

MARGOT KOTTELIN-LONGLEY

‘What Shall I Do? The More I Kill the Greater Becomes Their Number!’

The Suppression of Anabaptism in Early Sixteenth Century

Religion can exercise such power against nonconformists that it results in most cruel forms of persecution. The quote in the title of this article, however, demonstrates that sometimes even brute force is not enough to quell a fervent movement. The quote was uttered by the burgrave of Alzey, who, by 1530, had killed over three hundred Anabaptists in the Palatinate.¹

The Anabaptist movement was a ‘common man’s reform movement’ in Luther’s Europe. The Anabaptists wanted to reform the church according to New Testament guidelines more radically than either Luther or Zwingli were ready to do. For example, they baptised adults instead of infants, because they had observed that only adults were baptised in the Gospels, including the baptism of Jesus.² In reformation Europe any adults baptised by these reformers would have already received baptism as infants. It was this practise of re-baptising members of the Catholic Church that gave them the name ‘Anabaptists’. ‘Re-baptism’ was a heresy deserving death, and to classify these radical reformers thus made them legally subject to execution.³

1 Quoted in Bender 1984: 8. Dietrich von Schönberg was the burgrave of Alzey 1520–32. He had the Anabaptists dragged from their homes and led to the place of execution; men were beheaded and women were drowned. Those who recanted had their fingers cut off or a cross branded on their foreheads with a red-hot iron. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. I, 1955: 84–5.

2 The issue of adult baptism was only one among many. The Anabaptists had begun their protest, under Zwingli’s leadership, against church tithes. They wanted the local congregation to be able to elect and support its own pastor. Other issues, where they wanted renewal according to their understanding of the New Testament, were the Mass, the priesthood of all believers, mutual aid and accountability, non-violence and the separation of church and state.

3 Anabaptism had been classified as a heresy in Justinian’s imperial law code of 529 (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. I, 1955: 9).

In this article I will first explain what I mean by the 'Anabaptist movement'. This includes an introduction to early Swiss Anabaptism and to the way in which it was speedily persecuted by the religious authorities. This persecution caused flight and that in turn caused the movement to spread. As the number of Anabaptists increased to thousands, so did the persecution by torture and death.⁴ I will recount the stories of some Anabaptist martyrs during the course of this article. I will also look at the various justifications for the burning of heretics, as well as at the corresponding theological understanding by those who were burned. Let us now 'go back in time' to the sixteenth century.

Anabaptism: Beginning and Persecution

Anabaptism was a heterogeneous movement.⁵ The variation is partly explained by the fact that Anabaptism started independently in different parts of Europe: (1) southern Germany and Austria, (2) Switzerland and (3) North Germany and the Netherlands.⁶ Scholars have agreed that the date of the beginning of Anabaptism is 21 January 1525, because that is when the first (re-)baptisms took place in Zurich among a group of young and enthusiastic followers of Zwingli.⁷ This makes the Swiss the earliest Anabaptists.⁸ They called themselves the 'Swiss Brethren' or '*Schweitzerbruder*'.⁹

4 In more tolerant Moravia, in the latter part of the sixteenth century, there were colonies of Anabaptists numbering up to 30,000 people for a while, until persecution again drove them away (Dyck 1993: 78).

5 Scholarship has come to identify at least six different branches within it: (1) the Swiss Brethren, (2) the followers of Hut, (3) the Central German Anabaptists, (4) the *Stäbler* sects in Moravia, (5) the Marpeck circle and (6) the heterogeneous Melchiorite tradition. Stayer *et al.* 1975: 86.

6 Stayer *et al.* 1975: 86. More recently Arnold Snyder (1995: 6) has agreed that these are the three main "streams" of Anabaptism.

7 We have a first-hand account of the event in a letter written by one of the people baptised that evening. It was sent in 1530 from Switzerland to Cologne, as a response to an inquiry about the origins of the movement. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* 1987: 443; Fast 1973: 599–600; *Zwingli* 1927: 37–42, No. 108. See also Dr Leland Harder's research notes on the Kletgau letter (1985: 338–40).

8 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* calls the Swiss Brethren 'the oldest and most influential body of German-speaking Anabaptists' (Bender 1959: 669).

