The Limits of Confessionalization: Social Discipline, the Ban, and Political Resistance Among Swiss Anabaptists, 1550-1700

JOHN D. ROTH*

Abstract: Although historians have frequently emphasized the political, social, and religious radicalism of the Anabaptist movement, this essay suggests that in the context of seventeenth-century efforts to impose new forms of central state control over villages in the Swiss Cantons of Zurich and Bern, Anabaptism attracted new members in the countryside precisely because it preserved an older, medieval ideal of a Christian community, capable of self-regulation and self-discipline. At a time when the central authorities were seeking to take control of village *Chorgerichten* (morals courts) as institutions of social discipline, Anabaptists doctrines and practices gained support as a means of preserving the traditional ideal of a "moral community" made up of members whose disciplined lives were pleasing to both God and their neighbors.

On the afternoon of September 29, 1614, Hans Landis—a 70-year-old, self-educated farmer from the Swiss hamlet of Horgen—was led in chains to the main moat (*Hauptgrube*) at the outskirts of Zurich. There, only hours after the city's Great Council had judged him guilty of "stubborn and seditious rebellion," he spoke some final words to a hastily assembled crowd, granted the executioner's request for forgiveness, and knelt before the executioner's sword.[1]

By the time of his death, Zurich authorities were well acquainted with the gray-bearded Landis. Some twenty-five years earlier, in 1589, he, along with fourteen other peasants, had been imprisoned in the

*John D. Roth is a professor of history at Goshen College, where he also serves as the director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

1. The archival sources for the story of Hans Landis are located primarily in the Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zurich (SAZ)—with references scattered throughout the EI-7 and EII-443 signatures and the Ratsprotokollen—and in the Handschriftenabteilung of the Zentralbibliothek Zurich (ZBZ). Some of these sources have been made available in English in *Hans Landis: Swiss Anabaptist Martyr in Seventeen Century Documents*, trans. and ed. James W. Lowry (Millersburg, Ohio: Ohio Amish Library, 2003). Secondary accounts include: Paul Kläui, "Hans Landis of Zurich (d. 1614)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (Oct. 1948), 203-211; Barbara Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz: Der Umgang der Zürcher Obrigkeit mit dem Täuferlehrer Hans Landis* (Lizentiatsarbeit, Uni. Zurich, 1998-1999); S. H. Geiser, *Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden in Rahmen der allgemeinen Kirchengeschichte*, 2. Aufl. (Courgenay: Christian Schmutz, 1971), 405-410; and Cornelius Bergmann, *Die Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich bis 1660* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1916), 68-102.

MQR 89 (October 2015)

Wellenberg tower along the Limmat River on charges of spreading the heretical doctrines of the Anabaptists.[2] In the intervening years, Zurich officials had repeatedly arrested and interrogated Landis along with his coreligionists. Each time, Landis stubbornly held his ground against the arguments and threats of authorities, insisting that his only crime was that of following the simple and plain teachings of Christ.

When Landis was recaptured early in September of 1614, the exasperation in the tone of the interrogations and the protocol of the council meetings over the following weeks was palpable. Finally, on September 29, following a five-hour debate over an appropriate punishment, members of the council voted to execute the recalcitrant preacher, insisting that the order be carried out that same day.[3]

Within the sweep of early modern European history, Landis's bloody fate might easily be dismissed as a minor, almost insignificant, episode within a much larger process in post-Reformation Europe that historians have labeled "confessionalization." Introduced in the 1970s by German scholars like Ernst Walter Zeeden, Heinz Schilling, and Wolfgang Reinhard, the term "confessionalization" identifies a pattern in early modern Europe in which representatives of the territorial state sought to assert greater control over the daily lives and habits of their subjects by co-opting established forms of religious discipline (confessions, catechisms, visitations, church ordinances, etc.) and by bringing local clergy and religious practices under the authority of a central consistory.[4] Extending state control over local expressions of religious life contributed to the larger quest for "social discipline" and played a crucial role in the formation of early modern European states.

Understood in the context of confessionalization, the execution of Hans Landis could therefore be easily interpreted as simply one small instance of a larger effort by church authorities and state officials to unify religious practice in the region within the broader, inexorable process of state-building.

---

2. SAZ, EI-7, 3, Nr. 44; Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz*, 28.

3. Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz*, 62.

4. See, for example, Ernst Zeeden, *Das Zeitalter der Glaubenskämpfe, 1555-1648* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973); Wolfgang Reinhard, "Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 10 (1983), 257-277; Heinz Schilling, "Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich: Religiöser und Gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620," *Historische Zeitschrift* 246 (1988), 1-45; and *Kirchenzucht und Sozialdisziplinierung im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Heinz Schilling (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994). For an overview of more recent literature on confessionalization, see Ute Lotz-Heuman, "Confessionalization," in *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. David M. Whitford (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2008), 136-157.

Such a conclusion, however, would be highly misleading, if not entirely wrong. Between 1550 and 1700, precisely when the process of "confessionalization" was supposedly at its peak, Anabaptist dissidents like Landis were not only surviving in the rural villages around Zurich and Bern, but they were flourishing, attracting new converts and finding sympathetic supporters despite sustained, and frequently violent, efforts by state and religious authorities to eradicate them from the region. Rather than serving as a symbol of state control over local religious life, the execution of Hans Landis in 1614 testifies instead to the frustration of Swiss officials in their efforts to control the religious beliefs and practices of their rural subjects and underscores the limits of confessionalization as a strategy of state-building in the first half of the seventeenth century.

This essay seeks to explain the persistent attraction of Anabaptism in the Swiss territories of Zurich and Bern during the century following the Reformation. Unlike most literature on Anabaptism, however, it will attend more to the social and cultural context of the Anabaptist movement than to the substance of its theology; and unlike most literature on confessionalization, its primary focus will be more on the religious and moral ethos of the village than on the activities of the state. In so doing, I hope to challenge standard descriptions of seventeenth-century state-building as a unilinear, inexorable process, and to call attention to ways in which religious convictions continued to find powerful expression in the lives of Swiss villagers independent of state control.

