

Book Review

Astrid von Schlachta. *“Holding Fast to What is Good?” Tradition and Renewal in Hutterite History*. MacGregor, MB: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2021. 103 pp.

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In 2020, historian Astrid von Schlachta presented the Jacob D. Maendel Lectures via live streaming to members of Hutterite colonies in Canada and the United States, and others. (The lectures remain available on YouTube.) Augmented versions of the lectures are published here as *“Holding Fast to What is Good?” Tradition and Renewal in Hutterite History*. Von Schlachta, who has written many important books and articles on Anabaptists and Hutterites—for example, *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*—presently serves as the director of the Mennonitische Forschungsstelle in Weierhof, Germany. The Maendel Lectures recognize the life and work of Jakob D. Maendel (1911–1972), a Schmiedeleut Hutterite minister who promoted an increased emphasis on education in the colonies.

The essays themselves, which were translated by Hutterite teacher Jesse Hofer, are exceptional in their explanation of the history of the Hutterites in Europe, with a mix of analysis and story that gets to the heart of the group’s complicated evolutionary development. An ongoing question for Hutterites has been what it meant to practice Christian community of goods, and to do so in many different cultural and geographical settings across time, with diverse political and economic structures. From Austria to Moravia, Hungary, Transylvania, Romania, and Ukraine, the Hutterites continuously debated the relationship between immediate family relationships and the community as a whole, as well as their general leadership structures and decision-making patterns, church discipline, and the impact of materialism.

Von Schlachta discusses the historical development of the Hutterite *Gemeindeordnungen*, the basic principles around which community life was organized. She deals with internal conflict and external persecution, limiting her lectures (for the most part) to the European Hutterite experience that essentially ended with mass immigration to the United States in the 1870s.

I doubt it would be possible in a hundred pages to provide a more succinct and well-written analysis of Hutterite history in Europe, including important details about theological and cultural trends. The book includes the observations of non-Hutterites, such as the writer Grimmelshausen in the seventeenth century. Von Schlachta also discusses the Hutterite revitalization that occurred



when an infusion of Protestants fleeing from the Carinthian province of Austria joined and provided new energy and renewed commitment to communal life at a time when Hutterite society in Transylvania seemed to be dying in the mid-eighteenth century. Von Schlachta also discusses the beliefs and practices of the ethnic Hutterite Habaner people who joined the Roman Catholic Church after heavy persecution and harassment but continued to live somewhat separately (in Hungary) into the twentieth century.

Occasionally, parts of the lectures are devoted to singular relationships. For example, five pages of the book are focused on eighteenth-century Hutterite connections with the radical Pietist Moravian Brethren. Strong theological influences on Hutterite minister Johannes Waldner are noted, but it is unclear whether these influences were carried forward by later Hutterite leaders. Relationships with Mennonites in Europe are also discussed. This theme is important not only because of the groups' common Anabaptist roots but also because, later, in the 1870s, two-thirds of the Hutterites who immigrated to Dakota Territory in United States formed non-communal churches that ultimately joined Mennonite conferences. Earlier in the 1800s, Russian Mennonites had provided significant assistance (and even church oversight) to Hutterites when they relocated to southeastern Ukraine.

Curiously, the author never clarifies the decision to include only a brief piece of Hutterite history after they immigrated to North America. This brief mention comes in a three-page account of the group's pacifist beliefs and World War I, at which point no Hutterites were left in Europe. This discussion of 1910s events in North America comes without explaining the reasons that almost all Hutterites had left Ukraine 30–40 years earlier. The book's conclusion is titled "500 Years of Hutterite History," yet the book only discusses the first 350 years. It would have been helpful to include at least page or two to tie the past to the present (1,250 Hutterites in the world in 1880 compared to 50,000 today, for example). Maendel himself would likely have wanted to see this. I am told that as a practical man, he loved history, but didn't think that it was of much use if it didn't provide practical advice for the present. But this omission is a minor point, as was the decision not to include an index, in a book that is otherwise strong.

In general, this is an impressive collection of essays on the entire experience of the first 350 years of Hutterite life in Europe, an important period when the sermons (still read today) and many organizational and theological principles were institutionalized for the benefit of future generations. The history presented here provided an essential foundation for much of what has happened during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in North America.