

## IN THIS ISSUE

With the Schleithem Articles of 1527 early Anabaptism established itself as a Christian communion separated from state religion. Adherents of Schleithem would avoid attending state churches and furthermore, would not defend their home territories with the sword, and refused to swear any oaths at all. Their refusal to swear oaths was immediately problematic: oaths were the glue of allegiance that was thought to hold late-medieval society together. Oaths were required for membership in guilds, people were expected to swear oaths of obedience to overlords and city states, and oaths certified the truthfulness of court testimony, to name just a few situations in which oaths were required.

Unlike the refusal to bear arms, which remains a live issue today, oath refusal faded in significance over historical time, partly with the disappearance of feudal oath-based political systems, and partly because of the acceptance of oath substitution in courts. Already in 1526 in Basel the authorities allowed some Anabaptists to “promise” they were telling the truth, rather than forcing them to swear an oath to that effect.<sup>1</sup> This distinction has become customary in courts of law, the last refuge of the oath. Called as a witness in a court hearing a few years ago, for example, I was asked to “swear or affirm” the truthfulness of my testimony, with no question of my religious affiliation. Swearing or not swearing oaths occupies little time or attention among Anabaptist descendants today.

This lack of attention shifts briefly this year, first with the publication of Ed Pries’s definitive historical work on Anabaptist oath refusal with Pandora Press (see note 1 below), and now with the publication of **Marius van Hoogstraten’s** “Without Sovereign Guarantee. Reading Schleithem on the Oath with Giorgio Agamben,” in this issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Unlike Pries’s historical approach, van Hoogstraten considers Anabaptist oath refusal from a philosophical perspective, taking as a point of departure Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on the oath written well before Agamben’s controversial anti-government publications during the Covid crisis. Van Hoogstraten’s reflections lead him to the conclusion that Anabaptist oath refusal should not be seen as a marginal “afterthought,” but as “integral to, perhaps even exemplary of, the

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Pries, *Anabaptist Oath Refusal. Basel, Bern, and Strasbourg, 1525-1538* (Thunder Bay, ON: Pandora Press, 2023), 157–58.

attempt to build a community under a sovereignty of a radically different kind." Attentive readers will find much to appreciate in this unique philosophical analysis of a foundational sixteenth-century faith commitment.

In the second article of this issue, "Recovering an Experience of the Word: 'The Anabaptist Vision' and 'the Primal Imagination,'" **Joseph C. L. Sawatzky** draws on his experience as a Mennonite missionary Bible teacher in South Africa. He ponders in retrospect how his inherited "Anabaptist Vision" might be understood in light of a growing knowledge of the "Primal Imagination" approach to Christianity central to some African theologians. Concluding his examination, and reflecting the African emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, Sawatzky suggests that "following Jesus" in the sense expressed by the "Anabaptist Vision" needs to be extended beyond a mere ethical understanding. A broader understanding, he concludes, should express "a true 'participation in Christ,' an experience of the Lord of scripture, the Word of God made flesh in the power of the Spirit."

The next publication in this issue takes up the definition of *Swiss Brethren* for the second time in less than a decade. Responding initially to a redefinition of the *Swiss Brethren* by Martin Rothkegel, published online in the 2013 *Mennonitisches Lexikon* (see "Schweizer Brüder"), C. Arnold Snyder raised detailed objections to Rothkegel's proposed reconception.<sup>2</sup> Martin Rothkegel never responded to those published objections in the ensuing years. Instead, following a light revision of the original article in the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* in 2020, Rothkegel published a collection of sources in 2021 meant to document his singular conception of the Swiss Brethren.<sup>3</sup>

In "The Swiss Brethren Obscured. A Quixotic Redefinition Continues," **C. Arnold Snyder** examines in detail the documents listed in the first section of Rothkegel's book—source materials purportedly documenting the "crystallization" of the Swiss Brethren as redefined by Rothkegel.<sup>4</sup> This study comes to the conclusion that Rothkegel's demonstration fails, and that "an objective analysis of the 'crystallization' documents . . . leads . . . back to the prior existence of a separatist confessional tradition in

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<sup>2</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, "In Search of the Swiss Brethren," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (October 2016), 421–515.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Rothkegel, *The Swiss Brethren, A Story in Fragments: The Trans-Territorial Expansion of a Clandestine Anabaptist Church, 1538–1618* (Baden-Baden & Bouxwiller: Editions Valentin Koerner, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Because the current editor is also the author of this article, it underwent peer review and publication approval under leadership of the chair of the MQR publication committee, independent of the editor. The article is thus published at arm's length from the acting editor.

Switzerland and Strasbourg.” In light of Rothkegel’s failure to document his idiosyncratic description, the article concludes that the “Swiss Brethren” should continue to be understood as defined by all other scholars in the field, from Claus-Peter Clasen to James Stayer, Werner Packull, Hanspeter Jecker, John D. Roth, and others.<sup>5</sup>

In the fourth major contribution to this issue, “Anticipating 2025: Interpretations of Anabaptism on the Eve of a 500-Year Celebration, Part Three: Daring to Live Steadfastly,” **Leonard Gross** selects and translates articles from the third volume of the 500 Jahre Täuferbewegung 2025. This third volume was originally published in 2022 by Mennonites and other church groups in Germany, under the auspices of a conjoint committee. Selections from the first two volumes have been published in translation in prior issues of this journal.<sup>6</sup> These reflections by European church members expand and enrich our appreciation of five centuries of shared Anabaptist history.

As usual, several book reviews conclude this issue.

C. Arnold Snyder

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<sup>5</sup> In summary of the widely accepted view, the Swiss Brethren comprised “a confessional movement with origins in Switzerland, that spread to become a trans-regional movement composed primarily of non-Swiss adherents. Furthermore, the confessional parameters of this movement [are] generally agreed to be an emphasis on ‘separation from the world,’ marked by a close reading of the New Testament and resulting in a rejection of the sword and the swearing of oaths, a refusal to attend state churches, and a practice of sharing goods within their communities—although not a full practice of community of goods in the Hutterite sense.” Snyder, “In Search of the Swiss Brethren,” 430.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Gross, “Anticipating 2025: Interpretations of Anabaptism on the Eve of a 500-Year Celebration,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96 (January 2022), 103–32; Leonard Gross, “Anticipating 2025: Interpretations of Anabaptism on the Eve of a 500-Year Celebration: Part Two: Daring to Live Together,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 97 (July 2023), 317–34.