

2009

Anabaptism and the State: An Uneasy Coexistence

Sandra F. Joireman

University of Richmond, sjoirema@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joireman, Sandra F. "Anabaptism and the State: An Uneasy Coexistence." In *Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement*, edited by Sandra Fullerton. Joireman, 73-91. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.



5

Anabaptists and the State: An Uneasy Coexistence

Sandra F. Joireman

In any compilation of Christian views of the state, the Anabaptist position stands out as unique or, if one wanted to be less complimentary, extreme. The Anabaptist view of the state is less focused on articulating the division between church and state responsibilities than the Reformed or Lutheran traditions. Indeed, Anabaptists have no assigned role for government beyond the creation of order, emphasizing scriptural interpretations that give primacy to the church in the life of a Christian. As a result, political theology distances Anabaptists from both the Catholic Church and the mainstream of the Reformation.

There is no Anabaptist church; rather, Anabaptists are groups of Christians emphasizing similar faith positions. In the West, Anabaptists are predominantly Mennonite, but Anabaptism encompasses groups such as the Brethren, Amish, and Hutterites, as well as numerous other denominations outside Europe and North America.¹ However, there are some who would call themselves Anabaptist (for example, some Baptists) who may not necessarily share a similar political theology. In this chapter, the term Anabaptist is used in discussing the historical progression of the movement and changes to Mennonite when describing contemporary beliefs regarding the church and citizenship. This is a necessary distinction because the Mennonite position on citizenship is certainly not that of all Anabaptists. Anabaptism is a movement, and Mennonites are the largest church within that movement. Thus, to the extent that this chapter

addresses contemporary church positions, it must be from the slightly narrower Mennonite stance rather than from the Anabaptist perspective.

This chapter begins with a historical discussion of the roots of Anabaptism. Although history is important for all religions, for Anabaptists the time of the Reformation was not simply a chronological marker but a crucible that refined the movement in terms of beliefs and greatly reduced its numbers through martyrdom. It was during the institutional chaos and uncertainty of the Reformation that the political beliefs held by Anabaptists today were formed and contextually articulated. The middle section of the chapter details the origin of political beliefs that set Anabaptists apart from other denominations. The final section of the chapter addresses the implications of Anabaptist political beliefs put into practice within the contemporary state system.

Historical Background

The Anabaptist movement is often referred to as the radical fringe of the Reformation.² Some of the first Anabaptists, Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel, were students of Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland. They supported Zwingli's break with the Catholic Church and his push for reform, but they were uncomfortable with the way Zwingli used political power. Zwingli tried to work through the Zurich council, the local political authority, to win the council over to his side. His goal was to harness the power of the council and get it to establish policies that supported the position of the reformers. Zwingli believed it was the role and appropriate place of political authorities, such as the council, to oversee the implementation of the Reformation. Manz and Grebel disagreed. They believed that the progress and completion of the Reformation ought to be directed by the churches and not by government; after all, one of the goals of the Reformation was to challenge the close alliance between the Catholic Church and political authority (Goertz 1996: 11). Manz and Grebel led a break with Zwingli and the mainstream of the Swiss Reformation over the issues of political authority, opposition to a state church, and believers' baptism.

The Anabaptist movement was founded on January 21, 1525, when Manz, Grebel, and their followers acted on their differences with the mainline Swiss Reformers by rebaptizing adults. These early Swiss Anabaptists believed that there should be a free church patterned on the congregations of the New Testament and peopled by adults who were baptized as believers.³ This second or believers' baptism earned them the derisive name of Anabaptists, literally rebaptizers.

There were three strands of early Anabaptists: (a) the Swiss Brethren, as just mentioned; (b) Anabaptist groups in South Germany and Austria (Hutterites);

and (c) Dutch Mennonites. The Hutterite and the Dutch Anabaptist movements were more spiritualist and apocalyptic than the Swiss Anabaptists, and dialogues between leaders from these different Anabaptist movements demonstrated clear theological disagreements (Harder 1985). Balthasar Hubmaier, an Austrian Anabaptist reformer who had been part of the group who studied with Zwingli, commented regarding Hans Hut, a south German Anabaptist and the founder of the eponymous Hutterites, "[T]he baptism which I taught and the baptism which Hut purported to teach are as far apart as heaven and earth, east and west, Christ and Belial" (Goertz 1996: 7). Given this depth of feeling, it is not surprising that one "Anabaptist Church" never formed and that Anabaptism remained a movement, splitting into different sects based on locality of origin and beliefs, rather than a theologically unified group.

