

WIEBE & RELIGIOUS STRUGGLE

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W. J. KEITH HAS CLAIMED that Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China* is "among the finest novels written in Canada — or anywhere else, for that matter — in our time."¹ While I think that this extremely high praise needs to be qualified, I agree that Wiebe's novel is an impressive achievement. Although the problem of didacticism and the "syntactical awkwardness" in Wiebe's style — which leads to some very murky writing in places — are more obtrusive weaknesses than Keith allows, they are more than offset by the novel's strengths. In *The Blue Mountains of China* Rudy Wiebe not only vividly recounts the history of a segment of the Mennonite people, but, more importantly, he presents a complex judgment of the Mennonites and the modern world, and compellingly dramatizes his own radically Christian vision.

Wiebe relates the history of a group of Russian Mennonites, forced to flee Russia at various times because of restrictions on their religious freedom. The most conservative, committed Mennonites left Russia in 1870 and came to Canada, but when their freedom to use German in the schools was threatened, they emigrated once again, this time to South America. A second, more secular group of Mennonites stayed in Russia until 1929, departing only when their land was collectivized and they faced compulsory military service. Wiebe's main concern was not simply to re-tell this history, for as he explained in an interview with Donald Cameron, "in one sense historical novels are not really historical at all. You could call *The Blue Mountains of China* a historical novel, but it's about people struggling with exactly the kinds of things that we struggle with, except for a slight shift in time and place."² For Rudy Wiebe, and the Mennonites he presents in his novel, the "kinds of things that we struggle with" are primarily questions of religious belief. However, the struggle for faith and a truly Christian way of life is beset by many difficulties: the suffering in life, the attractions of the secular materialistic world, and, particularly for the Mennonites, the temptation to isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

Wiebe tells the Mennonites' history and explores his central themes in a book with a very unusual and complex structure. Many of the thirteen chapters of the novel read as almost self-contained stories, but Wiebe connects them in part by an intricate series of cross-references that help explain previous chapters and look forward to the ensuing ones. Also, the central characters in the novel — Jakob Friesen IV, Elizabeth Driediger, and John Reimer — appear in more than one chapter; Jakob, for instance, is introduced indirectly in the second and fourth chapters, the eighth centres on him, and he and John Reimer are the key figures at the end of the novel. The primary source of unity and continuity in the novel, however, is provided by the four chapters narrated by Frieda Friesen. In remembering the main events of her life, Frieda recounts the central experiences of the conservative Mennonites who twice emigrated for religious beliefs. Frieda herself, in fact, provides one of the touchstones in the novel; she has the kind of faith that makes a truly religious acceptance of life possible.

Wiebe begins the novel with Frieda's story because it takes us farthest back in time — to 1879 when her father Isaak Friesen came to Canada — and it establishes the religious theme. Frieda's opening words, as she remembers her earliest years in Manitoba, reveal her complete reliance on God:

I have lived long. So long, it takes me days to remember even parts of it. . . . What I tell I remember only through God's grace. I never wrote anything down and didn't have more than the usual Mennonite village school. . . . But the Lord led me through so many deep ways and of the world I've seen a little, both north and south. If your eyes stay open and He keeps your head clear you sometimes see so much more than you want of how it is with the world. And if you don't you can thank Him for that, too.

Frieda's trust in God, is, in a sense, normative, and stands as a contrast to the increasing lack of faith and acceptance shown by Jakob Friesen. For Frieda, despite the hardships she endures, the advice from her father sustains her throughout life: "But think always like this, he said, 'it does come all from God, strength and sickness, want and plenty'."

The normative implications of Frieda's life are touched on again in chapter three where she recalls the years in Manitoba from 1903 to 1926. She describes her wedding to Johann Friesen, and the success of their marriage almost seems the blessing they receive for their faith. Once when Johann is away, however, Frieda faces a moment of temptation:

It was a little later, November, 1906 when we already had two nice children, Johann and Esther, that God sent me great temptation and doubt. My nerves were very bad; I could not be alone. The devil stood right beside my bed with red horns and said, 'Do it, do it!' though he never said what. Twice the elders had to come to pray. Then I learned to know our Lord Jesus. Through many prayers and sleepless nights and God's grace I found forgiveness of all my sins and came to the true quiet faith.

