

# THEOLOGICAL AND SECULAR META-NARRATIVES OF POLITICS: ANABAPTIST ORIGINS REVISITED (AGAIN)<sup>1</sup>

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Once upon a time, the story of Anabaptism was a simple tale. Anabaptism began in the southern German-speaking areas of Europe, sometime early in the third decade of the sixteenth century. It could be identified by a relatively coherent, stable, and recognizable set of doctrines or behaviours, the most important of which included a personal and communal discipline, a rejection of state-sponsored religion, and one or another form of pacifism. Even the devil in the details of this story was a minor-league player. Scholars might dispute the precise origins of Anabaptism, but few seriously questioned that *was* such an origin and that Anabaptism was an easily identifiable movement.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, even though scholars had produced numerous biographies of early Anabaptist leaders, the differences between these leaders—with perhaps the exception of Thomas Müntzer and his immediate followers—could be treated as either largely incidental or as temporary pot-holes on the road to unity. It was relatively easy to discern who was or was not a “true” Anabaptist. It was possible, then, to trace a continuous, determinative path from the earliest Anabaptist stirrings in the 1520’s to the present day. Serious disruption in this narrative could be attributed mainly to external forces (persecution, political expulsion, war-time disorder, etc.). Internal disputes and splits among various Anabaptist groups could be treated as rifts in a main line that continued in unbroken succession to the contemporary inheritors of the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>3</sup>

No more. The scholarly work of the past thirty years or so has produced results that remind one of Nietzsche’s ironic (if erroneous) comment on the

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origin of nihilism: "Christianity breaks up because of the *necessary* character of its morality.—Science has awakened doubt in the truthfulness of the Christian God: and by this doubt, Christianity dies (Pascal's *deus absconditus*)."<sup>4</sup> The apparent unity in the origins of Anabaptism has been shattered not so much by openly hostile doubters, but by the truthful scholarship of contemporary Anabaptists themselves, or at least by camp followers. Their work has fragmented the seeming unity of original Anabaptism along several lines. The result threatens to be an *anabaptisma abscondita*. One can no longer tell "The Anabaptist Story."<sup>5</sup>

With this background in mind, the present essay has four aims. First, it examines the purpose and results of some recent work that has either questioned, rejected, or reformulated the possibility of envisioning an original Anabaptist unity. Second, it considers the motivations for fashioning such a contestable unity in the first place. Third, it considers the place of unitary motivations and their critiques in contemporary studies of Anabaptism. Fourth, it seeks briefly to draw implications for ecclesial historiography in general. A reconsideration of the debate concerning Anabaptist origins can be directed toward a larger register to provide for an instantiation (as well as a critique) of what John Milbank has called "a 'counter-modern' articulation of a specifically Christian onto-logic."<sup>6</sup> I want to suggest, then, that recent reappraisals of Anabaptist origins are best understood as attempts at "getting the story straight" that have their own story to tell. This new story—told in a *social science* mode—introduces a different meta-narrative that in turn raises a number of interpretive issues for telling, re-telling, appropriating, and evaluating the "original," *believers'* Anabaptist story. (Ironically enough, the original story was also accepted by certain scholars hostile to the Anabaptists.) These issues have remained somewhat elusive in the literature surrounding this debate, and the present essay aims to scrutinize more carefully the most important of them. Accordingly, the essay first reviews the transition from a unitary Anabaptist history to a more fragmented one. It then examines the character of this new, semi-fragmented account. Finally, it considers the conditions and premises for a new account of Anabaptist origins from a believer's perspective. Although these interpretive issues are raised here within the scope of Anabaptist history and its current status, the essay has wider implications concerning the problem of practical faithfulness and telling "true" stories. This problem is not confined to the intentions of "believers" alone, since the metanarrative of our truthfulness occurs as a subtext for every story.<sup>7</sup>

### *From Monogenesis to Polygenesis*

In a summary essay published in 1975 on the occasion of the "450th anniversary of the emergence of Anabaptism in Zürich,"<sup>8</sup> James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann suggested that the premises of

a unitary origin (monogenesis) of Anabaptism was an unsupported and unsupportable assumption of the pioneering work on the Reformation conducted by Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Holl, and other scholars hostile or indifferent to the religious claims of the Anabaptists, as well as by Anabaptist believers and scholars themselves. "The history of Anabaptist origins," they argued, "can no longer be preoccupied with the essentially sterile question of where Anabaptism began, but must devote itself to studying the plural origins of Anabaptism and their significance for the plural character of the movement." They noted that the assumption of Anabaptist monogenesis as opposed to polygenesis had never been established, but merely implied in the debate between Troeltsch and Holl, and otherwise generally assumed among contemporary Anabaptists and non-Anabaptist scholars alike. Empirical studies showed that it was "an unexamined assumption which simply does not bear rigorous examination."<sup>9</sup> Stayer, et al. did not indicate, however, the direction such studies might take, nor what results one might expect, nor what the normative consequences of polygenesis might be for those who looked to the Anabaptists as their spiritual ancestors.<sup>10</sup>

For scholars like Troeltsch and Holl, a unitary story with specific origins firmly (and unproblematically) "locates" Anabaptists in a sociological, cultural, or historical setting, making them readily identifiable and easy to characterize. In this paper, however, I focus on the motives of the so-called "evangelical Anabaptists" or "believers" and their "polygenetic" counterparts. For believers, past attempts at telling an Anabaptist story, with a determinative beginning, a coherent middle, and a tentative ending that terminates in one's own present (and therefore holds out the promise of a new beginning, or at least a continuation of the middle) had a justifiable and discernible impetus. It was in part an effort to trace a spiritual ancestry that would give practical moral identity to a contemporary community that saw itself as descended from the original Anabaptists. Such an intention elicits the following question: are the monogenetic stories of Mennonite scholars—"evangelical Anabaptists"—and other believers not simply historical self-authentications, self-serving attempts at establishing an historically located legitimacy, subtle expressions, as it were, of a will-to-power? Eric Voegelin's discovery of what he called historiogenesis as an activity of historical construction has (as we shall later see) its own problems, but is a helpful attempt to capture this motive.

According to Voegelin, "historiogenesis is a mytho-speculative extrapolation of pragmatic history toward its cosmic-divine point of origin" that "proves to be a symbolic form of extraordinary pertinacity, elasticity, and variability."<sup>11</sup> It is a construction of political history in which the author demonstrates a continuous line of politico-theological meaning from a divine origin to his own present. Voegelin found the phenomenon to be pervasive from as far into antiquity as written records exist up to the present day. In every case, the known pragmatic events of an author's past could

be strung along a line of meaning that demonstrated the continuous and continued divine sanction of the political and social order in which the author finds himself. Historiogenesis is, in this sense, "a speculation on the origin and cause of social order," but it is also the literary legitimization of a particular order. It emerges "from the cooperation of pragmatic historiography with mythopoesis and noetic speculation."<sup>12</sup> The telling distinction between "pragmatic history" on the one hand and historiogenesis on the other is that the single thread of meaning required by the latter frequently requires its authors to disregard and inventively re-interpret data uncovered by the former. For example,

The Sumerian Empire was a manifold of city-states under local dynasties, with an imperial organization superimposed, whenever one of the cities, not always the same, gained ascendancy over the others through conquering expansion. Whereas a critical historian would have to relate the parallel histories of the cities, as well as the changes of ascendancy, the authors of the King List constructed a unilinear history of Sumer by placing the parallel city-dynasties in succession on a single temporal line of rulers, issuing into the restored empire of their own time. The parallel histories of the cities were abolished, but nevertheless absorbed into an imaginary, unilinear history of empire. One cosmos, it appears, can only have one imperial order, and the sin of coexistence must be atoned by posthumous integration into the one history whose goal has been demonstrated through the success of the conqueror. If it, then, be remembered that the imaginary line of kings is extrapolated to its absolute point of origin in divine-cosmic events, so that nothing extraneous to it has a chance of disturbing the one and only course admissible, the construction appears as an act of violence committed against historical reality. The relevant course of events descends ineluctably from the cosmic origin down to the present of the authors whose society is the only one that matters.<sup>13</sup>

The two apparent motives for such constructions both originate in the pragmatic, concrete experiences of a society. In the first place, the continued historical existence of society makes one wonder what constitutes this existence and what kind of meaning it might have. A society must have existed long enough for such a "retrospective extrapolation of events of an absolute starting point [to be] intelligible,"<sup>14</sup> but this social stability cannot be taken for granted. Threats to the stability or even the very existence of a society make its members anxious, and this anxiety becomes the second motive for historiogenetic constructions. Temporal and temporary stability, always threatened by historical impermanence, includes an "imaginative construction" that converts "temporal gain into a possession forever."<sup>15</sup>

The rationale for introducing this concept into the discussion of Anabaptist historiography is three-fold. First, it seems to me that a critique of

such historiography as a kind of historiogenetic construction is what the new historians of Anabaptist heterogenesis that I will review are moving toward in their critique of the evangelical, unitary thesis. Second, if this critique has merit, then their historiogenetic critique is a powerful objection to evangelical ways of writing Anabaptist history. Third, then, we may ask: if we substituted into Voegelin's account of the Sumerian King List "church" for kingdom and city-state and imperial order, "theologian" or "Anabaptist leader" for ruler, and "kingdom of God" for cosmos, would we not have a crude summary of evangelical Anabaptist historiography? It seems on its face, at least, that insofar as twentieth-century Mennonites claim theological (often conjoined with direct biological) descent from the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, their historiography has clear historiogenetic characteristics in at least five ways.