CONFESSIONALIZATION IN THE SWISS TERRITORIES OF ZURICH AND BERN

From the moment of Luther's opening challenge to Rome in the fall of 1517, the path of theological and ecclesiastical reform that we know as the Reformation was profoundly shaped by political, as well as theological, interests. As the Reformation unfolded, none of its major protagonists envisioned a break with the fusion of church and state so integral to the medieval corpus christianum. Instead, they argued, the universal church of Rome was to be reconstituted on a territorial basis with each prince assuming the role of *summus episcopus* (supreme bishop) over an essentially nationalized church. Already in 1527 the Diet of Speyer acknowledged the sovereignty of the territorial prince in matters of religion, thus laying the groundwork for the principle of *cuius regio, euius religio* ("whose region, his religion") that was to define European church-state relations well into the eighteenth century.

Historical realities, of course, were much messier than legal principles. The Schmalkaldic Wars of the 1540s and 1550s presaged a series of

protracted and destructive religious wars that dominated European history for at least another century. Within the shifting kaleidoscope of religious, political, and dynastic interests, Lutheran and Reformed princes sought to secure their power externally by forging strategic alliances with their peers, and internally by extending the central authority of the state over the particularistic remnants of feudalism in the villages and countryside.

In the Swiss territories of Bern and Zurich, political power was concentrated not in the hands of a dynastic family, but in a complex array of urban councils, guilds, and standing committees, often with overlapping jurisdictions and competing competencies. Throughout the late sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century the city councils of Zurich and Bern—following the pattern of the territorial princes—sought to consolidate and extend their authority by rationalizing their governance structures, systematizing their legal codes, training an emergent cadre of civil servants, and imposing a new measure of conformity on the administration of the surrounding rural communes.[5]

Here, as in other German Protestant states, control over the church was a central part of this larger strategy. In both Zurich and Bern, the council charged a series of powerful politician-theologians with the task of codifying Reformed theology, professionalizing the clergy, and eradicating all forms of heterodoxy or dissent from their regions. For the latter task, the methods were relatively simple: in addition to taking careful note of church attendance, baptisms, and marriages (or the lack thereof), ecclesial authorities required local pastors to preach regularly on the divine authority of the state; following each sermon, they were to read aloud all newly-promulgated decrees or regulations; pastors were also ordered to assist local authorities in enforcing the law; and they were to file regular reports to the consistory regarding the moral and theological character of their parishioners, noting especially any vestiges of Catholic "superstition" or other expressions of heresy or sedition.[6]

But even though these strategies of confessionalization are relatively easy to document in Bern and Zurich, it is far less clear that the edicts were actually enforced. Indeed, if we shift our attention from the formal aspirations of the councils and consistories to the reception of their mandates in the countryside, the picture quickly becomes much more complicated.

---

5. Cf. Bruce Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 146-190.

6. Ibid., 228-260.

Local Forms of Social Discipline: The *Chorgericht*

Sources on rural life in early modern Europe are notoriously scarce and frequently difficult to interpret since they often originate within the instrumentalities of the state. One local institution, however—the *Chorgericht*, or morals court—serves as a very useful window into local attitudes and behaviors inasmuch as it was controlled by villagers and designed to enforce local standards of morality and ethics. Originally intended as a court for addressing marital conflicts, the Chorgericht in the villages of Zurich and Bern had gradually expanded its oversight in the late Middle Ages to include a wide range moral shortcomings, including fornication and adultery, drunkenness, gambling, loitering, and communion avoidance. A small group of local notables made up the court, led by a Chormann (or *Ammann*)—a villager elected to the position for a fixed term of office. Significantly, the local priest (or, in the post-Reformation era, pastor) could participate in meetings of the Chorgericht, but only as an adviser or clerk, not as a voting member. Punishment of wrongdoers came in the form of local sanctions, usually a combination of social pressure, shame, fines, or even imprisonment, always with the explicit hope that the offender would respond with remorse and moral improvement.

According to historian Heinrich Richard Schmidt, the Chorgericht embodied the inextricable connection in late medieval village culture between individual morality and corporate well-being: since individual acts of immorality threatened the spiritual and physical well-being of the entire village, any community that tolerated immorality was in danger of divine retribution. It was the task of the Chorgericht to identify such offenses and to enforce compliance with the goal of restoring moral and spiritual health to both the individual and the community alike.

In his analysis of some 4,500 cases of moral offense that came before the Chorgerichten of two Bernese villages between 1527 and 1800,[7] Schmidt makes a number of very significant findings. First, according to Schmidt's research, the Chorgericht had become a focus of considerable tension within the village by the early seventeenth century. Originally an institution of *local* control, the Chorgericht increasingly came to serve as an instrument of the Bernese City Council and consistory for enforcing its own policies on the village, policies that were often alien to local custom and tradition. In 1587, for example, the consistory—acting on behalf of the City Council of Bern—issued an edict that claimed for itself the right to appoint the head of the Chorgericht, thereby ensuring

7. Heinrich Richard Schmidt, *Dorf und Religion: Reformierte Sittengericht in Berner Landgemeinde in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: G. Fischer, 1995).

that its interests would be adequately represented in matters of local discipline. The mandate also standardized punishments in accordance with the infractions committed and it admonished the Chorgericht to serve as a watchdog over any hints of seditious or heretical behavior that might threaten the authority of the state.[8]

Paradoxically, however, just as state officials were seeking to rationalize and strengthen the authority of Chorgericht, its actual effectiveness as a tool of social discipline seems to have steadily eroded. Contrary to the hopes of state and church officials, general morality in the villages appears to have declined, rather than increased, during the course of the seventeenth century. In Zurich, for example, reports of clerical immorality, illegitimate births, empty churches, and—most troubling of all—expressions of religious dissent preoccupied the attention of the consistory throughout the entire century. In the Bernese Chorgerichten, reported incidents of church avoidance, sexual immorality, disorderly living, drunkenness, verbal aggression, and outright violence within the villages more than doubled between 1640 and 1690.[9]

Thus, just when the state was attempting to exert greater control over the social discipline of villagers, it would appear as if the incidence of both civic and religious nonconformity was on the rise and that traditional institutions for regulating moral behavior of the villagers—the church and Chorgericht—were ceasing to be effective in these roles. "It is a surprising but unequivocal fact," writes Schmidt, "that all levels of society remained at a certain distance from the church [during the course of the seventeenth century] and that . . . the village itself . . . continuously opposed the church." To the degree that moral discipline in Bern had occurred at all, he concludes, "it was not social disciplining of the state, but the Christian-inspired *self*-regulation of village communities."[10]

Against the backdrop of this context, the story of Hans Landis and the spread of the broader Anabaptist movement in the territories of Bern and Zurich can be understood in a new light.