One of the first lasting articulations of Swiss Brethren theology was the Schleithem Confession of 1527, which marked the beginning of the free church, meaning that its membership was not defined by political authorities.⁴ The Schleithem Confession expressed the Swiss Anabaptist positions of adult baptism based on professed belief, refusal to take oaths, the free election of church leaders, and Communion not as a sacrament or transubstantiation, but as an expression of Christian community. The rejection of violence or the "devilish weapons of force—such as sword, armor and the like, and all their use [either] for friends or against one's enemies—by virtue of the Word of Christ" (Swiss Brethren Conference 1527) was also present. Beliefs regarding the state were taken a step further than previously articulated, and members of the Brethren were encouraged to reject any service to the state, be it military or otherwise.

Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as in the mind of God toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed. For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed. (Swiss Brethren Conference 1527)

Anabaptism is clearly linked to the revolutionary changes in patterns of religious organization and belief that were happening during the Reformation. Yet because of the Anabaptist rejection of the organizational hierarchies of both Protestants and Catholics and their sharp break with the Protestant Reformation, both Catholics and Protestants persecuted Anabaptists.⁵

In the early 1600s, Dutch Anabaptists were vocal in their opposition to government efforts to cede authority of the state to the Dutch East Indies Company for law enforcement and the punishment of wrongdoers within territory controlled by the company. The Dutch Anabaptists believed that the state and no other must wield the powers attributed to it in Romans 12 and 13. While the Dutch Anabaptists supported the articulated responsibilities of the state, they did not think that vengeance belonged in the hands of the individual Christian or in the hands of a business venture with delegated state responsibilities (Brock 1972). Early Dutch Anabaptists rejected violence by believers but supported the right of the state to use violence in some circumstances, which was what they perceived to be the appropriate role for the state.⁶

Protestant, Catholic, or Evangelical?

The unique position of Anabaptists during and after the Reformation has led to the description of Anabaptists as “neither Catholic nor Protestant” or “both Catholic and Protestant.”⁷ Ambiguity regarding the categorization of Anabaptist beliefs has carried through in some form to the present day. Many Mennonites view themselves to be under the Protestant umbrella, albeit of a different persuasion than most, but others do not see themselves as Protestants and see Anabaptism as a third stream of Christianity.

To the extent that evangelicalism can be characterized by the three *solas*—*sola scriptura* (scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *sola fides* (faith alone)—Anabaptists can find themselves both within and outside the evangelical tradition.⁸ During the early 20th century, as North American Mennonites turned outward and began to engage the wider culture, they identified themselves with fundamentalist concerns. Craig Carter notes that Anabaptist leaders in the mid-20th century, such as Harold Bender, tried to make “evangelical Anabaptism” the focus of Mennonites in North America (Carter 2001: 37). In the contemporary era, the term *evangelical* does not have the same appeal. As the evangelical movement in America has come to be so closely identified with the state that there is no obvious separation between the two, the possibility of the church as witness to the world is eroded, and fewer Mennonites are willing to use the term *evangelical* without caveat.

The lack of a creedal tradition within Anabaptism and its low-sacramental nature are elements of evangelicalism that fit well with Anabaptist beliefs. However, among Anabaptists there would be a strong challenge to the idea of *sola fides*. Anabaptism has historically been characterized by a strong belief in the Jamesian statement that “faith without works is dead.” Menno Simons, an early Mennonite leader, famously stated: “True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people” (Simons 1956: 246).

An Anabaptist Perspective on the State

Anabaptists, particularly Mennonites, are popularly known for their pacifism and conscientious objector status during times of war. Yet, this is but one manifestation of deeply held beliefs regarding the suitable role of government and the appropriate role of the church. Pacifism is epiphenomenal to the Anabaptist view of the appropriate roles of the state and the church.⁹ The state has the function of ordering the social world, and the church should be the visible witness of believers, the primary affiliation of Christians, and separate from the state.

Some agreement regarding the role of government has developed among Mennonites in the contemporary era. Government exists within the world with a particular function—to provide order. This position is most strongly articulated in English through the works of Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder in the 1960s and 1970s (Yoder 1972, 2002).¹⁰ Order created by the state allows the church to grow and the gospel to be spread. Yoder argued that the necessity of the government derives from its responsibility in providing a service to the church. This position with regard to the role of the state is a result of early theological positions that rejected political authority in determining people’s religious beliefs. Moreover, in the early years of the Reformation, Anabaptists objected to forcible conversions of people from Catholicism to Protestantism or the determination of religion by geography; they argued that conversion should be an individual and not a political choice. It was this opposition to the role of state religions that led both to the persecution of Anabaptists and to their strong conception of the church as separate from and superior to political powers.¹¹