First, most Anabaptists had and many Mennonites have a strong "kingdom theology". In the manner of Augustine, they see the church as one kind of kingdom in conflict with the political rulers and authorities, as well as the sociological trends of the "secular" world.<sup>16</sup> The desire to render the continuities of Anabaptist ways of being church intelligible and useful may usher in a kind of historiogenetic construction that displays the continuity of the alternate "kingdom" (in the manner of Augustine) of the Anabaptists as a meaningful unity in both pragmatic or secular and theological history. Both anxiety, induced by the seeming fragility of this kingdom of faith, and the observation of seeming continuity despite four hundred years of episodic, sometimes intense persecution and oppression, are plausible motives for such constructions of meaning.

Second, Anabaptist historiography of any kind must deal with origins, which is perhaps its most contentious problem. The evangelical historians look to certain key events as the locus of Anabaptist origins. Cast under categories of "rebirth" or "restitution", they look to these originating events as recapturing an even more distant origin, the Christian church of the first century. Third, this question is then linked with the phenomenon of continuity, both of Anabaptism over the last four hundred years, and the Christian "free church" tradition over the last two thousand. Fourth, there exists a firm claim of divine sanction or divine blessing in the Anabaptist story. The Anabaptist and their modern heirs are, after all, attempting to live faithfully to a calling or standard for which they claim divine approbation if not command. Finally, the writing of Anabaptist history along these lines of meaning seems to demand a "selective" use of sources and a definitional imposition (what is "normative Anabaptism"?). In short, there exists a clear case for claiming that evangelical histories of Anabaptism are historiogenetic treatments of the historical data.

Even in the face of such historiogenetic motives among the monogenetic story-tellers, however, the (re-)discovery of Anabaptist polygenesis does not put to an end any attempt to tell a coherent story; it merely poses

the necessity of telling the story differently. That this is possible is not self-evident, yet not unlikely; but I anticipate.

Let us begin by considering specifically the most noted of the writings from the scholarship that attempts to define a new Anabaptist identity amidst the fragmented origins. These would include the work of C.P. Clasen, James M. Stayer, and Hans-Jürgen Goertz.<sup>17</sup> The primary motivation for their work seems to be two-fold. First, there is a "philological" intent. All three scholars are trying to get the story straight. All three consciously oppose the story they read out of the Anabaptist texts and other sources to the unitary account that evangelical Anabaptists and others have traditionally offered.

Stayer's book, for example, is an examination of the development and heterogeneity of Anabaptist thinking regarding "the relation of force and ethical values." This relation, in Stayer's view, is a specifically political problem, captured by the Anabaptists under the rubric "the doctrine of the Sword." This doctrine does not indicate an immediate concern with "revolution and pacifism" as central theoretical issues; rather, according to Stayer, Anabaptists "were wrestling ... with the ethics of coercion," which they referred to as the teaching on the sword.<sup>18</sup> Stayer develops a typology of positions on this question, and he discovers that the Anabaptists can be found on nearly every point of its topography.<sup>19</sup> In Stayer's finding, there is no unified Anabaptist opinion on this question of political coercion, which, according to their evangelical interpreters, most distinguishes Anabaptists from any other Christian tradition. With this result in mind, Stayer intends to deliver a "study of the historical development of a body of thought, not the systematic exposition of a static theory." He proposes not to "single out" a definitive Anabaptist doctrine, but to demonstrate "a diversity of Anabaptist doctrines of the Sword roughly paralleling that which was present in the first years of the Reformation movement before there were clearly identifiable Anabaptist sects." This diversity eventually coalesced among the several Anabaptist groups into a similar radical apoliticism, but only over a period of time. Stayer concludes that the Anabaptist distinctiveness on the question of coercion was not based on an initial unity, but on the fact that "the religious character of the several sects pointed them to a different ultimate resolution of the issues about the Christian and the Sword from the ones that won out in the various branches of official Protestantism."<sup>20</sup> Initially, then, the "family resemblance"—to use Wittgenstein's term—of Anabaptists is narrowly circumscribed, nearly formal: "The Anabaptists I have investigated are necessarily united only by the outer sign that gave them their label: they are members of sects practicing baptism of believers and forming religious groups on that basis. Any other general qualities of Anabaptism will have to be assigned on an *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* basis."<sup>21</sup> There appears, therefore, to be only a formal Anabaptist identity, but no universal or unitary Anabaptist qualities, and no clearly determinative Anabaptist origins or Anabaptist visions of the good life.

Clasen's book was published in the same year as Stayer's. Clasen wants to examine "the structure and nature of the Anabaptist movement itself." This seems a quixotic effort in our post-Kantian context. What, after all, is a "movement itself"? According to Clasen, it is discovered by approaching "the Anabaptist movement from the point of view of social history", which is an attempt "to understand Anabaptism in the context of the sixteenth century German society, not to formulate a sociological model." Thus, Clasen seeks to present a study "based strictly on fact."<sup>22</sup> His approach is avowedly "quantitative": how many Anabaptists lived in what towns? How many converts to Anabaptism were there in any given year? What occupations did Anabaptists have? How did Anabaptists organize themselves, economically and ecclesiologically? What did they *do*, empirically speaking? What was done to them?

Clasen writes in that era when there was considerable optimism among social scientists regarding the intrinsic intelligibility and power of empirical studies, and it would hardly be to the point to rehearse yet again the decisive objections to many of the claims of such endeavors. That facts only appear as facts within a contextual matrix is no longer news. Suffice it to say that we know there are no "facts" apart from interpretive structures that give them their "place" in a coherent whole.<sup>23</sup> But this well-sung refrain has implications for Clasen's study that should not be shrugged aside and that I will examine presently. For the moment, let us note that Clasen's study also opens a space for questioning monogenesis. Questioning this premise is not an initial motivation of his work, but observations of doctrines and behaviors lead him to the conclusion that Anabaptism was, in its doctrines, practices, and adherents, pluralistic, if not polygenetic.

Goertz's work takes up where Stayer's leaves off, with a nod to Clasen's efforts. Unlike Stayer, Goertz seeks a common motivation among Anabaptists that would give their "family resemblance" more depth. This would give us a better conceptual grip on what Anabaptists were about than the formal, descriptive appellation with which Stayer begins and seemingly ends. Like Stayer and Clasen, Goertz begins with the premise that the Anabaptists must be understood in the context of the social and ecclesiastical politics of their time. Their unique but disparate doctrines and practices are, consequently, the direct product of an engagement with their political environment.<sup>24</sup> According to Goertz, the various features of the heterogeneous Anabaptist groups of the sixteenth century have in common an "ant clerical impulse" that can be traced through every ecclesiological, social, and political practice unique to them.<sup>25</sup> Anabaptism in all its manifestations is defined by anticlericalism, which is the source of any "family resemblance" among them. Although this looks like a new monogenesis at the motivational level, Goertz suggests its normative implications are heterogeneous or polymorphic, and therefore indeterminate.

*From Polygenesis to a New Story*

I have suggested that the first motivation of the work of Stayer, Clasen, and Goertz rests in an effort to get the story straight. But this effectively opens up a second motivation in the midst of the first: each wants to tell a story of his own. For the "evangelical Mennonites", the history of early Anabaptism is ultimately a story of God's activity in history, with which later Anabaptists can identify and in which they can discover moral and ethical resources for living their own story by continuing in what has gone before.<sup>26</sup> A social-scientific approach to Anabaptist origins and history results not only in a disruption of this evangelical story, but in its replacement.

