

## „Anabaptists and the Sword“ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants

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The official or “magisterial” reformation being itself an event dependent for its shape and its survival on a particular relationship to the civil order, naturally its thinkers had to understand movements of dissent and protest in similar terms. So it was that Huldrych Zwingli, as soon as the wisdom of hindsight could illuminate the movement of events, interpreted the Anabaptism that had sprung from his own movement in terms of an implicit anarchism.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is not surprising that Anabaptism has become, far more than an historical phenomenon for empirical description, an “ideal type” on the chessboard of the history of ideas. Over against the majority view, characterized by the acceptance of civil responsibility, Anabaptism represents a pure outworking of the logic of a systematic apoliticism or a dualism of the civil and religious orders. This systematic approach has born its ripe fruit in the dissertations of H. Hillerbrand<sup>2</sup> and C. Bauman;<sup>3</sup> the latter more dogmatically oriented, the former in the mode of the history of ideas.

Then as now, one of the evident issues for debate in understanding Anabaptism in its relationship to the official reformation is the influence which prior assumptions about the nature of the civil order have upon the way in which the data of the historian will be made meaningful. The data in question have not been very debatable for a century already: but with

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<sup>1</sup> In one testimony of April 1525 Zwingli combines three reports: a) a second-hand account of an unidentifiable non-Anabaptist named Martin, who said that “the Anabaptists are right, that there should be no government”; b) a second-hand account of Blaurock’s discussing with a Zollikon Anabaptist some future time when they would be numerous enough to defend themselves against a small army; c) Zwingli’s own synthesis of this data is that “they have undertaken so to increase their numbers as to declare themselves free of government”. *Huldrych Zwingli’s Sämtliche Werke* IV, Leipzig 1927, Nr. 54, 172 f. His first comment on the theme was in his *Who gives Occasion for Tumult* of December 1524, *op. cit.* III, Leipzig 1914, Nr. 42, p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Hillerbrand, *Die politische Ethik des Oberdeutschen Täuferturns*, Leiden/Köln 1962 (PET); proleptically summarized in “The Anabaptist View of the State”, *MQR* XXXII (April, 1958) 83 ff. (AVS).

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Bauman, *Gewaltlosigkeit im Täuferturn*, Leiden 1968.



the publication of the new panoramic work of Stayer,<sup>4</sup> the stage is perhaps set for a fuller analysis of the shape of the issue of interpretation, as that is predisposed by the prior systematic decisions of the historian.

It cannot be the goal of this study to catalog the immense body of recently published material dealing with the broad theme, “Radical Reformation and the Civil Order” systematically. Such discussion was always full and frequent in any treatment of reformation ethics. It has become still more so by way of response to recent fashions which attempt to interpret the reformation in the area of “theology of revolution”, “Christianity and Marxism”, “Church in the Third World”, etc.

The goal of the present analysis shall rather be to try to illuminate one issue at the heart of the matter when interpreted as a systematic challenge, doing so especially in conversation with the three very worthy dissertations of Hillerbrand, Bauman, and Stayer. Our concern shall not be with the remaining possible discrepancies of interpretation about biographical or chronological detail, but rather with the way in which a prior theological and world view commitment enters into the capacity of the historian to make a meaningful unity out of the data he reads.

This rounding out of a generation’s monographic efforts may provide us a base for reviewing the systematic axioms which these analysts exemplify. Behind a growing consensus regarding the main outlines of majority Anabaptist thought, and behind increasing precision in tracing shifts and differences in detail now added in the work of J. Stayer, the abiding polemic-ecumenical challenge of the assumption just described remains: – what for our purposes may be labeled a “systematic dualism“. By “systematic“ is meant the fact that the dualism is brought by the historian to the data he interprets, when he puts a premium on those phenomena which are to his mind more “consistent“.

The most consistent, and therefore most representative Anabaptist position, as described with only minor differences by both Bauman and Hillerbrand, is that which Stayer calls “separatist nonresistance“ and which Sanders<sup>5</sup> characterizes as being “without compromise“. The measure of “consistency“ or “compromise“ is the concept of “The State“ which the historian brings to the question, and this concept is itself defined in terms compatible with the decisions of the official reformers.

*The concept of the political order according to which the most separatist Anabaptists were most consistent*

“The State“ is assumed to be the same in essence in all times and cultures, so that the ethical issue posed for the Christian by participation in its violence is the same whether we speak of the age of Josiah, of the early church, of Constantine, of Charlemagne, or of Charles V. Any pluralism of historical interpretations, any real development or change from one age

<sup>4</sup> James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, Lawrence, Kansas 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Sanders, *Protestant Concepts of Church and State*, New York 1964.



to another, is excluded, not on the grounds of observation but by definition. So the question "should the Christian be an agent of the State?" always has the same shape and, to be consistent, must always have the same answer.

