

Church, State and Politics: Cooperation or Protest? Today's Challenges in the Light of Zürcher Reformation
Response from an Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective

I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

On behalf of the Mennonite World Conference, I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting us to respond to Meehyun Chung's keynote address from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. It is noteworthy that this can be done at a conference which seeks *"to examine the theme of church, state and politics from the approach of Zwingli's theology."*

Indeed, in 1523 Zwingli had still written *"Where there is faith, there is freedom."*¹ Unfortunately, however, this freedom that he claimed for himself was one that he was no longer willing to extend to alternative convictions as the Reformation progressed.

Thus, for example, in 1527 he could state that *"The Anabaptists, who really should finally be cast to the ravens, are disturbing the peace of the pious among us. But I believe that the axe has been laid to the root of that tree."*²

The very fact that this Anabaptist voice still exists today suggests that either Zwingli's axe was not sharp enough, or that there have always been people who have defended this tree's right to exist.

Your invitation, to offer a Mennonite perspective on today's topic represents to me a similar validation [of the Anabaptists' right to exist] on the part of the WCRC. Because indeed, the theme of "Church, State and Politics" was exactly one of the reasons why Zwingli had become increasingly estranged from a circle of radical like-minded friends, the later Anabaptists – and why he wanted to use the axe...

II. "STEPS TO RECONCILIATION"

Before I elaborate further, let me remind you that this invitation is also a sign that the relationship between Reformed and Mennonite churches today is no longer the same as it was in Zwingli's time. Centuries of opposition have increasingly turned into mutual respect.³ Sometimes we have spoken of "steps to reconciliation".

¹ Huldreich Zwingli's sämtliche Werke (ZSW) hg. von Emil Egli und Georg Finsler. 1905ff, Volume II, 80. («Wo der gloub ist, da ist fryheit»).

² ZSW IX, 8. On this, see also my blog entry on the new Zwingli-Film «Wenn Zwingli doch bloss mehr auf seine Frau gehört hätte» «If only Zwingli had listened more to his wife», URL: <https://de.bienenberg.ch/blog/zwinglifilm>.

³ For a chronology of the most important events see: Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund (Hg.), Christus ist unser Friede. Schweizer Dialog zwischen Mennoniten und Reformierten 2006-2009, Bern 2009, v.a. 18-38.

This is true both for the global and for the national level.⁴ In Switzerland, the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich has played a pioneering role in this. As early as 2004, Ruedi Reich, then President of the Church Council, has captured impressively in words for the Reformed side what "steps to reconciliation" could mean.⁵

"The Reformed Churches and the Anabaptist movement are all essentially branches on one and the same bough of the great Christian tree. Both are offspring of the Reformation. Right from the start however they went their separate ways, so that a tragic rift ran through the Zurich Reformation, painful traces of which are discernable to this day. [...]"

We confess that that persecution was [...] a betrayal of the Gospel and that our Reformed forefathers were in error on this issue.

We affirm that the judgement against the Anabaptists [...], which discards their teaching [...] as unbiblical and refuses any communion with them, is no longer valid for us [...]"

We acknowledge the faithful of the Anabaptist tradition as our sisters and brothers and their churches as part of the body of Christ [...].

*It is time to accept the history of the Anabaptist movement as part of our own, to learn from the Anabaptist tradition and to **strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue.** [...]"*

The Swiss Mennonites accepted this confession with heartfelt thanks and gladly complied with the request for forgiveness. I see today as a continuation of what was said already 15 years ago - namely, that out of the strengths and weaknesses of our two traditions we learn together and from each other *"in order to strengthen our mutual testimony through dialogue."*⁶

⁴ For the International Dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference 1984-1989 and the Dialogue between the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and the Conference of Mennonites in Switzerland 2006-2009, see Footnote 3. For a general overview see Art. "Konfessionsgespräche, bilaterale" in the online-encyclopedia "Mennonitisches Lexikon" URL: [https://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=top:konfessionsgespraeche-bilaterale&s\[\]=dialog](https://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=top:konfessionsgespraeche-bilaterale&s[]=dialog).

⁵ Michael Baumann (Hg.), Steps to Reconciliation. Reformed and Anabaptist Churches in Dialogue, Zürich 2007, 81f. „Reformierte Kirchen und Täuferbewegung sind Zweige desselben evangelischen Astes am grossen christlichen Baum. Beide sind Kinder der Reformation. Doch ihre Wege haben sich bereits am Anfang getrennt. Ein tragischer Riss geht durch die Zürcher Reformationsbewegung und hat bis heute seine Spuren hinterlassen. (...)"

Wir bekennen, dass die damalige Verfolgung nach unserer heutigen Überzeugung ein Verrat am Evangelium war und unsere reformierten Väter in diesem Punkt geirrt haben.