9 The name first appears in print in the Hutterite Chronicle in recounting events in 1543: 'In 1543 Hans Klöpfer of Feuerbach and four others united with us in the

Persecution Sets In

Persecution began very soon after these baptisms in Zurich. The first Anabaptists were arrested in February, 1525 (Dyck 1993: 46). They were threatened with torture and death if they persisted in their views. The next step was a Mandate on 7 March 1526, which stated that:

Henceforth in our city, territory and neighbourhood, no man, woman or maiden shall re-baptise another; whoever shall do so shall be arrested by authority and after proper judgement shall without appeal be put to death by drowning. (von Muralt and Schmid 1979: 78–9, No. 70.)

This Mandate was also put into practice; an Anabaptist leader by the name of Felix Mantz became the first Anabaptist martyr in Zurich in January of 1527. Mantz was drowned in the following manner: He was first trussed and taken by boat to the middle of the River Limmat, which runs through Zurich. A preacher at his side spoke kind words to him, encouraging him to recant. But then Mantz perceived his mother, Anna Mantz, with some other Anabaptists on the opposite bank, admonishing him to be steadfast in his faith. He did not recant, so he was heaved overboard. He sang with a loud voice: 'In Manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum' as the waters closed over his head.¹⁰ Zwingli thought drowning a very fitting way of executing an Anabaptist. Mantz was really fortunate though, because most Anabaptists were severely tortured first and then burned at the stake. Protestants beheaded or drowned Anabaptists, Catholics burned them alive. Ferdinand I of Austria issued a Mandate in April 1528, according to which anyone had the right to kill any person suspected of Anabaptism without a trial. Many thousands of these pacifist Anabaptists lost their lives. As the Anabaptists fled this persecution, the movement spread in Switzerland and in Germany and Austria. In Switzerland, for example, on Easter Sunday 1525, 200 people marched down the High Street of St Gall to a mass baptism at the river. (Kottelin-Longley 1997: 35.) On the same Sunday, 300 people were baptised in nearby Waldshut on the Swiss-Austrian border (Snyder 1995: 56). A Swiss Anabaptist by the name

Lord with our brothers at Schakwitz. He was previously a servant of the Word among the Swiss Brethren and lived at Pollau, at the foot of the Mayberg [mountain in Moravia]. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* 1987: 226.

10 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. III, 1957: 474. Anna Mantz is mentioned by name in Zurich court records (von Muralt and Schmid 1974: Nos. 170 a and b, 178 and 179).

of Eberli Bolt had preached so mightily in the Swiss canton of Appenzell, that 1,500 people were converted immediately. In a few years the whole canton was Anabaptist. As for Eberli Bolt, he became the first Anabaptist martyr burned at the stake on 29 May 1525.

Zurich, Basel, Augsburg and Strasbourg soon became centres of Anabaptism. Further North, the Reformation that first reached the Catholic-controlled Netherlands was in fact an Anabaptist reformation. Nowhere had Anabaptism been so widely accepted as in the Netherlands. And nowhere was the persecution as fierce: up to 2,500 people were martyred in the Netherlands (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. III, 1957: 199, 523). Most of the victims, including women, were burned at the stake.

The Martyrdom of Weynken, Daughter of Claes

Weynken was a Dutch woman, who was burned in The Hague on 20 November 1527. She had been kept in prison in the hope that she would recant her faith. An old court record narrates her story:

Weynken was arraigned before the governor and the full council of Holland. There a woman asked her:

"Have you well considered the things which my lords proposed to you?"

Ans. "I abide by what I have said."

Ques. "If you do not speak differently, and turn from your error, you will be subjected to an intolerable death."

Ans. "If power is given you from above I am ready to suffer." John 19:11.

Ques. "Do you then, not fear death, which you have never tasted?"

Ans. "This is true; but I shall never taste death, for Christ says: 'If a man keeps my saying, he shall never see death'" John 8:51. The rich man tasted death, and shall taste it forever." Luke 16:23.

Ques. "What do you hold concerning the sacrament?"

Ans. "I hold your sacrament to be bread and flour, and if you hold it as God, I say that it is your devil."

Ques. "What do you hold concerning the saints?"

Ans. "I know no other Mediator than Christ." I John 2:19. ...

Ques. "What do you hold concerning the holy oil?"

Ans. "Oil is good for salad, or to oil your shoes with." I Tim. 4:4. ...

Ques. "You must die if you abide by this."

Ans. "I am already dead." Gal. 2:19.

Ques. "If you are dead, how can you speak?"

Ans. "The Spirit lives in me; the Lord is in me, and I am in Him."
John 14:20. (van Braght 1950: 422–3.)¹¹

Weynken was condemned to be burned at the stake because she refused to change her religious convictions. The old report has it: 'She then went gladly, as though she were going to a marriage; and her face did not once betoken fear of fire' (van Braght 1950: 423). This kind of severe persecution almost wiped out Dutch Anabaptism.