The state is seen as an extension of the good order of Creation, analogous to (or an extension of) the order of the family, and of work (*Beruf*). Partially marred through Adam's fall, partially restored through the establishment of the Davidic kingdom and further through Constantine, we still perceive in government its original created intent. It may be spoken of as "sword", but that is the weapon of the benevolent patriarch, without which there could be no society. The state is in its essence the *sine qua non* of civilized society, and only exceptionally the agency of tyranny, empire, pillage and destruction.

The context of ethical decision is assumed to be one in which Christians are numerically and socially dominant, so that their ethical choices must be tested by the criterion of generalizability. "What if everyone did it . . .?" is the way to test an ethical conviction, since practically everyone is Christian. If Christians would not administer the government, there would be none, or it would fall into the hands of a few brigands who would fail to discharge its civilizing mission.

Once the definitions are thus established, there is little choice left to the Anabaptist who wants to be "consistent". If he makes the teachings of Jesus on the sword and the oath normative, if he confesses in the New Testament a movement beyond the Old, if he considers Christian identity a matter of adult, personal decision which cannot be imposed upon an infant by its parents or upon a society by its sovereign, there is no alternative to the withdrawal which the historian calls "consistent". And since the issues are timeless, the same options will always apply. Thus Sanders pursues into the mid-twentieth century the struggle of Mennonites over whether to remain consistently "apolitical".

There is no doubt that this "consistent" position existed among Anabaptists, that it was expressed radically and thoroughly by major figures, especially Sattler, Riedemann, and Walpot, and that with the passage of time under conditions of persecution it came to dominate numerically. Yet to test the adequacy of a systematic construction, it is not the "typical" cases which are most important, but the exceptions. And there are exceptions, as we shall see.

### *The limitations of the "systematic" view*

In the face of this sweeping consensus in the monographic works of recent generations, the present essay suggests that we will only progress further in understanding the sixteenth century if we become more self-critical about this dogmatic assumption. Why should it be assumed, after all, that the only respectable answers to an ethical question, especially one so complex as "Should the Christian be a ruler?" must be an unqualified "yes" or an unqualified "no", so that intermediate views are less worthy of recognition?



I. This dogmatic way of putting the question is itself representative of a prior commitment to the *Volkskirche* position. The moral claims in favor of the violent defense of the existing social order can only demand a yes/no answer if their content is unambiguous and their bindingness self-evident. Yet that is precisely what is being contested between the established churches and the radical reformation, and in later centuries between more authoritarian and more covenantal/democratic views of the civil order.

II. The systematic way of putting the question is overly concerned for finding in the Reformation models applicable to later debates, thereby illuminating but also distorting the original events through their modern “relevance“. One observes this when modern Mennonites appeal to Anabaptist “apolitism“ as defined by John Horsch and Sanders in order to undercut criticism of American militarism. One observes it on the other hand in Karl Holl’s rejection of the suggestion of Troeltsch that the radicals of the sixteenth century represented the future of protestant political development more than Luther did. One recognizes it when Stayer in his introduction identifies his personal bias, which he calls „liberal“, as being particularly hostile to the subtype of Anabaptist pacifism which according to his own later account was the only one that could survive in the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

III. The systematic way of putting the question results in an unrepresentative selectivity in actual reading of the Reformation story. It calls “typical“ one set of Anabaptist phenomena, and thereby uses them to organize and sometimes to disqualify the others; yet this “type“ is logically one end of a scale, not an average or a developmental paradigm.

One of the indications of this bias in favor of the categories of the official tradition is the selectivity which is usually exercised among the opinions of the reformers prior to making the comparison with the radicals. The major reformation spokesmen expressed themselves often and in varied ways concerning government. When they had the time to be careful and objective they could be relatively critical of oppression and arbitrary violence, and could project a picture of what Christian government ought to be which continues to be appealing. Under other pressures, and specifically sometimes under the pressure of the dissent of more radical protestants, their advice and their tacit consent permitted their rulers to proceed in a far less humane way than the reformers’ best visions. Yet the position which the systematic historians contrast with the separatism of the Anabaptists is often not the actual practice of the governments of Saxony or Zurich but rather the higher (usually earlier) ideals of the reformers when they were more critical.