Contemporary Mennonites view the church and the state as separate and unequal, with an elevation of the church over the state. The state is useful on earth for creating order so that the gospel can be spread, but the church is more important. This is very distinct from other theological approaches: “In contrast

to the church, governing authorities of the world have been instituted by God for maintaining order in societies. Such governments and other human institutions as servants of God are called to act justly and provide order. But like all such institutions, nations tend to demand total allegiance. They then become idolatrous and rebellious against the will of God. Even at its best, government cannot act completely according to the justice of God because no nation, except the church, confesses Christ's rule as its foundation" (Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee 1995: 85).¹²

The belief in the order-providing role of the state derives from both historical experience and an interpretation of Romans 13 that assumes the state does not have the right to command a Christian to do what God has forbidden. Romans 13: 1–5 has been viewed by some Christian groups as a call to obey the state in all matters or as absolving the Christian of guilt for obeying the state.¹³ Mennonites interpret the same passage differently, through the hermeneutical lens of the life of Christ. The text of Romans 13: 1–5 (Today's New International Version) is as follows:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

John Howard Yoder interprets Romans 13 as follows: "God is not said to create or institute or ordain the powers that be, but only to order them, to put them in order, sovereignly to tell them where they belong, what is their place. It is not as if there was a time when there was no government and then God made government through a new creative intervention; there has been hierarchy and authority and power since human society" (Yoder 1972: 203).¹⁴ The appropriate roles of the church and the state have been debated throughout the history of the Mennonite tradition. The early Dutch Mennonites used Romans 13 to support their claim that only the government has the power to wield the sword, an argument against the authority of the Dutch East Indies

Company. Additionally, a related Mennonite hermeneutic interprets the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament (Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee 1995).¹⁵ The two Testaments are not given equality, as they might be in other Protestant denominations, but are viewed progressively.¹⁶ The life of Christ, in particular, should enlighten the interpretation of all other scripture (Weaver 2005: 169–179). Thus the interpretation and understanding of New Testament verses on the role of the state are far more important than any of the examples of the Old Testament monarchies. From a Mennonite perspective, the state is not the Christian's fundamental allegiance. Mennonites are particularly suspicious of calls to engage in violence on behalf of the state. They believe that Christians live in a different reality than that faced by the state, as well as a different reality than that experienced by non-Christians.

The Mennonite view of the role of the state is complemented by a unique understanding of church. The role of the Christian community is essential, not only for reasons of discipleship and teaching but also because of the belief that it is within the church that one can see the presence of Christ.¹⁷ The church stands as a visible witness to the world, distinct and different from it. This idea of church as witness makes strongly held and unpopular positions, such as pacifism, much easier for the church to bear because the church is understood to be an alternative polis. While Niebuhr (1951) goes too far in suggesting that the Anabaptist vision is that of the church against "culture,"¹⁸ the church should be recognizably different than the world. When the distinction between the church and the world is no longer discernible, the church has lost its ability to bear witness to the good news of Christ.

Implications of the Church-State Hierarchy

The Mennonite beliefs regarding the role of the church and the state and its implications for military service are familiar to many Christians. Mennonites are conscientious objectors and have either negotiated with governments to engage in alternative service during times of conscription or been imprisoned. Pacifism is a manifestation of the early understandings of the Anabaptist movement regarding the proper relationship of political authority to the church and the correct interpretation of scripture. Although not present in all early strains of Anabaptism, the issue dates back to the Reformation era, even prior to the Schleithem Confession. Conrad Grebel, the founder of the Swiss Brethren Church, wrote to Thomas Muntzer in 1524: "True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anguish and

tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death, tried in fire, and must reach the fatherland of eternal rest not by slaying the physical but the spiritual. They use neither worldly sword nor war, since killing has ceased with them entirely, unless indeed we are still under the old law, and even there (as far as we can know) war was only a plague after they had once conquered the Promised Land. No more of this" (Harder 1985: 284). This quote is from one of the founding Anabaptists at a time when the various streams of Anabaptism were still present within the main flow of the Protestant Reformation. It illustrates quite well the Anabaptist position regarding the use of force by Christians.

