

Anabaptists in Strasbourg: Outside Perceptions and Self-Images

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[trans. John D. Roth]

Abstract: Outside perceptions and self-images of Strasbourg Anabaptists were more fluid and ambivalent than the simplistic dualism of persecutors and persecuted would suggest. Unequivocally hostile rejection could coexist with a tacit awareness of belonging to the same church struggling to reconcile its differences. Anabaptists could be perceived as enemies of God, while simultaneously compelling unwitting respect from their detractors for their high ethical standards. It was often one and the same figure, Anabaptist or Reformer, who, depending on circumstances, held deeply contradictory views of the opposing camp.

The study of outside perceptions and the self-image of the Anabaptists in Strasbourg is an exciting and rewarding task that also presents several unique difficulties. A focus on Strasbourg is all the more interesting since in no other city did reformers and Anabaptists meet in such a variety of ways over a longer period of time. Beginning in 1526 representatives of almost all currents of Anabaptist theology appeared in Strasbourg, where they encountered a receptive audience among the local population, frequently engaged in polemical debates with the Strasbourg preachers, and then moved on, leaving behind their theological traces on the city's turbulent ecclesiastical landscape.¹

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1. Basic introductions to Anabaptism in Strasbourg, even if somewhat dated, include: Camill Gerbert, *Geschichte der Straßburger Sektenbewegung zur Zeit der Reformation 1524-1534* (Straßburg: Heitz, 1889); Abraham Hulshof, *Geschiedenis van de Doopsgezinden te Straatsburg van 1525 tot 1557* (Amsterdam: Clausen, 1905). Also indispensable are Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman. Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), esp. 139-193; John D. Derksen, *From Radicals to Survivors: Strasbourg's Religious Nonconformists over Two Generations; 1525-1570*, 't (Goy-Houten: Hes & de Graaf, 2002); and Henry G. Krahn, "An Analysis of the Conflict between the Clergy of the Reformed Church and the Leaders of the Anabaptist Movement in Strasbourg (1524-1534)"

At the same time, however, exploring outside perceptions and self-images of the Strasbourg Anabaptists is particularly difficult because the sources are extremely asymmetrical. The official church theologians and political authorities who dealt with these outsiders to the Reformation—who, since April 23, 1529, had faced persecution and the death penalty throughout the Empire²—were well organized and followed systematic procedures. Their perceptions of the Anabaptists can be documented quite well from abundant and well-preserved archival sources, including mandates, interrogation protocols, letters, and official statements.

By contrast, Anabaptist sources that provide authentic, unfiltered insights into their self-perception are scarce. Their historical circumstances did not lend themselves to relaxed introspection or thoughtful self-reflective texts. Nonetheless, it is possible to gather scattered hints of the Anabaptists' view of themselves. This essay sketches a stimulating constellation of images and perceptions that bear witness to the often-paradoxical interactions between the official church and Anabaptism.³

(Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington, Seattle, 1969). Useful studies on specific aspects of the topic include John S. Oyer, "Bucer and the Anabaptists, in: Martin Bucer and Sixteenth Century Europe," *Actes du colloque de Strasbourg* (28-31 août 1991), ed. Christian Krieger and Marc Lienhard, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 603-613; Amy Nelson Burnett, "Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (Jan. 1994), 95-122; Marc Lienhard, *Religiöse Toleranz in Straßburg im 16. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1991), 1-38; Hans-Werner Müsing, "Karlstadt und die Entstehung der Straßburger Täufergemeinde," in *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism. Proceedings of the Colloquium Organized by the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Strasbourg* (20-22 February 1975), ed. Marc Lienhard, (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1977), 169-195; Jean Rott and Stephen F. Nelson, "Strasbourg: The Anabaptist City in the Sixteenth Century," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (July 1984), 230-240; Stephen E. Buckwalter, "Die Stellung der Straßburger Reformatoren zu den Täufern," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 52 (1995), 52-84. An article in the online version of the *Mennonitische Lexicon* offers an overview of the current state of scholarship.—Stephen E. Buckwalter, "Straßburg (Strasbourg)," in: MennLex V: <http://mennlex.de/doku.php?id=loc:strassburg> (Accessed Feb. 15, 2022).