8. Ibid., 1-25.

9. Ibid., 147ff. The first peak can be attributed to efforts to implement the Chorgericht Statute of 1587; but the second wave is more difficult to explain. Schmidt suggests that an economic crisis brought on by a sharp decline in grain prices and the Swiss Peasants' War of 1657 helped to foster this growing alienation from church and church authorities. It is difficult, of course, to determine whether these figures reflect an actual change in behavior or a more aggressive policy of moral regulation.

10. Ibid., 384, 400.

The Persistence of Anabaptism in Switzerland

Anabaptist dissenters had been a thorn in the flesh of Protestant reformers almost from the very inception of the movement in Zurich in the early 1520s. The first Anabaptist leaders had been intimate friends and followers of Ulrich Zwingli, and their break with his reform in January of 1525—symbolized by the ritual of adult baptism—had the intensity and pathos of a painful family breakup. Already in 1526 the City Council of Zurich instituted the death penalty for anyone teaching Anabaptist doctrines, a law first enforced in January of 1527 with the execution by drowning of Zwingli's former colleague, Felix Manz.[11]

Such measures had the effect of suppressing the public face of the movement; but pockets of Anabaptist—or Swiss Brethren—sympathizers persisted, especially in the western and southwestern regions of the territory. In March of 1530 the Zurich City Council issued a comprehensive mandate (*Das grosse Sittenmandat*) that set the tone for the city's official position on religious dissent for the next century. In particular, Article 9 of the mandate condemned the Anabaptist rejection of the oath and the sword as leading to the "destruction of all authority," and it detailed heavy penalties for anyone who joined the group or gave assistance to known Anabaptists.[12] In the following year, Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, published his first major treatise against the Anabaptists, *Von dem unverschampten Fraefel*, an exposé of the anarchic consequences of Anabaptist theology, the basic themes of which reappeared three decades later in his magisterial polemic, *Der widertöufferen Ursprung* (1560).

Although the actual number of Anabaptists executed within the territory remained relatively small, authorities continued to be haunted by the fear of new outbreaks of religious dissent. Throughout the remainder of the sixteenth century the Bernese and Zurich city councils, along with their Reformed consistories, issued repeated directives to local officials ordering them to identify all villagers who avoided communion, refused to baptize their infants, advocated pacifism, attended private services, or failed to attend fealty oath ceremonies.[13]

Sources regarding Anabaptism in Zurich and Bern are relatively quiet during the middle decades of the century, but there is clear evidence of

---

11. The best collection of primary sources in English on these events can be found in *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, ed. Leland Harder (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985).

12. For a copy of the 1530 Sittenmandate, see *Actensammlung zur Geschichte der Zürcher Reformation in den Jahren 1519-1533*, ed. Emil Egli (Zürich: Canton und Stadt Zürich, 1879), 702-711.

13. Mark Furner, "Lay Casuistry and the Survival of Later Anabaptists in Bern," *MQR* 75 (Oct. 2001), 429-470, offers a detailed study of local resistance in Bern.

renewed tensions in the early 1580s when local authorities began to report with alarm on the growing presence of Anabaptist missionaries from the Netherlands and Moravia in the region and a corresponding wave of emigration out of the region.[14]

On July 4, 1585, representatives from Zurich, Bern, Basel, and Schaffhausen agreed on a series of measures to combat the renewed threat of religious heterodoxy in the region.[15] The joint mandate they issued was remarkably frank in acknowledging the need for thoroughgoing reforms in the training, discipline, and moral behavior of their own clergy, especially in the rural regions. The primary focus of the mandate, however, focused on strategies for eradicating the Anabaptists. Anyone attending an Anabaptist service or supporting their cause was subject to a series of economic sanctions, ranging from fines and banishment from the commons, to the loss of inheritance rights and confiscation of property. In extreme cases, the government might consider life imprisonment, exile, or sentencing into service as a galley slave.[16]

The consequences of the 1585 mandate and the subsequent reforms of the Chorgericht in 1587 appear to have been quite mixed. On the one hand, the measures underscored a new level of resolve by authorities in their fight against Anabaptism and a willingness to join with neighboring territories in a collaborative plan of action. Yet nothing in the archival sources suggests that the mandate came anywhere close to accomplishing its goal of eradicating the Anabaptist movement. Indeed, throughout the 1580s and 1590s church and state officials complained regularly that their directives were being ignored at the village level and that Anabaptists were not only gaining a sympathetic hearing in the countryside but were steadily growing in number.[17]

Subsequent mandates followed in 1596, 1601, and 1608, each admonishing local authorities to renewed diligence in their efforts to eradicate the Anabaptists.[18] Three years later, in 1611, the Zurich council

---

14. Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich*, 41; see also Arnold Snyder, "Research Note: Sources Documenting Anabaptism in Zürich, 1533-1660," *MQR* 69 (Jan. 1995), 95-96.

15. ZBZ, "Eidgenossen Abschiede vom 4. Juli 1585" (Nr. 718); Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich*, 55.

16. The mandate, however, explicitly cautioned against the use of capital punishment in responding to the Anabaptists, fearing that it would strengthen the dissidents in their opposition and open themselves to criticism from Catholic territories who were then being censured for their own harsh treatment of Protestant minorities in their lands.