Being a principled scholar, Stayer clarifies his historiography with two remarks that help us to understand what he is doing. First, he calls himself a "profane historian with a liberal perspective." We are led to believe that this characterizes the history he writes as "profane history", which is contrasted in particular with the history that "Anabaptist evangelicalism" tells. The problem with the latter, in Stayer's view, is that it "imposes on the disparate Anabaptist sects a consistency and a system which do not correspond to sixteenth-century realities."<sup>27</sup> His profane perspective is intended to provide a critical distance from such religiously or politically motivated interpretations. Evangelical Anabaptism is "an abstraction of limited utility," containing "within it phenomena which [are] stubbornly different from one another." These phenomena would "have to be understood in an historical context even if in a differently constructed one from Holl's *Schwärmertum*."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, whereas the evangelical Anabaptist historians seek an identity, a single thread of continuous meaning in the story of the Anabaptists, Stayer is uninterested in or dubious about such a "confessional" enterprise. Instead, the meaning of the story resides for him in the gradual resolution of conflicting dogmas and mediating political experiences. His hope is for a continuing "rationality and progress of knowledge," which begins with a focus on "interacting groups and sects, rather than [the] unified movement" depicted in Evangelical historiography.<sup>29</sup>

But what does this mean? When he is confronted with the sixteenth-century Anabaptists' political doctrines, Stayer acknowledges in a second remark a realpolitical liberalism that regards the Anabaptist doctrine of nonresistance (which finally won the day as the movement coalesced) as quixotic and unpersuasive, but as perhaps the most relevant "to the historical situation of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists."<sup>30</sup> Even though an "absolute rejection of the pragmatic, and of social responsibility ... is built into the ethics of non-resistance," the Anabaptist response is an expedient response to their sociopolitical situation. Its political effectiveness and its meaning beyond a pragmatism that insures survival appear to be nil.<sup>31</sup>

In a helpful review of Stayer's argument, John H. Yoder takes up this evaluation and shows that "prior theological and world view commitments"



will affect the "meaningful unity" Stayer constructs from the data he examines. Yoder does not directly contest Stayer's critique of the evangelical Anabaptist historiography, but he does contend that Stayer's prior commitments lead him to misunderstand some of the variation in Anabaptist criticisms of the political authorities of their time. Stayer's realpolitical commitments force the need for an ideological consistency on Anabaptist positions that excludes, *ex hypothesi*, a number of possibilities for dialogue that Anabaptists wanted to entertain. Thus, Anabaptism may be poly-genetic, and it may vary across its responses to varied political situations, but this pluralism is a *principled* pluralism that finds its identity in an underlying unity of hope and purpose concerning the political realm.<sup>32</sup> If a realpolitical liberalism obscures the principled yet pliable stance of the Anabaptists, then they cannot be partners in discussion, but only contestants in conflict.

It would appear, then, that Stayer's real-historical perspective measures success by survival, not by a faithfulness to a story that must take some account of the situation. His position does not thereby contest the Anabaptist perspective, but undermines or subverts it, because he relocates the meaning of the Anabaptist story. For Stayer, principled pacifism and non-resistance (whose manifestations may vary with the political situation) are rooted *not* in an effort at obedience to a story as it is delivered in an authoritative text, but in an Anabaptist political illegitimacy that makes such pacifism expedient.<sup>33</sup> Stayer's "profane" history is a history written from the perspective of the *Realpolitiker*, in which pacifism and non-resistance are neither "true", nor faithful, but expedient. Anabaptism's plural origins and its hesitant, historically mediated progress toward unity are, for Stayer (and Goertz), evidence of this assertion. For the evangelical interpreter, however, the same data are evidence of readiness to rational discussion, willingness for negotiation and careful assessment of the situation, but without sacrifice of core principles. Thus, Stayer's finding of Anabaptist pluralism on certain central doctrines leads him, out of his interpretive commitment to *Realpolitik*, to dismiss Anabaptists as partners in discussion on grounds of both incoherence and opportunism.

Stayer's claim of pluralist *development* are a critique not only of contemporary evangelical Mennonite claims of continuity, but, more importantly, of their own (and, most likely, earlier Anabaptists') self-understanding. It seems to imply that peaceableness is a product of expediency, not a recovery of an original, biblical vision. (We will see that Goertz's and Clasen's work produce similar results). Yet Stayer's findings of doctrinal fragmentation do not proceed to a typologically necessary conclusion. First, we may learn lessons and clarify our principles in light of practical experience, but that does not vitiate their moral insight, nor make them merely exercises in expedience. Second, peaceableness is neither a necessary nor historically frequent response to persecution or political oppression. Violent resistance

and an ongoing quest for revenge are more likely. Indeed, as Yoder points out, there is no evidence that *any* of the doctrinal or practical outcomes in the Radical Reformation are predetermined. Sociological explanations that exclude not merely “religious impulses”, but faithfulness to a vision or the possibility of an historically circumscribed theophany are not only theoretically overdetermined, they are only partially supported by the evidence.<sup>34</sup> Stayer’s perspective allows him to dismiss the possibility that peaceableness is not merely a politically expedient stance, but a stance based on a wider “kingdom theology” that has both deeper sources and broader implications than one’s immediate relations to the ruling authorities, and that strictly limits the role of expedience as a political directive for survival.

We see similar outcomes in Goertz’s attempt to relocate the Anabaptist “family resemblance” in an “anticlericalism”. In Goertz’s view, a variety of Anabaptist activities and doctrines, including their use of biblical writings, their practice of sanctified living, their pacifism, their demand for a believer’s church independent of the ruling political authorities, and their interpretation of standard Christian doctrines (Lord’s Supper, Eucharist, etc.) reduces to one or another form of anticlericalism. Like Stayer’s interpretation, however, this conceptualization is effectively an attempt to retell the Anabaptist story. Thus, we may call Dirk Willems’ famous rescue of his pursuer (who then had him arrested and ultimately executed) from the frozen river into which he had fallen an act of anticlericalism insofar as it displays a degree of faithfulness to an ethic of *agape* or love for the enemy that few “clerics” of the Magisterial churches either preached or demonstrated.<sup>35</sup> But such self-sacrifice seems to stretch the definitional function of the category beyond what is useful or credible. Certainly, the violence of the Batenburgers, a sect immediately descended from the Münster Anabaptists and with whom Willems or his peaceable companions had to contend, is also “anti-clerical”, but to much different effect. Thus, the term itself does not provide us with the resources to make sufficient ethical distinctions within stories or between them. Adding such resources—if we procure them from a story of faithfulness rather than from a real-historical story—is already to retell the story in such a way that its meaning moves beyond Goertz’s anticlerical appellation.

To put it another way, anticlericalism is an epiphenomenon of Anabaptism, an accidental quality attendant to Anabaptist activity that does not capture what Anabaptists seem to have thought they were doing.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the doctrines and activities of anticlericalism (biblicism, separatist ecclesiology, adult immersion, moral discipline, and so on) are “anti-clerical”, because they are the activities of the citizens of one kingdom in contrast to the activities of the citizens of another kingdom, whose most powerful and articulate representatives happen to be in significant part the clergy of the Magisterial churches. Anticlericalism is the surface of the story, not its depth. Goertz reads a surface phenomenon, an accident that seems to be

universally present among the Anabaptists, for the essential “family resemblance”. To exchange one for the other is to tell a different story, not necessarily to render a better “explanation”. It is the different story Goertz tells that makes this move in nomenclature intelligible. In the story he replaces, the practice of a sanctified life, not anticlericalism *per se*, may lead to a diatribe against the “shepherds”, whose assigned (but neglected) task it seems originally to have been to assure the conditions for such a life. The practices of the Anabaptists lead to an implicit or even explicit critique of those who do not live up to their self-assigned claims in the way the Anabaptists attempt to do, but Anabaptist practice itself is not the critique of the clergy *per se*, and it precedes this latter activity.<sup>37</sup> In the new story, which Clasen articulates more sharply in this register than Goertz, anticlericalism is an immediate expression of resentment, embitterment, and populist distrust of education. Clasen rightly points out the execrable excesses of the Anabaptists in their criticisms of the clergy, but these misdeeds do not remove the possibility of loftier motives—among at least some or even many of the Anabaptists—as the initiating impulse for such critique.<sup>38</sup>