2. Emperor Charles V had already ordered the death penalty for Anabaptists on Jan. 4, 1528 (Deutsche Reichstagsakten. Jüngere Reihe 7/I, 177); that mandate was elevated to Imperial Law at the Speyer Reichstag on April 23, 1529 (Deutsche Reichstagsakten. Jüngere Reihe 7/II, 1325-1327). See also Eike Wolgast, *Stellung der Obrigkeit zum Täuferum und Obrigkeitsverständnis der Täufer in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, *Radikalität und Dissent im 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Goertz and James Stayer (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2002), 89-120.

3. The most useful source collection for this project is the well-edited four-volume Alsatian Täuferakten series: *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Elsaß I: Stadt Straßburg 1522-1532*, vol. 7, ed. Manfred Krebs and Hans-Georg Rott (Gütersloh: Mohn 1959); *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Elsaß II: Stadt Straßburg 1533-1535*, vol. 8, ed. Marc Lienhard, Stephen F. Nelson, and Hans Georg Rott (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1960); *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Elsaß III: Stadt Straßburg 1536-1542*, vol. 15 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1986); and *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, Elsaß IV: Stadt Straßburg 1543-1552*, vol. 16 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1988) [henceforth quoted as: QGT Elsaß I-IV]. Also of great value is: *Kunstbuch. Briefe und Schriften oberdeutscher Täufer 1527-1555. Das 'Kunstbuch' des Jörg Probst Rotenfelder gen. Maler* (Burgerbibliothek Bern, Cod. 464), ed. Heinold Fast and Martin Rothelg (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007). Another useful collection of sources is found in *Der linke*

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

My overview begins with a very specific outside perception—not of the Anabaptists, but of the Anabaptist perceptions of the Strasbourg preachers. Although this reverse perspective is not the primary focus of this essay, it nevertheless plays a key role in the larger discussion. In the course of the sixteenth century, the Strasbourg reformers repeatedly discovered, to their dismay, that the Anabaptists considered them implicit allies. Anabaptists arriving in Strasbourg seemed to believe the rumor that the city's preachers secretly sympathized with them, though the preachers did not want to acknowledge it openly. Thus, at the beginning of the complicated relationship between the official church and Anabaptists in Strasbourg was the Anabaptist perception that the Strasbourg preachers were theological companions who simply lacked the courage to openly profess their Anabaptist-friendly views.

The first well-known Anabaptist leader to seek refuge in Strasbourg, Wilhelm Reublin, arrived there from Waldshut in March 1526.⁴ In a letter to Zwingli dated April 4, Wolfgang Capito, a leading reformer in Strasbourg, reported that Reublin was spreading a rumor that the Strasbourg preachers approved of his teaching but were afraid to admit it openly for fear of the authorities.⁵

More than fifty years later, the Strasbourg pastor Elias Schad reported on a clandestine church service he had surreptitiously joined on the night of July 4, 1576. On this occasion, roughly 200 Anabaptists were meeting in the Eckbolsheim forest near Strasbourg.⁶ Toward the end of the event, which lasted many hours, Schad revealed himself to the Anabaptist congregation as a pastor of the official church and prevailed upon the group for permission to address them directly. He later justified this with the following words:

If sooner or later they found out that there had been clergymen among them they should not interpret our presence to mean that their doctrine was so praiseworthy and good that we accepted and

Flügel der Reformation. Glaubenszeugnisse der Täufer, Spiritualisten, Schwärmer und Antitrinitarier, ed. Heinold Fast (Bremen: Carl Schünemann, 1962).

4. To him cf. most recently Peter Bührer, "Wilhelm Reublin. Radikaler Prediger und Täufer," *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 65 (2008), 181-232.