How the Exercise of Power against the Anabaptists was Justified

Both religious and secular authorities thought that it was their duty to defend the Christian faith from any perceived danger. Heretics had to be warded off and the faith kept pure at all costs (Frank 1995: 125). Where deviant practices were seen as disturbing the common good, the death penalty was felt to be a fitting response for religious and political reasons.

Political Justification

The Anabaptists were one of the most persecuted groups during the Reformation, as many as 5,000 lost their lives.¹² One reason for torturing and killing them was their belief that warfare was contrary to the Gospel injunction. Their pacifism proscribed participation in the all-too-frequent military campaigns of the sixteenth century. They did not fulfil their civic duties as Heinrich Bullinger describes in 1561:

[The Anabaptists] believe that...Christians do not resist violence and do not take recourse to law. They do not use the law courts. Christians do not kill. The punishment used by them is not imprisonment or the sword, but only church discipline. They do not defend themselves,

11 The question about oil was asked later by two Dominican friars.

12 Snyder 1995: 93. Other Christians than Anabaptists also faced persecution in the sixteenth Century. Nevertheless, because the movement was so widely condemned, it faced more systematic persecution and resulting martyrdom than other Christian groups.

therefore they do not go to war and are not obedient to the government on this point.¹³

They even refused to fight the arch-enemies of the Christian West, the Turks. This kind of behaviour by the Anabaptists was seen as benefiting the enemy. They were executed for treason and for being on the side of the Turks, rather than on the side of Christian Europe. An early Anabaptist leader, Michael Sattler, was accused of this very thing in 1527 at his trial in Rottenburg:

[H]e has said that if the Turks should invade the country, no resistance ought to be offered them; and if it were right to wage war, he would rather take the field against the Christians than against the Turks; and it is certainly a great matter, to set the greatest enemies of our holy faith against us.¹⁴

Sattler responded to this accusation in this way:

If the Turks should come, we ought not to resist them; for it is written: Thou shalt not kill. We must not defend ourselves against the Turks and others of our persecutors, but are to beseech God with earnest prayer to repel and resist them. But that I said, that if warring were right, I would rather take the field against the so-called Christians, who persecute, apprehend and kill pious Christians, than against the Turks, was for this reason: the Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith; and is a Turk after the flesh; but you who would be Christians, and who make your boast of Christ, persecute the pious witnesses of Christ, and are Turks after the spirit. Ex. 20:13; Matt. 7:7; Tit. 1:16. (van Braght 1950: 417.)

An other political reason given for their annihilation was the accusation that the Anabaptists were 'revolutionaries'. The Anabaptists were very egalitarian in their theology. Anyone could receive the power of the Holy Spirit and act for God. Even women could take up leading roles in the congregation of believers. These egalitarian ideas were, once again, based on the Gospels. The Anabaptists had inherited these ideas from the

13 Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, gave this testimony in his *Der Wiedertoufferen Ursprung* in 1561: Folio 16 (quoted in Bender 1956: 10).

14 Nine charges were read against Michael Sattler at his trial (van Braght 1950: 416).

Peasants' Revolt of 1525.¹⁵ When this Revolt was crushed in 1525, any 'left over' revolutionaries, in the form of Anabaptists, were fugitives from the law. If caught, anyone had the right to execute them.

More formidable than political reasons were the *religious* ones which were given in order to justify torture and death.

A Brief History of Theological Justification

Early Church theology was irenic. The early Christians had opposed the burning of heretics, perhaps because they were the ones being burned as heretics for 200 years. Church Fathers such as Athanasius (c. 296–373) and John Chrysostom (347–407), said that Christianity should not be forced on anyone and that the burning of heretics was from the Devil (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. III, 1957: 41). Augustine (354–430) was the first theologian to advocate corporal punishment of heretics. He justified it by his rather curious biblical exegesis, for example, he took Jesus's parable of the banquet as recorded in Luke's Gospel. Several people had refused to come to the banquet, and there was still room for more guests. Luke continues the story: 'Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and *make them come in*, so that my house will be full."' ¹⁶ Augustine concluded from this verse of Scripture that it was right to use physical force against heretics who were obviously outside 'Mother Church', and who needed to be 'made to come in'.