Thus by definition the temptation is to compare what cannot be fairly compared: On the one hand, careful, measured thought from the pens of

<sup>6</sup> In an earlier writing, “The Earliest Anabaptists and the Separatist-Pacifist Dilemma“, *Brethren Life and Thought*, X (Winter, 1965), 17 ff., Stayer evidenced an interest much like that of the present essay. Since then his investment in the rigidity of the “dilemma“ seems to have increased, at the same time that his sympathy for the separatists has waned.



professional intellectuals, and on the other statements wrung under torture from fugitive preachers and recently converted peasants. Ideals on the one hand (which have a very specific meaning when there exists a self-conscious theory about how to dose the dilution of divine and human righteousness) and immediate practical situational decisions on the other. This does not mean there can be no fair historiography or no fair dialogue, but it does call for a greater degree of self-critical awareness of the dogmatic commitments which pre-structure the possible conversation.

IV. The assumptions underlying this argument are such as can only be meaningful after Constantine and before the development of modern social pluralism. It reasons from the nature and the needs of the total social order to the ethics of the individual. The individual should reason and decide in such a way that if everyone reasons and decides as he does, the social order will be healthy. Since it is his duty so to think, his specific decisions should be guided not by a christological critique but by a calculation of what kind of activity, if generalized, will make for social health. This process is self-evident in a situation where it is assumed that all of the significant persons will be reasoning on the basis of the same ethical assumptions. It ceases to represent a reasonable set of assumptions if a society has become genuinely free and pluralistic. Nor can it be a reasonable set of assumptions in a society in which Christians are a missionary minority.

V. There is obvious moderization in the shape of the question when it is interpreted as a sample of a timelessly consistent attitude which in order to be genuine would need to apply to other governments in other places, especially at the point of participating in democratically structured societies either as holders of office or as voters.

These five complaints are not ultimately distinguishable. They are aspects of the single objection that this definitional dualism brings to the data of the sixteenth century a prior systematic bias which renders more difficult a full grasp of the nuances of the story. This is not the same as arguing that the predisposition of the question is confessionally prejudiced. The Mennonite Clarence Bauman, the Lutheran Hillerbrand, the "profane historian" Stayer, and Sanders all use the same approach. The Mennonite John Horsch, who considered the "separatist nonresistant" view the normative one, and Stayer who shows how many other Anabaptist views there were, agree to define it in these same terms.

The priority of consistent logic over actual events, which is the methodological assumption of the "history of ideas" as a discipline, constantly runs the risk of imposing a simplicity or a consistency which is more the product of the mind of the analyst than it was a necessity in the minds of the historical personages.

"A related weakness for the empirically minded reader is the author's method of relying entirely upon the inner logic of ideas to the total exclusion of the 'logic of events'."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Allen W. Dirrim, reviewing Hillerbrand PET in ARG LV (1964) 266.



This observation is exemplified at two points where the more systematic treatments focus little attention. Most weighty: there were many non-resistant Anabaptists who did not draw systematic dualist conclusions, yet who were recognized by their brothers within Anabaptism and by their opponents as fully a part of the main stream of that movement. They do not represent a distinct group or “tendency” but are found within all the various strands of peaceful Anabaptism. While affirming the normativeness of the teaching and example of Jesus for the entire life of the disciple, rejecting the forms of reasoning which Stayer calls “internalisation” and “realpolitical” as grounds for justifying the sword, and thereby committing themselves to defenselessness,<sup>8</sup> they did not reason back from that clarity to the sweeping conclusion that the disciple of Jesus will under all circumstances reject all forms of civil responsibility. When asked whether an *oberer* could be a Christian,

- a) some said they would let God be the judge of who is Christian,<sup>9</sup>
- b) some said that taking a position on this question is not constitutive of Anabaptist identity; one may believe either way;<sup>10</sup>
- c) more of them answered situationally, “as long as they behave in a Christian way and according to the commands of God”.<sup>11</sup>
- d) some of them spelled out the situational application by being willing to stand watch but not to bear arms<sup>12</sup>
- e) some would carry weapons ceremonially, or to avoid betraying themselves as Anabaptists, but would not use them;<sup>13</sup>
- f) some would approve the acceptance of administrative functions in the civil order to the exclusion of killing<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The more current designation “non-resistant” is not only less literal as a rendering of “wehrlos”; especially it suffers for our purpose from its having been made a code designation for the systematic separatism which this essay challenges.