Goertz’s and Clasen’s recasting of the story raises anew the questions that Stayer’s retelling invokes. What will be the “narrative base” from which we tell the story?<sup>39</sup> Will it be a narrative of essential conflict and violence, or of prophetic faithfulness and hope? Stayer himself seems ultimately to want to avoid disrupting the Evangelical Anabaptist tradition, preferring perhaps to attenuate its basis:

The revolutionary (and in many areas mystical-spiritualist) beginnings of sixteenth-century Anabaptism must not be allowed to obscure the peaceful, biblicist, sectarian and separatist character of the mature movement. It is the need to revise and enlarge, without destroying, the vision of Anabaptism of the earlier generation of committedly pro-Anabaptist historians that makes polemic so inappropriate at this juncture.<sup>40</sup>

But what does this mean? Along with Clasen, Stayer explicitly states that the evangelical perspective is—methodologically, at least—uninteresting, and Goertz suggests the same.<sup>41</sup> Instead, they ask us to assume the perspective of the real-historian. To do so, however, implies that we historicize and then relativize the tradition that Stayer does not intend to disable. In his words, “A major thesis of the book was that separatist non-resistance alone survived the sixteenth century because it was the most realistic of the competing Anabaptist teachings on the Sword.”<sup>42</sup> To repeat, the question here is expedience and survivability, not faithfulness, vision, or hope. For Goertz, it is enough to conclude that the plurality itself of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century brings their significance for a modern normative theological determination into doubt.<sup>43</sup> The intensely contextual nature of their anticlericalism, moreover, makes their particular theological insights, derived from a

particular historical context, of little value for contemporary problems. Accordingly, the normative demand of theology or ecclesiastical historiography cannot be founded “scientifically”, which is to say, in a social or doctrinal history.<sup>44</sup> Such a history discovers conflict, but without a determinative normative vision.

The conclusions of Stayer and Goertz, then, do not merely add new data to the debate, but rather, they deny an alternative core of Anabaptist self-understanding, which subsists in what one might call a “prophetic vision”.

A return to the prophetic [an understanding found mainly in the great prophets of the Old Testament and in Jesus] understanding of the sacred—this is the heart of the radical religion of Anabaptism. It would be incorrect to say that no others in their time had grasped this understanding of things. A measure of it existed in Protestantism as well as in Roman Christianity. But the Anabaptists were practically the only ones who sought to find and express God’s will in radically personal and communal terms.<sup>45</sup>

In such a reading, the activity of God in history is paramount for every leader in the early Anabaptist movements. As part of this divine activity, Jesus of Nazareth is the founder of a new kingdom. The significance of this claim for Christian ethics—i.e., how to live up to the appellation, “Christian”—is multifold, but two strands stand out in the context of our discussion.

First, the ethical perspective and principles of behaviour of this new kingdom stand in marked contrast to the ethical perspectives and principles of conduct in the earthly kingdoms of the larger world, where the citizens of the new kingdom are still physically located as resident aliens. In the Anabaptist view of the church, citizens of Jesus’ kingdom have, by joining that kingdom, made a conscious choice to live in a new way with new norms. For example, they will love their enemies, they will renounce selfishness and violence, and they will submit themselves to disciplined communities of faith. The sociopolitical implications of such a stance include a skepticism regarding the claims of the state or the political authorities over the lives of its/their citizens or subjects, most particularly in cases when the ruling political authorities pretend to godly sanction. Anabaptists are enabled to live up to the demands of their new citizenship by reason of the second strand of God’s activity; the new kingdom is God’s ongoing work in the world, and Anabaptists have become a part of it. The current work of the kingdom of God belongs to its members in partnership with God.<sup>46</sup> Thus, a description of the new kingdom and of its members’ participation in it must take the form of a story. The kingdom has a past, a present, and a future. Its members enter that narrative (for the Anabaptists, in faith through baptism) and continue to work out the narrative into which they are adopted.<sup>47</sup>

The analyses of Clasen, Stayer, and Goertz all lead to a retelling of this story, which implies a denial of Anabaptist claims at several levels. The core of their claims, I think, has been recast in John Milbank's account of social and political theory in the West since Machiavelli. According to Milbank, Western social and political theory, regardless of school, thinker, or national origin, has been subtended by a theological meta-narrative deliberately set off in contrast to the traditional narrative of Christianity. This meta-narrative has been consistently underwritten by an ontology of violence that none of its indigenous critics have overcome, despite consistent attempts to supersede it. The metanarrative that Milbank traces takes for granted essential ontological premises regarding the necessary role of force and violence in human affairs. His ultimate intent is to discover an alternative narrative that denies the necessity of violence. He looks to one strand in the Christian tradition, displayed in constructs like Augustine's theology of the two cities, to do so. This tradition rejects violence as the regulating principle of either human or divine acts, and it proposes to replace it with an ontology of peaceableness. My suggestion is that this is what those Anabaptists who took up non-resistance as a personal and communal ethic were also trying to do. Goertz's "antiergicism", Stayer's "expedience", and Clasen's "social history", however, all extend a metanarrative of violence into a self-interpretation of peaceableness and the belief that such peaceableness is a real possibility.

This move, moreover, is easy enough to understand. After all, an ethic of peaceableness is fragile—in connection with the Anabaptists, the personal eruptions of Thomas Müntzer<sup>48</sup>, the political eruption at Münster, and the subsequent marauding of the Batenburgers, for example, are evidence that peaceableness is indeed a delicate plant. As Milbank has it, such evidence can only be overcome with a counter-story of God's peaceable and loving relationship with human beings. Its fundamental characteristics from both the divine and human sides are ultimately displayed in the life of Jesus, but also in the lives of martyrs like Willems.<sup>49</sup> It is the display of this life that Anabaptists—at least as an evangelical interpreter reads the [same] evidence—seemed to want to emulate.

The real-historical or social-historical analysis of Anabaptism, then, is a denial of peaceableness as an ethical possibility. This denial displays itself in curious, seemingly picayune details in the new stories Stayer, Goertz, and especially Clasen tell. As an example, let us note the difficulty Clasen experiences in his brief discussion of the Anabaptist martyrs. Death, that stark limit and deep chasm before which we each must stand, forces upon us the question of the meaning of the thin thread we call our life. The Anabaptists responded with a story of the kingdom of which they saw themselves a part. Faithfulness and hopeful obedience to its dictates and a willingness to die in that obedience were, therefore, the substance of their lives' meaning and the basis of their courage. Clasen disregards this

self-interpretation, and the result includes strikingly banal observations regarding, for example, the executions of Anabaptists. He notes that “Erhard reports that on their way to the gallows some Anabaptists were fearful, if not terrified, and depressed.” “Under immense nervous strain,” he continues, “some of the Anabaptists doomed to die behaved in a most unusual way. One brother who lost his shoes in the mud along the road did not even look back and went right on singing.”<sup>50</sup> This curiously detailed and descriptive account that is somehow trite and without any concern for the *meaning* of the Anabaptists’ death is not a trivial difficulty: Clasen’s methods cause him to miss the possibility that martyrdom is a form of political witness within a coherent ethic, as Stanley Hauerwas has argued in another context:

For it was through martyrdom that the church triumphed over Rome. Rome could kill Christians but they [sic] could not victimize them. The martyrs could go to their death confident that the story to which their killers were trying to subject them—that is the story of victimization—was not the true story of their death. To Rome Christians dying for their faith was an irrational act. For the martyrs their dying was part of a story that Rome could not acknowledge and remain in power as Rome.