Most present-day Mennonites still articulate a belief in nonviolence, particularly state violence in times of war. Some would accept that violence by the state is never appropriate, and others would argue that violence by the state is necessary for the state to keep order, but only against those who have done wrong. In either case, participation in the military is never understood to be a legitimate vocation of the Christian.¹⁹ The position of the church regarding military service is the most visible evidence of the Mennonite belief regarding the responsibilities of the church and the state. Yet, the position of nonviolence is not limited to its collective denominational manifestations. Mennonites focus on nonviolence within congregations, and many try to make it a way of life, though there is certainly a great deal of variation in practice. There are four more implications of the Mennonite belief regarding the role of the state identified next. They move beyond the more traditional discussion of pacifism and tease out the contemporary meanings of the belief that the church ought to be above the state.

First, if the church holds a primary claim on Christian allegiance, then all state decisions and policies should be considered in relation to their effect on the church and its mission in reaching unbelievers and providing a witness to the love of Christ. Any state policy that might affect not just the domestic church but the church worldwide is a matter of concern for Mennonites. This perspective provides an unusual lens for examining foreign policy. For example, Mennonites in America and in other countries can be opposed to the war in Iraq because they are against violence.²⁰ However, theologically they also ought to be opposed to the war, and many are, because of its potential negative effects on Iraqi Christians, whose lives will be rendered more difficult, or even ended, because of the war in Iraq. Moreover, to the degree that American intervention in Iraq is perceived as a "Christian" action by others, and this action confers a negative image upon the church that impedes its growth and attractiveness, Mennonites ought to be opposed to it. The idea that the church holds the primary claim on Christian allegiance and that foreign policy should be examined in light of its effects on the church worldwide should also apply in

other policy areas, such as trade and diplomatic relations with other countries. Any government action that is injurious to the worldwide body of believers in Christ should be rejected.

The second implication of the Mennonite prioritization of the church is that as the nature of the church changes, political issues of concern to Mennonites will change as well. The growth of Christianity worldwide is concentrated in the global South, in Africa, India, and South America. Such popular commentaries on this trend such as Jenkins's *The Next Christendom* (Jenkins 2002) note that this will change the nature of Christianity, including the concerns of the church. As the church grows in the global South, international issues of concern to Mennonites in North America and Europe should be more focused on foreign policy issues as they relate to the global South and the church there. Issues such as debt relief, poverty alleviation, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic have been and will continue to be major policy concerns for Mennonites because they directly affect the church.

In a somewhat circuitous manner, this Mennonite concern for the church worldwide places Mennonites in the same place politically as many Catholics, though via a different mechanism. Catholic social teaching articulates a "preferential option for the poor," meaning that when there is a trade-off between what is beneficial for the rich and what is beneficial for the poor, the correct choice is the option that is beneficial for the poor. As a result, the Catholic Church has been at the forefront of movements that are specifically concerned with Christians in the global South. An excellent example is Catholic leadership on the Jubilee debt relief campaign. Mennonites arrive at the same place via a different theological route and support issues such as debt relief, conflict resolution, and international development efforts because they help our brothers and sisters in the church in the developing world, promote primary justice worldwide, and demonstrate the concern that God has for the poor.²¹ Both Mennonites and Catholics are extremely active in poverty reduction efforts around the globe, though with slightly different theological justifications.

The third implication of the Mennonite belief regarding the appropriate relative positions of the church and the state is that nationalism is viewed in a dubious manner by most Mennonites. Nationalism, the psychological or emotional attachment to a group, is acceptable only insofar as it does not become idolatrous.²² Consistent with the earlier points, nationalism can be harmless up to the point at which it leads people to favor their allegiance to the state or other substate group over that of the church and the gospel. In practice, this means that cheering for your state in the Olympics would be fine, as might be standing for the national anthem.²³ However, any sort of nationalist sentiment that leads one to forget or degrade the primary role of the church is eschewed.

As noted previously, the war in Iraq was problematic for Mennonites because the potential killing of Iraqi Christians might impede the spread of the gospel. Arguments by politicians for the U.S. national interest in the Iraq war were widely labeled idolatrous within the Mennonite church because they elevated national interest above the church. These systemic concerns are in addition to individual practice: the avowed Anabaptist imperative is that Christians should not kill; therefore, they should not be involved in the armed forces in any capacity that would lead them to kill another human being.²⁴

The fourth implication of the Mennonite belief regarding the role of the state and the church is its effect on political action. During the Reformation, early Anabaptists rejected the idea that they should play any role at all in governance. Many Mennonites follow this logic in the contemporary era and refuse any sort of government service (not just military). Other Anabaptist communities, such as the Hutterites and Old Order Mennonites, refuse to even vote. However, there is no explicit church position, and more Mennonites are taking political action within the governing structures than ever before, even going so far as to run for political office.²⁵ John Redekop has argued that the Schleithem Confession has carried too much weight with Mennonites and is no longer useful in the North American context. He views the confession as too strong for present-day theological guidance, originating, as it did, during a time when Anabaptists were persecuted by the government and governments did not perform many positive roles for the population. For those of us living in democratic states with governments that are pursuing the welfare of their citizenry (albeit not always well), Redekop argues that the Schleithem Confession leads us in the wrong direction, toward sins of omission, where the state could be used to pursue good and is neglected (Redekop 2007).