This scene has a crucial structural and thematic significance in the novel. Frieda's faith is strengthened here, and, of equal importance, the nature of her temptation is deliberately left ambiguous, for what is being emphasized is her resistance to *any* temptation. But in much of the rest of the novel Wiebe examines the experience of Mennonites who succumb to various "temptations." The main structural principle of the first half of the book, in fact, is to alternate the presentation of Frieda's faith with a chapter showing a Mennonite struggling with the confines of the religious tradition.

Jakob Friesen IV is in many ways a contrasting figure to Frieda. At the end of the novel, as an old man, he claims he no longer "believes," but from the very beginning Jakob does not adhere firmly to his faith. When we first meet him, in the second chapter "Sons and Heirs," he has already succumbed greatly to the temptations of materialism and, unwilling to give up his possessions, has remained in Russia. He has become a rich kulak with the biggest operation in Karatow colony and we find out indirectly, through the reflections of his son Jakob V, that while other Mennonites were trying to get out of the "communist paradise":

His father, face black with rage, said he was not moving, let the whole village run if it would. He would

let them run can't fit in when a little changes or some stupid communist says don't preach so much let them run won't take this from me they can't do anything without me and they'll have to keep exile pooh I'm no preacher
buy it up and run it all by himself. He almost had.

Jakob is a secularized Mennonite who has abandoned much of his religious tradition; nonetheless, he apparently is still a believing Mennonite at this point. However, the decisive event in his life occurs when the communists take Jakob V away in place of him, and assuming his son is lost, Jakob flees to Moscow with the rest of his family. Jakob never recovers from the guilt of abandoning his son and comes, unlike Frieda, to doubt God's justice.

AS THE EXPERIENCE of Jakob V is described, the complexity of Wiebe's attitudes towards the Mennonites' religious tradition becomes evident. Jakob V is held in a cell for six weeks by the communists and is dazed and disoriented by the experience, but an even greater shock awaits him when he returns home and finds everyone but Escha, the Russian peasant who worked for his father, and Muttachi, his grandmother, gone. Wiebe uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to present Jakob's innermost thoughts, and the first thing we see is that his sexual desire is in conflict with his religious training: "*Blessed savior make me pure that in heaven I may.*" Through Frieda, Wiebe shows the positive aspects of the Mennonite religion, but here he begins to examine its restrictive

features. Jakob regards sexuality as a temptation and a possible sin, and his religious tradition stresses the need for confession of sins:

the Russian girl in the water naked squatting and rising I never confessed that I saw my sister when and wet playing with Jesus has come again he will come again will you be ready when the trumpets sound six times I was not ready with all my sins he has come.

Jakob's religious upbringing has inhibited the free expression of his sexuality, and Wiebe implies a criticism here, even while he obviously does not approve of the loose sexuality represented by Escha, who is paying a Russian girl to sleep with him. Escha offers the girl to Jakob, who is repulsed and yet at the same time is struggling with his desire for her: "*blessed savior make me pure.*" But Jakob is ensnared by his desire and while talking to Muttachi about the fate of the fleeing Mennonites, he thinks:

Runners and hiders and liars. There was lying here she had no inkling of, thank god. Everything seemed acrawl in him; control of mind and body he had fought for and he thought held, sometimes so very precisely in that stinking cell seemed now, when he placed a finger against it, almost moldered away that he was home in the huge, empty, house. He had been trained well, a good Mennonite boy; learned quiet joy and denial and prayers, sat between parents in church or, later, in front with the other boys, decently and quietly had been taught his sins and cried over them and asked the Lord Jesus forgiveness, and his parents too. . . . He prayed also, as always, as always all he had pushed aside and gotten round though he knew it wrong, rose in the praying blacker and heavier than sin and he asked forgiveness, crying. There was such comfort in cleanliness. Runners and hiders; liars.