17. One official even accused the Anabaptists of "praying that God would send pestilence, wars and other plagues" in order to distract the government's attention, a tactic that he vowed would fail.—ZBZ, B163, 82v.

18. For a useful overview of these and other repressive measures, see Hanspeter Jecker, "'Biss das gantze Land von disem Unkraut bereinigt sein wird.' Repression und

issued yet another mandate against the Anabaptists, this time opening the door to the use of corporal punishment and even the possibility of the death sentence.[19] Yet another mandate in 1613 echoed this new resolve and likened the stubborn persistence of Anabaptism in the region to a "cancer" that was slowly destroying the body of society itself.

Yet it appears as if little actually changed. Despite repeated and sustained measures to repress the Anabaptist movement in the countryside—including the use of spies, property confiscation, fines, and forced baptisms—the Zurich City Council repeatedly noted outbreaks of Anabaptist converts in such districts as Birmensdorf, Bremgarten, Wädenswil, Horgen, and Hirzel throughout the seventeenth century, and Bernese authorities reported similar pockets of dissent throughout the region. Indeed, in the fall of 1612, the magistrate of Wädenswil even reported to Zurich authorities that "they have such a large following that no one wants to lay hands on them." [20]

Just how many Anabaptists were living in the territories of Zurich and Bern at any given time is extremely difficult to determine. Anabaptist congregations kept no membership records, and the line between those villagers who were openly sympathetic to the movement and those who were full-fledged members is often blurry in the official documents. But in its broad strokes, the picture is relatively clear: in the face of repeated mandates against them, including the confiscation of property and threats of imprisonment, expulsion, and even death, religious dissenters continued to persist, and even flourish, in the countryside surrounding Zurich and Bern. Even after authorities gained control over the village Chorgericht, incidents of civil discord and a general disregard for the moral teachings of the church seem to have grown rather than declined in the course of the seventeenth century.

How are we to account for this phenomenon? Why, at precisely the moment when the city councils of Zurich and Bern were creating a rationalized administrative system to eliminate all forms of religious dissent, does it appear that Anabaptism continued to find strong support in the countryside? The answers to these questions reveal much about

---

Verfolgung des Täufertums in Bern—ein kurzer Überblick zu einigen Fakten und Hintergründen," in *Die Wahrheit ist Untödlich: Berner Täufer in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Rudolf Dellsperger and Hans Rudolf Lavater (Bern: Schweizerischer Verein für Täufergeschichte, 2007), 97-132.

19. Following longstanding juridical tradition, the council sought to distinguish between religious and political crimes, suggesting that capital punishment was appropriate only for offenses against the authority of the state. Thus, the death sentence could be pursued, "not on account of their faith, but because they act seditiously, are perjurers and deceive subjects, making them disobedient against their lords."—Quoted in Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz*, 38.

20. Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich,* 68-102.

the ongoing power of religion in the social and political life of early modern Europe.

ANABAPTISM AS A VEHICLE OF RESISTANCE TO STATE-BUILDING

On the surface, it might be tempting to explain the persistent popularity of Anabaptism in these Swiss territories in functionalist terms: Swiss peasants supported the Anabaptist movement not because they were persuaded by Anabaptist teachings, but because their association with radical dissent offered a convenient vehicle for resisting the extension of state authority into the countryside. In this sense, support for Anabaptism was not qualitatively different from other expressions of antisocial behavior that corresponded with the demise of the traditional Chorgericht as documented by Heinrich Richard Schmidt.

Historian Roland Hofer has argued this point explicitly in his study of Schleitheim, a region north of Zurich where Anabaptists found a refuge of safety well into the seventeenth century.[21] Citing numerous examples where villagers in Schleitheim refused to carry out mandates against the Anabaptists or cooperate with state officials, Hofer concluded that "within the village community of Schleitheim, communal solidarity and family relations were stronger than governmental efforts to isolate individual villagers as Anabaptists through legal measures."[22] In his view, local solidarity with the Anabaptist movement was simply a convenient way of expressing resistance to an intrusive government (*Herrschaftsdurchdringung*).

Other evidence of similar resistance to state efforts to eradicate Anabaptism abounds. Virtually every mandate issued against the Anabaptists in the course of the seventeenth century, for example, contained clauses that imposed heavy fines on villagers who offered food and shelter to Anabaptist refugees, refused to bring Anabaptist children entrusted to their care to the church for baptism or instruction, warned them when state spies or armed "Anabaptist hunters" (*Täuferjäger*) appeared, or leased land from Anabaptists who had been forced to flee. On at least three occasions sympathetic guards helped Hans Landis and his fellow dissidents successfully escape, the most spectacular occasion occurring in 1613 when it was reported in the

---

21. Cf. Roland Hofer, "Anabaptists in Seventeenth Century Schleitheim: Popular Resistance to the Consolidation of State Power in the Early Modern Era," *MQR* 74 (Jan. 2000), 123-144. For a broader argument linking Anabaptism with a readiness to resist authority see Winfried Schulze, *Bäuerliche Widerstand und feudale Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), 115-127.

22. Hofer, "Anabaptists in Seventeenth-Century Schleitheim," 130.

countryside that "an angel" had freed Landis and two others in Solothurn while they were being transported to the French ambassador to serve a sentence as galley slaves. A local Reformed clergyman reported they had been received in their home village with "great jubilation" (*großem jubilieren*).[23] Following each escape, Landis appears to have simply resumed his preaching activities unhindered by local authorities for several more years until he was arrested again.[24]

Clearly, the Zurich City Council was sensitive to this dangerous affront to its authority; but the council was also aware that public opinion tipped heavily in favor of the Anabaptist cause. Thus, when it finally decided to impose the death penalty on Landis, the council took the very unusual step of executing him immediately without any public fanfare whatsoever. In the late Middle Ages, executions of criminals were generally understood to be public spectacles—dramatic morality plays that provided entertainment, a demonstration of state power, and a salutary warning to all those in attendance. In Landis's case, however, the council clearly did not want to attract any public attention to their action, in the knowledge that the execution was likely to evoke a negative public reaction.