5. *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke* [hereafter: ZW], ed. Emil Egli, Georg Finsler, and Walther Köhler (Berlin/Leipzig/Zürich: M. Heinsius Nachfolger 1914), 8:557,6-11.

6. Schad (Schadaeus, Schade) had come to Strasbourg in 1570, where he became a deacon at St. Aurelia. In 1577 he took over the pastorate of the Alt St. Peter's church. For more on his life, cf. Marie-Joseph Bopp, *Die evangelischen Geistlichen und Theologen in Elsaß und Lothringen. Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neustadt an der Aisch: Degener, 1959), 466.

sanctioned it silently because we could say nothing against it. I therefore ventured in the name of God to preach a sermon"⁷

Schad then tried to dissuade the forest worshipers from their false understanding of infant baptism.

This Anabaptist perception of their official church opponents as tacit supporters of their doctrine recurred repeatedly over the decades. The curious perception was possibly due to the proverbial tolerance of the city as well as the apparent willingness of many preachers to seek out conversations with incoming Anabaptists with the goal, of course, of dissuading them from their views.⁸ Capito, in particular, was known for his hospitality to Anabaptist leaders as well as his efforts to discuss issues with them at length.⁹ And Matthäus Zell, preacher at Strasbourg Cathedral, is said to have maintained contacts with Reublin even without the knowledge of the other preachers.¹⁰

The perception among the Anabaptists that their Strasbourg opponents were implicit allies, however, also had a very tangible reference point in the early theological efforts of the Strasbourg preachers to disassociate salvation from any material element and to regard outward form of water baptism as "nothing but a sign . . . of inner spiritual baptism, which the Spirit of God wrought in us."¹¹ Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg reformer, had very clearly drawn this conclusion in his writing "Reason and Cause" (*Grund und Ursach*) of January 1525: "In summary: no matter where you turn, you must leave baptism free as an external thing that God has not bound to any time."¹² When Bucer even wrote that it was "a disgrace to Christ . . . to say or think [that] a child might not be saved" if the child did not receive "outward baptism with water,"¹³ Anabaptists could rightly

7. Jean Rott, "Warhafft Relation eines widerteufrischen versammlung bei nechtlicher zeit in einem wald und daselbst mit inen gehaltner disputation durch Eliam Schad ... verfertigt," in *Les Anabaptistes Mennonites d'Alsace – Destin d'une minorité* (Strasbourg: Istra, 1981), 32-35, quote 33; English translation in "M(aster) Elias Schad, True Account of an Anabaptist Meeting at Night in a Forest," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (July 1984), 292-295, quote from 295.

8. See, for example, Sebastian Franck's statement in his *Germaniae Chronicon* (Augsburg, 1538), 283r: "Where other places practice hanging, in Strasbourg one is only beaten with rods."—Quoted in Deppermann, *Hoffman*, 143.

9. On May 12, 1544, Capito apologized to William Farel for not visiting him personally during his stay in Strasbourg. Capito had spent the entire afternoon with a stubborn Anabaptist and was too exhausted to meet Farel.—QGT Elsaß III, No. 1108, 471f.

10. ZW 8, 557, 11f.

11. QGT Elsaß I, 27, 22-25.

12. QGT Elsaß I, 28, 24f.

13. Martin Bucer's *Deutsche Schriften* [hereafter: BDS], 1:257, 25-28.

ask whether this did not fundamentally call into question the validity of infant baptism.¹⁴

The mutual perception of Strasbourg reformers and Anabaptists is also particularly intriguing because it concerned not only true doctrine but also proper church practice. The main argument of all Anabaptist groups—the absence of visible ethical fruits of the Reformation and the lack of collective moral renewal—also remained a central concern of Bucer throughout his life. As a theologian who always “perceived and developed theology as ethics,”¹⁵ Bucer inevitably had difficulty distancing himself from a group that did exactly the same thing.¹⁶