The Mennonite emphasis on sexual purity has just brought Jakob torment and left him incapable of either resisting this temptation or responding freely.

Instead of pursuing his family to Moscow Jakob remains at home in a kind of daze, held by the girl. Wiebe captures something of the disoriented state of Jakob's mind when he first goes to her; she apparently draws him into a sexual dance, which results in a fight between Jakob and Escha. When Jakob leaves the barn he reflects:

He had been taught man is not a carefree brute. . . . 'Thou shalt not.' He had been taught his sins. But now, like then on the studfarm, he had played with himself; alright, wanted himself to be played with, and he was beyond control.

He returns to the barn and kills Escha, whom he seems to blame for his "fall," then he sleeps with the girl. Jakob is quickly apprehended and as he is being taken away he hears that his "mother and sisters are out, Germany, the 25th, but your father — they're shipping him — ." His information mingles with his thoughts about what he has done; he realizes he experiences a certain relief, and

feels “*blessed alone out the 25th and shipping him blessed alone.*” When Serebro, a former Mennonite who has become a communist, offers to help clear Jakob of the murder, Jakob begins kicking him, bringing on his own death: “The commissar sank to the ground screaming, and Jakob was laughing so hard, laughing so dry and hard, he did not stop when down into his face the first gun barrel smashed.” Apart from his obvious distaste for Serebro, Jakob kicks him because Serebro is tempting him to get away with his crime. Nonetheless, Jakob, I take it, has broken down completely at this point, and while the experience of being imprisoned by the communists and being left alone by his family have unsettled him greatly, it is also clear that much of the strain on him has been caused by his religious training.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER, “Black Vulture,” is a pivotal point in the book, for, as Franz Epp tells John Reimer of the night in Moscow in 1929, when Jakob Friesen IV was taken away by the communists, we are introduced to all the other central characters: the Epps, the Reimers (out of consideration for John, Franz disguises Samuel Reimer Sr., calling him Ernst Balzer), and the Driedigers. One of the main points of Franz’s tale is the implied contrast between his father and Jakob Friesen. Franz tells John: “If I was drafted, Pa wouldn’t leave if they chased him, which wasn’t likely. He was like that: he wouldn’t leave one child behind. God had given them to him and he would not leave one in the godless country Russia had become.” And Franz speaks of another father who acts badly: Balzer is concerned solely for his own family and is indifferent to the fate of Jakob Friesen — and to the grief of Mrs. Friesen. The implications of Balzer’s selfishness are explored by Wiebe in the last part of the novel, and in a sense Wiebe sees the narrow self-regarding concern enacted by Balzer as the ultimate form of moral failure and the central temptation facing the Mennonites. In the immediately following chapters, however, Wiebe examines the more specific kinds of temptations that the Mennonites must confront.

In leaving Russia, and their villages, the Mennonites are exposed to a more materialistic way of life. In chapter five, “Over the Red Line,” Wiebe describes the crossing of the Driedigers, Epps and Friesens to the new world, but focuses on the experiences of the young Elizabeth Driediger (whom we encounter at the end of the novel as the forty-seven-year-old, disillusioned professor). At first glance this chapter appears slight, providing, in W. J. Keith’s words “a welcome relief from the harrowing tension of the earlier episodes.”³ But in fact it explores one of the central concerns in the novel: the difference between the Mennonite and the secular world. Like Jakob V, Liesel (Elizabeth) is attracted to something outside the Mennonite tradition — here the secular life on the Class A deck

aboard ship. Unlike Joseph, Liesel does not feel remorse for turning towards another world, for the hold of the religious tradition on her is already slight. We are told that:

After crossing the barrier Liesel suspended thinking on what she had heard so often: the badness that a Mennonite child must never see or hear or think about to keep its eternal soul clean. . . . she had finally decided that her soul, since it was so important despite its elusiveness — perhaps because of that — must be prepared at certain times to take care of itself.

The tone of this is lighthearted, but the issues are serious.

