

American Society of Church History

Recent Currents in the Historiography of the Radical Reformation

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Sep., 2002), pp. 523-535

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [American Society of Church History](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4146418>

Accessed: 09/03/2013 18:25

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Recent Currents in the Historiography of the Radical Reformation

JOHN D. ROTH

There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of 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.

With these confident words, Harold S. Bender introduced the main theme of his presidential address at the fifty-fifth meeting of the American Society of Church History, held at Columbia University on 28 Dec. 1943.¹ In the decades that followed, Bender's speech—which he titled “The Anabaptist Vision”—quickly assumed a significance that went far beyond the scholarly findings it presented. Its publication the following spring in the venerable pages of *Church History* symbolized a new era of academic openness to Anabaptism as a legitimate topic of serious research. Long consigned to the dustbin of ecclesiastical history, Anabaptist studies, Bender seemed to be suggesting, could now claim a legitimate place within the orthodox circles of the academy.

That Bender's address appeared simultaneously in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*—and was immediately published in pamphlet form for distribution throughout the Mennonite church—also made it clear that his efforts to rehabilitate Anabaptism in the academy were inseparable from his use of history as a means of spiritual renewal within the Mennonite church.² To be sure, Bender was not alone in this blurring of academic and denominational boundaries—similar dynamics had characterized Lutheran and Reformed scholarship since the time of the Reformation itself. But the multiple audiences of Bender's “Anabaptist Vision” were symbolic of a methodological debate that was to shape Anabaptist and radical reformation studies for the next fifty years.

1. Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Church History* 13 (Mar. 1944): 3–24, quotation on 4.
2. Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (Apr. 1944): 67–88. The Mennonite Publishing House (Scottsdale, Penn.) has republished the speech in several different formats, and it still remains in print today.

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Church History 71:3 (September 2002)

The historiography of the radical reformation in the half-century following Bender's landmark address has been rich and nuanced. A full survey would go far beyond the scope of a journal article. In this essay I will focus primarily on several key methodological developments that have emerged in the field during the second half of the twentieth century, most of which have had echoes or analogies in other fields of church history as well.

I. THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE RADICAL REFORMATION

For nearly four centuries—following a pattern established in the sixteenth century by Philip Melancthon and Heinrich Bullinger, and continuing through the Luther renaissance of the early twentieth century—standard readings of the Reformation dismissed the Anabaptists as seditious revolutionaries or *Schwärmer*. Theological, ecclesiological and social anarchists, the Anabaptists embodied the worst excesses of religious reform in the sixteenth century. They were, in the wording of a standard German church history text, the “deformation” of the Reformation.³

By the time of Bender's “Anabaptist Vision” speech in the middle of the twentieth century, however, the confessionalist polemics of the past were moderating. The pioneering work of European scholars like Ludwig Keller, Ernst Troeltsch, Walter Köhler, and Leonhard von Muralt had begun to reintegrate the Anabaptists into the broader drama of the Reformation and into church history more generally.⁴ In the 1930s the *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte* sponsored the publication of three massive source collections—the first of the so-called *Täuferakten*. The same decade witnessed the opening installments of the *Mennonitische Lexikon* and a steady stream of articles on the Anabaptists and Hutterites in Bender's own *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Among church historians in North America, a growing interest in the roots of the free church tradition attracted such notable scholars as Franklin Littell, Roland Bainton, Hans Hillerbrand, and George Williams to the Reformation's more radical movements, each of

3. The phrase comes from Johann Kurtz, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte für Studierende*, 9th ed. (Leipzig: Neumann, 1885), 148 ff. For similar assessments, see also Karl Holl, “Luther und die Schwärmer,” (1922) in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948), 1:420–67.