When, within a year of Landis's death, an anonymous booklet appeared in the countryside arguing that matters of faith could not be settled by coercive force, the council again reacted allergically. Even though the pamphlet, entitled *Christian Thoughts* (*Christliche Bedenken*), consisted only of a series of quotes from the early writings of Luther, Zwingli, and other Reformation stalwarts, the council aggressively sought to confiscate all copies and to prosecute the printer.[25]

The rapid response of the Zurich City Council seems to have prevented the booklet from spreading widely; but they were not able to squelch other forms of subtle resistance. Shortly after Landis's execution, for example, a song offering a detailed and heroic account of his final hours began to circulate within the villages outside of Zurich. When the

---

23. SAZ, EII-437, 1042.

24. Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich,* 88.

25. On the basis of research by historian Hanspeter Jecker, we now know that the author of the text, Heinrich Boll, had heard of Landis's execution from an extensive report written by Rudolf Egli, a well-known Anabaptist leader from the area. Egli had witnessed Landis's death and had composed his recollections shortly thereafter in response to a request by an Alsatian Anabaptist who wanted a firsthand account to share with his congregation. At Boll's prompting, Egli sent a copy of the account to Boll along with a request that he tear it up after reading it so that it did not fall into the hands of authorities. Thus, reports circulating about Landis's execution helped to bring into print form arguments for religious toleration that had hitherto existed only in manuscript form. See Hanspeter Jecker, *Ketzer, Rebellen, Heilige: Das Basler Täufertum von 1580-1700* (Liestal: Verlag des Kantons Basel-Landschaft, 1998), 274-275.

forty-six-verse hymn made its way into print, it virtually guaranteed that Landis would be remembered as a folk hero and a symbol of popular defiance long after the state's effort to silence him.[26]

ANABAPTISTS AS EXEMPLARS OF THE TRUE CHRISTIAN LIFE

That religion can serve as a vehicle for political interests—for the lowly as well as the powerful—can scarcely be disputed. But though this may explain some of the popular support for Anabaptism, political self-interest was clearly not the only reason why Swiss villagers were attracted to the movement. Many also seem to have found in Anabaptism an authentic expression of Christian life that was missing in the state church.

Reformers like Luther and Zwingli burst into public awareness by drawing on powerful currents of religious ideals and aspirations that went far deeper than political calculations. The institutions of medieval Catholicism, they claimed, had thwarted the free movement of the Spirit and the Word of God. Catholic theology had imprisoned common people within a material world of saints, pilgrimages, and good works, buttressed by the dead weight of tradition and the clergy's monopoly over the sacraments. The reformers, by contrast, preached the liberating message of spiritual freedom. And many who joined the Reformation cause regarded these words of grace, forgiveness, and faith as genuine liberation.

Less clear in Protestant theology, however, was the link between the inward experience of God's grace and the daily life of the believer. Indeed, in his later years, Luther wondered despairingly if the Reformation had been a failure, a fear seemingly supported by scores of visitation reports filtering back to the consistory regarding the theological ignorance and low moral standards of rural Protestants.[27] If these reports were to be believed, the reformation of doctrine had not yielded a reformation of life. Leaders of the Swiss Reformation—Bullinger, Myconius, Grynaeus—shared these same concerns. Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, the Reformed consistories of Zurich and Bern were almost obsessed with improving the educational and moral quality of the clergy while responding to a

26. The hymn first appears as No. 132 in the 1645 edition of the *Ausbund*, a songbook still in use today by the Amish, and is included in the dozens of reprints of the hymnbook that have appeared since then. For a translation of the hymn, see Nadine E. Holder, *Landis German Song* (Morgantown, Pa.: Masthof Press, 1998).

27. The most dramatic summary of this argument, sparking a lively historical debate, can be found in Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

steady stream of reports that lay people were not sending their children to catechism and were skipping communion, sleeping through sermons, and ignoring the church's teachings on gluttony, temperance, and marital fidelity.

It is not surprising, then, to discover in consistory minutes and interrogation transcripts repeated evidence that the strongest appeal of Anabaptism derived less from its doctrinal subtleties than from its insistence that true faith must bear the fruit of moral rectitude and the ethical earnestness of those already committed to the cause.[28]

The story of Hans Landis again offers an insight into this aspect of the Anabaptist appeal. Already in the interrogation following his first arrest in October of 1589, Landis had complained about the low moral standards and the absence of discipline within the state church.[29] Five years later, at a public disputation organized in the village of Wädenswil,[30] he insisted that the Anabaptists "don't teach anything other than what the bible instructs and what the apostles did." Instead of responding to the interrogators theological question, Landis wished to focus on practical morality, citing the conversion of a well-known villager who had earlier given himself over to "laziness, gluttony and drunkenness" (*saß, fraß und soff*) until he encountered the Anabaptists and resolved to change his life in accordance with the teachings of Scripture. When one of Landis's colleagues, a man named Gallus, challenged the authorities to grant them free reign in the village of Hirzel to see which church would attract more people, Landis injected a cautionary—if rather immodest—note into the discussion, claiming that already "more people are running to us than we would prefer."[31] A report from the Obervogt of Horgen in 1608 echoed these concerns, lamenting the inability of the local Reformed church to slow the growth of Anabaptism in his region and acknowledging that much of the problem stemmed from the general decline in morality and piety that was all too evident in the local state church. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, were widely-known for their moral integrity and their

28. Ernst Müller, *Geschichte der bernischen Täufer*, 107-131, provides numerous examples from interrogations in which the appeal of the Anabaptists in the canton of Bern during the seventeenth century was clearly linked to the seriousness with which the Anabaptists practiced church discipline.

29. Kläui, "Hans Landis of Zurich," 204-206, offers a concise summary of this testimony.

30. Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich*, 84-88, offers a detailed description of this encounter.