Liesel sneaks up to the A deck where she encounters a way of life totally unknown to her. She sees a woman who “from her hips [showed] a hand-width of glittering leg above the knees.” and Liesel comes across a man and woman engaged in a rather furtive sexual act. Wiebe seems to present these people critically, but to Liesel’s eyes at least “they were all so tall and fine, so elegant, their movements so free, dignified. . . . Such laughing; like a grace. She had never heard such happiness or imagined there could be so many people together laughing in the whole world.” While Liesel may be deceived, Wiebe does suggest that these people possess qualities lacking in the more restrictive Mennonite community. Nonetheless, he presents her attraction to the secular world as a form of a “fall.” Leaning against a double railing, Liesel watches a pageant presenting a scene of guilt and confession — which has a direct relevance to her own actions. But, as she watches, “at that moment, like a new world opening, the double rails swung into space and she fell.” Although Wiebe’s depiction of the scene is unnecessarily confusing, she appears to fall into the sea, and the fall symbolizes the danger of her attraction to secular life. Further, Liesel’s fall into the sea, and away from the Mennonites, contrasts with Frieda’s baptism, in the opening chapter, into the Mennonite faith. Significantly, Liesel is rescued from the water not by a Mennonite, but by Mr. Adolf, one of the men she was attracted to. The closing scene between Liesel and her father reinforces the sense that she has been lost. The ship has now passed over the red line into the free world, just as Liesel herself has passed over to the secular world. Her father, recognizing his, and realizing that she will return again to seek out the A deck, comments:

‘And next time, at least leave the shawl’. She stared, suddenly aware of his tone. He did not go in to switch on the light. ‘We can’t lose everything beautiful at once,’ he said. He stood at the open door; standing aside, waiting.

To the father’s conservative religious point of view Liesel has been lost, and while we can’t simply identify Wiebe with the judgment implied here, the way in which he presents the scene — the father’s comment concludes the chapter — suggests that he is in fairly close agreement.

But Wiebe’s attitude towards the Mennonites and the modern world is complex,

and can't be ascertained from any single chapter. "The Well," which is in certain ways complementary to "Over the Red Line," examining the same issues, presents a different picture. As "The Well" is the seventh chapter it literally is at the centre of the book and, again, carries more significance than might at first be apparent. The trip made to the well by Anna Friesen, Frieda's daughter, dramatizes the choice between two kinds of life. And now for the first time Wiebe criticizes the conservatism of the Mennonites who have come to South America. The Indian women they encounter have a freedom and naturalness that the Mennonites distrust. Their women

did not come like the Lengua women, one pot balanced on their head and the other in their hand, staring wherever their eye strayed; their pails hung from a wooden yoke, the weight of which sat mainly on the back of the shoulders. As a result, though Lenqua women always walked about like stallions in spring, the women of Schoenbach stooped forward whether they carried water or not. Which was a becoming posture for a woman, according to Elder Wiebe the Younger. Humility is required.

It is not, however, primarily the Indians that cause the conservative Kanadier to worry, but the Russlander Mennonites — those who have become "modern" and those who, like Jakob Friesen, had stayed in Russia until 1929: "They spoke the same Lowgerman as the Kanadier, though with a very different accent, with some unheard-of words. And they had emigrated only once for their faith. Not that the Kanadier were Proud." The Kanadier reject totally any modern ways and we begin to sense that Wiebe is not uncritical of their decision to leave Canada because they could not run their schools in "the German biblical way." Elder Wiebe the Older, who led them from Canada, preaches a fairly rigid traditionalism — rather like that put forth by Deacon Block in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Elder Wiebe

intoned that the Bible, the Catechism and the *Kirkenbuch*, the plow and the shovel were the faith of their fathers. It was enough for them, and it is enough for their children and children's children, now and for evermore. To have too much is to want more. New ideas, book learning, singing in several voices are unnecessary and dangerous. The desire for knowledge leads to pride and self-deception. To long for change is to fight one's destiny. Fighting one's destiny is rebellion against God. Man's duty is to obey, pray, work, and wait in terror for God's wrath.

Not a very cheerful picture. In contrast to Frieda's open faith and trust in God, the Elder Wiebe is committed to a set of dogmas that are not the essence of religious belief.