If Mennonites are cautious regarding political action, it is partially because of the belief of the primacy of the church over the state. Yet there is also a second impediment to Mennonite political action, and that is a unique understanding of citizenship. Elements of this unique understanding of citizenship are evidenced in the quote from the Schleithem Confession. Mennonites, and many other Anabaptists, take seriously the idea of citizenship in heaven, an idea that, although it might be familiar to Christians, is quite alien to political scientists.

Citizenship

The apostle Paul discusses his place as a citizen of heaven in Philippians 3:20: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there,

the Lord Jesus Christ" (NIV). Coming from another biblical figure, this statement would not have been as persuasive.²⁶ But Paul understood the benefits of Roman citizenship and demonstrated it through his actions. He used his citizenship as a tool to further the kingdom of God. When he was attacked or vulnerable to the caprice of authority, Paul frequently made use of the privileges of his Roman citizenship, understanding quite well the superiority of his status under Roman law compared with others around him who were not Roman citizens.²⁷ Did Paul do this in a purely self-interested way? No. Anyone reading through Paul's letters to the early church cannot escape noticing Paul's complete commitment to building the church and telling the good news to those who had not heard it. Paul's self-interest was to stay alive so that he could continue to serve the church. As he notably stated in Philippians 1: 21: "To live is Christ and to die is gain."²⁸ Following his goal of building the church and spreading the gospel, Paul was willing to use the resources of his Roman citizenship. Yet, after claiming all the rights of citizenship that could protect him against wrongful punishment and imprisonment, Paul says: "I am a citizen of heaven."

It is this model of heavenly citizenship that was adopted by the early Anabaptists and provides some of the justification for modern Mennonite approaches to the state. There is an understanding within the Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions that as Christians we have citizenship first in heaven and our citizenship in the state in which we live is subordinate. It is right and proper for Christians to hold a distinctly alternative understanding of citizenship than political scientists.

There is such a clear and contemporary understanding of citizenship in heaven as the Christian's fundamental affiliation that it caused problems in naming the recent merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. A debate occurred over whether the new body could be referred to as the Mennonite Church USA or whether this name would be unacceptable because of the implication of citizenship in the United States of America.²⁹ Mennonites present were not so out of touch with political realities that they did not understand that they were citizens of the United States; rather, they understood that putting the name of a state in the title of a denomination contradicts fundamental Mennonite beliefs regarding citizenship. It was debated at length and decided that the title Mennonite Church USA stands as an oxymoron. "The Mennonite Church" acknowledges our citizenship in heaven as followers of Jesus, and "USA" notes merely where these followers of Jesus are located. This understanding of the title of the church neatly avoids ever declaring citizenship in a state.

This example is fascinating because it denotes the seriousness with which the idea of citizenship in heaven is held by many Mennonites and the present nature of that understanding as something that exists apart from a historically limited scriptural interpretation. From a Mennonite perspective, it is insufficient to read Paul's discussion of his citizenship in heaven and understand it in a temporally delimited way, exclusively as his relation to the Roman Empire at that time.

The Anabaptist Tradition and Contemporary Politics

The unique understanding of citizenship held by Mennonites does not lend itself well to manipulation by political leaders. Cries to do something because it is "right for America" (or some other country) are likely to fall on the ears of those who are deaf to the message, or even condemning of it. Mennonites who avidly adhere to a theological tradition that encourages them to understand themselves as citizens of heaven can find themselves in tension with those who treasure their citizenship in a particular country.³⁰ These tensions can be difficult to negotiate among Christians, and almost impossible to explain to those who are not.³¹

In addition to these difficulties in communicating, there are more tangible issues that relate to academia and government. Mennonites remain ambivalent about participation in government and lack enthusiasm for studying politics, power, and policy. There are not many Mennonite political scientists. The Anabaptist tradition does not incline Mennonites, or other Anabaptist groups, to take the role of the state seriously. Mennonite colleges do not have political science departments, although they do have conflict resolution programs. The scarcity of teaching on political science in Mennonite institutions of higher learning sends a message to students that is implicit in its absence and occasionally made explicit in rhetoric, that the study of the state and political power is an unworthy or inappropriate pursuit. The neglect of teaching on the state and formal power relationships between states is understandable, given the dominance accorded to the church and the understanding of citizenship.