OUTSIDE PERCEPTIONS OF THE ANABAPTISTS

On August 1, 1536, the Anabaptist Barbara Bruder offered several very revealing comments during an interrogation conducted by Capito in the presence of the so-called “Anabaptist lords.”¹⁷ In her testimony, Bruder made the bold claim that Bucer had “destroyed” infant baptism on the occasion of his public disputation with Hans Denck in 1526. The interrogation transcript concludes with Capito's attempt to dissuade her from this misunderstanding and to explain to her what Bucer “really meant” regarding baptism.¹⁸

It is curious that Barbara Bruder called attention to a disputation with an Anabaptist as the setting in which Bucer supposedly destroyed infant baptism. She was referring to a sensational debate between Bucer and

14. Bucer's peculiar difficulties in distancing himself from the spiritualism of the Anabaptists find expression in many places in his *Getrewen Warning der Prediger des Evangelii zu Straßburg über die Artickel, so Jacob Kautz, Prediger zu Wormbs kürzlich hat lassen außgohn* of July 1527.—BDS 2, 225-258. See also Martin Bucer *Briefwechsel. Correspondence* [hereafter: BCor], vol. 2, no. 160. To be sure, in the following years, Bucer's theology reflected a steadily growing emphasis on external signs. In the course of his rapprochement with Luther in the controversy over the Lord's Supper, Bucer was increasingly willing to emphasize the institutional, external church as an ecclesiological necessity. True, human salvation could be attributed solely to God's election and not to any external human action. But the “fact of election,” to quote Gottfried Hammann, required “a visible . . . community.” In other words, “the elect needed an institutional framework for their community.”—Gottfried Hammann, *Zwischen Volkskirche und Bekenntnisgemeinschaft*, 137, 139.

15. Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 31.

16. Cf. in particular, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Die Täufer. Geschichte und Deutung*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Beck, 1988), 67-75.

17. The *Wiedertäuferherren* were officials commissioned by the Strasbourg city council to deal with Anabaptists. A document preserved in the Strasbourg municipal archives originating sometime in 1530 (1 AST 166, fol. 306v) explained their function as follows: “The ‘Anabaptist Lords’ are specific people out of the regiment commissioned to summon and interrogate persons suspected of being Anabaptists or imprisoned [as Anabaptists] in order to make them swear upon the articles [of faith].”—QGT Elsaß I, 289,22-25.

18. QGT Elsaß III, Nr. 726, 31f.

Hans Denck that took place on December 22, 1526, in front of a group of 400 spectators in the former Dominican Church. Sometime in the months prior to the exchange Denck had come from Augsburg, where he had presumably baptized Hans Hut. In Strasbourg he was promoting a spiritualistic theology that combined mystical insights with strong ethical components. In the course of the disputation, Bucer tried to back Denck into a corner by reading aloud several theologically sensitive passages from Denck's book "On the Law of God" (*Vom Gesetz Gottes*) and challenging Denck to comment on them.

The result for Bucer was extremely frustrating. Denck left him hanging with vague responses that avoided revealing any disagreement, while insisting that he could not express himself more clearly.¹⁹ Later, Bucer complained that Denck "presents his case so darkly and intricately that no one can deduce from it his final opinion."²⁰ Capito also described Denck as a "cunning and fickle person."

In general, this assessment became a common perception of Anabaptists among the preachers: They were unruly deceivers who dissembled in conversation, disguised their views, and avoided taking clear positions. On February 12, 1543, for example, the town clerk Johannes Meyer complained that "the Anabaptists do not want to be told, nor do they give any answer to the things that they are asked."²¹