The more modern Russlander are not as dour and their relaxed ways are viewed critically by the Kanadier:

They could sing Highgerman and Russian in different voices . . . and laugh and quarrel far into the night. And crazy to laugh! Hearing this, Anna knew without being told, as did every Kanadier girl, that despite their Mennonite names and talk, these men were too different, too wrong and — obvious — to even think about. . . . They would not get into heaven.

Yet when Anna encounters one of the Russlanders, Joseph Hiebert, at the well, she quickly forgets about her fiancé, Abraham K. Funk. We already know that Hiebert has moved away from the Mennonite faith, but Wiebe's attitude towards him is somewhat ambiguous. There is a vague suggestion that the drink Joseph gives Anna has an alcoholic content — "yerba and unheated water gave terere" — and if so it would imply that we are to regard him critically. However, it seems more likely that the drink is strange to Anna simply because it was "outside regulation," and that Wiebe's criticism is aimed at the narrow restrictions of the conservative Mennonites. Joseph has lost the seriousness of the Mennonites, and while he may be becoming simply frivolous — he plays practical jokes on the Kanadier boys and teaches some of them to sing "Kommt ein Vogel geflogen" in four part harmony, which is forbidden — there is a certain attractiveness about him. Years later Anna hears that he is in Buenos Aires. "It was said someone had seen him eating and drinking at a table with a painted woman." He has obviously ceased to be a Mennonite at all, and, to that extent, he represented a temptation to Anna. The chapter concludes with Anna, now married, remembering the day at the well: "I last remembered, oh, it must be almost three years. I have almost forgotten." And she would smile a little at her baby of that year, a quietness she knew as joy moving within her." Wiebe presents a fairly balanced, complex view of the issues here. Anna has achieved a joy by staying within the confines of the traditional Mennonite community, but she has a vague sense of other possibilities, and perhaps even of loss.

The ultimate temptation that confronts a Mennonite, however, is to lose faith because of personal suffering. Jakob Friesen IV, whom we encounter again, in chapter eight, "The Cloister of the Lilies," as a prisoner in Siberia in 1932, is unable to accept his suffering without misgiving. As Jakob and another prisoner are being moved they stumble onto a cloister; within they discover a picture of a row of lilies hidden beneath the grime on a wall. This seems to symbolize Jakob's own relation to his faith; it is buried, hidden, indeed almost lost. As they wait out the blizzard a man arrives with his wife, who is dying, and they are desperately trying to reach home: "But she cannot last a month as God is good and she wants to see the children at last." The woman is raped by the guards, yet she and her husband endure, and his advice to Jakob is "Survive." In the face of the man's grief, Jakob reveals what has been tormenting him: he abandoned his son. The man replies:

A man could endure ten years. . . . There is the possibility. But he cannot afford

thinking what you keep thinking; then it is impossible. You must survive. That is all. Survive as God is good.

'You keep saying that,' Friesen whispered.

'Yes.'

'Then why did all this happen? To us?'

'To live, it is the most necessary possibility.'

Friesen was never sure to what question the man gave this answer . . . the faceless immobile man whose name and place he never knew, before whose immobile accepted suffering his own had finally broken between his teeth.

Unlike Jakob, the man not only accepts his suffering but is able to affirm that "God is good." Jakob is at the point of losing his faith entirely, or at least doubting it; at the end of the novel he claims he "believes nothing." Yet Jakob is obsessed with the man's ambiguous statement: "Whatever the man had said . . . seemed for an instant to blaze with a kind of holy wisdom that was." Jakob's attempts to understand the statement show that he is still struggling with his faith, and it is because of this struggle that later, as an old man, he is attracted to John Reimer.