Augustine advocated the use of force, but he did not call for the killing of heretics. It was another great theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who used his exegesis of parts of the Bible to justify the execution of heretics. He took Jesus's description of the shepherd and the flock of sheep from the Gospel of John, chapter 10. According to Jesus, there are 'thieves' and 'robbers and wolves', who unlike the good shepherd want to destroy the sheep:

All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them... The thief comes only to slay and kill and destroy...

15 The 'peasants' also had based their egalitarian demands on the Gospels. See Blickle 1987, especially section 1.2.2.: 'Theologische Begründung und evangelische Logik der Remeindereformation', pp. 59–67.

16 Luke 14:23; the whole story can be read in verses 15–24.

The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep, so when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. (John 10:8, 10, 12; NIV.)

Jesus is talking, as was his custom, in symbolic language here: the 'shepherd' symbolises Himself, the 'flock' symbolises the church and the 'thief and the wolf' symbolise false teachers, who are attacking the church. Aquinas then reverts to a very literal interpretation of the text, and asks: 'What is done with thieves and with wolves?' He answers his own question: 'Thieves you hang and wolves you club to death!' So it is 'Scriptural' to beat and kill the heretics (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. III, 1957: 41).

It was a contemporary of Aquinas, Pope Gregory IX (1227–41), who established the Papal Inquisition. In the fifteenth century, Roman Law was assimilated into German Law, and this gave the Catholic Church exclusive authority to punish the crime of re-baptism with death (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. III, 1957: 129). In the sixteenth century, the course of the trials of Anabaptists began with arrest and imprisonment. Then the 'heretic' was cross-examined by the inquisitors asking questions about the sacraments and about details of his or her re-baptism. If the questions were not answered satisfactorily, which was usually the case, the victim was racked by the executioner in the torture chamber. This sometimes happened more than once. Then both men and women were condemned to be 'executed with fire', i.e. burned alive at the stake (*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. IV, 1959: 233–4).

A Theology of Martyrdom

Why did these Anabaptists submit to torture and execution? One simple answer is that they were simply overpowered by Imperial or Magisterial troops. They did not seek martyrdom, but rather tried to escape capture whenever possible. It was just that the religious and secular authorities combined forces to root out and utterly destroy the movement. This was the reason why so many of them ended up in the hands of the executioner. The Anabaptists tried to come to terms with the fierce opposition they faced by developing a kind of theology of martyrdom.

The Anabaptists saw themselves as belonging to the long line of martyrs of the Christian Church, starting with the crucifixion of Jesus and the stoning of Stephen. As we have seen, they were also especially interested in the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In the Sermon on the

Mount they read Jesus's commandments about non-resistance:

But I say to you, Do not resist the one that is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:38–41 and 43–45; NIV.)

The Anabaptists actually followed the words of Jesus literally. Jesus did not resist or strike back. Instead he submitted to being slowly tortured to death by crucifixion. The Anabaptists followed the example of Jesus and called it *Nachfolge*. They suffered and were non-resistant to the point of martyrdom.

The Martyrdom of Michael Sattler

We have already met Michael Sattler at his trial. At that same trial he was sentenced to be burned as a heretic. We can read about the sentence he received from the extant court records:

it has been found that Michael Sattler should be given to the hands of the hangman, who shall lead him to the square and cut off his tongue, then chain him to a wagon, there tear his body twice with red hot tongs, and again when he is brought before the gate, five more times. When this is done he should be burned to powder as a heretic. (Yoder 1973: 74 f.)

Sattler, like most Anabaptist martyrs, regarded his suffering and martyrdom as part of the tribulation preceding the second coming of Jesus (van Braght 1950: 420). The Anabaptists were convinced that, as the people of God, they were at the centre of God's purposes, and that suffering and martyrdom were only temporary. The Last Day would soon come when they would be rewarded for their faithfulness, and their enemies would be condemned. They were certainly persecuted and taken like lambs to the slaughter, but they knew that that was not the end. As Jesus had risen from the dead, so they too would partake in His resurrection (Kottelin-Longley 1997: 112 f.).

Conclusion

Life was very precarious and cheap in the sixteenth century; especially in the hands of the Church. The Anabaptists were persecuted and taken like lambs to the slaughter, but they believed that it was not the end. As Jesus had risen from the dead, so they too would partake in His resurrection. The Last Day would soon come when they would be rewarded for their faithfulness. (Kottelin-Longley 1995: 112 f.)

These in the white robes, who are they and where did they come from?

These are they who have come out of the great tribulation: they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He Who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them.

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, not any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their Shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 8: 13–17; NIV.)

To them, death was a door to a better world.

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