Another equally widespread perception of the Anabaptists, one that sometimes clashed with the notion that they were evasive, was that the Anabaptists were pious but misguided, badly in need of instruction. The Anabaptists who engaged with the preachers in Strasbourg were often perceived to be a small minority within a largely malicious movement—there were good people who had fallen in among the Anabaptists, but who could be freed from their error by proper instruction. Capito pitied these Anabaptists because they "have not yet attained the spirit of wisdom and do not actually recognize that God looks at the heart alone. Instead, they think they can please God with works."²² How does one deal with such Anabaptists? Capito proposed the following approach: "To love them as brothers and fellow members, to hold them tenderly in their weakness, and to instruct the ignorant with a gentle spirit of truth."²³

The point here was not to condemn Anabaptism wholesale, but to reach out and save the pious souls among them. In its Anabaptist mandate of March 23, 1538, the council had to preface its warning against the

19. QGT Elsaß IV, Nr. 1261, 17.

20. QGT Elsaß I, 97,20f. = BDS 2:239,25f.

21. QGT Elsaß IV, Nr. 1261, 17.

22. QGT Elsaß I, 82,19-22.

23. QGT Elsaß I, 82,23-25.

Anabaptists with a concession: "And even though there may be many devout people who come to it solely out of ignorance, it has nevertheless happened that deceitful people have joined them who know how to suppress all mercy and authority."²⁴ The council was thus aware that there were also good people among the Anabaptists. On June 7, 1539, the preachers urged the council to implement a pragmatic Anabaptist policy that aimed to "win what can be won."²⁵ They regarded the Anabaptists almost as a kind of reservoir from which the official church could recruit new members, if only it were smart enough to do so.

This positive view of Anabaptists found a particularly strong expression in Capito's lament over the execution of Michael Sattler at the end of May 1527.²⁶ Although Capito clearly noted and disapproved of legalistic impulses in Sattler's theology, he acknowledged that Sattler displayed "an admirable zeal for God and the congregation of Christ." Capito had "never criticized, but only praised and encouraged" Sattler's striving for a Christian congregation that was "pious and upright" and "free of vices."²⁷ The Strasbourg preachers later even called Sattler "a dear friend of God's" (*eyn lieber frundt Gots*) and "a martyr of Christ" (*eyn marterer Christi*).²⁸

Yet another perception of the Anabaptists emerges in Bucer's writing—again linked to their exemplary way of life, but which he turned completely against the Anabaptists with indignant severity. Here the biblical passage from 2 Corinthians 11:14 played a key role, with its reference to Satan disguised as an angel of light. For Bucer, the positive impression that Anabaptists made because of their modest way of life was nothing other than a dangerous snare of Satan. It was consistent with the fallen nature of humanity to consider the apostles of Satan more holy than the apostles of Christ. The Anabaptist movement in general, Bucer suggested, was a strategy of Satan permitted by God in order to test those who were steadfast in the faith. For Bucer, the apparent apostolicity of Anabaptist itinerancy and persecution was only an illusion inspired by the devil: true piety consists of a humble love that edifies, not self-righteous separatism.

24. QGT Elsaß III, 816,10-13.

25. QGT Elsaß III, 344,33f.

26. For more on Michael Sattler, cf. Klaus Deppermann, "Michael Sattler – Radikaler Reformator, Pazifist, Märtyrer," in: *Protestantische Profile von Luther bis Francke. Sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 48-64; C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984).

27. QGT Elsaß I, 81.

28. QGT Elsaß I, 110,25.33 = BDS 2:253,22.29f.

Bucer also accused the Anabaptists of lacking love—this, in his view, was what made them heretics. As he wrote to Margarethe Blarer on September 19, 1531:

Heresy has nothing to do with this or that fantasy or opinion. It is rather a desire of the flesh by which people presume in their teaching or life to undertake something better than what is the common Godly custom in the church, and therefore separate themselves from the church and join a distinct gang or sect.²⁹

In Bucer's view, it was not the persecuting official church that was the aggressor, but the Anabaptists themselves, who by their separatism denied fraternal fellowship—and therefore Christian love—with the rest of the church.