Thus, the most determinative political witness the church had against Rome was martyrdom. By remembering the martyrs, the church in effect said, “You may kill us, but you cannot determine the meaning of our deaths.” Rome does not get to tell the story of our lives, but rather the church claims to be the triumphant political community that knows the truth of our existence better than Rome. The church—exactly because it does not seek to rule through violence, though it necessarily manifests God’s rule—triumphs by remembering the victory of the Lamb through the witness of the martyrs.<sup>51</sup>

On this account, Clasen’s social history turns the story of Anabaptist martyrdom into a story of victimhood. Like Stayer, he renders their story(s) essentially meaningless.<sup>52</sup> This meaninglessness of the Anabaptist story is highlighted for Clasen by the historical ineffectiveness of this “minor episode in the history of sixteenth-century German society.”<sup>53</sup> In Clasen’s curious reading of Anabaptist doctrine, “it was a fantasy to hope that love could take the place of law and government.”<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, Clasen denies the Anabaptist witness; although he sympathetically suggest that “if we do not recognize the spiritual force of Anabaptism, we fail to understand the movement altogether,” his own implicit “methodological atheism” prevents him from doing so in a way that makes sense of this aspect of the story.<sup>55</sup> One wonders what, precisely, a “religious impulse” or a “spiritual force” is.<sup>56</sup> Clasen recognizes and pointedly argues that Anabaptism must be reckoned as a social phenomenon, because “Anabaptism was not just a set of doctrines and practices to be followed; it deeply changed the life of the believer,” which had strong implications for how the believer conducted himself or

herself in the world.<sup>57</sup> In his estimation, however, "The Anabaptists had no discernible impact on the political, economic, or social institutions of their age," nor did they have much "if any, influence on sixteenth-century culture." He finds it unlikely that the later notion of the separation of church and state was in any way derived from earlier Anabaptist formulations.<sup>58</sup>

### *Anabaptist Historiogenesis?*

It is no accident, I think, that neither Stayer, Clasen, nor Goertz are ultimately able to move from scholarly curiosity to finding much of use in the Anabaptist story. Their narrative base denies them this possibility. The Anabaptist story loses its ethical significance, precisely because a "real-political" stance or "methodological atheism" excludes it. But this outcome does not make their story untrue, so we must ask: what of the contrasting story of Anabaptist unity that evangelical Mennonites once told? What is the purpose and use of that story? Can it be sustained in the face of the empirical research Goertz, Clasen, and Stayer provide? Are much of their data concerning pluralism simply ignored, as Stayer asserts,<sup>59</sup> or are these data themselves not in question here, but only the story the authors make of them? Can other interpretations of Anabaptist history find rich resources in these works, and can these resources serve as important controls on any subsequent interpretation of Anabaptism? Are not the metanarratives and presumptive motives of these stories likewise eligible for scrutiny?

Let us consider briefly three such narratives. Harold Bender's well-known article, "The Anabaptist Vision," is more an analysis or even synthesis of events than a story as such, but his treatment of Anabaptism subsumes a clear narrative. There is, in Bender's reading, an "Anabaptist spirit" or "Anabaptist vision" that makes the emergence of Anabaptism as a discernible movement the "culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli." This vision was lost by these two reformers in the ongoing events and decisions of the early Reformation, but it was retained by the Anabaptists, who broke with the predominant Reformation trend. Who is and who is not to be counted among this latter group is clear.<sup>60</sup> The story moves down to the present day in a well-defined way. The "heterogeneity" of non-Lutheran or non-Zwinglian Christian groups, moreover, is neither denied nor overlooked; its constituents are simply differently characterized: "There is no longer any excuse for permitting our understanding of the distinct character of this genuine Anabaptism to be obscured by Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants War, the Münsterites, or any other aberration of Protestantism in the sixteenth century."<sup>61</sup> There is, as Stayer complains, a "normative Anabaptism" and all the rest.

Walter Klaassen's account, which appeared a year before Stayer's analysis, is a more extended formulation of Bender's brief articulation of the

Anabaptist vision. Where Bender focussed on a new conceptualization of Christianity as discipleship, church as brotherhood, and love and non-resistance as the proper Christian activity as the major constituents of the Anabaptist vision, Klaassen widens this vision to consider more of the practical problems such a vision encounters and the sorts of political, social, ecclesiological and ethical solutions it proffers. Klaassen is particularly interested, as I have already noted, in stressing the "prophetic" character of this vision.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps because his treatment is more extended, Klaassen acknowledges more readily than Bender that at least some of the Anabaptist "aberrations" must, in fact, be recognized as part of the story of Anabaptism itself, not as entirely extrinsic phenomena. Like Bender, however, Klaassen sees in Anabaptism a spiritually motivated unity of purpose, motivation, and vision that the real-historians replace or deny.

Klaassen extends the Anabaptist story into the present by suggesting that many of the problems in established Christianity to which Anabaptists responded are the problems of established Christianity today. Indeed, he sees Anabaptism ecclesologically and sociologically reborn in contemporary debates. *Contra* the real-historians, the Anabaptist story has, in this sense at least, historical continuity.

More explicitly than either Klaassen or Bender, J. Denny Weaver acknowledges "the different origins and the diverse histories of the several early Anabaptist movements."<sup>63</sup> Despite this polygenetic heterogeneity, however, Weaver insists on a "shared outlook" that consists in a set of "common beliefs and practices" that "did develop—if something short of a homogenous theology—at least enough in common that one can follow its legacy through clearly identifiable streams into the last quarter of the twentieth century."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, this common stream is part of an even wider current of movements, which, if "not causally related, ... all reflect a way of being the church identifiable throughout Christian history." This stance allows Weaver the title of his final chapter, "The Meaning of Anabaptism," in a way that the approaches of Stayer, et al. would not. Weaver demonstrates that the heterogeneity and polygenesis of Anabaptism can be subsumed under the broad intention of living faithfully to a vision and understanding of Christian practice without denying the real cleavages that this heterogeneity produces or the historically delimited context in which the practical working out of such a vision must take place. Thus, trading back real-political motivations for "religious" ones re-establishes the possibility of a unitary meaning in Anabaptism without ignoring the historical data more recent, less "religiously" motivated studies have brought to light. Perhaps most important for any evangelical interpretation of the story, by reasserting the priority of a historical vision that affirms the regulative moral authority of a tradition of faith handed down through several millennia, it denies without historical falsification Goertz's conclusion that sixteenth-century Anabaptism speaks in no meaningful way to its modern students. In the end, perhaps



Weaver, Klaassen, and Bender see a historical continuity in the problems Anabaptism addresses that Goertz, Clasen, and Stayer do not. That a real-political stance—which assumes a structural continuity in human affairs through time—should produce this historicist result is one of its prevailing ironies.<sup>65</sup>

In the accounts of Weaver, Klaassen, and Bender, Anabaptism cannot be reduced to expressions of resentment, powerlessness, or illegitimacy. Anabaptists themselves, these authors suggest, had something else in mind, a more positive agenda by which they identified themselves. It might be described as “recovery” or “restoration.”<sup>66</sup> What they sought to “recover” or “restore” was the manifestation in practice of an image of the good life, or, to speak with Paul and James rather than Plato, the just life, or, to use an Anabaptist term, the “God-pleasing” life.<sup>67</sup> The image was rendered for the Anabaptists in the stories of the Old and New Testaments, both in the form of specific commands, but more generally in the form of narratives that illustrated how to live out such commands or what a life that embodied such commands might look like. In contrast to the real-historians, the evangelical interpreters insist on the essential pertinence of this vision for contemporary concerns and practices. Its content includes what I have noted in passing: non-resistance pacifism; a new conception of church as brotherhood and separated from political power; the practice of peace and *agape* as central to Christian ethics; a prophetic stance toward the powers that be.

The real-historians and the evangelical historians are not so radically separated in their enquiry, however, that we cannot contrast them along a common line. All want to tell a story, a unifying tale with an underlying “lesson.” For the former group, the lesson is realhistorical—the modern relevance of the Anabaptist story is nil, itself an affirmation of realpolitical principles concerning the historical relativity of moral questions. For the latter group, the moral continuities provide resources for present practices. Thus, we return to the question of historiogenesis.

Although the stories of the real-historians may themselves be a part of a competing historiogenesis (a credible possibility I leave aside here<sup>68</sup>), they clearly have the function of disrupting the unitary evangelical alternative with their “pragmatic historical” claims. We must ask, then, whether any attempt to make an Anabaptist vision pertinent for present concerns requires the kind of historiogenetic construction we surveyed earlier. The question is pertinent in a consideration of real-historical evaluations of Anabaptism, because such evaluations tend in the direction of this assertion. Not to raise the issue is to beg nearly every question real-historians direct at evangelical interpretations. The answer falls into two parts.