<sup>9</sup> Hillerbrand PET 50, note 101.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Nadler, Hillerbrand PET 46 f. and AVS 101. Or the witness may otherwise evade being drawn out; Valentin Gredig or Jacob Gross in Stayer AS 108 and 112.

<sup>11</sup> Hillerbrand PET 47 n. 87, 48 n. 90, 50 n. 101. One can rule if he is faithful to Christian love: Scharnschlager, in Stayer AS 184; Junghans Waldshuter, Stayer AS 112. If rulers would “walk the strait and narrow way and bear the cross, who would want to deny them their office?” Andreas Gut, Zürich Anabaptist in 1589. The citation by Bergmann, upon whom Hillerbrand is dependent for this quotation in PET 47, is incomplete, so that one cannot evaluate whether this is a case of virtual negation by conditional affirmation, like the Hutterite Hans Schmid’s statement of 1558: “. . . then they asked him, whether they (*die Obrigkeit*) are Christian, he answered, if they deny themselves and renounce violence and pomp . . .” A. J. F. Zieglschmid, ed. *Die älteste Chronik der Hutterischen Brüder*, Ithaca 1943 (ACHB), 387.

<sup>12</sup> Stayer AS 107 f. and Hillerbrand PET 51: Jacob Gross of Waldshut (early) and a deliberation of Strasbourg elders (1568).

<sup>13</sup> Stayer AS 323 (Mecklenburg Mennonites 1554).

<sup>14</sup> Hillerbrand PET 48 (1536) Stayer AS 161 Ulrich Gässli, 1535; four prisoners in Esslingen, 1544; 302 (Conrad von Grünberg); 316 ff. (Menno); 327 (Waterlander elders, 1581); 129 f. (actual Anabaptist officeholders in Switzerland in 1530). One may use physical force but no military service; AS 185 (Rothenfelder).



- g) some said a Christian could stay in government but not for long<sup>15</sup>  
 h) one would accept being called to the colors but instead of fighting he would plead with the enemy to make peace.<sup>16</sup>

These attitudes and others less simple to document or interpret<sup>17</sup> demonstrate sufficiently that, far from seeking hard and fast doctrinaire clarity, these Anabaptists were aware of nuance and flexibility in the shape of the question. They have in common a refusal to let the terms of their decision be dictated by a prior dogmatic definition that the civil order must always and everywhere be so seen that by definition the follower of Jesus must be excluded from it.

Clarence Bauman, whose concern is of all our sources most systematic, refers to the existence of these views as safeguarding against a "principled demonising of government"<sup>18</sup> but does not pursue their significance further. Hans Hillerbrand reports more fully, speaking of them as "the minority within the minority", treating them as a systematic embarrassment, explainable on the grounds that the witnesses in question wanted to avoid offense.<sup>19</sup>

It is at this point that the much more empirically oriented interpretation of James M. Stayer is very helpful. Stayer separates his sources carefully according to time, place, and tendency, with the result that the dogmatic dualist position is found to be much less dominant, and the less rigorous attitudes far more widespread. Stayer recognizes positions which he sometimes calls "moderately apolitical" or "undogmatic". Stayer as intellectual historian is still theoretically committed to the systematic dualist definition of the question. Therefore he holds that these moderate and undogmatic positions are ultimately inconsistent and not viable. Still, his empirical approach leads him to analyze them far more fully than Bauman or Hillerbrand, and thereby he has opened a new possibility for conversation. That these figures existed, that they in all other respects were representative of the main stream of evangelical Anabaptists, is not challenged by any of the recent historians. But what does their existence mean? Can we permit

<sup>15</sup> Stayer AS 112, Jacob Treyer.

<sup>16</sup> Stayer AS 186, Michael Ecker.

<sup>17</sup> One may be born into office but not seek it; capital punishment may be admissible while war is not (see below note 27); cf. also note 30 on the shadings of the meaning of recognizing someone as "Christian".

<sup>18</sup> GIT, 281 ff.

<sup>19</sup> "... scheinbare Zugeständnisse, . . . von dem Bestreben geleitet, . . . den antössiigen Eindruck . . . zu verwischen." Hillerbrand PET 47. Such an interpretation, disqualifying one's sources on the grounds of intent to mislead, could of course be pushed in either direction. Granting that a ruler may properly use the sword might also be such a Zugeständnis.

The value of Hillerbrand's recognition of this group is vitiated by his statement (PET 48, AVS 101 f.) that B. Hubmaier is its foremost spokesman, which he clearly is not. Hubmaier was far nearer to Zwingli's view of the sword in the Christian commonwealth than he was to the undogmatic nonresistants Teck and Gross who had to leave Waldshut during his ascendancy (Stayer AS 107 f.) or to the Stäbler he argued against in Nikolsburg.



them to be recognized as valid historical data, or must they be declared unrepresentative on the grounds of a particular doctrine of what is properly political?