SELF-PERCEPTIONS

What self-images do we encounter from the Anabaptist side? Interestingly, we find in Michael Sattler a perspective that was almost analogous to that of Bucer and Capito. Although in his farewell letter to Bucer and Capito from late 1526 or early 1527 Sattler also noted irreconcilable theological differences, he took his leave from the reformers with a reference to himself as “your brother in God the heavenly father” (*uwer brüder jm gott dem hymelschen vatter*),³⁰ as if he presupposed membership in a common church. Some seven years later, in June 1534, the Tyrolean Anabaptist Leupold Scharnschlager also seems to have presupposed common theological convictions with the Strasbourg City Council when, citing Luther and Zwingli, he asked the magistrates to tolerate the Anabaptists. Scharnschlager reminded the councilors that they, as representatives of the temporal sword, “were not to rule in matters of faith, as your own leaders and preachers, Luther and Zwingli, have written.”³¹ Specifically, Scharnschlager referred to “the little pamphlet” (*das tractätl*) that Luther wrote “on temporal power, the sword, and governance”³²—i.e., Luther's text “On Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed” (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei*) of 1523.³³ At the heart of Scharnschlager's argument was a central theme from Luther that appeared in this tract: “One cannot and should not force anyone to believe.”³⁴ On the basis of this principle, Scharnschlager saw an analogy between the pressure exerted by Emperor

29. BCor 6:125,4-8.

30. QGT Elsaß I, 70,19.

31. QGT Elsaß II, 347,4f.

32. QGT Elsaß II, 350,23-27.

33. D. Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Weimarer Ausgabe: WA]: Abteilung Schriften, 11:245-281.

34. WA 11:264,22f.

Charles V on the Protestant estates and the coercion that Protestant authorities were attempting to exercise on the Anabaptists: "So you say that we do not have the true faith, but you do. Therefore, we should simply turn from our faith to yours."³⁵ In response to the claim of the official church that it alone had the right faith and therefore had to take action against the Anabaptists, Scharnschlager replied: "The emperor and the bishop say the same thing to you—namely, that they rather than you have the true faith. Yet you do not want to turn from your faith to theirs. Why then should we yield to you?"³⁶ Scharnschlager claimed Luther's own arguments on freedom of conscience when he instructed his readers:

I have no doubt that any one of you who loves truth also wishes to have a free and independent access to God of your free own will — yes, to offer your service to God voluntarily, without being coerced or forced. And where you are coerced to a faith that you and others do not actually hold in your conscience, then you cannot accept it in good conscience.³⁷

Scharnschlager thus engaged the Strasbourg authorities on the basis of an agreement, at least hypothetically, with his interpretation of Luther's writing "On Temporal Authority." In so doing, it almost sounds as if he was appealing to a shared Reformation heritage.

To be sure, many Anabaptist sources did not express any attempt to emphasize theological commonalities with their Reformation opponents, but rather their sense of belonging to a chosen minority. On December 21, 1540, Pilgram Marpeck,³⁸ who had worked in Strasbourg from 1528 to 1532, sent a letter to the congregations in Strasbourg, Alsace, and the Kinzig and Leber valleys probably from Ilanz in the Grisons.³⁹ It is significant how Marpeck addressed his congregations: "to the chosen, God's holy ones in Jesus Christ."⁴⁰ Among other things, Marpeck exhorted his readers to read "the faithful warning of Paul . . . that you tolerate nothing impure among you. For God does not disregard the unclean

35. QGT Elsaß II, 349,18-20.

36. QGT Elsaß II, 349,21-14.

37. QGT Elsaß II, 348,28-33. Heinold Fast offers the following modern version of this passage: "I have no doubt that each of you, if you love the truth, desires to have free access to God of your own volition, yes, to serve God voluntarily, unforced and uncoerced. And if someone coerces you into a faith that you and those among you do not affirm in your own conscience, then you can never accept it with a clear conscience." —Fast, *Der linke Flügel*, 123.