Mennonites have sacrificed the study of politics, and this has led to a lack of sophistication in efforts to advocate for the worldwide church and an ineffectiveness in efforts to promote development and the well-being of Christians around the globe. Ironically, many others with less theological motivation have been ahead of the Mennonites in encouraging political activism on issues of concern to the Christian church worldwide (Hertzke 2004). Mennonites

are not completely absent from political lobbying. However, they are not as engaged across a wide spectrum of issues as they could be, nor is political activism given much emphasis. Mennonite advocacy in Washington, D.C., has been spearheaded by the Mennonite Central Committee's Washington Office, which focuses on informing policy makers about events and perspectives from around the globe and not necessarily those issues that are in the spotlight at any given time (Miller 1996).

In the United States, issues of political inaction or resistance by Mennonites are partly explained theologically, yet another piece of the explanation has to do with the uneasiness that many Mennonites have with living in an imperial state. Anxiety regarding U.S. military endeavors overseas and the role of the state makes it difficult to conceive of using U.S. political power in a positive way that might benefit the church. A more pragmatic approach would allow Mennonites to use the power of the empire while remaining opposed to the dangerous and theologically objectionable elements of U.S. foreign policy. For example, Mennonites could lobby the State Department to exert pressure on governments that oppress Anabaptists as a matter of policy, such as Eritrea and Vietnam. This kind of pragmatic approach to empire would be much like that of the Apostle Paul. Anabaptists would be following in Paul's footsteps by using earthly citizenship for the good of the church while acknowledging primary citizenship in heaven.

Conclusions

If the negative side of Mennonite political theology is that Mennonites often abdicate from a serious consideration of the role of the state, there is also a positive side to this "neglect of the state," which is that Mennonites take the role of the worldwide church very seriously. This means that Mennonites have historically been tremendously active in the areas of relief, development, and conflict resolution as areas that are clearly building the church and furthering the spread of the gospel. In any given Mennonite congregation in the United States, one can find a handful of people who have served overseas with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the relief and development arm of the Mennonite Church. Moreover, MCC's work is given quite an elevated status within the denomination, with many congregations having a designated MCC representative to that congregation with the responsibility of keeping the congregation informed about MCC's efforts overseas and ensuring that MCC has a steady supply of school kits, hurricane relief containers, and other

project-related donations. The work for the church worldwide is visible on a regular basis and not something discussed one Sunday a year. Moreover, MCC also works in the area of conflict resolution, doing grassroots justice facilitation in areas all around the world. This is seen as both evangelistic and palliative in conflict areas.

Not surprisingly, Mennonite scholarly contributions on the study of nations have been in areas of conflict resolution and development rather than in more conventional areas of international relations, such as security, grand strategy, or even trade. Perhaps in the future this trend will change, and more Mennonites will become engaged and be affirmed in the study of states while still maintaining the beliefs that the church is superior to the state and that believers are primarily citizens of heaven. This is not advocacy for replacing what is currently being done; rather, it is advocacy for augmenting Mennonite involvement with the state so that core goals of building the church and spreading the gospel would be advanced. In this the church should take the Apostle Paul as an example. Paul shared Mennonite beliefs regarding citizenship and the state. The church should emulate his tactics and use the state and citizenship wisely, without allowing Mennonite values or agendas to be co-opted.

NOTES

So many people were helpful in the preparation of this chapter. Not wanting to misrepresent the Anabaptist position, I distributed the manuscript quite widely for comment, and I owe a debt of gratitude to those who were willing to read through the various drafts and offer comments. Thanks go to Sarah Baggé, Daryl Byler, Victor Hinojosa, John Roth, David Peyton, Bill Swartzendruber, Kimberly Gilsdorf, Paul Joireman, Todd Friesen, Richard Kauffman, Derek Keefe, and Andrew Sprunger. All flaws are my own responsibility and not the responsibility of these generous readers.

1. The largest Anabaptist national conference in the world is that of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia. Large Anabaptist churches also exist in Indonesia (Jemaat Kristen), the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam.

2. There are divergent opinions as to which groups are correctly included in the early Anabaptist movement. Snyder eludes the quagmire by categorizing early Anabaptist as “anyone in the sixteenth century who practiced the baptism of adult believers” (Snyder 2004: 16).

