

# The Radical Reformation: The Anabaptists

Anabaptists, or rebaptizers, were members of a variety of 16th - century religious groups that rejected infant baptism. Since they believed that only after an adult had come to faith in Christ should he or she be baptized, they taught that converts who had been baptized in infancy must be rebaptized. Also known as the Left Wing of the Reformation and the Third Reformation, it includes all reforming elements not identified with the magisterial reformation. Common to all its participants was disappointment with moral aspects of territorial Protestantism and the rejection of some of its doctrines and institutions. While various interlocking historical connections and doctrinal variations limit the validity of typological and ideological classifications, several main groupings of radicals have been identified: Anabaptists, enthusiasts, spiritualists, and evangelical rationalists.

Anabaptists held the church to be the congregation of true saints who should separate themselves from the sinful world. Their theology was highly eschatological, and they claimed direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. The Anabaptists refused to take oaths, opposed capital punishment, and rejected military service. Their beliefs made them appear subversive and provoked persecution. Many of the Reformers disclaimed them, regarding them as fundamentally opposed to the ideas of the reformation.

## Overview

In Zurich, Conrad Grebel performed the first adult baptism on Jan. 21, 1525, when he rebaptized Georg Blaurock in the house of Felix Manz. Anabaptism spread to southwest Germany, Austria, Moravia, along the Danube, and down the Rhine to the Netherlands. Numbering less than 1 percent of the population, the Anabaptists were for the most part of humble social origin. Among their leaders were Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Jacob Hutter, and Hans Hut.

In 1534, militant Anabaptists, inspired by radical **Melchior Hofmann**, seized control of the city of Munster. Led by Bernt Knipperdollinck, Jan Mathijs, and Jan Beuckelson, better known as John of Leiden (c. 1509 - 36), they drove out all Protestants and Roman Catholics. John set up a theocracy, became king, and established polygamy and communal property. After a 16 month siege, the bishop of Munster recaptured the city and executed the rebels. **Meno Simons**, a Dutchman, restored the reputation of the Anabaptists through his moderate and inspired leadership. His followers have survived and are known as **Mennonites**. The **Hutterian Brethren** are descendants of the group led by Hutter. The **Amish** are an outgrowth of the Swiss Mennonites and take their name from Jacob Ammann,

## Anabaptists

The Anabaptist movement had a varied cast of characters. From it has evolved the **Free Church** tradition. From Luther to twentieth century scholar Karl Holl, the opinion prevailed that Anabaptism began with revolutionaries and spiritualizers such as the Zwickau Prophets and Thomas Munzer and reached its logical conclusion with the violent Munsterites. In the 1940s Harold S Bender inaugurated a new era in American Anabaptist studies. Using primary sources and following up directions indicated earlier by C A Cornelius and other Europeans, Bender distinguished between Anabaptists and revolutionaries. He placed Anabaptist origins in the circle of Conrad Grebel, which left Zwingli's reformation when Zwingli compromised its biblical basis. From Zurich the movement was spread by missionaries from Switzerland to Austria and Moravia, South Germany, and the Low Countries. Bender described the movement as the logical culmination of the reform begun but left unfinished by Luther and Zwingli. Its principal characteristics were discipleship, biblicism, and pacifism. Beginning in the late 1960s scholars challenged and, to a considerable measure, reoriented Bender's findings. They described a pluralistic rather than a homogenous movement with several points of origin and a multiplicity of reforming impulses.

## **Swiss Antibaptism**

Anabaptism in Switzerland developed from Zwingli's early supporters. These future radicals included the Grebel circle, which gathered in the home of Andreas Castelberger for Bible study, and priests from the outlying towns of Zurich. For different reasons the urban and rural radicals became disillusioned with Zwingli's reform. Seeing the Bible as an alternative authority to Rome, the Grebel circle desired Zwingli to proceed rapidly to purify the city's religious establishment of such corruptions as the Mass. When Zwingli allowed the city council to determine the speed of reformation, it seemed to the radicals the substitution of one oppressive authority for another. The radical movement developed social as well as religious dimensions when its members joined forces with rural priests such as Simon Stumpf at Hongg and Wilhelm Reublin at Wittikon, who sought to establish self-governing Volkskirchen in the rural communities, independent of Zurich's central authority, both religious and civil. The rebaptisms which occurred first on January 21, 1525, and from which come the name Anabaptism, originally expressed an anticlerical opposition to civil and religious authority outside of the local parish rather than a Free Church theological concept.