First, Voegelin’s use of historiogenesis, which he regards in the same class of literary constructions as theogony, anthropogony, and cosmogony, tends to reduce all stories to a kind of mythopoetic “speculation”, thereby subordinating them, in his analysis, to philosophy. This, too, is a tendency of

realpolitical or real-historical studies. But an analysis of narrative theology suggests that the category of historiogenesis (or other concepts in its class) cannot itself be the last word for Voegelin's philosophy of history. Put briefly, I have suggested throughout this essay that the evangelicals and real-historians are offering two alternate narrative contexts within which to understand moral reflection (scholars or "unbelievers" who offer a hostile monogenetic account have yet another). The real-historical account insists that power and interest defined in terms of power—which is to say, violence and the necessity of violence for establishing political stability and legitimacy—is the proper context for comprehending the meaning of *any* story, including the Anabaptist one. Powerlessness and secular political illegitimacy breed their own theologies and ethics, but over the long-term, these are of little interest and even less importance. The Anabaptist view of the world, is, therefore, a product of the resentments, power struggles, and political illegitimacies of a particular time and place. It may be of interest to the antiquarian, but it is of no use for understanding the contemporary situation, which continues to reflect the truth of realism and the moral relativism/situationalism that attends it.

The evangelical interpretation, on the other hand, takes for granted a narrative context for understanding ethics—past and present—and God's activity in the world.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, it rejects the real-historical premise concerning the *necessary* ubiquity of power as the defining element of every human relation. And finally, it suggests that there is no ultimate meaning "behind" the story of Anabaptism it tells. It is the story itself that is a manifestation of the new kingdom of which the evangelical narrator wants to be a part.<sup>70</sup>

In response to a charge of historiogenesis, the evangelical historian suggests that the Anabaptist story, as told from an evangelical perspective, *can* be historiogenetic, but it need not be. It does take account of a *kind* of continuous kingdom, but this continuity may not be materially and politically manifested, which is not the case in imperial historiogenesis. It does take origins into account as well, but unlike most foundation myths, the founding of this kingdom tells of the death of the founder, and the subsequent martyrdom of its citizens and refounders, including the Anabaptists.<sup>71</sup> It thereby indicates a rejection of the violence that characterizes the narrative base of all other historiogeneses. Third, then, the continuity of this kingdom is based not on human will, force, and violence, but on God's grace. It is, therefore, "not of this world," which is to say, its divine sanction is not a justification for violence, but a protest against it. Finally, the problem of "definition" is not unique to Anabaptist historiography, but attends all historical accounts. accordingly, criticizing a move toward definition is question-begging. We may avoid "the creation of idealized and systematic pictures of all the Reformation groups" in an "exploitation of history for purposes of theological apologetics,"<sup>72</sup> but that does not obviate the need for

an interpretive framework, regardless of our historiographic intent. On a wider register, then, the problems of Anabaptist historiography are similar for any group of believers who seek to give intelligibility and meaning to their tradition of practices. In each case, the identification of a "narrative base" in Newbigin's terminology or a "metanarrative" in Milbank's is the primary step towards identifying both the integrity and the God-conforming truthfulness of our story over against any number of attempts to retell it.<sup>73</sup>

The necessary and sufficient condition for historiogenesis is, on this account, the exclusionary, triumphalist element that lies at the heart of the constructions Voegelin examined, and that asserts itself as a justification for violence in human affairs and as an "explanation" for the divinely sanctioned success of that violence. Although every community "has externality as one of its important components," Voegelin suggested it "is as a whole a little world, a cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization." The meaning of such a "little world" is "illuminated through an elaborate symbolism," of which historiogenesis is one conduit.<sup>74</sup> If we drop the triumphalist pretense and its subtext of violence, however, the apparent Anabaptist "historiogenesis" of its "community of faith" takes on a radically different meaning for this "little world" than the historiogenetic construction of the other "little worlds" that inhabit the story of humankind up to the present. Faithfulness, martyrdom, and vision give continuity in this story, not divine sanction manifested in violence and political power. The evangelical tale is, therefore, quasi-Augustinian. (It is not precisely Augustinian, because it denies the use of force to either establish or maintain the kingdom of God, whereas Augustine eventually accepted such practice). It is the tale of a different kingdom, whose divine sanction is manifested not in political power, but in the ability to remain faithful. This also means that its continuation does not depend on the use of violence, which historiogenetic myths serve to justify. Moreover, it means that the continuation of the kingdom is not only a divine act, but a divine challenge. The construction of the story is not meant only to illustrate historical continuity, but prophetically to inspire it. This inspiration becomes a corner-stone of "the mode and condition" of "self-realization" for those who "create and bear" the kingdom story.

The perspective I have drawn here actually permits a new kind of historical freedom. The stories of Anabaptists need not be inserted willy-nilly along a single line of meaning, forcing the "facts" that real-historical studies uncover into predetermined results in order to make them meaningful along predetermined lines. In this case, there need not be an anxiety that may result either in despair or triumphalism and that betrays the "emotional confusion" that ushers in mythopoetry.<sup>75</sup> Instead, there is a story that expresses a clear vision embodied in the story itself. The scope of the vision permits critique, course correction, and new creative modes for its realization

in time. It is not bound by the necessities of realism, and it does not strictly belong to the historiogenetic type.

*The Anabaptist (Augustinian) Counter-Narrative*

Historiogenetic constructs are one way to symbolize the historical continuity of a perceived political/cultural unity. They are not merely a “pretext” for violence, nor merely a self-serving justification for it, although they do perform these functions. They are also accounts of the historical continuity of a specific community, thereby rendering that continuity and the peace of the community’s citizens in it meaningful. They help to make sacrifice (including a willingness to kill or die) for the sake of a community both possible and intelligible. An evangelical Anabaptist history of God’s kingdom (I have used Jesus’ overt political term intentionally) serves similar functions. And as the wider discussion of Newbigin and Milbank, for example, show, similar histories serve these functions in other Christian narratives. But historiogenetic constructions must be understood not only in terms of their form, but their intent. Whereas the intent of political historiogenesis is both to justify violence and render it intelligible, the evangelical intent is to extract an intelligible line of meaning from what is admittedly a set of heterogeneous and heterogenetic events, but to do so in a way that displays the possibility of peaceableness and faithfulness, not violence. It does so to fulfill a need, being a narrative that attributes meaning. Joyce Clemmer Munro has well described the need for such narrative—hinted at, but not fully articulated in Weaver, Bender’s or Klaassen’s work:

I am not a trained historian, but I am an American Mennonite hunting for workable fragments from our experience, partly because the rest of the world—before it considers me anything (female, Christian, Mennonite, mother, student of literature, writer)—considers me an American. So I must examine my Mennonite roots in the context of the American soil in which they have taken nourishment these past three hundred years. As a person particularly interested in storytelling and the force of storytelling among my people, I want a history that will ‘see life steadily and see it whole,’ a view of our past from which good fiction, good philosophy, good theology, good poetry, good art and good deeds can grow.<sup>76</sup>

I would suggest, then, that interpreters in the school of Goertz, Clasen, and Stayer cannot (as Stayer himself seems cheerfully to admit) have the last word. As long as the Mennonite descendants of Anabaptism remain a recognizable group with a past, a present, and the hope of a future, its members will continue to explore the basis for the “family resemblance” that allows them to “see life steadily and see it whole” so that they may have the

resources to live the life their family resemblance demands. Real-historical works deliver a plenitude of “facts”, incidents, or findings that may attenuate unifying claims that can themselves all-too easily become exclusivist, insular, and even triumphalist—a long stride toward historiogenesis. Insofar as these works purport to tell a story of their own, however, they cannot be a final word in the matter, nor, perhaps, even a particularly encouraging word—they merely open a new realm of contestation. Thus, being a “believer” produces a no more recognizably fideist stance than any other perspective. It simply produces (or demands) a different story. And this story is no more closed to scrutiny in its defence of its “truth” than any other. Indeed, an openness to peaceable discussion may make it less so.

This openness poses a challenge from Anabaptists to their Christian confreres in other traditions. Milbank, whose critique of social-scientific readings closely informs the present account, offers a pertinent example of how this challenge operates. Having developed a Christian counter-narrative of peace over against the ontological violence inherent in every form of modern social-scientific reasoning, he moves to an Augustinian justification for the (albeit tragic) Christian use of violence.<sup>77</sup> On an Anabaptist reading, this move seems to be an act of faithlessness again the story God reveals in the life of Jesus.<sup>78</sup> A perceived appeal to steer historical events for the sake of the neighbor’s well-being, thereby taking up against the violence one has refused an identical counter-violence (even if for noble ends), is an insufficient imperative in the Anabaptist view. Faithfulness, rather, consists of letting God take responsibility for history, which is to say, the members of His kingdom do not forsake peaceableness, regardless of the ends or consequences. As Guy Hershberger has suggested, moreover, Augustinian moves of this kind may too readily discount the creative measures peaceableness can take against the world’s violence that so quickly justifies seemingly noble-minded counter-violence.<sup>79</sup> Thus, it is certainly the case that the problems of Anabaptist historiography I have recounted here could be used as a practical example of how to read a believer’s story both as narrative and “counter-narrative” over against a host of hostile contenders (as Milbank has so ably done). Important as this lesson might be, however, it would miss the deeper point of the Anabaptist story, which is to present a narrative of the kingdom not as method (as either a “Machiavellian” or genealogical or real-historical reading of this story might suggest), but as substance, that substance being the peaceableness of God.