38. For an overview of this key Anabaptist leader see the article in the online version of the *Mennonitisch Lexicon*.—Martin Rothkegel, "Pilgram Marpeck," in: MennLex V: http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=art:marpeck_pilgram (Accessed Feb. 12, 2022).

39. Edition in: QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), Nr. 5, 158-163.

40. QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), 159.

things among his people; rather, the whole world must be punished and destroyed."⁴¹

A similar self-confidence that the Anabaptists were a small group of the elect found expression five years later in a sermon preached during a clandestine service in the Eckbolsheim forest near Strasbourg on the night July 25, 1545, a full three decades before the forest service attended by Elias Schadaeus noted above. To be sure, the only information we have about this service comes from Johann Steinle, son of the pastor of St. Aurelien, who reported the following:

When the crowd was assembled, it was about ten o'clock in the night. One of them began to preach until approximately one o'clock. His sermon was about the children of Israel in and out of the land of Egypt. It was intended to comfort the people with the fact that God would do the same to them, the Anabaptists, separating them from the eternal people of God, and would root out or execute all other people who were not of their religion as Papists, Lutherans, Zwinglians and Philippites,⁴² since they alone have the true religion.⁴³

In addition to these fantasies of destruction, the Anabaptists, according to the informant, also polemicized against the massive Strasbourg Cathedral.⁴⁴ "They also preached from the 11th chapter of Revelations about the temple of God,⁴⁵ how it is not like the cathedral or other stone churches but extends far and wide across the entire heavens."⁴⁶ This polemic was possibly an unconscious reflection of the Anabaptists on the circumstances of their enforced open air nocturnal meeting.

More idiosyncratic was the self-image of Melchior Hoffman's followers, known to scholars as the "Strasbourg prophets." They combined their End Time expectations and their view of themselves as the true church with a strikingly positive evaluation of the Strasbourg magistrates. During an interrogation in January 1543, one Anabaptist stated that Melchior Hoffman had advised him that he "should be attentive to the government and especially the government of the city of Strasbourg, since it was a

41. QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), 162. On the assumption that the Epistle to the Hebrews is Pauline, Pilgram Marpeck refers here to Hebrews 12:15.

42. The Philippites were an Anabaptist splinter group in Moravia and Swabia composed of disciples of a certain Philipp Plener ? bestand. —QGT Elsaß III, 39, fn. 5.

43. QGT Elsaß IV, 144,2-9.

44. Foreign visitors of the city were certainly aware that the 142-meter steeple of the Strasbourg Cathedral, completed in 1439, was among the tallest buildings of the time.

45. Rev. 11:19: "And the temple of God in heaven was opened."

46. QGT Elsaß IV, 144,9-12.

righteous government.”⁴⁷ Hoffman's followers believed that they belonged to the true church, which would find refuge in the Free Imperial city of Strasbourg during the End Times and would enjoy the protection of the Strasbourg magistrate.⁴⁸

However, a letter of consolation written in February 17, 1543, by an unknown Anabaptist to his fellow believer Jörg Norlinger, who was imprisoned in Strasbourg, expressed a much harsher, indeed combative, tone. Here there was no sign of any appreciation of Strasbourg as a place of refuge for persecuted Anabaptists. To the contrary, the author asserted that “in this place, Strasbourg, there are many false, deceived people. And I cannot see here anything other than the true Capernaum, of which Christ speaks in Matthew 11[:23], as exalted to heaven and cast out to hell.”⁴⁹ The letter evoked distinctly martial images, assuring the imprisoned Jörg Norlinger that “the almighty God and heavenly Father has accepted you . . . as his champion against all enemies of his cross.”⁵⁰ Norlinger was fulfilling what was prophesied in Deuteronomy 32:30—namely, that God will put thousands of soldiers to flight.