4. See, for example, Ludwig Keller, *Zur Geschichte der altevangelischen Gemeinden: Vortrag, gehalten zu Berlin am 20. April 1887* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1887); Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981; rpt. of 1931 ed.), 2:703 ff; Leonhard von Muralt, *Zum Problem: Reformation und Täuferum* (Zürich: Zwingliverein, 1934); Walter Köhler, “Wiedertäufer,” *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2d ed. (Tübingen, 1931), 5:1918.

whom published essays and monographs that described Anabaptism as a legitimate and coherent expression of Christian reform.⁵ The culminating achievement of these new energies was clearly George William's *The Radical Reformation*, an encyclopedic tome published in 1962 that situated the Anabaptists and other radical groups firmly within the theological landscape of the broader Reformation.⁶ By the middle of the 1960s these efforts had more or less established the radical reformation as a sub-field within Reformation studies. Readers of this journal may be surprised to note that in the three decades following Bender's presidential address, *Church History* published nearly 20 articles on topics related to the Anabaptists or radical dissent in the sixteenth century.⁷

Within the Mennonite tradition, Bender and his colleagues continued to promote a somewhat narrower definition of an Anabaptism whose adherents were uniformly nonviolent biblical literalists, earnestly seeking a thoroughgoing restoration of the apostolic church. Excluded from Bender's pantheon of "normative" or "evangelical" Anabaptists were the likes of Thomas Müntzer and his cohort of peasant revolutionaries, Balthasar Hubmaier, who was tenuous on the question of the sword; and Hans Denck and Caspar Schwenckfeld, whose Nicodemite retreats into spiritualism put them at odds with the heroic martyrs of the Swiss Brethren tradition.⁸

If the scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s rehabilitated Anabaptists as sober-minded and peace-loving paragons of Christian virtue—solidly anchored in the principles of *sola Scriptura* and religious liberty—the generation that followed complicated the picture considerably. James Stayer set the tone of the revisionist approach with his *Anabaptists and the Sword* (1972), a carefully nuanced argument emphasizing the broad diversity of Anabaptist teachings on the principle

5. Franklin Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Beacon, 1957); Roland Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951); Hans Hillerbrand, *A Fellowship of Discontent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
6. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); a revised edition of Williams work has since appeared in Spanish, and a third edition with still more revisions is now available in English as *The Radical Reformation*, 3d ed. (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000).
7. In fact, the inaugural issue of the journal included an essay on the Anabaptists: Harold H. Schaff, "The Anabaptists, the Reformers and the Civil Government," *Church History* 1 (1932): 27–46. The almost complete cessation of articles on the radical reformation in *Church History* after the 1970s seems to coincide with the departure of Hans Hillerbrand from the editorial board.
8. These assumptions are made quite evident in Bender's biography of Conrad Grebel: *Conrad Grebel, c. 1498–1526, Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 1950).

of nonresistance.⁹ Three years later, in a now famous essay appearing in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* entitled "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis," Stayer and fellow historians Werner Packull and Klaus Deppermann challenged Bender's focus on the Grebel circle in Zurich as the birthplace of the Anabaptist movement. The authors insisted that legitimate claims for Anabaptist origins might also be made for the followers of Melchior Hoffmann in the Low Countries or the apocalyptically minded converts of Hans Hut in Central Germany.¹⁰

Similarly, in contrast to the tendency of the Bender school to describe Anabaptism as a natural outgrowth of lay bible study groups seeking to apply New Testament teachings on nonresistance and discipleship, the social historians of the 1970s historicized Anabaptist beginnings within the context of late medieval mysticism, and especially within the social and economic milieu of the Peasants' War.¹¹ In this new view, an ethic of nonviolence and a separatist ecclesiology emerged only gradually over time as a highly contingent outcome forged from a complex alloy of anticlericalism, apocalyptic fears, and aspirations for social reform. Theological convictions that Bender had assumed were the *raison d'être* of the Anabaptist movement turned out to be mere epiphenomena—products of expediency and survival strategies rather than religious convictions based on biblical convictions or Christian faith.