To argue that meaning is self-assigned would, in a Christian context, be idolatrous. To suggest, however, that Christians explore their stories to find there the resources for living well or living faithfully is only to enjoin them to engage in a kind of political theory in one context and theology in another. Literature does so without being asked. Perhaps, then, “peoplehood”, “faithfulness”, “restitution”, or “people of God”,<sup>80</sup> to name only four, are, in fact, useful and not self-authenticating categories for exploring new ways of

delivering the elusive family resemblance that constitutes Anabaptism, and for considering the ongoing Anabaptist challenge to hear anew God's story as told in the Anabaptist instantiation of His kingdom.

## NOTES

- 1 My thanks to Ryan Beasley, Raymond Christensen, Ken Collier, Paul D'Anieri, Stanley Hauerwas, Tara Heilke, Kurt Thurmaier, and the editors of this journal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. The research and writing of this paper were supported by a Fellowship from the Evangelical Scholars Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts. My sincere thanks to the directors and referees of the program.
- 2 James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins." *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* LIX (1975), pp. 83–122, here p. 83.
- 3 My picture of simplicity is deliberately overdrawn. For a strong suggestion that the story of the Anabaptists has rarely, if ever, been seen this uni-dimensionally, see Werner Packull, "A Response to History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* III (1979) 3 pp. 108–211, here p. 210. It is clear, too, from Bender's summary article, that unitary Anabaptism was something to be established, not assumed (Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* XIII [1944] 1, p. 7.) For a brief inventory of some pertinent issues on both sides, see James M. Stayer "Was Dr. Kuehler's Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism Historically Sound? The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Münster 450 Years Later," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* LX (1986)3, pp. 261–2.
- 4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, eds., vol 12, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887* (Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 122–3; (2[123]).
- 5 This is the title of William R. Estep's work (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963), which is a good exemplar of the "unitary" interpretation of Anabaptist history. For a review of the fragmentation, see especially James Stayer, "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* LIII (1979)3, pp. 211–218.
- 6 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), p. 296.
- 7 Milbank, *Theology*, p. 23.
- 8 Editor's comments, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LIX (1975)2, p. 82.
- 9 Stayer, et al., "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis," p. 85.
- 10 Although one might expect a clearer notion in Stayer's "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom," he remains elusive, celebrating diversity seemingly for its own sake.
- 11 Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol IV of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 101.
- 12 Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, pp. 60, 62.
- 13 Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, p. 65.
- 14 Barry Cooper, "Voegelin's Concept of Historiogenesis: An Introduction," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* IV(1975), p. 237.
- 15 Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, p. 66; cf. pp. 68–73.
- 16 Cf. Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), pp. 36–48; James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 160–62, 173–7.
- 17 C.P. Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525–1618*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972); James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1976); Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Die Täufer: Geschichte und Deutung* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1980).
- 18 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, pp. 2, 4, 5, 1.
- 19 See Stayer's map, *Anabaptists*, xviii, and his verbal elaboration at pp. 2–3.

- 20 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 4.
- 21 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 4.
- 22 Clasen, *Anabaptists*, pp. xi, xvi.
- 23 Cf. Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), esp. pp. 43ff. "But facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a 17th-century invention. In the 16th century and earlier 'fact' in English was usually a rendering of the Latin 'factum,' a deed, an action, and sometimes in Scholastic Latin an event on occasion. It was only in the 17th-century that 'fact' was first used in a way in which later philosophers such as Russell, Wittgenstein, and Ramsey were to use it. It is of course and always was harmless, philosophically and otherwise, to use the word 'fact' of what a judgment states. What is and was not harmless, but highly misleading, was to conceive of a realm of facts independent of judgment or any other form of linguistic expression, so that judgments or statements or sentences could be paired off with facts, truth or falsity being the alleged relationship between such paired items." (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988], pp. 357-8.
- 24 Goertz, *Die Täufer*, pp. 8, 10, 36, 40.
- 25 Goertz, *Die Täufer*, p. 66.
- 26 This seems to be the thrust of Davis's defense of Harold Bender's "religious sensitivity" or "religious presuppositions." (Kenneth R. Davis, "Vision and Revision in Anabaptist Historiography: Perceptual Tensions in a Broadening Synthesis or Aleian Idealization?" *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* LIII (1979)3, pp. 203, 204). Davis's defense of Bender and his concomitant criticisms of Goertz and Stayer are on target, but his use of "religious" is underspecified: the term carries unfortunate implications that make it too amenable to the story Goertz and Stayer are trying to tell. It remains part of a liberal Enlightenment discourse that subsumes Christianity into a category that is essentially alien to the Anabaptist version of Christianity and that sympathizers of the Anabaptist project may deny *in toto*. (Cf. Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 101-143; and Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986], pp. 10-20).
- 27 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 13.
- 28 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 17; cf. pp. 334, 335.
- 29 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 20.
- 30 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 22; cf. pp. xv, 335, 337.
- 31 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 22.
- 32 John H. Yoder, "'Anabaptists and the Sword' Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* LXXXV (1974)2, pp. 127-139. Goertz seems to think that Yoder's rejoinder misses the main thrust of Stayer's analysis: "Yoder concentrated on Stayer's typology, failing to see that it had been subordinated to a careful search for historical factors of the beginning and development of Anabaptist ideas. This 'empirical' concern stands in the forefront against a systematized theological history which tends to abstract historical reality." (Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* LIII [1979]3, p. 183). It seems to me, however, that Yoder's claim is precisely that Stayer has done something similar to what Goertz accuses Yoder of doing. In Yoder's reading, Stayer's empirical concerns are, in fact, subordinated to the interpretive grid he brings to his "search for historical factors," which prevents him from reading the story in any but one way. Yoder is concerned not with Stayer's typology, but with the "priority" of a "consistent logic" in his "definitional dualism" that allows only one, rather unannounced reading of the Anabaptist story (p. 130). The typology follows from this reading, as Goertz is right to point out, but the reading is itself largely pre-determined, not confessionally, but definitionally: "Why should it be assumed, after all, that the only respectable answer to an ethical question, especially one so complex as 'Should the Christian be a ruler?' must be an unqualified 'yes' or an unqualified 'no', so that intermediate views are less worthy of recognition?" (p. 128; cf. pp. 129-30).
- 33 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, pp. xxii, xv. It might be worth pointing out that "legitimacy" is itself a perspectival political criterion. The Anabaptists laid charges of illegitimacy on biblical

