BOOK REVIEWS


In research both thorough and important, Mathilde Monge, an assistant professor of history at the University of Toulouse, examines Anabaptism in the Imperial free city of Cologne and the surrounding duchies of Juliers-Berg, covering the period from 1533 until the end of the seventeenth century. While never becoming Protestant, this region was initially attracted to Erasmian ideals of reform before eventually deciding in favor of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. The area was also populated by small communities of Lutheran and Reformed dissidents, the latter finding themselves in more or less the same legal situation as Anabaptists.

Having consulted extensive archival resources, (cf. 21-23), mostly records of interrogations, Monge identified 724 Anabaptists living in the region between 1530 and 1650, 259 from Cologne itself. In Appendix 5 (292-301), the author describes in detail the methodology used to analyze the sources, and the functioning of local institutions from which they originate. Maps and analytical illustrations are found throughout the work and in the appendices.

An important methodological guiding point consists of describing Anabaptism as a relational phenomenon, defined as much by outsiders as by the groups themselves. Through the examination of the social and geographical networks of which they were a part, as well as of mechanisms of societal inclusion and exclusion, Monge concludes that these Anabaptists were not as separated from surrounding society as is often claimed.

The first three chapters of Monge’s book study the external factors contributing to Anabaptist identity. She begins by examining the way the notion of heresy contributed to the definition and exclusion of Anabaptists, creating a descriptive identity that often did not correspond to reality. Catholics and Protestants alike used the designation of “heretics” to construct and consolidate their own rival orthodoxies, while political institutions used the notion to affirm and strengthen their power over the territories they ruled.

In any event, the extremely harsh laws promulgated against Anabaptists were often not applicable. Local officials would sometimes resist imperial decrees (for example, the death penalty) in order to affirm their own authority and resist hierarchical encroachment. They viewed their role as one of keeping peace in their own jurisdictions wherein sympathy for religious “dissidents” was often observed. In addition, lacking the financial and political means necessary to deal with “heretics” meant that local authorities would often simply look the other way.
Denunciation of Anabaptists occurred most frequently in prison and under torture. Local populations were hesitant to denounce their neighbors and often remained silent, thus providing a kind of tacit support for Anabaptists (as well as for Lutherans and Reformed).

Monge’s study provides the reader with different reasons for the tacit acceptance of Anabaptists between the periods of heavy persecution. (Note that the majority of executions happened between 1557 and 1565). The difference between their everyday life and practice did not correspond with the more official, negative, post-Münster description of Anabaptists. Neighbors to Anabaptists during this period were becoming more familiar with the co-existence of different interpretations of Christian faith and practice, perhaps an early indication of European privatization of “religion.”

After examining external factors contributing to the identity, inclusion, and exclusion of these Anabaptists, Monge focuses on the description of the communities themselves (chapters 4-6). They are first placed in the larger historical context of dissidence and “deviance” already present in the area in previous centuries. These communities were also part of a larger international network (the Netherlands, Aix la Chapelle, the Palatinate, Alsace), something which helped to build and reinforce identity over time.

Different rituals, such as baptism, communion, and discipline (exclusion), were important identity-shaping factors for these communities, although Monge claims that most members did not really understand the theology of their leaders (166). Daily life, along with other more frequent practices and the attitudes they shaped, also played an important role in the creation of an “Anabaptist culture.” Reading Scripture, singing together, and the importance of certain leaders contributed to this culture in which martyrdom was an important element. Several writings that circulated in these communities, or that were published in Cologne, are mentioned (von Imbroich, Rothmann, Hoffmann, Denck, Kautz) without any major content analysis. As time went on, these small local communities formed their identity, and fit into a larger European Anabaptist network.

Chapter 7 provides a detailed, descriptive analysis of where Anabaptists lived and their social relationships with their neighbors. In fact, there was no separate “Anabaptist neighborhood” in Cologne. Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists were scattered throughout the city. Monge concludes that Anabaptists were thus not living in ghettos separated from the rest of society and found their place among others, who often kept silence about their neighbors or even protected them.

The final chapter leads us to the period of the dissolution of Anabaptism, at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Cologne and at the end of the century in the territory of Juliers-Berg. Monge rightly argues that emigration and assimilation into the larger society were the two main reasons for this disappearance. She then follows up with a detailed descriptive analysis of the networks of emigration.

A certain modesty in Monge’s conclusions is to be appreciated, as there is no claim to have written an exhaustive history Anabaptism in this area or assertion that the archival evidence can be generalized beyond the episodes related.
The results nevertheless point to a certain tension or ambiguity in the identity of these small Anabaptist communities. While holding to traditional Anabaptist tenets relating to baptism and oaths, Monge does not consider these communities as “radical” or “separatist,” due in part to the fact that they continued to live alongside of others and to integrate themselves as much as possible into society. These Anabaptists lived out the tension between their “radical spiritual choice and the continuity of everyday life” (250).