Ultimately the attempts to become a mass movement failed and there emerged the idea of the church of the separated, persecuted, and defenseless minority. The Schleithem Articles of 1527, edited by Michael Sattler, consolidated this Swiss Anabaptism. Its goal was not the purification of existing Christianity, as it was for the early Zurich radicals, but rather the separation of congregations of believers from the world. Thus at Schleithem first emerged the idea of a "free church." These Swiss Brethren came to be known for their legalistic approach to the Bible, a salvation manifesting itself in the creation of separated congregations, and baptism which symbolized that salvation and made the baptizand a member of the congregation.

## **South German Anabaptism**

In spite of the mutual practice of adult baptism, Anabaptism in South Germany was a quite different movement from the Swiss Brethren. South German Anabaptism stems from the reformulation of ideas from Thomas Munzer by Hans Hut and Hans Denck (c. 1500 - 1527). Reflecting a medieval, mystical outlook, Munzer envisioned the inner transformation of persons through the Spirit and an accompanying external transformation of the entire society, with the newly transformed individuals acting in revolutionary fashion to usher in the kingdom of God. This revolution, along with Munzer, died in the May 1525 massacre of peasants at Frankenhausen. Hans Denck's concept of inner transformation was pacifist in expression, with focus more on the renewal of individuals than of society. This inner, transforming Christ served Denck as an alternative authority both to the Roman hierarchy and to the learned exegesis of the Reformers. Positing the inner Christ as ultimate authority made Denck less than absolute in his approach to adult baptism and the written word, both positions which brought upon him the criticism of the Swiss Brethren.

Hans Hut understood the inner transformation to be accomplished through the experience of both inner and outer struggle and suffering. Hut modified Munzer's revolutionary outlook, commanding the transformed believers to keep the revolutionary sword sheathed until God called for it. Unlike the Swiss Brethren, Hut's practice of rebaptism was not to form separated congregations, but rather to mark the elect for the end-time judgment. Hut's movement gradually died out following his death in a jail fire.

A Hut legacy continued through several metamorphoses. One form developed in Moravia, out of the conflict in the congregation at Nikolsburg between the pacifist Stabler (staff bearers), influenced by Hut and Swiss Brethren refugees, and the Schwertler (sword bearers), the majority party under the influence of Balthasar Hubmaier, who had established a state church form of Anabaptism in the city. Forced to leave Nikolsburg in 1529, the Stabler pooled their few possessions as a survival necessity. This community of goods, which became the movement's trademark, soon received a theological justification, making it a social expression of the inner mystical transformation of believers envisioned by Hut. Following the dispute-filled early years Jacob Hutter's strong leadership from 1533 to 1536 consolidated this Anabaptist form. His name still identifies the Hutterites in the twentieth century.

## Moravian Anabaptism

Hutter was a Tyrolese who had learned the hatters trade, from which he took his name (the German word for hat is Hut). He became leader of the Tyrolese Anabaptists, and to escape persecution organized a migration of his followers to the greater safety of Moravia. He remained in the Tyrol, but was called to Moravia to settle the conflicts caused by the arrival of the newcomers, which had aggravated the discord that was endemic among the Moravian Anabaptists. Convinced of his divine mission to lead the Moravian groups, he eventually succeeded in having his claims recognized. He also believed, and induced his followers to agree, that they were the true church, outside of which there was no salvation.

Ferdinand I continued his efforts to suppress the Anabaptists, and in 1535 they were expelled from Moravia. They had nowhere to go, and suffered great hardships as homeless wanderers. This was the common fate of the Anabaptists in that period. Hutter, urged by his followers to look out for his own safety, returned to the Tyrol. He believed that suffering was the inescapable lot of the chosen and would lead to their eventual triumph. Captured by the Austrian authorities, he remained steadfast under torture. On February 25, 1536, he was put to death by burning.