- grounds against the prevailing ecclesiastical authorities, but these charges could be ignored on the basis of who held political power, not moral suasion.
- 34 Cf. Eric Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in Ellis Sandoz (ed.), *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Published Essays, 1966–1985*, vol. 12 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 65.
- 35 For a recounting of this story, see Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater on Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, Joseph F. Sohm, trans. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1938), pp. 741–2.
- 36 Goertz's reply to this objection is worth nothing: "Die Historie versucht, die Intention aus einem überintentionalen historischen Geflecht zu erarbeiten, denn vieles, was den Menschen bewegt und zu zielgerichtetem Handeln treibt, geschiet hinter seinem Rücken. Historische Forschung kann die Intention also nicht für sich nehmen, sie muß zugleich ihre historischen Bedingungen einerseits und ihre gesellschaftlichen Implikationen andererseits in Rechnung stellen. Nicht was die Täufer wollten, macht ihr Wesen als historische Erscheinung aus, sondern was sie waren" (*Täufer*, p. 156). Although one can hardly deny the contextual character of human action, Goertz's stance, which harkens to the French positivists of the nineteenth century, seems to me to permit us to challenge any self-interpretation as essentially misled, if not self-serving. This is an exercise in the expurgation of "false consciousness" fraught with difficulties, not the least of which is moral self-authentication for the expurgator. Its implicit search for "invisible hands" in history (which, curiously enough, take over the narrative role of the Holy Spirit in Christian discourse) raises problems we cannot address here.
- 37 The judgments and exhortations of the thirty-fourth chapter of the biblical book of Ezekiel may be instructive here.
- 38 Clasen, *Anabaptism*, pp. 75–77, 82–3.
- 39 The term is from McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 154.
- 40 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. xiii. "James Stayer has demonstrated that the unity of Bender's Anabaptism was somewhat overdrawn, but the fundamentals of Bender's thesis still hold if one grants the validity of religious presuppositions. The degree of unity manifest by the Schleithem Articles (1527) indicates that in only two years, a remarkable degree of consensus and cohesion had already emerged." (Davis, "Vision and Revision," p. 204.)
- 41 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. 6; Goertz, *Täufer*, pp. 161–4.
- 42 Stayer, *Anabaptists*, p. xv; cf. p. 335.
- 43 Goertz, *Täufer*, p. 161.
- 44 Goertz, *Täufer*, p. 164.
- 45 Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1973), p. 18. For an elaboration of the sociopolitical dimensions of this vision, see John H. Yoder, "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in Guy F. Hershberger (ed.) *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1957), pp. 93–104.
- 46 Friedmann, *Theology of Anabaptism*, pp. 36–46.
- 47 McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 27–35, 56–67, 328–356.
- 48 I cannot help but note the extraordinary and personalized violence of Müntzer's language, even taking account of the polemical context and disregarding ultimate "intentions" (See, for example, his sermon and two tracts ["The Prague Protest," "Sermon to the Princes," and "A Highly Provoked Defense"] in Michael G. Baylor, edited and translator, *The Radical Reformation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], pp. 1–32, 74–94).
- 49 Cf. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, esp. pp. 380ff.
- 50 Clasen, *Anabaptism*, pp. 403–406.
- 51 Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 38.
- 52 Not surprisingly, the Stayer-Goertz-Clasen accounts underwrite a Nietzschean genealogy: powerlessness breeds resentment. Resentment creates theodicies and theologies that explain powerlessness as a kind of moral power. (Cf., Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. [New York: Random House, Inc., 1967], esp. *First Essay* [pp. 24–56].) Accordingly, pacifism is a moralistic expression of the small-minded resentment of "slaves"—the powerless. For a real-historian this is the only possible reading of the foolishness that is pacifism. For the Christian non-resistant, in turn, it is an egregious misreading of God's power.



- 53 Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, p. 428.
- 54 Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History*, p. 428.
- 55 The term is from Goertz, "History and Theology," p. 186. (The entire essay, translated into English by Werner O. Packull and James M. Stayer, forms a portion of the final chapter of Goertz's book, *Die Täufer*, where the term also appears). Clasen's implicit "methodological atheism" appears in the penultimate paragraph of his introduction: "Mennonite historians and other church historians in this country regard the Anabaptists with much warmth and sympathy. I have the impression that their sympathy is often based on religious convictions and moral sentiments. As a social historian primarily interested in sixteenth-century German society, I prefer to approach the Anabaptists from a different angle. I confess that ideologies, whether Christian or Marxist, do not interest me very much. I am not particularly concerned with the rediscovery of Christian truths of the establishment of God's kingdom. I am, however, greatly interested in the question whether during the sixteenth century, or even today, the political doctrines of the Anabaptists could be considered a workable basis for the functioning of society. Once this question has been asked, Anabaptism appears in a new light." (*Anabaptism*, p. xviii). To my knowledge, no Anabaptist ever claimed that his or her "political doctrines" "could be considered a workable basis for the functioning of society," if the ultimate aim of that society was not the selfless worship of God. One should note, moreover, that "workable" is a spurious criterion until given concrete form. And at that point, the Anabaptist critique begins.
- 56 Clasen, *Anabaptism*, p. 425.
- 57 Clasen, *Anabaptism*, p. 140.
- 58 Clasen, *Anabaptism*, p. 428. This conclusion is clearly a direct refutation of Bender's claim that "There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of the church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism, and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them, and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice. The line of descent through the centuries since that time may not always be clear, and may have passed through other intermediate movements and groups, but the debt to original Anabaptism is unquestioned." Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* XIII (1944), pp. 3-4. Clasen's conclusion is somewhat self-contradictory, in that, while he denies a discernible Anabaptist impact, he suggests at the same time that "ironically, these meek people, who endeavour in the name of Christ to establish the kingdom of love, in reality seemed to be bent on destroying civilization." (Clasen, *Anabaptism*, p. 425). It is worth recalling in this context William Klaassen's reply to Clasen, that survival of either civilization or of the seemingly historically unimportant group we are examining may not be the most important question for us to ask. (See William Klaassen, "History and Theology: Some Reflections on the Present Status of Anabaptist Studies," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* LIII (1979)3, p. 199.)
- 59 James Stayer, "Die Anfänge des schweizerischen Täuferturns im reformierten Kongregationalismus," in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed., *Umstrittenes Täuferturn, 1525-1975: Neue Forschungen*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), p. 49n96: "Hier haben wir die beherrschende Weiterführung einer Tendenz in der Täufer-Historiographie, die ihr vorgefaßtes Bild vom Täuferturn dadurch bestätigt, daß sie alles, was nicht dazu passen will, schlicht als "nicht-täuferisch" bezeichnet."
- 60 "Although the definitive history of Anabaptism has not yet been written, we know enough today to draw a clear line of demarcation between original evangelical and constructive Anabaptism on the one hand, which was born in the bosom of Zwinglianism in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1525, and established in the Low Countries in 1533, and the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, or even antinomian related and unrelated groups on the other hand, which came and went like the flowers of the field in those days of the great renovation. The former, Anabaptism proper, maintained an unbroken course in Switzerland, South Germany, Austria, and Holland throughout the sixteenth century, and has continued until the present day in the Mennonite movement, now almost 500,000 baptized members strong in Europe and America." Harold Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* (1944) XIII, p. 8.
- 61 Bender, "Vision," p. 8.
- 62 See, for example, *Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, pp. 18, 62-3.

- 63 J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987), p. 111. (Weaver's bibliography includes the works of Goertz, Stayer, and Clasen).
- 64 Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, p. 112.
- 65 Cf. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 1–11.
- 66 Walter Klaassen, "The Nature of the Anabaptist Protest," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* XLV(1971)4, pp. 298–300. Cf. H.W. Meiheuizen, "The Concept of Restitution in the Anabaptism of Northwestern Europe," William Keeney, trans. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* XLIV(1970)2, pp. 141–158; Frank J. Wray, "The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the Church," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXVIII (1954)3, pp. 186–196.
- 67 Klaassen, *Neither Protestant nor Catholic*, p. 20.
- 68 The immediate analysis itself seems to usher in monogenetic conclusions: "It appears that the newer theory of polygenesis is but a form of monogenesis one step removed. That is, Anabaptism is again seen as primarily originating from a common movement of social tension with its attendant expressions of anticlericalism." Davis, "Vision and Revision," p. 206.
- 69 Cf. McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 59–62.
- 70 Cf. David Burrell and Stanley Hauerwas, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 20.
- 71 On the role of fratricide in foundation myths and its meaning, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 18–20.
- 72 Stayer, et al., "Monogenesis to Polygenesis," p. 87.
- 73 Milbank's discussion of ontological violence in post-modernity and of the retelling of the Christian story demonstrated in the post-modern genealogical method is a wider example of this same problem (Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 278ff).
- 74 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 27.
- 75 Voegelin, *Ecumenical Age*, p. 110.
- 76 Joyce Clemmer Munro, "Passing on the Torch," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LX (1986)1, p. 10.
- 77 Milbank, *Theology*, pp. 417–422.
- 78 I have detailed this argument elsewhere. See my, "On Being Ethical Without Moral Sadism: Two Readings of Augustine and the Beginnings of the Anabaptist Revolution," *Political Theory* 23 (1996), pp. 493–517.
- 79 Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale: The Herald Press, 1946), pp. 360–61.
- 80 See Calvin Redekop, "Anabaptism and the Ethnic Ghost," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LVIII (1984)2, pp. 133–146, for a critical account of the constitutive possibilities this term offers. John Howard Yoder in "The Hermeneuticals of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 15–45 examines the practical hermeneutics the concept may deliver.



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