31. Quoted in Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz*, 41. One Anabaptist, a man named Bachmann, reported that he had visited many other religious groups in Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, and that he had learned about all sorts of convictions; but he said that nothing gave his conscience peace like the Anabaptists. "God led me to these brethren," he concluded, "and I want to remain with them for as long as I have breath." — Ibid.

readiness to follow Christ in daily life. Some had even established their own communal property whose income "helped them to support their poor and attracted others to join their group."[32]

If anything, references to the Anabaptist reputation for high moral standards as an explanation for their popular appeal became even more numerous throughout the course of the seventeenth century. In 1644, for example, authorities in Aargau reported that villagers were attracted to the Anabaptists because "they actually followed what was taught [in the Apostles' Creed]" and refused to allow the godless to participate in communion.[33] In December of 1647, Hans Stentz, a recent Anabaptist convert in Kulm, argued in his defense that "the Anabaptists prove the power of the holy gospel through their works, but many among us [Reformed] do not." The court records noted that Stentz "has nothing against our teachings, only the conduct of our life."[34] A year later Martin Burger explained his defection from the Reformed church because of its toleration of immorality and because "there was no piety in the church. One in front, another behind was always sleeping. . . ." At first he had gone to the Kapuzinern in Lucern but found them to be just as lax. Then he visited the Anabaptists and discovered "a peaceful and upright people who . . . gladly gave their alms, who loved each other, who refused to swear, who were not immoral despite what [the authorities] said about them."[35] Burger acknowledged that he was not well versed in theology; and he thought most of the Reformed doctrine was good. But "it was bad that the teaching and living did not always agree with each other."[36] When her local pastor asked the sister of Uli Fischer of Walistolen if it were true that she was about to become an Anabaptist, she responded by saying "no, I'm not good enough to become an Anabaptist; they would likely not take me in since the Anabaptists are a very holy people." Her brother Uli had been a dissolute and godless person, she reported, but after he became an Anabaptist "it was just like when the Apostle Paul was illuminated (*erleutchtet*) and converted." The pastor at Lauperswyl complained in 1670 that many in his village think that "the prayers of the Anabaptists are much more powerful than ours … therefore some of ours have them pray for their sick." The number joining their fellowship grows every day, he reported, to the point where "in some villages they outnumber our own." Even worse, he grumbled,

32. Bergmann, *Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich*, 76.

33. Müller, *Geschichte der bernischen Täufer*, 105.

34. Ibid., 107.

35. Ibid., 108-109.

36. Ibid., 110.

when they were brought before local authorities for disciplining "their testimonies moved some members of the Chorgericht to tears."[37]

These same sentiments found more formal expression in academic circles as well. Between 1672 and 1693, Reformed theologians in Switzerland published no less than four weighty books against the Anabaptists, each openly acknowledging the troublesome attrition of their membership to the Anabaptist cause and each referring explicitly to perceived moral laxity within the Reformed church as a persistent—if misguided—reason for the defections.[38] In the preface of a 1693 volume commissioned by the Bernese government as a practical handbook for local clergy, Georg Thormann openly conceded that "people in the countryside have such a great respect for Anabaptists that many look upon them as holy, as the salt of the earth, as the true chosen people, as the genuine essence of all Christianity." "It has gone so far," he continued, "that many have the notion that a . . . Christian and an Anabaptist are one and the same thing, and that you could not be a . . . true Christian unless you were—or became—an Anabaptist." Over the next 610 pages, Thormann sought to disabuse his readers of the notion that the exemplary moral conduct of the Anabaptists was sufficient reason to leave the Reformed church.

Clearly, rural villagers in the territories of Zurich and Bern supported the Anabaptist movement not only as a symbol of resistance to the state, but also because they were attracted to the quality of their Christian lives. Although they may not have always been able to articulate a formal theological rationale for their actions, the moral example of their Anabaptist neighbors provided a compelling reason to support the movement even in the face of government sanctions and persecution.

ANABAPTIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE: *ON THE CHRISTIAN BAN*

There is yet at least one more dimension to the popular appeal of Anabaptism, even in the face of official opposition, one that situates the distinctive themes of Anabaptist theology in the communal traditions of early modern European village life. Here the power of religion in social

37. Ibid., 130-131.

38. Johann Heinrich Ottius, *Annales Anabaptistica* (1672); Friedrich Seyler, *Wiedertäuffer-Gheimnusse* (Basel, 1680); Salchli in 1693; and Georg Thormann, *Probier-Stein* (Bern, 1693). Johann Jacob Wolleb followed with his *Gespräch zwischen einem Pietisten und einem Wiedertäufer* (Basel, 1722). The Salchli text is described in greater detail and reproduced in Hanspeter Jecker and Heinrich Löffler, "'Wie dem schädlichen Übel der Täufferey zu remedieren sey.' Zwei Briefe des Pfarrers Johann Rudolf Salchli von Eggiwil im Emmental (1693f.). Transkription, Übersetzung und Erläuterung," *Mennonitica Helvetica*, 28/29 (2005-2006), 89-146.

life—as opposed to the private dimensions of the religious experience—takes center stage inasmuch as Anabaptism offered a collective dimension to faith not fully represented in either medieval Catholicism or the various Protestant traditions.

If the high point of Catholic worship was the communal reenactment of the drama of Christ's passion in the ritual of communion, Protestant worship tended to focus on the interiorized and subjective reception of God's gift of grace within the heart of each individual believer. To be sure, the covenantal emphases in Reformed theology had initially held out the ideal of a redeemed, holy community, but as Bruce Gordon has noted, second-generation reformers "were much less sanguine about the possibility of creating a godly society. They knew the elect were few and that the ordinances of the church and state were essentially designed to keep human conduct in check."[39]

Here Anabaptist theology took on a distinctive form. In contrast to the privatizing, individualistic impulses within Protestantism, Swiss Anabaptists clearly linked salvation to the gathered, visible church. For the Anabaptists, the gift of God's grace included a corporate dimension—membership in the visible church. In their understanding, baptism signified not so much a mystical union with the invisible body of Christ as entrance into an alternative social and political reality, one characterized by concrete practices such as an economics of mutual aid, an egalitarian approach to leadership, an ethic of love and nonresistance in human relations, and a commitment to honesty that made oaths unnecessary.