Still another portion of the story which must be dealt with in the same context is the freedom with which various major Anabaptist spokesmen addressed themselves to the civil authorities concerning the exercise of their office, despite the fact that no such right of address was conceded to them. Often the subject matter was the call for religious liberty or the request for an open hearing regarding matters of theological difference for which they were being persecuted. But the pleas and the complaints were not limited to this: they included appeals for righteousness in government in broader terms (taxation, serfdom, freedom of movement). Generally they assumed that despite the differences in particular conviction regarding such matters as baptism, even despite the fact that they were being persecuted by them, the Anabaptists still considered the statesmen being addressed to be in some sense fellow Christians who could fittingly be challenged to participate in a binding conversation.<sup>20</sup> This form of address can hardly have been only a hypocritical rhetorical convention. It must therefore constitute a part of the facts needing explanation.

The case being made for toleration (“toleration“ is probably a better word than “religious liberty“, since it seldom was spoken of in terms of disestablishment or neutrality) constantly assumed that the ruler could be spoken to as a Christian.<sup>21</sup> A Christian, granted, who was not fully aware of what it would mean to be fully faithful to the teachings of Christ, but nonetheless one concerning whom the Anabaptists assumed that an appeal to the norms of biblical ethics is relevant. When asked „who will run the government if Christians do not?“ most Anabaptists answered “that is something the New Testament says can be done by the heathen.“ But seldom if ever does an Anabaptist push consistency to the point of telling a given Prince, judge or jailer that he is pagan. He rather invites him to live up to his claim to be Christian by renouncing pride, violence, and oppression. It will not do to argue that these calls for religious liberty are not representative of an involvement in the political order. For all parties to the debate, this was a political issue.

Yet another point of discriminating political involvement is represented by the occasional refusal of Anabaptists to pay war taxes. A thorough separatist dualism would exercise no discrimination among the kinds of violence which it would be ready to tolerate in the pagan order.<sup>22</sup> The Anabaptists on the other hand distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate objects for revenue raising, refusing to comply with levies speci-

<sup>20</sup> Stayer AS 174 (Hutter, Aurbacher); 184 (Marbeck); Menno dedicated his *Foundation Book* to “Pious rulers“. AS 311 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. below note 30.

<sup>22</sup> “Was ‘draußen‘ in der Welt geschieht, ist für die Täufer unwichtig.“ Hillerbrand PET 38.



fically identifiable as "war tax".<sup>23</sup> As recent American experience has again made visible, war tax objection, far from being a still more thorough abstention, is a very threatening form of political involvement.<sup>24</sup>

The other dimension of the "logic of events" which is needed, if we are to read fairly the dissenters of the sixteenth century, is the definition of what actual models of "Participation in Government" were available for their evaluation when they were asked whether such participation is a Christian calling. The review cited before continues,

"the Anabaptist attitudes toward existing secular governments are treated as inherent attitudes toward government in general without considering the policies of actual governments during the period the Anabaptist ethic was formulated."

When the tension between Anabaptist separation and responsible involvement is made a modern paradigm for systematic ethics, "responsible participation" tends to be defined in modern terms. It is assumed that the citizen has access to free public discussion, that many citizens actually have access to governmental office, and that those in office recognize an accountability to the constitution and to popular consent. This leads to a completely illegitimate modernization of the 16th century discussion. The *Obrigkeit* with which Anabaptists concretely had to deal was a closed authority structure. It was not accountable even to many of those who technically enjoyed citizenship. Before the Anabaptist movement came into being it had already decided that the *Obrigkeit* was the sovereign agent to decide how the church was to be reformed, and had declared politically illegitimate any religious dissent. Before the time of the first formal "separatist" statement, (Schleitheim, February 1527) this repression was being sanctioned by the death penalty. When then we ask what the question is which an Anabaptist is being asked, often under torture, we must contextually let *Obrigkeit* be defined with that much realism. "Is it the calling of the Christian to exercise unaccountable sovereignty, to oppress the poor, to brake the pace of the reformation of the church, and to punish with death those of another religious opinion?" Only if he is ready to admit that as a representative formulation of the question can the modern advocate of "responsible involvement" fairly use the Anabaptist negation as expressing a systematic separatism.

