group exemption until the 1860s, property restrictions also prompted mass emigration to Imperial Russia. Yet if Mennonite migrants left Prussia to escape a modernizing society, Russian rulers saw these same individuals as modernizers, welcoming their ability to colonize agricultural land.

Two predominant themes emerge across the volume, offering insight into possible ways of integrating Anabaptism with narratives about modernity. The first involves religious violence and the development of tolerance toward minorities. While 16th-century Anabaptists — like Jews, witches and other groups — faced persecution, they eventually helped foster pluralism in places as diverse as Poland, Central Asia and North America.

The second theme is the rise of nationalism and centralized state systems. Just as governments in the Netherlands or Imperial Russia treated Mennonites as valuable state-builders, patriotism among communities in Austria-Hungary or Nazi Germany reinforced modern conceptions of national belonging.

Any stimulating book will prompt ideas for future research. I was struck by the absence of discussion about Mennonite overseas missions, a major plank of European Anabaptism from the 1820s onward. Given the prominence of empire, evangelism and colonialism in current debates about modernity, it may be worth asking whether Anabaptism’s historical significance can be evaluated in any volume limited to Europe. The demographic weight of the Mennonite church — and Christianity generally — shifted decades ago to the Global South, suggesting that scholarship on modernity must consider developments in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

For readers interested in an earlier epoch, European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity is invaluable. It is among the richest books on European Mennonites to appear in recent years.