

IN THIS ISSUE

Scholars of the Radical Reformation have long recognized the unique challenges posed by the historical sources documenting the individuals and movements they study, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although it may appear that archival and print sources on groups like the Anabaptists and Spiritualists are abundant, the vast majority of the extant documents reflect an unmistakable bias against groups at the edges of the magisterial Reformation. Thus, for example, we can track the spread of Anabaptism through the lens of mandates issued by the emperor, territorial lords, or Swiss city states, all of which begin from the premise that participants in the movement were, by definition, seditious criminals. Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries frequently referred to Anabaptists, but their writings were almost always polemics that asserted their own Christian orthodoxy by depicting the Anabaptists as social revolutionaries, latter-day Pelagians, or purveyors of other alleged heresies. Transcripts of interrogations may appear to give the Anabaptist defendants a voice, but the questions posed to them presumed their guilt, and it is impossible to interpret the responses apart from the threat—explicit or implied—of imprisonment, torture, or execution hovering in the background. Voluminous correspondence between civil and ecclesial leaders can offer a glimpse into Anabaptist life, but these sources more often reveal the determination of authorities to eradicate the Anabaptist “cancer” from their regions.

To be sure, Anabaptist confessions of faith, hymns, martyrologies, and occasional letters have also survived. And historians have recently uncovered a rich manuscript tradition circulating within Swiss Anabaptist communities in the latter half of the sixteenth century. But compared with the number of hostile sources, scholars of Anabaptism, especially in Switzerland and South Germany, have relatively few windows into the experiences of ordinary believers or a clear sense of Anabaptist congregational life.

In light of these challenges, the long essay by the **Urs Leu**, director of the rare books division of the Zurich Zentralbibliothek, that opens this issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* offers readers a welcome surprise. In the essay, Leu provides a detailed biography of Hans Müller, a seventeenth-century Anabaptist from Edikon who emerged as a significant pastor and spokesperson for Swiss Anabaptism in the first half of the seventeenth century. Drawing on a wide range of sources—including five texts written in Müller’s own hand—Leu traces the tumultuous career of this erstwhile farmer, who converted to Anabaptism

in 1627 and went on to become a well-known Anabaptist leader in the Zurich region and then, following his forced exile in 1649, in Alsace, and still later in the Palatinate. In the course of this biography, Leu offers fascinating information into a host of details about Anabaptist life, including: prison conditions; the support of friends; family life; theological conversations; marriage rituals; relations with Dutch Mennonites; emigration; and attitudes toward government officials. A persistent theme, echoing throughout the sources, was a concern over financial matters. In 1640 Zurich authorities confiscated Müller's farm with the promise to restore it to his children; yet over the next twenty years, the city council of Zurich consistently refused to return Müller's property—or property confiscated from other Anabaptists—to its rightful heirs. The essay includes extensive excerpts from Müller's writings, followed by an appendix that offers readers a lengthy transcript of an interrogation in February of 1646.

The essay that follows illustrates another creative approach to Anabaptist scholarship in which surprising insights can emerge from unlikely sources. In 1545 the artist Bartlme Dill Riemenschneider, son of the well-known sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider, completed an altarpiece for a chapel in the South Tyrolese cathedral of Brixen that he devoted to the theme of the Three Magi. On the surface the triptych seems to depict a familiar rendition of the Three Magi offering their gifts to Mary and the Christ Child, flanked by two female saints on the wings. In a close analysis of the painting, however, art historian **Wolfgang Strobl** demonstrates how Riemenschneider, a professed Anabaptist, secretly embedded a series of hidden messages into the composition of the altarpiece that revealed his Anabaptist identity. Among other clues, Riemenschneider's depiction of King Balthasar subtly alludes to the depravity of the Catholic Church, a theme further reinforced by his juxtaposition of two female saints who contrast the true piety of the Christian martyr with the false piety of the official church. The painting also includes a self-portrait of the artist, forced into hiding but defiantly present nonetheless. As such, Riemenschneider can be added to a long tradition of creative tricksters whose critique of the authorities is hidden in plain sight. Strobl's essay not only demonstrates how the discipline of art history can provide an unexpected window into the imaginative world of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, but also offers a helpful reminder that the movement found support in circles beyond those of peasants and artisans.

– John D. Roth, editor