3. This narrative privileges the Swiss Anabaptist tradition over the Dutch Anabaptist or Hutterite movements for several reasons, the dominant one being that it is the Swiss Anabaptists that lend the most to the understanding of the political beliefs of Anabaptists in the current day. One could argue that by doing so I am articulating a less spiritualist or apocalyptic tradition. There is precedent for the emphasis on the

Swiss strand of Anabaptism in the work of Harold Bender, who views some of the more radical vestiges of the movement as aberrations (Bender 1944).

4. One of the problems in studying Anabaptist history is that so many people were killed for their beliefs during the Reformation era. People who die untimely deaths due to persecution are less likely to leave collections of letters and sermons or treatises on the evolution of their beliefs.

5. John Roth would argue that the rejection of the oath was even more politically troubling and revolutionary than the appropriate moment of baptism (Roth 2005b).

6. One can identify similar reasoning among some contemporary Anabaptists who would not personally engage in violence in service to the state but would not reject any use of violence by the state, particularly in defending the vulnerable and fighting oppression.

7. One of the interesting trends of Anabaptism in the past twenty years has been dialogues recognizing the history on Anabaptist persecution between Mennonites and the churches that persecuted them during the Reformation.

8. This shorthand definition is from Buckley's introduction to George Lindbeck's book (Buckley 2002: viii).

9. Craig Carter described this nicely in his articulation of the theology of John Howard Yoder. Carter argues that, for Yoder, "pacifism is not the point; Jesus is the point" (Carter 2001: 17).

10. Yoder was writing in English. Paul Peachey and Clarence Bauman, writing in German, also contributed to the articulation of a common understanding regarding the role of the state.

11. To my knowledge, no other Christian sect gives primacy to the church over the state. Most Christian denominations and groups choose between two models of church and state originally articulated at the council of Nicaea in 325, the first being the subservience of the church to the state, and the second being the two kingdoms conception of the church and the state occupying two separate spheres of power. See Kuyper (2002) for a Calvinistic view and Lomperis, chapter 3, for the Lutheran point of view. See Mark Noll for a succinct description of the political implications of the Council of Nicaea (Noll 2000: 59–62).

12. The confession unhelpfully confuses the two terms, *state* and *nation*, and used them interchangeably to refer to the state.

13. For example, Luther, raising the bar on the just war tradition regarding participation in war, argued that if a Christian knew the war to be wrong he should not fight in it, but if he was not certain, he should obey the ruler, and the responsibility of sin would fall on the ruler. Mennonites and early Anabaptists would disagree, arguing that "do not kill" means "do not kill" and that the state cannot order Christians to do that which God has forbidden.

14. One may find an earlier expression of a similar view in the 1632 Dortrecht Confession, adopted by the Mennonites in Dortrecht, Holland. Article 13 states:

We also believe and confess, that God has institutes civil government, for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the pious, and also further

for the purpose of governing the world—governing countries and cities; and also to preserve its subjects in good order and under good regulations. Wherefore we are not permitted to despise, blaspheme, or resist the same; but are to acknowledge it as a minister of God and be subject and obedient to it in all things that do not militate against the law, will and commandments of God; yea, “to be ready in every good work” also faithfully to pay it custom, tax and tribute; thus giving it what is its due; as Jesus Christ taught, did himself, and commanded his followers to do. That we are also to pray to the Lord earnestly for the government and its welfare, and on behalf of our country, so that we may live under its protection, maintain itself and “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” And further, that the Lord would recompense them (our rulers) here and in eternity, for all the benefits liberties and favors which we enjoy under their laudable administration. Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1, 2; 1 Pet 2:17; Matt 17:27; 22:21; 1 Tim 2: 1, 2. (Hershberger 1969: 319)

Clearly the difference between Mennonite and other positions with regard to the interpretation of the Romans passage is expressed in the Dortrecht Confession in the phrase “all things that do not militate against the law, will and commandments of God.”

15. Another important verse to justify this position is Colossians 2: 15: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (NIV).

16. For a description of early Swiss-Anabaptist approaches to the Old Testament, see Roth (1999).

17. This is not because of the believed superiority of Christians in community but because of the view that, unlike the state and other institutions, the church is not less moral than its individual members. As Carter paraphrases Yoder, “Being a member of the church does not cause one to adopt a lower form of morality than that which is commanded by Jesus” (Carter 2001: 45).

18. Niebuhr is almost forced into this extreme position by his encompassing definition of *culture* as everything from the arts, to the state, to organizational life. Even the most extreme communities of Anabaptists, such as the Hutterites or Amish, would have trouble with the complete rejection of all that Niebuhr means by “culture.” The more mainstream Anabaptist position would be similar to that of most Christians: some elements of the culture are to be appreciated; others are to be rejected. John Howard Yoder and Richard Niebuhr engaged in a discussion of this issue in print that is nicely summarized in Carter’s *The Politics of the Cross* (2001: 215–223).