HAVING EXAMINED VARIOUS MENNONITES in conflict with their faith, Wiebe begins to emphasize more directly, in the second half of the novel, the kind of Christian response he himself admires. David Epp, whom we meet in chapter nine, "Drink Ye All of It," represents the ethical ideal in Wiebe's religious vision. David and his family, with a group of Mennonites, escape from Russia into China, but David fears that the Mennonites left behind may be punished for their act. He decides, therefore, that he must leave his family and return to Russia to see if he can possibly exonerate the other Mennonites. He is giving up his freedom, and probably his life, in what may be a quixotic gesture. But the heroic nature of his act reverberates throughout the rest of the novel in the lives of those who come after him. David's selflessness contrasts with the narrow self-seeking that we saw represented by Balzer (Samuel Reimer Sr.) on the night in Moscow in 1929. Oblivious to the fact that Jakob Friesen is taken away, Balzer leaps for joy that he and his family are spared by the communists: "Oh God, my God how marvelous are Thy ways, how He answers prayer!" But old Mr. Epp, David's father, quietly admonishes him: "Ernst, I think Mrs. Friesen was praying too." Balzer's selfishness is even more clearly placed by David Epp's selfless act. In his radical concern for others and in his willingness to sacrifice himself, David Epp shows himself to be a true follower of Christ.

Frieda and her husband, as I've said, also embody a positive religious response, and in the following chapter, the tenth, we get her last narrative, which covers the early years in South America, up to the present, 1959. Despite Frieda's troubles — a child has died, there is sickness in the family, and she has repeated

operations for cancer — she reaffirms her trust in God. But the main point of the section is the affirmation her husband Johann makes as he is dying. He insists that their decision to leave Canada, giving up an easier life, in order to practice their religion freely, was right. Whatever the children may feel, he advises Frieda: “And don’t let one of them, not one, make it hard for you. We did what we believed.” His statement has a normative bearing in this novel; the lives of some characters — even Samuel Reimer — are finally a failure because they do not act on what they believe.

Frieda and Johann represent the best of the old ways and Wiebe’s attitude towards them is highly approving. Nonetheless, Wiebe knows that their way is no longer viable in the modern world and this seems to be part of the reason why Frieda’s final story is placed at this point. After Johann dies, Frieda comes to Canada in 1959 to visit her daughters, but the secularization she sees appalls her. Dennis Willms, her daughter Esther’s husband, has changed his name to “Williams,” largely abandoning his Mennonite heritage. And the congregation generally has lost the deep religious faith that led the Mennonites to seek new lands: “I went to their church. They prayed and sang and read from the Bible; it was all English and not Mennonite but the most people there came from us and to me it sometimes looked they were stretching themselves around for what they weren’t.” Frieda chooses to return to the more orthodox and traditional ways in South America, but, as Wiebe knows, the younger Mennonites must learn to live and act in the modern world she rejects.

The problem of the lack of religious faith in the modern world is confronted directly by Wiebe in the last two chapters of the novel. Here he examines the radical responses of two men appalled both by the materialism of modern life *and* by the insularity of other Mennonites. “The Vietnam Call of Samuel V. Reimer” is accurately described by W. J. Keith as a “biblical parallel-cum-parody (I Samuel 3) which succeeds in being both humorous and serious at the same time.”⁴ Samuel is called by God to go and proclaim peace in Vietnam. Wiebe apparently wants us to believe in the authenticity of Samuel’s voice, but, in any case, in showing the resistance to Samuel and his mission, Wiebe presents his critique of the modern world. There is a total lack of faith and an inability to believe in the very possibility that God would still speak directly to man. The pastor of the Mennonite Church ludicrously wants “evidence” and asks Sam to tape the voice. And Wiebe is even more critical in his presentation of the institution of the Mennonite Church: “[The] Inter-Mennonite Church Service Society, Peace Section . . . had ruled his plans were too likely to raise derision and suspicion among both church members and government agencies for the Society to be able to support him, in any way.” Facing disbelief in his voice and hostility towards his plan, Sam explains why he would still like to go to Vietnam: “If . . . [my children] could see, when they’re old enough to see, that I was doing some-

thing needed. You know, that had to be, for others, not just so our family has it softer." He has the image of David Epp's heroic act in mind; he does *not* want to be like his father, and he recalls old Mr. Epp's words: "'Samuel,' he said to my father, 'I think Mrs. Friesen was praying too'." A true Christian is responsible for all of his fellow men, and Samuel argues that even if something were to happen to him in Vietnam, "so what? I'd have been doing a Christian's job — not sitting here just talking, growing fat on the land." Samuel Reimer achieves a sense of what, in Wiebe's view, a truly fully Christian life involves, but the opposition to his plan proves too much for him; unlike David Epp, he fails to act on his belief. He gives in to despair and dies, and the story ends on an ironic note with the triumph of the material values he abhorred.