### *Reading through a less dualist grid*

In order to disentangle from other issues the key question we are pursuing, it will be helpful to distinguish the variety of logically possible posi-

<sup>23</sup> ACHB 514 (1579), 536 (1584), 553 (1589). 575 ff. (16 1596) cf. Frantusek Hruby, *Die Wiedertäufer in Mähren* ARG XXX (1933) esp. 185 ff.

<sup>24</sup> In the same paragraph (176 f.) Stayer says both that war tax refusal is inconsistent with letting civil government wield the sword unhindered, (i. e., that it interferes with the civil order) and that it represents the most radical form of separation from sin.



tions which could be taken on the question of the sword in the context of reformation debates.<sup>25</sup>

- A. It is possible to hold that there should be no government at all; a theoretical anarchism.
- B. It is possible to hold that among Christians there should be no government, but that apart from the voluntarily established order in the believing community, i. e., among unbelievers, Satan has established his contrary order in which the sword is present, and in fact properly characteristic of that realm.
- C. It is possible to hold that two orders of preservation and redemption exist together under the same God. In one of them the sword has no place, due to the normativeness of the work of Jesus Christ, whereas in the other the sword has a limited legitimacy, which is tested precisely at the point of its ability to keep itself within limits. The classic early Anabaptist statement of this position is that of Schleithem VI: “The Sword is an ordering of God outside of the perfection of Christ.”
- D. It can be held that the Christian, because of his loyalty to Christ, will not wield the sword, but that it is not necessarily or always the case that this will exclude him from participation in the civil order. He might govern without killing, he might stand watch without bearing arms, he might accept an office which has come to him by inheritance, or he might stay in an office which he held before his conversion, but he will probably not be able conscientiously to stay in it permanently. How long he will stay in it will be decided by the factual situation, not by a theory.
- E. It is possible to hold that, while a Christian should not (ideally, scripturally) be violent, just as a Christian should not be proud, or a usurer, or gluttonous, it is quite possible for the faithful church, teacher, or prophet to admonish in the name of Christ those who are still involved in such weaknesses. This is the position which H. Zwingli took with regard to usury. In June 1523 Zwingli had clarified with great logic and detail why it is proper that “human justice“ should fall short of “divine righteousness“ by permitting a moderate amount of usury. Yet as late as April 1525 he continued to hold that the individual who lent at excessive interest should be excluded from the Lord’s Supper.<sup>26</sup> This combination of rejecting the sin while continuing respectfully to

<sup>25</sup> Stayer is certainly correct in asking that we stay by the sixteenth century usage, “sword“, if we wish to understand sixteenth century thought in its own context, rather than seeking (or before seeking) to relate it to later or contemporary understandings of “the state“, *Obrigkei*t, the social contract, the civil order in creation, etc. “The sword“ represents the capacity of the ruler to coerce and even to kill, which is both the definitional component and the main functional content of the definition of being a ruler. “The sword“ is at the same time what a ruler does, the basis of his claim to have the divine right to do it, and the basis of his ability to do it.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.* IV Nr. 52, 25 ff. and III 349; Roger Ley, *Kirchenzucht bei Zwingli*, Zürich 1948, 38.



- admonish the sinner is probably the best description of how Menno or Marpeck looked on the Christian sovereigns whom they urged to abstain from war, capital punishment and the repression of religious dissent.
- F. It is possible to hold that suffering love including the rejection of the sword is normative for all of the life of the believer, with the single exception of such usage of the sword as is legitimated by a government. That government's legitimacy is subject to some evaluation and challenge, according to the criteria of good government which may be found in Scripture, in reason, in the history of the laws, or in the ecclesiastical doctrine of the just war. If in a given case these bounds are overstepped, the Christian citizen or soldier will refuse to serve. This was the position of the early Luther and the early Zwingli, and of the Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier.<sup>27</sup>
- G. Others may hold the righteous sword in the hands of the saints is not completely subject to the restraints of reason, due process, or the just war doctrine, since it may be used for God's own cause, which is greater than that of civil order. This was the position of Müntzer and of Münster in their respective later phases. It was the view of the late Zwingli. It may be a settled conviction, regarding the status of the regime itself, in which case (G/1) it is traditionally called "theocracy". Or it may be episodic, spasmodic, specially revealed, in which case (G/2) we call it "fanatic" or "apocalyptic". The difference between these two lies in their epistemology. With regard to the ethics of the sword, they are parallel. Or it may simply mean that since the Prince is in office by Divine Right, what he does is *eigengesetzlich*, subject to no evaluation by anyone or any norm beyond himself (G/3).
- H. Another kind of option must be identified which cannot be placed simply within the above categories because its relationship to them is modified by an additional variable, that of time.

