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## Book Review: Between 2 Gods: Memoir of Abuse in the Mennonite Community

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## REVIEW: *BETWEEN 2 GODS: MEMOIR OF ABUSE IN THE MENNONITE COMMUNITY*

Melanie Springer Mock

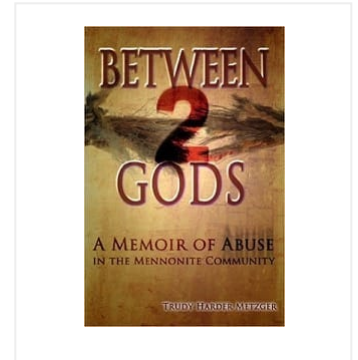
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BOOK MATTER

Trudy Harder Metzger, *Between 2 Gods: Memoir of Abuse in the Mennonite Community* (Little Elm, Texas: eLectio Publishing, 2015).

In introducing readers to her **blog**, Trudy Harder Metzger describes herself as a kind of Joan of Arc, fighting for justice and mercy where darkness often reigns; as a kind of Mother Theresa, providing care for those who have been wounded by abuse; as a believer who clearly knows God's grace and kindness, in her life and in the lives of others. She is, she writes, a person who is passionate about "God, people, truth, justice and mercy."

These character traits drive Metzger's writing, both on her blog and in her memoir, published last year by eLectio. *Between 2 Gods: Memoir of Abuse in the Mennonite Community* narrates Metzger's upbringing in a Mennonite family and with a father whose volatility often led to abuse. Although Metzger's painful life experiences continue after she leaves home at 17, the memoir ultimately offers its readers affirmation that God's grace reaches all, and that the past can "become a launching pad into greater things" (239).



Metzger's journey toward this epiphany is a difficult one, and she does not attempt to mollify readers by avoiding distressing details. This is a definite strength in *Between 2 Gods*. Rather than offer us a pleasant story of healing and redemption alone, Metzger names the many abuses she experienced at the hands of those who should love and protect her, including family members and church leaders. One point made both implicitly in *Between 2 Gods*, and explicitly by its publication, is exactly this: that people need to acknowledge their abuses for there to be healing; and that stories about abuse need to be told, even when doing so might implicate presumably Christian people and institutions.

*Between 2 Gods* begins with Metzger's childhood in Mexico, where her parents belonged to several Old Russian Colony communities. Her family moved several times in Metzger's first few years of life, in some part because church authorities believed her father was abusing his children. The accusations angered Metzger's father, although they were also true. Metzger unflinchingly details the abuse that happened early at his father's hands, starting when Metzger was a toddler, and her father came to her crib, asking for "sexual favours" (11).

It is clear that Metzger's father suffered from some form of mental illness, his rage, countered by moments of affability, making for an uneasy home environment. Metzger expressed that she was never sure what would set her father off, nor could she predict what he would do when alone with his daughter. Because his volatility was intertwined with his rigid religious legalism and strict teaching, Metzger's belief in a loving, relational God was eroded. In its place was a sense that God was an angry, "harsh judge," one who hated not only sin, but also sinners. "The terror my parents had of Him was transferred to us," Metzger writes, "evoking in us unholy terror of our parents, as well as of God" (50).

When her family moved to Canada, little changed for Metzger. Her father took his family from one church to the next, seeking believers who shared his ideological sense that being worldly did not reflect God's commands for followers. Metzger herself held out hope that one church or another would heal her father and make the family safe from his abuses. But this was not to be. At one church, members were excommunicated for watching TV or listening to the radio, yet sexual abusers went unpunished, their indiscretions hidden. When even the pastor's son violated several young people in the church, including Metzger, he was protected from any kind of discipline,

while other church-goers, Metzger writes, had their sins “broadcast and announced from pulpit to pulpit of sister congregations across the province of Ontario” (65).

What seems clear in the early chapters of Metzger’s memoir is the ways the church failed – and continues to fail – its children, assuring that abuses were kept secret and abusers unpunished, all in an effort to protect the church’s religious image. What also seems clear is the ways repeated abuses from within a child’s family and from without eroded Metzger’s sense of self and distorted her relationship with God and with others. So much so that at 16, Metzger devised a plan to leave her religious community and her family, believing she would be not only more free, but also safer, living apart from the cloistered Mennonites and their abuses. As the rest of the memoir reveals, this decision only led to more danger and further abuse, and also carried Metzger farther away from – and then back to – a loving, grace-filled God.

The second part of *Between 2 Gods* details Metzger’s life apart from her family, trying to find safety and a sense of home. At each place she stayed, though, Metzger found little happiness, and instead faced others who took advantage of her youth, her insecurity, and her low self-esteem. Some people she met expressed kindness and concern, offering Metzger a place to live and sometimes a job, but others found ways to use her. Finally, on a long bus ride from California to Ontario, Metzger met a man from Indiana and decided to move in with him, a decision that would leave her even more damaged, isolated, and afraid. Her time in Indiana, living with Dodi (her boyfriend) and his sister, became a turning point for Metzger, as she began to wrestle intensely with what she believed demonic forces, taking her away from the “the truth of Jesus” (215).

Her struggle to resolve her damaged past with the grace she found in Jesus sent Metzger further into emotional turmoil, but also became the impetus to change her life’s trajectory. A seemingly divine intervention compelled Metzger back to her family and her church of origin, and also back to the faith she had abandoned. Though some of the elements that had caused her to leave remained unchanged, Metzger herself had been transformed completely. She writes, “More and more, my heart longed for the One . . . The One whose name I had whispered with my first breath – Yahweh . . . The One who kissed me with sunlight and invited me close to Him” (227). While she still felt “damaged” and “unworthy,” Metzger finally made her choice, between the God of her childhood, judgmental and angry and unforgiving, and the God she meets as a young adult, full of grace, love, and mercy. The choice between these two Gods was complicated by her religious upbringing and her own history of abuse, yet in deciding to embrace the God of love and grace, she says, “everything” changed for her.

This does mean, of course, that the abusers of her youth could be released of responsibility for her (and others’) pain. Throughout all of Metzger’s writing – in her memoir, on her blog – Metzger makes clear how damaging hidden abuse has been, to victims of abuse, and also to the church itself. Metzger has been instrumental in the founding of **Generations Unleashed**, a Canada-based charity that supports victims of sexual abuse, providing supplemental programs for those going through the healing process from abuse. Providing a voice to those who have been silenced, Generations Unleashed endeavors to honor the stories of those who have faced sexual abuse, and in the process, break the cycle of abuse that too often seems like an inevitability.

*Between 2 Gods* joins a growing body of Mennonite works, both online and in print, that acknowledges a long legacy of hidden abuse within the church and within Mennonite families. Like **Our Stories Untold**, a site that shares personal stories of abuse within the Mennonite church, Metzger’s *Between 2 Gods* serves as an important reminder that Mennonites have not been immune from sexual violence, nor from the oppressive silence that often accompanies assault. Metzger’s courage in telling her story will, hopefully, open pathways for others to also come forward, so that Mennonites can acknowledge that although abuse has been a far too pervasive part of their past, it doesn’t need to be part of their future, too.