Mathilde Monge does an impressive job of interpreting the available data and applying her chosen methodology. Much can be gained from the examination of Anabaptists over a longer period of time rather than staying within the framework of early beginnings. The splintering of Western Christianity generated the “confessional” period in Europe, and the development and survival (or disappearance) of Anabaptist communities needs to be considered in that context. The existence of these communities along with dissident Lutherans and Reformed in Catholic territory signified that religious and political authorities were faced with a plurality of “heresies,” something which, at times, created more peaceful bonds between Anabaptists and others, especially the Reformed.

Perhaps due in part to my own research and methodology, I find that her examination of the content of theological texts and hymns might have been more thorough. While it is possible that “ordinary” Anabaptists did not have the theological understanding of their leaders, it must be said that maintaining their convictions demanded courage, and the theological content of those convictions did much to contribute to Anabaptist self-identity. Monge claims, for example, that it was more the simple fact of singing together than the theological content of Anabaptist hymns that was identity-building (172). Of course, as the book asserts, Anabaptists did sing the songs of others. This is hardly surprising given the fact that Anabaptists did share basic elements of a common identity with other Christians. That being said, Anabaptist hymnody was an important vehicle of more specific Anabaptist emphases, including believers’ baptism and the refusal of violence, and it is hard to believe that the content of these songs played little or no role in the formation and maintenance of identity.

More specific references to Ein schöne bekanntnus of Thomas von Imbroich and the Concept of Cologne (1591) would have contributed to a more complete understanding of the self-identity of these communities. Even though Anabaptist communities disappeared from Cologne, the Concept contributed to maintaining relationships between the Dutch and the Swiss Anabaptists of the Palatinate, Switzerland, and Alsace. Through the influence of Cologne being a kind of “geographical bridge,” Alsatian and Palatine Anabaptists adopted the Dordrecht Confession during the seventeenth century and Dutch Mennonites helped those in the South when they were hard pressed by their governments. The longer term effects of documents are also an important part of identity-formation and network relationships beyond local communities and languages.

Mathilde Monge’s research is part of an expanding French-language literature related to Anabaptist history and theology. For such work, she is to be thanked. It is my hope that those writing about this subject in English, German, or Dutch will
also take into consideration and embrace French voices in the ongoing quest for a
deeper understanding of Anabaptism.

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This book sets itself an ambitious goal: to provide a comprehensive account of the Reformation in Switzerland over the course of the sixteenth century. As the editors note, textbook descriptions of the Swiss Reformation are usually “limited to developments in Zurich, subsumed under the categories of urban reformation and the Eucharistic controversy, and presented as background to the ministry of Jean Calvin and the development of ‘Calvinism’” (introduction, 3). The birth of Anabaptism is also usually told as part of the Swiss Reformation story, its origins and the first five years or so of its existence often described in detail. The book as a whole, by contrast, aims to “go beyond the traditional narrative, which concentrates on the earliest, most dramatic phase of the Reformation” (introduction, 9). It intends to expand the narrative not only chronologically over the full sixteenth century, but also geographically by including less prominent states and territories.

It must be said that this volume succeeds admirably in attaining its goal, with one regrettable exception about which more will be said later. The contributions by the fourteen different scholars and specialists are of excellent quality, summarizing a wide range of original research that often lead to surprising insights. In scope and detail this book has no equal in the English language—or perhaps any language for that matter. It is a worthy, more detailed companion and successor to Bruce Gordon’s excellent survey The Swiss Reformation (Manchester University Press, 2002).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is composed of only two contributions, the introduction and opening chapter, “The Swiss Confederation Before the Reformation,” by Regula Schmid. The latter provides the late-medieval background to the complex political, social, economic, and religious reality of the states and territories that made up the Swiss Confederation at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This first chapter and the last (chapter 16: “Religious Stalemate and Confessional Alignments,” Thomas Maissen) can be read as bookends, highlighting the way in which the Reformation complicated but ultimately contributed to the political formation of the Swiss Confederation over the course of the sixteenth century. Looking to the looming Thirty Years’ War from the vantage point of the end of the century, Maissen notes that even though “confessional plurality” at one point threatened the existence of the Confederation itself, and prevented the pursuit of a univocal foreign policy, nevertheless this same plurality “ultimately benefitted the Swiss because, uncertain as they were among themselves about eternal, divine truth, it allowed them to abstain from the