This militant, self-confident, almost aggressive, Anabaptist self-image found its fullest expression in a text by Leupolt Scharnschlager that was probably written shortly before 1556. Scharnschlager dedicated the short treatise “On True Faith and Common Salvation in Christ” (*Vom wahren Glauben und gemeinem Heil in Christus*) to “all true believers in Jesus Christ, above all in Alsace.” His text conveyed the self-image of a church besieged by its enemies, but defiantly standing its ground and ultimately emerging triumphant. Alluding to Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid,” Scharnschlager declared:

a lighted candle cannot be hidden. . . . By confessing its faith the body of Christ or the church must invite upon itself devil, hell, death and the whole world—Baptists, Lutherans, Zwinglians, false Anabaptists, as well as all other repugnant sects and opinions.⁵¹

Precisely because it is the true church, this shining city on the hill will become the target of hostility from so many false churches and groups. But the persecuted Anabaptist church can draw hope from the saying of Zechariah [12:3]: “On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves.”

47. QGT Elsaß IV, 11,1f.

48. Cf. Deppermann, *Hofmann*, 185f.

49. QGT Elsaß IV, 18,19-22.

50. QGT Elsaß IV, 18,24f.

51. QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), 539.

Scharnschläger understood the Anabaptist church as this persecuted city of God, as the essential Jerusalem, "which must endure many a storm, dispute, bombardment and attack."⁵² Indeed, the suffering and mockery that Christ experienced was being repeated in the suffering and mockery endured by the Anabaptist church. "For the disciple is not greater than his master, nor the servant above his lord."⁵³ It was precisely the relentless persecution they endured that demonstrated the authenticity of the Anabaptists as the true Church of God. The Anabaptists were the true Jerusalem, a stone on which all enemies will stumble and injure themselves.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This brief review has revealed a great diversity of Anabaptist perceptions by outsiders and their own self-images. Diametrically contradictory perceptions could come from the same observer. Anabaptists, for example, could be the object of condescending pity at one moment, and apostles of Satan at another. Anabaptists could appeal to their persecutors as fellow Christians; yet elsewhere they perceived themselves as lonely fighters in the battle against an overwhelming number of enemies of the cross of Christ.

This unpredictable diversity should not surprise us. It reflects the fluid, dynamic state of the controversy between the official church and dissenters, as well as a tenacious struggle on the part of both sides in their quest for theological identity and ecclesiological expression. It is not easy to reduce this kaleidoscope of perceptions down to a common hermeneutical denominator. Just how tenuous the boundary could be between rejection and respect is made clear in the following example of Bucer's perception of the Anabaptists, with which I would like to conclude this essay. On January 14, 1535, the Strasbourg reformer addressed a letter to Margarethe Blarer in Constance, in which he asked her to invest 100 florins on his behalf. He had scraped together the money from various sources, and was hoping for a 4 or 5 percent return. But why would Bucer bother to invest the 100 florins in Constance, more than 100 miles away, instead of locally in Strasbourg? Bucer offered Blarer the following explanation. If he entrusted such a sum to a Strasbourg businessman or bought something in Strasbourg with the money, the transaction would not escape the critical gaze of the Anabaptists and their followers, and they would make a scandal out of it.⁵⁴

52. QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), 539.

53. QGT 17 (Kunstbuch), 539 (cf. Jn 15:20).

54. "hic si cui ad negotiationem damus aut aliquid emamus, sic nos perscrutantur catabaptistae et quos hi infecerunt, ut verendum sit offendiculum." — QGT Elsaß II, 414,13-

Remarkably, the same churchman who had the power to ban numerous Anabaptist leaders from Strasbourg and regarded Anabaptist separatism as an almost demonic affront, unconsciously treated the local Anabaptists with such respect that he feared their moral judgment and judged his own behavior according to them. In so doing, Bucer implicitly recognized them as a moral authority whose public disapproval he sought to avoid.

15. Register in: *Briefwechsel der Brüder Ambrosius und Thomas Blaurer*, vol. 2: August 1538 - Ende 1548, ed. Traugott Schiess, (Freiburg i.Br.: Fehsenfeld, 1910), No. 40, 813.