Wir halten fest, dass das Urteil über die Täufer, das die Lehren der Täufer als unbiblisch verwirft und mit ihnen jede Gemeinschaft verweigert, für uns nicht mehr gilt und wir bestrebt sind, das Verbindende zu entdecken und zu bestärken.

Wir anerkennen die Gläubigen der täuferischen Tradition als unsere Schwestern und Brüder und ihre Gemeinden als Teil des Leibes Christi (...)

Es ist an der Zeit, die Geschichte der Täuferbewegung als Teil unserer eigenen Geschichte zu akzeptieren, von der täuferischen Tradition zu lernen und im Dialog mit den täuferischen Gemeinden das gemeinsame Zeugnis des Evangeliums zu verstärken."

⁶ A.a.O., 83f., Zitat 82.

And so, returning to the topic: In her four parts on Zwingli, Barth, feminism and Korea, Meehyun Chung said much that also takes up Anabaptist accents. Let me now address and deepen some of those accents.⁷

III. ANABAPTIST EMPHASES ON CHURCH, STATE AND POLITICS

1. The Voluntary Nature of Faith and Church Membership

Some Anabaptist convictions that were controversial in the Early Modern period have, in the meantime, prevailed in many—although not all!—parts of this world. Here, I am thinking about the Anabaptist insistence on the **voluntary nature of faith and church membership** and the **freedom of faith and conscience** associated with it. The Enlightenment, the rise of individualism and the growth in multicultural diversity has led Christians in some places to become minorities, even in the so-called “Christian West.” Anyone who wants to introduce “*Christian values*” into politics and society – for example, in the struggle for the rights and dignity of the weak and marginalised—will increasingly need to be prepared to do so without state support and possibly even with social resistance. Such convictions are becoming costlier in terms of energy, time and money. The first Christians and many Anabaptists recognized this, as do many Christian minority churches know it until today (e.g. the EYN church in Nigeria!). We all can learn from these groups.

We will also need to reassess how what I have called “Christian values” can flow into politics and society. Magisterial church traditions have deeper experiences in cooperation and interaction between church and political authorities. Anabaptist circles, by contrast, have a history which has been more shaped by protest, social separation, and noncompliance.

Only together will we find appropriate balances of cooperation **and** separation, participation **and** noncompliance, support **and** resistance.

2. New Approaches to the Christian Faith in Place of Compulsory or Habitual Participation

With the decline of all forms of compulsory or habitual participation, we as Christian churches must find better and more credible ways to create new, viable **entry points to the Christian faith** for people. It presupposes that we create vessels in which faith can be nurtured in sustainable communities, reflected upon critically, and lived openly in and vis-a-vis the world. Here traditional Anabaptism seems to have found ways, even as a minority, to develop models of faith that outsiders viewed as credible and attractive. In the future, the Church will be more dependent on women and men who have the gift of making visible in their very person how the life-changing power of the Gospel of God's love and mercy can find expression in human experience. It is through such people that others will come to faith!

⁷ See Mennonite World Conference Document «The ‘Anabaptist Tradition’ Reclaiming its gifts, heeding its weaknesses» URL: https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/teaching_resource_jecker_en.pdf.

3. “Seek the Welfare of the City” !

This model of faith often included a remarkable willingness on the part of many Anabaptist women and men to “**seek the welfare of the city,**” even when—as in Jeremiah 29 – that city was foreign and **hostile** to them. They did this, above all, in the context of simple neighborly help and especially as care-providers – midwives, country-doctors. They did this at places where there was unmistakable – and otherwise unaddressed - need. The emphasis on care of neighbors shows a strong parallel with Zwingli and the Zurich Reformation - early Anabaptism cannot deny its theological roots!

The relevance of this point for the present is obvious: Christian churches will increasingly need to go to hot spots of need, which nobody— until now—has addressed. They will do so on their own initiative and beyond their own comfort zone, without privileges, without state support, and often without applause and recognition.

4. “Do Good to Them” - Just Peace and the Rejection of Lethal Violence.

Throughout the centuries, the most controversial aspect of Anabaptist theology in relation to the state was its focus on the renunciation of lethal violence—including a **rejection of the death penalty, the oath, and military service**. This was often the decisive factor for their challenge of so-called “Christian civil authorities.” Much more than today, civil authorities in the Early Modern period, were involved in the exercise of the temporal sword at virtually every level. From an Anabaptist perspective, civil authority and the temporal sword were indeed part of “*the divine order*” —but they called it an ordering of God «*outside the perfection of Christ*”. In the Old Testament God had often ordered the restraint of “evil with evil.” In Christ, however, God had shown his people a more sustainable – but also a more costly – way of dealing with conflict, hatred and violence. Anabaptists have borne witness to *this* way many times. Repeatedly, they paraphrased texts like Romans 12, like Hans Seckler in 1527 does here in a very typical way:

“What kind of Christians would we be if we wanted to take revenge on those who persecute us? We have not come to know Christ in such a way that we should inflict pain and evil on those who harm us; rather, we should do good to them. This is what we want to do as long as we live.”⁸

Anabaptists consistently answered the question whether a Christian could participate in government in a way similar to Hans Träyer in 1527:

*“A Christian may well **be** a magistrate; but he will not **remain** one for long.”⁹*

Today, as you know, governmental functions extend across a much broader spectrum of concerns, including civilian matters that have nothing to do with the temporal sword. In this

⁸ Staatsarchiv Bern (StABE), A V 1453, Nr. 7. Abdruck in QGTS III, Nr. 1052. „Was werend wir für christen, wan wir ess rechen wetten an die, so uns ferfolgen. Wir haben Christus nit also glernet, das wir solen argss und bessess dun denen, so uns leytz duont, sunder wir sellen in guotz duon. Dass wend wir ouch tun, diewil wir leben.“

⁹ StABE A V 1453, Nr. 2. Abdruck in QGTS III, Nr. 343. «Ein christ mag ein oberer sin, aber nit lang blyben.»

respect, meanwhile even Christians in peace churches find there are numerous paths of political responsibility open to them. But the Anabaptist challenge remains highly relevant for the still pressing questions worldwide of violence and injustice—and how these must be answered from a Christian perspective.

Anabaptist non-participation and noncompliance (Acts 5:29!) should not necessarily be seen as “apolitical” or as shirking responsibility. The argument that the only effective response in the face of injustice and war is to “assume responsibility” by intervening with military methods and lethal force – is fatal.

Examples from the Anabaptist story make it clear that non-violent action taken to prevent or to rebuild can contribute in decisive and lasting ways to peace and justice and demonstrates that in these areas we have by no means exhausted the possibilities.¹⁰

IV. CONCLUSION

Leonhard Ragaz, a Reformed theology professor at the University of Zurich, considered that Anabaptism could contribute significantly to a renewal of church and society. In 1909 he wrote:

“In some respects the Anabaptists wanted a more radical conversion to the Gospel [...] than the other Reformation. [...] They were serious about the priesthood of all believers. [...] They understood the Sermon on the Mount. They took seriously the person of Jesus. They drew the social consequences of the gospel, they preached and practiced brotherhood and social justice. [...] In them the spirit of a new time appears [...]”¹¹

Unfortunately, as Mennonite congregations we have to confess that in many respects we have lagged far behind the insights I have outlined here; sometimes Christians from other traditions are much further along than we are.

Which makes it all the more crucial and hopeful that we commit ourselves to “strengthening our mutual testimony through dialogue.”

That brings me to my concluding remarks. It is likely not very well known that we are holding our conference here in Horgen in a region where well into the 17th century some of the most intense disputes took place between the Reformed authorities and the Anabaptists

¹⁰ Cf. for the concept of «responsibility to protect» (R2P) with the three areas of responsibility to prevent, responsibility to react and the responsibility to rebuild Dirk Rademacher and Ines-Jacqueline Werkner, *Protecting People - and Losing Just Peace?* Zurich 2013. From a peace church perspective cf. Fernando Enns, Gerechter Frieden zwischen Interventionsverbot und Schutzgebot Das ethische Dilemma der Gewaltanwendung (2013) URL: <https://friedensbildung-schule.de/sites/friedensbildung-schule.de/files/anhang/medien/fbs-responsibility-protect-449.pdf>

¹¹ Leonhard Ragaz, *Der christliche Glaube (Dogmatik)*, Erstfassung der Vorlesung WS 1909/1910, S. 443 (zitiert in: Markus Mattmüller, *Leonhard Ragaz und der religiöse Sozialismus. Eine Biographie*, Bd.1, Zollikon 1957, S. 209f.).

who had a strong local presence here.¹² Those disputes ended in 1614 with the last execution of a Zurich Anabaptist, Hans Landis who lived just a few kilometers from here. The result was the definitive expulsion of all Anabaptists and, unfortunately, the end of all dialogue. Continuation of that dialogue on equal footing would have been essential for all in avoiding future one-sidedness. It is a sad fact that this dialogue has been impossible for centuries, but it is a reason for gratitude and hope that it is now back on track.

Thank you very much!

Trad.: John D. Roth / Joe Springer

Hanspeter Jecker
Fachstelle für Geschichte und Theologie des Täufern
Bienenberg
CH-4410 Liestal (Schweiz) | Fon +41 61 906 78 17 | <http://www.bienenberg.ch>

¹² James W. Lowry (ed.), Hans Landis – Swiss Anabaptist Martyr in seventeenth Century Documents, Millersburg OH 2003. See for example the interrogation with 15 Anabaptists in the Wädenswil castle in January 1613 on pp. 20-53.