Reinforcing the boundaries separating this reconstituted Anabaptist community from the "fallen" world was their practice of mutual admonition, or church discipline. At the point of their baptism, members of the congregation pledged themselves to give and receive counsel from the group—following the pattern outlined in Matthew 18—promising, ultimately, to submit to the wisdom of the larger body. Thus, much like a monastic order, Anabaptist congregations sought to give corporate expression to the ideal of Christian holiness; church discipline, including the possibility of excommunication and the ban, was the means to that end.[40]

---

39. Gordon, *The Swiss Reformation*, 229.

40. Ervin A. Schlabach, "The Rule of Christ Among the Early Swiss Anabaptists," (Ph.D., Chicago Theological Seminary, 1977) provides the best general overview of the Swiss Brethren understanding of church discipline. See also Franklin H. Littell, "What Butzer Debated with the Anabaptists at Marburg: A Document of 1538," *MQR* 36 (July 1962), 256-276. Menno wrote extensively on the subject of church discipline and the ban. See the following treatises published in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956): "A Kind Admonition on Church Discipline" (1541), 407-418; "A

Details about the actual practice of church discipline within Anabaptist congregations remain somewhat hazy. Apart from a number of theologically-oriented treatises, most of what we know about Anabaptist understandings of church discipline has generally come to light in the context of intramural disagreements about just how severely the ban should be applied.[41] The recent discovery of a manuscript in the Zurich Staatsarchiv, however, sheds new light on Anabaptist understandings of the ban and offers a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of Anabaptist survival and growth during the seventeenth century. The manuscript in question bears the title "On the Christian Ban and Excommunication of Disobedient and Evil People from the Pious and Faithful in the Congregation of God. How and Why It Should Be Exercised." It has been found in three copies, the earliest of which is dated 1575, with Thomas Meyer of Rätterschen, near Lindau on the Bodensee, identified as its author.[42] Of the two other extant versions of the manuscript, one is undated (but probably originates in the early seventeenth century), and the other is dated 1634, suggesting that the manuscript retained interest well into the seventeenth century.[43]

Meyer's treatise is noteworthy because the author consciously targeted his rhetorical appeal to a lay Reformed audience. In contrast to

---

Clear Account of Excommunication" (1550), 457-476; "Instruction on Discipline to the Church at Franeker (1555), 1043-1045; "Instruction on Discipline to the Church at Emden" (1556), 1050-1051; "Instruction on Excommunication" (1558), 959-998; and "Reply to Sylis and Lemke" (1560), 1000-1015. The scripture index of *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, vol. 4: *Drei Täufergespräche*, ed. Martin Haas (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), 485, lists dozens of references to Matthew 18; and the issue also emerged in the public disputation with Pfistermeyer (1531), at Zofingen (1532), at Bern (1538), and again at Frankenthal (1571).

41. On the one hand, for example, Pilgram Marpeck accused the Swiss Brethren of using the ban indiscriminately, as a weapon in defense of legalistic and wooden interpretations of Scripture; and several Hutterite sources claimed that the Swiss Brethren leaders had issued so many mutual excommunications that no one was clear where spiritual authority resided. At about the same time, however, the Swiss Brethren ran afoul of their Dutch Mennonite cousins because they rejected the stricter practice of marital shunning advocated by Menno Simons and several other leaders in the Netherlands. Marpeck, who consciously sought to find a compromise between what he perceived to be the excessive legalism of the Swiss Brethren and the individualism of the spiritualists, defends a via media position in his "Admonition of 1542," *The Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck*, trans. and eds., William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 295-297.

42. All copies can be found at: STAZ, EII 444; 143-163, 227-240, 242-259. I am very grateful to C. Arnold Snyder of Conrad Grebel University College for sharing his careful transcriptions of these manuscripts. Efforts to learn more details about Meyer's biography or the circumstances that gave rise to the essay have thus far been frustrated, but the arguments are clearly Anabaptist in substance, and I have identified the owner of the earliest manuscript, Jagli Hürliman of Burg, as a confirmed Anabaptist.—Cf. J. P. Zwicky von Gauen, ed. *Schweizerisches Familienbuch* 3 (Zurich, 1949), 204, 238, 241.

43. This manuscript is associated with the name of Hans Herman Zydler of Herisau, as yet unidentified in my research.

other Anabaptist documents from the era that are frequently cast in a defensive and apologetic mode, Meyer adopted a more gentle tone of thoughtful persuasion. His treatise seeks less to defend than to convert; and it does so in language and an argumentative style that a lay audience could not easily dismiss.

The central arguments of the manuscript can be summarized as follows:

1. The use of the ban in Anabaptist circles is no different in principle from the common practices of guilds or handworkers, who also need to hold wrongdoers accountable and to encourage their members to do right. Since the focus of biblical discipline concerns the soul, however, its application in the church should be even more imperative.

2. Scriptural references to discipline and the ban are numerous and the biblical teaching is consistent. Citing the concordance of the Zurich Bible, Meyer moved freely between the Old and New Testaments, listing admonitions on the purity of the church and highlighting numerous biblical examples of church discipline in practice. He particularly emphasized the passage from I Corinthians 5 with the apostle Paul's dire warning against those who partake of communion "unworthily."

3. All of the reformers, Meyer insisted—Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Luther, Bucer, "and other learned people"—had defended church discipline in their early writings. Lamentably, they later "turned back on Scripture and on their own teachings, and separated themselves from the fellowship of God."

4. The toleration of open sinners in the congregation imperils not only the spiritual welfare of the individual, but that of the entire community. Meyer frequently used metaphors like yeast, wild fire, and floods to underscore the baneful effects of individual sin on the spiritual well-being of the congregation as a whole. Because God's wrath will be directed not only against the sinner, but also against all those who tolerate sin, the health of the community must always take precedence over the natural inclination to overlook the immorality of a spouse, friend, or family member.