<sup>27</sup> A special subform of view (F) would be to grant that a Christian ruler, although he would not go to war or repress the church, might enforce the death penalty. Stayer holds that this was the view of Menno until the 1550's (when he clearly began to condemn capital punishment) and of his predecessor Melchior Hofmann. It is true that Menno does refer to the "ordinary sword of justice" whose continuing function he does not intend to question. Yet the "sword" as a symbol of civil justice for Menno need not include capital punishment if we can once grant (as Stayer does) that for the "undogmatic nonresistants" it excludes war. Menno clearly writes of and to rulers as Christians. Yet he does not, in the few texts reported by Stayer, complete the logical series Christian = ruler = sword = killing, to affirm the propriety of killing by Christians on the ground that they are rulers.

"The Sword" includes killing for Sattler in Schleithem VI, which is why the Christian is excluded from that office. For the less dogmatic Anabaptists, that "the sword" would have to include killing, even if a true Christian were governing, remains to be demonstrated. Is the originality of the "undogmatic" Anabaptists that they permit the Christian ruler to kill criminals (Stayer's view for the younger Menno)? Or is it that they hold that good government does not need the death penalty (clear for the later Menno and for the others cited above)?



During the present time, the place of the believer is that of position B or C above. The separation between church and world has not only soziological but also eschatological dimensions. But this rejection of the sword in the hand of the believers, being conditioned by a particular understanding of the course of salvation history, is not a thoroughly ethical rejection. It can therefore be suspended or replaced in another epoch. At the time of the imminent intervention of God, the elect may be called by special dispensation to wield the righteous sword (G/2). This we probably have in Hut, in Hofmann, and (realized) in Münster.

Our effort to qualify the presuppositions which circumscribe the syntheses of the historian will most simply be portrayed by contrasting the various ways in which the differing positions on this scale are interpreted in relationship to one another.

It is possible on the basis of a prior dogmatic commitment to see this scale as expressing polar alternatives, in which the intermediate stages are not really conceivable or consistent. Thus those who held or hold to them are confused.<sup>28</sup> Then the interpreter will be predisposed to tighten the tension between the alternatives by denying the middle of the scale.

Once the polarity has been thus defined, the partisan of the official reformers will describe their views in the more moderate form (F) and will see the Anabaptists as characterized by the more extreme and rare positions (A and B).<sup>29</sup> The free church historian will contrast the actual practice of the protestant states (G/1 or G/3) with the more sober Anabaptist spokesmen for limited government (C and D). Perhaps there is some value in that debate, but the present study claims that more would be learned by rising above the assumptions which predetermine its form. We therefore seek to note those aspects of the picture which the polarized view tends to obscure.

The possibility of an abstention from government service is not limited to the Anabaptists. Luther calls the soldier to disobey, at the cost of suffering, if he is called to participate in what he knows is an unjust war. Every position but the absolutist (G) provides for such a possible case. "Withdrawal" is thus not peculiar to sectarians.

It is possible logically to condemn a given action in principle, and yet to continue to consider those who persist in that action as Christians, albeit misguided ones, and thereby to continue conversing with them. Thus to say "A faithful Christian cannot consistently wield the sword" is not the same as to say "Anyone who wields the sword is not a Christian", even

<sup>28</sup> Stayer is generous with the attribution of confusion to those whose sense of consistency is not systematic. Ringk is obscure (332), Denck is ambiguous and paradoxical (147), Joris equivocates (334), Junghans Waldshuter probably spoke with mental reservations (112), Menno is confused (314 ff.).

<sup>29</sup> When Stayer uses his own words to describe the separatist position he uses the language of position (B): "satanic", "damnation", . . . (23, 118, 122, 148). Yet when he uses their own words it is position (C) which the Anabaptists take.



though the critics of the Anabaptists have often refused to sense that difference.<sup>30</sup> It is a difference that lies at the heart of binding ecumenical dialogue. It may be expressed in one sense of the verb "to suffer" or "to tolerate", which designates the readiness to submit to the continuation of what really should not be. This is not a distinctively Anabaptist position: it appears as well in Zwingli's attitude toward "human justice" in the matter of tithes and interests, and in Luther's attitude (before the crisis of 1525) toward the injustices of which the peasants complained.