These new directions in radical reformation scholarship found additional support among East German historians who regarded Thomas Müntzer and the *frühbürgerliche Revolution* of 1525 as the real story of the Reformation. And the revisionists received added encouragement from left-leaning historians like Robert Scribner and Peter Blickle, whose interest in "popular religion" and communal politics

9. James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado, 1972).
10. James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975): 83–121. "The history of Anabaptist origins 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" (85).
11. A pioneer in this revisionist work was Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525–1618* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972); but other seminal works moving in a similar direction include: Martin Haas, "Der Weg der Täufer in die Absonderung. Zur Interdependenz von Theologie und sozialem Verhalten," in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed. *Umstrittenes Täuferium, 1525–1975* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 50–78; Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Soziale Unruhen und apokalyptische Visionen im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979); Gottfried Seebass, "Peasants' War and Anabaptism in Franconia," in *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer*, ed. Werner O. Packull and James M. Stayer (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1980), 154–63.

underscored the complex social and cultural tapestry of all religious movements in the sixteenth century.¹²

To be sure, Bender's interest in a "usable past" continued to find able defenders among his students—John Howard Yoder and Heinold Fast come to mind.¹³ But the primary energy within radical reformation studies in the 1970s came from outside the Mennonite denomination; and by the 1980s the once comfortable notion of "evangelical Anabaptism" as a clearly defined, normative standard against which other sixteenth- (or twentieth-) century expressions of faith might be judged had given way to a view of Anabaptism whose boundaries were exceedingly fluid and whose theological core defied easy summary.¹⁴ Indeed, by the late 1970s, the deconstructionist impulse of the social historians raised serious questions about whether the radical reformation—and Anabaptist studies in particular—had eviscerated itself of its own subject.

II. CURRENT METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The historiography of the radical reformation in more recent years might be summarized through the lens of three methodological debates or transformations that have unfolded over the past two decades. While these three themes certainly do not adequately capture the full scope of the field, they do highlight some basic new research directions, and they suggest points of departure for broader conversations about the state of church history more generally.

12. For an insight in the methodological approach of the East Germans see, for example, Gerhard Zschäbitz, "Die Stellung der Täuferbewegung im Spannungsfeld der deutschen frühbürgerlichen Revolution," in Gerhard Brendler, ed. *Die frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), 152–62. The core themes of Peter Blickle's arguments can be found in his *From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man*, trans. Beat Kümin (Boston: Brill, 1998); Scribner's many works include *The German Reformation* (London: Macmillan, 1986) and *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).
13. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *Täuferertum und Reformation in der Schweiz: Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523–1538* (Karlsruhe: Mennonitischen Geschichtsverein, 1962) and Heinold Fast, *Beiträge zu einer Friedenstheologie: Eine Stimme aus den historischen Friedenskirchen* (Maxdorf: Agape Verlag, 1982).
14. The culmination of these efforts is best seen in James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991), Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei. Die reformatorischen Bewegungen in Deutschland, 1517–1529* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987). For a very fine summary of the methodological debate at the time, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 53 (July 1979): 177–88; James Stayer, "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 53 (July 1979): 211–18; along with other essays in this special issue by Carter Lindberg, Werner Packull, and John Oyer.

WHAT'S "RADICAL" ABOUT THE "RADICAL REFORMATION"?

George Williams introduced the term "radical reformation" in 1962 with the intention of broadening the field of study beyond Bender's so-called "evangelical Anabaptists" to include at least two additional groups of dissenters from orthodox Protestantism: the "spiritualists" and the "evangelical rationalists." In his usage, the term "radical" was meant to embrace a kind of laundry list of theological principles—among them believers' baptism, the separation of church and state, a commitment to missions, and a general insistence on free will. Radicalism for Williams thus implied a theological willingness to move beyond the conservative impulses of the mainline Reformers, thereby pushing the Reformation to its logical end. It did not, however, imply a clear social or political expression.¹⁵