IN THE FINAL CHAPTER, "On The Way," Wiebe explores further — particularly through Elizabeth Driediger, Jakob Friesen IV, and Dennis Willms — the problem of the loss of faith among the Mennonites, and he sets against this the Christian view of John Reimer, Samuel's educated, and more articulate, brother. The section opens with the accidental meeting, in the Toronto airport in 1967, between Elizabeth Driediger, now a forty-seven-year-old professor, and Jakob Friesen, now an old man, who has come to Canada for the first time, to visit his daughter. They both claim that they are no longer Mennonites, but, for Jakob at least, the matter of belief is clearly still predominant. The main question Jakob has to ask Elizabeth is: "Are you still a Mennonite?" He very briefly tells her the story of his life, then states:

'Yes, I have a strong body. That is why I survived. And because I believe nothing.'

'You believe . . .' for an instant she doubted her knowledge of the word.

'Yes. Like you, I have no longer anything with the Mennonites.'

That was not what she had meant, but she understood his expression exactly. Like some little grandmother who had never been beyond her *darf* street, despite his lifetime wandering there was for him still only one thing to believe or not believe. Well, she did not believe it any more, either. In that one and only way.

But without some openness to faith it seems unlikely that Jakob would have had the strength to survive his ten years as a prisoner in Siberia. Questions of religious belief are never entirely closed for Jakob, which is why he, and Elizabeth, seek out John Reimer, who is walking through the West carrying a cross, bearing witness to Christ's presence in the world.

Before presenting John, however, Wiebe brings Dennis and Esther Willms into the story, and through them shows the defeat of the Mennonite tradition by material values. Esther is Frieda's daughter, but she and her husband have long

since lost Frieda's strong faith. Dennis is almost totally assimilated into the secular modern world; he is a successful businessman with narrow concerns. Wiebe characterizes him, emphasizing his narrowness, by a reference to the mountains, symbol of the quest that the Mennonites have pursued throughout their history. Relaxing in his Cadillac, "Dennis stretched out, foam rubber cushioning his cheek against the window. He would see the mountains a bit longer across the rising land. Odd; he had never thought much about them, one way or another." When Dennis and Esther stop at the side of the road to speak to John, they find Jakob and Elizabeth already with him, and there is an unravelling of family relationships. As the various conversations take place, John's voice becomes increasingly dominant as he presents his social vision and his view of Christ. But Dennis is unwilling to listen, and only feels that John is making a fool of himself by "running across the country, like that"; he hopes that John will give up his walk and take a "worthwhile" job. Dennis and his family leave, but they are late, and in hurrying to Edmonton they are apparently killed in a car accident. (In fact, it is not entirely clear whether Dennis has had a heart attack and they are taking just him to the hospital, or whether the whole family is being rushed to the hospital: in either case Wiebe's point would be the same.) The accident (or Dennis's death) is a symbolic representation of the destructive tendency of a materialistic secular civilization, and the speeding, hurrying that causes it is in direct contrast with John's more relaxed and reflective state of mind.

John puts forth a view of Christianity which radically challenges the basic assumptions of the conservative Mennonites — and of many other Christians as well. He insists that a wide social concern is of the essence of Christianity and that "the whole idea of Jesus just telling about people being 'saved' and feeling good about it is wrong. Quite wrong. He was alive, on earth to lead a revolution! A revolution for social justice." And John is especially critical of the position taken by the Mennonite church, for he argues that Jesus didn't intend to achieve his revolution "by setting up a church that can never change no matter where on earth or in what century it is." He redefines what the real church should be: "No! The church Jesus began is us *living, everywhere*, a new *society* that sets all the old ideas of man living with other men on its head." The new society is built by our "thinking different" about everything.