There begins to surface at this point something new in the history of ideas. Between the simple condemnation, "it must not be done", issuing in withdrawal, and the simple acceptance, "it cannot be helped", which justifies compromise, there arises the "it should not be" which refuses either to destroy the adversary or to withdraw from the struggle. The ethicist would call it "continuing ethical discourse in the face of value pluralism". The politologist will recognize it as a prerequisite of viable democracy.

Let us then return to our scale of options in the light of this observation. Instead of representing a logical impossibility, position (E) as just interpreted may be seen to represent a normal way for a Christian minority to participate in ethical discussion within civil society whenever Christians do not dominate the situation numerically or politically. It is the normal position on ecclesiological grounds, quite apart from the particular ethical issue of the sword.

When the issue of the sword arises, then the choice must be made between positions (D) and (F). Both are consistent sub-forms of (E), as applied in the particular context. They are nearer to one another than they are to the extremes on either side. The latter (F) is not one of unconditional involvement, since it will refuse unjust wars (Luther) and will prefer exile to letting government prescribe one's faith (Hubmaier). The former (D) is not one of withdrawal on principle, as long as the participant in government does not have to deprive his neighbor of either his life or his religious

<sup>30</sup> Here we touch only the edge of a further question worthy of far more attention. "Christian" is not a univocal term. Stayer's thorough use of "Can a Christian be in government?" as a prism to spread out the spectrum of possible answers tends to assume that it is. For some, "Christian" simply meant any non-Jewish European. Thus "there should be no authority or sword at all among Christians" (position falsely ascribed to Hans Hut, Stayer 158 and 164) could mean anarchism. At the other extreme "Christian" might mean "a member of a voluntary visible, persecuted minority community"; definition which many Anabaptists presupposed and something which many Christian rulers would not have wanted to be. Between these is the option "Someone whom I differ with yet whom I still address in the light of his claim to Christian faith." This new alternative destroys the univocality of the prism question by separating addressability from obedience. It would also be important to separate justification from obedience. Stayer classifies Luther as "moderately apolitical", near Hofmann, the young Menno, and Marbeck, thus confusing two dimensions. For the early Luther government was not very important and not very righteous, and a non-Christian might also be a decent ruler, but his reasons for this distance from the Sword were different, relating to the priority of the question of justification.



liberty. In the person of Marpeck it was compatible with noncombatant duties exercised under the civil government. In a more hospitable climate (Penn) this position is compatible with the exercise of major governmental responsibilities.

In a less hospitable context, however, the only room left is for separation (C), which however must be seen as a consistent sub-form of (D), as applied in the particular situation. In a situation where the reality of government was one whose centers of decision they had no access, which recognized no accountability to them as subjects, which denied them freedom of assembly, movement, and worship, the majority of free churchmen in the sixteenth century nonetheless rejected the temptations of both radical dualism (A or B above) and the polar alternative of righteous counter-theocracy (G/2) and continued to confess (C) that even the persecuting government, like that of ancient Rome, was not without a place in the divine “ordering“, even though “outside the perfection of Christ“. The striking fact is not that they then became separatists, for separation was imposed upon them against their will and over their protest;<sup>31</sup> the important fact is that they nonetheless in the face of persecution continued to affirm the legitimacy of the civil order and to testify to it as they could.

Two paradigmata from the sixteenth century, both of them radical, may be constructively provocative in our time. Those who esteem it desirable to transfer divine sanction from conservative to revolutionary coercion will find the peasant uprisings instructive. Those who see the contemporary challenge to Christians as being rather one of finding ways for the Christian Church in diaspora to be constructively critical in a world she cannot control may be heartened by the example of the free churchmen who refused to let the relevance of their witness be cramped by the categories of the official theologians, refused to let their criticism of tyranny be blunted by granting the ultimate autonomy of “The Sword“ as a principle of order, thereby prefiguring a democratizing, pluralizing, disabsolutizing thrust in social thought for which the language of their century was not yet ready.

Instead of remaining boxed in by a conceptual polarization which was created to defend as the only realistic option a position of privilege which churches today can in any case not retain, we may learn from them how to combine the defenselessness of the church under the cross with the persistence of a prophetic critique which refuses to be stilled by the claimed moral autonomy of the political realm.

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<sup>31</sup> Stayer, whose general reliance on the adequacy of the realpolitik/separation scale I have had to object to, occasionally grants this point: “Whatever is unappealing in his [Sattlers] spirit of alienation ought in justice to be attributed first to those who had power and used it in a devilish way“ (AS 124). Cf. as well the conclusion of his earlier article (note 6 above): “it was the world, then, that muffled the dialogue that some sixteenth-century Anabaptists had begun with it on coercion, love, and peace.“