Persecution failed to break the spirit of the Hutterites or to destroy their organization. In 1536 they decided to divide up into small groups and seek homes and work. The nobles, who had been reluctantly compelled to expel them the previous year, were happy to receive them back, though they were careful to avoid open defiance of the law. The Brethren were able to rebuild their old communities, establish many new ones, and set up a systematic and effective missionary organization, the best one in Europe at the time. The missionaries were persecuted without mercy; four-fifths of them were executed. The Moravian communities were subject to another period of severe persecution from 1547 to Ferdinand's death in 1564. This was followed by a period during which they were left alone to a great extent and were able to carry on their proselytizing activities, which were often accompanied by a sense of proud and intolerant self-righteousness and self-assurance. One reason for this attitude was the number of different sects that developed around them in Moravia; according to a Venetian traveler who visited the area, there were thirteen or fourteen different ones in Austerlitz alone.



Even within the Hutterite group there was dissension and a lack of charity. The preachers were domineering and exclusive; the members were in constant conflict with each other; and the use of the ban, a regular feature of Anabaptist communities, was carried to such extremes among the Hutterites that the excluded members were even refused food and drink. Nevertheless, the prosperity of the Hutterites and the degree of toleration they enjoyed proved very attractive to other religious radicals, who visited them and made attempts to unite with them. These included Greeks, Italians, and Poles.

By 1572 the Hutterites had reached the height of their success and prosperity, with perhaps as many as thirty thousand baptized adults and a flourishing economy. In that year the tide turned when their protector, Lord Liechtenstein, died without heirs. In 1576 the emperor sold his domains to a member of a devout Catholic family, who proceeded to take energetic measures against the heretics in and around Nikolsburg. His work was completed in the seventeenth century by the combined efforts of the Jesuit order and the Austrian government. Thousands died in the persecution; according to a chronicler, they were torn to pieces on the rack, burned, roasted on pillars, torn with red-hot tongs, shut up in houses and burned in masses, hanged on trees, killed by the sword, drowned, starved in prison, and so forth. They were forced to live in caves and pits, in wild forests, in rocks and caverns. Eventually they were obliterated in Moravia, but they have continued to exist in other countries, including the United States.

Something should be said about the economic and social organization of Hutterite communism. Its motivation was not economic but religious. Community of goods was seen as an expression of fellowship, of brotherly love. Only if all things were held in common could selfishness be overcome and the true imitation of Christ attained. The Hutterite organization was anything but individualistic. The community of the faithful was the true church, outside of which nobody could find salvation, and to which each individual owed complete obedience. The basic unit in their communities was the household, which normally included several hundred persons living in one building under a head officer known as a householder. All

members ate in a common dining room; nurseries, sickrooms, and schools were also shared in common. Outside of such personal effects as clothing and bed linen, there were no individual possessions. Marriage to an outsider resulted in expulsion from the community, and young women were sometimes forced into marriages that were distasteful to them.

The head of the entire Hutterite community was the officer known as the chief bishop. Under him were ministers of the Word, or elders, and ministers of necessities, or deacons. Preachers were chosen by the whole community and had much authority. Thus the Hutterian Brethren present one of the most highly organized religious communities of the time. If it did not flower into a model of brotherly love, it did undeniably achieve a remarkable economic prosperity. The Hutterites raised the largest crops in the area and bred the best horses. Their craftsmen were similarly outstanding.

Another form of the Hut legacy developed in South Germany around Pilgram Marpeck. Although he left his native Tyrol after adopting Anabaptism, and while he was forced further to move several times because of his Anabaptist views, Marpeck's skills as a civil engineer enabled him to live in relative security. Marpeck's view was not widely held and therefore is not normative for Anabaptism; but he did develop a mediating position on the Bible, critical both of the legalist Swiss and of spiritualist views. Rather than the radical social separation of the Swiss Brethren, Marpeck held to a separation of church and state which did not withhold all cooperation by believers.