In more recent years, social historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz—building on the work of the East German Adolf Laube—has challenged this conceptualization of the "radical reformation."¹⁶ Goertz and Laube have both argued that by many standards the Reformation convictions of the early Martin Luther were actually *more* radical than those of the many colorful personalities populating the book by Williams (who tended to retain elements of medieval mysticism, a visible church, and a Catholic soteriology of good works). At some point, however—for Luther it was the *Invocavit* sermons at Wittenberg in 1522; for Zwingli, the disputation on the mass in October of 1523—the magisterial Reformers backed away from the radical social and political implications of their arguments and elected to revise their theological programs in the interest of social stability and their own political survival. Thus, the true radicals were those who held firm to the *original* Reformation critique—whose essence Goertz thought was to be found in anticlericalism—rather than adopting the new institutional forms and state patronage of the established Protestant churches.

This new conceptualization of the radical reformation integrated Anabaptism more organically within the broader Reformation movement. At the same time, it also provided a helpful framework for understanding the *attenuation* of radical impulses among Anabaptist groups in the second half of the sixteenth century. Though coming much later in time, second and third generation descendents in virtually

15. James Stayer makes this point succinctly and insightfully in "The Radical Reformation," *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, eds. Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (New York: Brill, 1995), 2:249–51.

16. Goertz, *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei*, passim; Adolf Laube, "Radicalism as a Research Problem in the History of the Early Reformation," in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *Radical Tendencies in the Formation: Divergent Perspectives* (Kirksville, Mo.: SCES, 1988), 128–41.

all of the radical groups began—in a manner analogous to that of the magisterial Reformers—to take on more sharply defined institutional forms; they adopted confessionalist traditions, reinstated a clergy, and made their peace with the early modern state.

This process of “de-radicalization” is, in fact, the focus of some of the most creative current research on the radical reformation. Here one could cite Hanspeter Jecker’s study of Anabaptism in Basel in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century; a dissertation by Mark Furner—a Cambridge student of Robert Scribner—on Nicodemism and survival strategies among the Swiss Brethren; dissertations-in-progress by Astrid von Schlachta (University of Innsbruck) on the institutionalization of Hutterite mission and Martin Rothkegel (Charles University in Prague) on the humanist influences on Anabaptist groups in Moravia; Brad Gregory’s recent comparative study of evolving martyr traditions; the efforts of Michael Driedger and myself to interpret Anabaptist-Mennonites within the confessionalizing impulses of the early modern state; or Werner Packull’s careful treatment of the consolidation of Hutterite theology and historical identity in the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁷ All of these recent works seek to contextualize Anabaptist groups within broader themes of early modern European history—that is, confessionalism, toleration, Pietism—and they trace a process in which these once radical groups slowly developed institutions, traditions, and some measure of accommodation with the surrounding culture.

BEYOND POLYGENESIS?

A second significant methodological discussion has emerged recently in reaction to the portrayal of Anabaptism as a congeries of loosely connected, theologically fragmented, geographically disparate groups with little in common outside of a possible commitment to adult baptism. In 1995 Arnold Snyder, a historian at Conrad Grebel College, published *Anabaptist History and Theology*—the first survey of the radical reformation since William’s book more than thirty years earlier.¹⁸ Snyder is openly indebted to the work of the polygenesis

17. Hanspeter Jecker, *Ketzer, Rebellen, Heilige: Das Basler Täuferium von 1580–1700* (Liestal: Verlag des Kantons Basel-Landschaft, 1998); Mark Furner, “The Repression and Survival of Anabaptism in the Emmental, Switzerland 1659–1743” (Ph.D. Diss., Cambridge University, 1998); Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Driedger, “Mennonites? Heretics? Obedient Citizens? Categorizing People in Hamburg and Altona, 1648–1713” (Ph.D. Diss., Queens University, 1996), and Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
18. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 1995).

revisionists—he readily acknowledges the social context of the Anabaptist movement and the rich diversity of theological expression that flowered in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. But his book also challenges the conventional emphasis on Anabaptism’s internal differences by arguing that the movement was indeed shaped by a “core of shared theological assumptions.” This core, according to Snyder, included convictions held in common with all Christians (for example, the Apostle’s Creed); it also included a set of basic theological principles that the Anabaptists shared with other Protestant groups (for example, *sola Scriptura*). But then Snyder went on to identify a number of “doctrinal emphases” that were specifically Anabaptist in character. These emphases emerged dynamically out of a series of internal debates that united Anabaptist groups in conversation around two theological axes: one focused on Biblical interpretation (with the spirit and the letter being at opposite poles) and the other on ecclesiological form (with the poles being an “inner” spiritualism versus an “outer” visible or disciplined church).