19. See Roth (2005a) for a discussion of the variety of Mennonite beliefs on the issue of the use of force.

20. The language here is chosen carefully. What is important from a Mennonite perspective is that one does not disobey God by killing for the state. Mennonites would hold other Christians to a similar standard and say that they are not in obedience

to God when they kill for the state. Christians who kill for the state have seriously confused allegiances. However, there is less judgment for nonbelievers who have no competing loyalty to that of the state.

21. I prefer Nicholas Wolterstorff's concept of primary justice to the more commonly used and often polemicized phrase "social justice."

22. This definition of nationalism is inclusive of patriotism, which would be an emotional or psychological attachment to a state, as well as substate ethnic identifications such as Xhosa, Hutu, Scottish, or Basque. See Joireman (2003) for a discussion of nationalism. Interestingly, there are Mennonites, called within the church "ethnic Mennonites," who may see their identity as Mennonite only as a "nationality," not as a religious position. These are people who may have been raised in Mennonite communities or come from Mennonite backgrounds, identifiable by certain names and traditions, who do not necessarily hold to Mennonite religious beliefs. Thus one could find non-Christian, agnostic, Reformed, and Catholic Mennonites, with Mennonite in this context indicating ethnicity.

23. Though certainly not pledging allegiance to the flag, which is a declaration of allegiance to something other than Christ and his church. There is a heated debate among Mennonites about what acceptable displays of nationalism might be, if in fact there are any. John Roth's book *Beliefs* gives examples of the spectrum of Mennonite/Anabaptist opinion on this issue (Roth 2005a).

24. Again, John Roth (2005a) gives examples of Mennonite opinion on this issue. The theology of the denomination is not necessarily belief in the pews.

25. In my own congregation, one of the members announced that he was running for the U.S. House of Representatives and created a campaign committee that included church members.

26. This is not to suggest that I hold the writings of Paul above other scriptural texts. However, given the fact that the state as we know it did not come into being until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and Paul lived as a citizen of the Roman Empire, which would have been the closest thing to a modern state at that time, his writings have a contextual validity for an understanding of citizenship in the current day that the writings of Peter, for example, would not.

27. Acts 22: 2–29.

28. The whole section of Philippians 1: 21–26 from the New International Version of the Bible is: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

29. For this example, I thank John Stolfus, who used it in a sermon to illustrate another point entirely.

30. This is especially problematic in the United States and in other countries where the sense of patriotism (a form of nationalism that supports the state) is very

strong. In Canada and other countries where nationalism is less virulent, presumably there is less tension between Anabaptists and others.

31. Imagine the difficulty of telling a well-educated, secular, and professional person that your citizenship is in heaven, and you will understand the difficulty of explaining a political position that derives from that point of view.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bender, Harold S. 1944. *The Anabaptist Vision*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Brock, Peter. 1972. *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Buckley, James J. 2002. "Introduction." In *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. G. A. Lindbeck. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Carter, Craig A. 2001. *The Politics of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Goertz, Hans-Jürgen. 1996. *The Anabaptists*. New York: Routledge.
- Harder, Leland, ed. 1985. *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Hershberger, Guy Franklin. 1969. *War, Peace and Nonresistance*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Hertzke, Allen D. 2004. *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith Committee. 1995. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Jenkins, Philip. 2002. *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Joireman, Sandra F. 2003. *Nationalism and Political Identity*. New York: Continuum.
- Kuyper, Abraham. 2002. *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Miller, Keith Graber. 1996. *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1951. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Noll, Mark. 2000. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Redekop, John H. 2007. *Politics under God*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Roth, John D. 1999. "Harmonizing the Scriptures: Swiss Brethren Understandings of the Relationship between the Old and New Testament during the Last Half of the Sixteenth Century." In *Radical Reformation Studies*, eds. W. O. Packull and G. L. Dipple. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.
- Roth, John D. 2005a. *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Roth, John D. 2005b. Personal communication. Wheaton, IL, August 19.
- Simons, Menno. 1956. "Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing." In *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Snyder, C. Arnold. 2004. *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*. Maryknoll, NY.

- Swiss Brethren Conference. 2005. *The Schleitheim Confession*. <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html>. Accessed June 20, 2005.
- Weaver, J. Denny. 2005. *Becoming Anabaptist*. 2nd ed. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Yoder, John H. 1972. *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Yoder, John H. 2002. *The Christian Witness to the State*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.