In articulating this view of Christianity John is quite obviously a spokesman for Wiebe himself. In the interview with Donald Cameron Wiebe explains:

I would like to think of myself as someone who's trying to live what the original Anabaptists were about. They're very contemporary, in a way, because they felt that the social structures that had evolved in the west had no sanction. To be an Anabaptist is to be a radical follower of the person of Jesus Christ — that's really what it's about — and Jesus Christ had no use for the social and political structures of his day; he came to *supplant* them.⁵

There is little separation between what Wiebe believes and what John advocates, and as Wiebe is largely using John to assert his own view, rather than fully dramatizing it, the novel comes close to being overtly didactic at this point. Elizabeth, it is true, objects to John's position, insisting "there's too bloody much sacrifice in the world already. . . . We need a world where everybody can live for himself, just be himself." But John replies decisively, "You want everyone except you dead?" In the final section, however, where John attempts to explain his views to Jakob Friesen, the professed unbeliever, Wiebe is more successful at dramatizing his religious beliefs.

John re-affirms his desire "to live the concern for others and love that Jesus showed" and when Jakob asks how he is doing this by walking along the road, John explains that he is simply trying to relate — show warmth and concern — to all of his fellow men. And the main point he makes is that unlike most Mennonites he is "not going anywhere"; by simply walking on the open road he is challenging the traditional goals of the Mennonites — those symbolized by the title of the novel. The title comes from the appearance of the Greater Khingan Mountains of China which David Epp, as he led his people out of Russia, saw as "*black and jagged from here black in the heartless cold nothing like the thin blue sketch, beckoning from across the river the beautiful mocking blue.*" The blue mountains symbolize the hope of the Mennonites that somewhere they will find a place where they will be able to lead their lives and religion in total peace and freedom. But the blue is "mocking" because the goal is unattainable, and, in the eyes of John Reimer — and Rudy Wiebe — it is finally undesirable. The Mennonites' dream of isolating and insulating themselves from the world involves a failure of true Christian responsibility, which is shown by being involved *in* the world.

John had been walking west towards the Rocky Mountains, but he realizes that they too represent a false dream. "They look so nice, I thought sitting on those hills outside Calgary, almost like a new world, sharp, beautiful, clean. But usually when you get over there's always more of what you climbed them to get away from." Instead, he heads north, but, unlike the conservative Mennonites who have moved into the north to "get away from everyone but themselves," John is neither withdrawing from the world nor hoping to set up a separated place. He criticizes the Mennonites for wanting to build their own private land, for, he claims, it isn't anywhere on earth.

That's the trouble with Mennonites; they show it clearer than most other Christians, especially Protestants. They wish they were, if they could only be Jews. On the mountain Moses said 'Go over that river, there's the land God has given you forever,' but Jesus just said, 'I'm going to make a place ready for you and then I'll come and get you. You wait.' Moses gave his people manna to eat when they

were hungry, and Jesus did that a little but then he changed. Then he just said, 'I'm bread enough for you. Remember me.'

'That's the big trouble with Jesus,' said the old man. 'He never gives you a thing to hold in your hand.'

The other answered, 'There are things, many things that you can't hold in your hand.'

Jakob is sceptical to the end, but John has the last word. And while he redefines the nature of the religious struggle that the Mennonites, and modern man, must face, he makes it clear that in religious matters there can be no easily found answers; an act of faith is always necessary.

NOTES

¹ "Introduction" to Rudy Wiebe, *The Blue Mountains of China*, 1970 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), p. 1.

² *Conversations with Canadian Novelists Part Two* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 159.

³ Keith, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, p. 148.

FOX

Ron Miles

Or Dog? No.

Fox, half rusty tail
beside the sage ahead
and I guarded by wind
for once, briefly his
superior, amazed he follows
my daily path, briefly mine.

Across the ravine construction has ended
for the day. He sniffs the distant buildings
senses me behind and runs
faster than I could, even in my mind
down into the ravine disappearing
while I dog his footsteps, down.
But up the other side
where only houses grow
daily in our path.