The result of Snyder’s work was a creative new synthesis that rooted the Anabaptists clearly within a late medieval social and theological context. At the same time, it explicitly acknowledged the theological debts early Anabaptists owed to the magisterial Reformers, and it recognized variations and tensions within the movement. Yet, all the while, Snyder’s text sought to bring into focus those “family resemblances” that kept the various radical reformation groups within a coherent theological trajectory. The book was not reviewed that widely, perhaps because Snyder opted against a university publisher. But *Anabaptist History and Theology* is a significant achievement, not least because it dared to identify patterns of synthesis and convergence in a field where such claims had long been associated with denominational self-interest or faith-based special pleading.

THE “SECOND NAIVETE” OF POSTMODERNITY: EVANGELICAL ANABAPTISM REVISITED

Perhaps the most interesting methodological debate looming on the horizon of radical reformation studies is one sparked by the fallout of postmodern (or deconstructionist, or poststructural) discourse that has worked its way through the disciplines during the past fifteen to twenty years. This is not the occasion, of course, to analyze all the nuances of postmodern theory; but its impact on radical reformation studies can be seen in two, seemingly contradictory, expressions. On the one hand, it is possible to read the rejection of Bender’s “master

narrative," the emphasis on the fragmentary character of the movement, and the impulse to expose the social, economic or political self-interests lurking behind the religious language of the sixteenth century as consistent expressions of the deconstructivist impulse that has reshaped the scholarly landscape throughout the academy.

At the same time, however, a somewhat younger group of scholars trained in postmodern theory have also begun to turn these very same analytical tools against the assumptions implicit in the revisionist historiography itself. This critique is of special relevance to professing Christians whose faith commitments have generally been forced underground—rendered private or irrelevant—by the postconfessionalist "methodological atheism" that has dominated church history during the last third of the twentieth century.

In its simplest form, this approach simply turns postmodern theory back on its own protagonists: since engagement with the primary sources—and the subsequent narratives we write—inevitably reflect particular cultural and linguistic commitments, there is no reason why the commitments of believing Christians or, say, those of Lutherans or Mennonites should be any less legitimate than the commitments of secular social historians to the principles of "methodological atheism." The point is not to defend willful ignorance or to recklessly cast established principles of evidence and logic to the wind. But it does suggest a new openness to the writing of church history in a consciously constructivist mode, albeit one tempered by an epistemological humility and the principles of honesty and fairness.

Three examples suggest the general outlines of this emerging backlash against deconstructionist methodologies.

Thomas Heilke—a political scientist at the University of Kansas—recently published an essay sharply critical of James Stayer's classic text *Anabaptists and the Sword*.¹⁹ Drawing on the social philosopher John Milbank, Heilke argued that the social science methodology adopted by Stayer in his description of Anabaptist diversity ultimately rests on epistemological faith claims that are not all that different from those of traditional Christianity or the confessionalist interests of Bender and his successors. To emphasize the variety of first generation Anabaptist positions on the sword, for example, holding each up critically to a standard of *realpolitik*, does not finally "get the story straight" so much as merely replace one metanarrative with another—in Stayer's case, a social historical analysis rooted in an ontology of violence that simply denies nonviolence as an ethical

19. Thomas Heilke, "Theological and Secular Meta-Narratives of Politics: Anabaptist Origins Revisited (Again)," *Modern Theology* 13 (Apr. 1997): 227–52.

possibility. Yet in Heilke's view, there is no inherent reason why this reading is more plausible or "correct" than a traditional Mennonite counternarrative that regards the peaceableness of God's character as the ontological grounding of history, even if it finds temporal expression only rarely and imperfectly.