5. Meyer scoffed at arguments that the exercise of church discipline will drive common people out of the church and into the taverns. Such claims, he insisted—appealing to a latent sense of anticlericalism in his readers—serve only to shame the clergy (*die Gelehrten*) for their timidity and ineffective teaching.

6. Finally, the goal of the ban, Meyer claimed, was not to banish the disciplined member forever from the community, but to encourage repentance and conversion. As soon as the wayward member expressed penitence, he should be readmitted. Meyer contrasted this model of

biblically-based, restorative discipline with the state's current practice of threatening, persecuting, and even killing people who were trying to be sincere Christians.

In making his case, Meyer wrote in a simple, clear Swiss dialect; he anticipated, and responded to, counterarguments; he evoked images and metaphors that a lay person could easily understand; he appealed to the original teachings of the reformers themselves; and he called on churchgoers to assume responsibility for the morality of their own communities. Far from being an eccentric teaching of a radical sect, church discipline in Meyer's treatment was biblical, reasonable, and normative for a healthy and faithful Christian community.

Undoubtedly, many Reformed villagers remained unconvinced by Meyer's exposition of godly discipline as the foundation of the true church. But his arguments—whether expressed formally in this treatise or more casually in conversations and sermons—could not have been easily dismissed by serious-minded villagers who were troubled by the erosion of local institutions of social discipline. At a time when control of the Chorgericht had been ceded to the state, when the Reformed church seemed increasingly powerless to regulate the moral behavior of its parishioners, and incidents of crime and disregard for the law were clearly on the rise, villagers had good reason to believe that the spiritual health of the entire community was imperiled—allowing immorality to go unchecked was inviting the wrath of God, not just on the individual but on the entire community.

For these pious villagers, the attractions of Anabaptism were clear: they not only practiced a life of exemplary behavior based on Christian teachings but they also retained a means of enforcing local discipline at a time when the Chorgericht was losing its authority as an means of regulating communal norms.

Thus, ironically, the most radical of the surviving Reformation traditions became a means of preserving *traditionalist* values, an option that restored some measure of local control to religious life and practice while preserving an ideal—deeply rooted in Reformed theology—of a moral community. As a fundamentally conservative force in the Swiss countryside, Anabaptism attracted new members precisely because it offered a model of virtuous living, communal solidarity, and local control over the spiritual and moral fate of members – all of which were being threatened in the course of the seventeenth century.

If such conclusions bear themselves out with more careful scrutiny of the primary sources, then the Swiss Brethren story in Switzerland should complicate—in a creative and productive way—the standard picture of

confessionalization or "social discipline" in which the institutions of church and state are the primary actors in the drama.

CONCLUSION

In the long run, it may seem that the city councils of Zurich and Bern ultimately emerged victorious. By the opening decade of the eighteenth century, it appears as if most Anabaptists had fled the region, seeking refuge elsewhere in isolated hamlets scattered throughout the Emmenthal, the Jura mountains, or the Palatinate. And, from the larger perspective of European history, the story of state-building remains an appropriate leitmotif for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Throughout Europe absolutist monarchs persisted in their efforts to bring every aspect of life—including religion—within the jurisdiction of their centralized state bureaucracies.

Yet evidence from the Swiss territories of Zurich and Bern would suggest that historians should exercise caution in how they interpret the role of religion in this process. Here, as we have seen, the process of confessionalization was neither unilinear nor inexorable. Despite the efforts of urban councils to appropriate religious institutions and doctrines as a tool for controlling their rural subjects, the experience of Anabaptism suggests that the role of religion in this process was much more complex—that religious beliefs and practices could just as easily be a catalyst for resistance against this process. In the face of sustained efforts by government and ecclesiastical officials to imprison Anabaptist leaders and impose punitive measures against their supporters, Anabaptist congregations continued to gather in secret and even to flourish.

The reasons for the ongoing popular appeal of Anabaptism in Zurich and Bern resist simple explanations. Some were likely attracted to Anabaptism simply as a means of expressing social deviance; here the appeal of Anabaptism was more functional than theological. But others were clearly drawn by the movement's sincere effort to embody Christian ideals in their daily lives: the Anabaptists seemed to offer a more compelling vision of Christian discipleship than that of the state church. And, at an even deeper level, Anabaptism appealed to Swiss villagers because it preserved an older, medieval ideal of a truly Christian community, capable of self-regulation and self-discipline, and aspiring to gain God's favor in difficult circumstances by the quality of its moral life. At a time when the authority of the Chorgericht as a local institution of "social discipline" was rapidly eroding, Anabaptism doctrine and practice preserved the traditional ideal of a "moral

community" made up of members whose disciplined lives were pleasing to both God and their neighbors.

POSTSCRIPT

In the early eighteenth century local religious resistance to the authority of the state and the Reformed church in Zurich and Bern did not disappear. Instead it persisted in the more private, individualistic, and diffuse form of Pietism, a religious impulse that shared many of Anabaptism's concerns for a pious and disciplined life, stripped, however, of the corporate dimensions of church discipline. Pietism internalized the regulation of moral behavior, granting to the sensitized conscience of the individual believer a role once held by the visible church or the local community. Late in the seventeenth century, Jacob Ammann, a Swiss Reformed convert to the Anabaptist movement, became convinced that Anabaptists were succumbing to the Pietist impulse to internalize their faith, opting for a "sweet Jesus" rather than the costly path of suffering discipleship. In 1693, Ammann led a renewal movement to restore stricter practices of church discipline and the ban to Anabaptist groups in Switzerland. In language far less winsome than that used by Thomas Meyer, he reasserted themes of biblical consistency, moral clarity, and a conviction that the sins of the individual—left unattended—imperiled the spiritual health of the entire community. The appeal of this Amish renewal movement—like that of the Anabaptists themselves—was precisely its *conservative* impulse. Indeed, in the Amish today we can hear an echo, not only of seventeenth-century Anabaptist theology, but also of the moral economy of village life in early modern Europe.