### **Low Countries Anabaptism**

The Anabaptists so far discussed were people of peaceful habits who were not interested in the violent overthrow of existing institutions. That they were considered dangerous was the result partly of their unorthodox religious doctrines, which were considered subversive in an era of close union between church and state, and partly of the activities of such men as Andreas Carlstadt, Thomas Mantzer and Melchior Hoffmann, as well as the tragic events of 1534 and 1535 in Menster, events which appeared to be linked with the ideas of these men.

The third major Anabaptist movement was planted in the Low Countries by Melchior Hofmann (c. 1495 - 1543). An erstwhile Lutheran preacher in Sweden and Schleswig - Holstein, always zealously interested in eschatological speculation, Hofmann found in the Strasbourg Anabaptists influenced by Hans Denck the ideas which precipitated his break with Luther and enabled him to develop his own form of Anabaptism. Hofmann believed in the near inbreaking of God's kingdom into the world, with divine vengeance upon the wicked. The righteous would participate in this judgment, not as agents of vengeance but as witnesses to the coming peace. Hofmann's baptism served to gather the elect into an end - time congregation to build this new Jerusalem. He died after ten years imprisonment in Strasbourg.

Two lines carried on in transformed fashion the Hofmann legacy. One, the revolutionary Melchiorites, founded the short - lived kingdom of Munster, 1534 - 35. Under Jan Matthys, baptized as a disciple of Hofmann, and then under Jan van Leiden, who seized power at the death of Matthys, the revolutionary Melchiorites in the city of Munster gave a political and social expression to Hofmann's end - time kingdom. They transformed his idea of divine vengeance so that in Munster the members of the kingdom carried out vengeance upon anyone who opposed them. Following the fall of the city revolutionary Melchioritism died out, although it was carried on for a time by personages such as Jan van Batenburg.



The pacifist line from Hofmann runs through Menno Simons, who left the priesthood in 1536 and whose name twentieth century Mennonites carry. After the fall of Munster, Menno rallied the peaceful Melchiorites as well as the surviving Munsterites disillusioned with violence. Menno replaced Hofmann's near end time with the idea of a time of peace which had already begun with Jesus. Using the aberrant "celestial flesh" Christology of Hofmann which he adopted, Menno developed concepts of the transformation of the individual and of the assembly of a spotless church. Although beginning from different presuppositions, Menno's positions on transformed individuals and a pure, separated church resembled closely the outlook of the Schleithem Articles. The heirs of the various Anabaptist groups came to recognize their common emphases on the Bible, adult baptism, pacifism, and sense of separation from the state church and worldly society. They had contacts and discussions and divisions. While they never united into one homogeneous body, some sense of unity developed, as represented by the Concept of Cologne signed in 1591 by fifteen preachers, the first confession of faith accepted simultaneously by Dutch and High and Low German Mennonites.

## Spiritualists

Radicals characterized as spiritualizers downplayed significantly or rejected altogether external forms of church and ceremonies, opting instead for inner communion through the Holy Spirit. Thus for example Silesian nobleman Kasper Schwenckfeld held that there had been no correct baptism for a thousand years, and in 1526 he recommended suspension of the observance of the Lord's Supper, the Stillstand observed by his followers until 1877, until the question of its proper form could be settled. Sebastian Franck (1499 - 1542) rejected altogether the idea of an external church. He saw external ceremonies as mere props to support an infant church and which in any case had been taken over by the antichrist immediately after the death of the apostles. Franck held the true church to be invisible, its individuals nurtured by the Spirit but remain scattered until Christ gathered his own at his second coming. Marpeck combated this individualistic, invisible church as the principal threat to South German Anabaptism.



## Evangelical Rationalists

Other radicals, given significant weight to reason alongside the Scriptures, came to reject aspects of traditional theology, principally in Christological and Trinitarian matters. Michael Servetus, burned in Calvin's Geneva for his views, is a noteworthy example of antitrinitarianism. Antitrinitarianism attained institutional form in the pacifistic Polish Brethren, later known as Socinians, and in the Unitarian churches in Lithuania and Transylvania. A remnant of the latter survives into the twentieth century. Other modern Unitarians inherit the intellectual if not the historical legacy of antitrinitarianism.

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