A similar argument can be found in a sharply worded critique of Snyder's *Anabaptist History and Theology* that came not from defenders of the polygenesis school, but from a fellow Mennonite—theologian and church historian J. Denny Weaver of Bluffton College.²⁰ Sparking a vituperative exchange, Weaver insisted that Snyder's methodology—describing Anabaptist theology as an extension of broadly accepted Christian and Protestant doctrines—was fundamentally flawed. Especially troublesome was Snyder's use of a 1526 catechism written by Balthasar Hubmaier to represent this overlap of Anabaptist and Protestant themes. A creative theologian who vigorously defended believers' baptism, Hubmaier's place in the Anabaptist pantheon has long been disputed. After all, he ultimately rejected an ethic of nonviolence, he assumed that a Christian could be a magistrate, and he was vague about the nature of a separatist church. But these are all themes, Snyder insists, that were contested within early Anabaptism. They emerged as a kind of Anabaptist "orthodoxy" only in subsequent years.

Weaver protested vigorously against this way of framing the Anabaptist story. "How we tell the story of our history, especially church history," he argued, "shapes the way we think about the world."²¹ In his view, Snyder's eagerness to ground Anabaptist theology on a foundation of generic Christian and Protestant convictions—and his appeal to Hubmaier as a transitional figure for Anabaptist theology—makes the principles of pacifism and a believers' church *peripheral* to the Anabaptist story. Rather than being foundational to the Anabaptist movement, they become particularistic accretions to an emerging Anabaptist theology. Thus described, claims Weaver, pacifism will be less likely to be viewed by contemporary Mennonites as theologically normative; history thus will be misused as a means of accommodating violence.

Weaver does not suggest that the swordbearing Anabaptists such as Hubmaier should be excised from the story. But he does challenge a conceptual methodology that seems to make the principles of nonviolence and a separatist ecclesiology of only secondary importance to

20. J. Denny Weaver, "Reading Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism Theologically: Implications for Modern Mennonites as a Peace Church," *Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 1998): 37–51.

21. *Ibid.*

the movement. "As a postmodern theologian," writes Weaver, "I reject the notion that heuristic or organizing principles are merely secondary issues. . . . Snyder's organizing narrative puts Anabaptist nonviolence at a serious disadvantage. It is a chosen standpoint . . . not merely an unbiased reading of the sources."²²

Snyder was, to put it mildly, not convinced. Among Mennonite scholars, an accusation of being soft on the principle of nonviolence is the closest thing to a gauntlet that a pacifist can lay—and Snyder, generally a soft-spoken and gentle-spirited person, responded with an invective rarely seen in the pages of a Mennonite journal.²³

Finally, Brad Gregory's recent book, *Salvation at Stake*, offers yet a third example of this new, theoretically informed approach to the study of religion that challenges conventional assumptions by an implicit appeal to a kind of Ricoeurian "second naivete."²⁴ Gregory opens his highly praised comparative study of Reformation martyr traditions by vigorously rejecting the tendency of many contemporary scholars to regard religion as merely "symbolic"—as opposed to the material domain of the "real"—and by refuting a methodology of hermeneutic suspicion that seeks to unmask hidden ideologies and special interests disguised within the language of faith.

Like Heilke, Gregory argues that reductionist explanations of religion share the same epistemological structure of traditional confessional history, only substituting unbelief for the presumed centrality of religious conviction. Moreover, he argues, such theories evince an impoverished historical imagination, since they view the past only in terms of a "progressive" anticipation of modern tolerance and relativism which predictably "yields a history reflecting the interpreter's [presentist] commitments."²⁵

It is important to note that Gregory is not calling for a disembodied history of souls; indeed, much of his book attempts to situate martyrs within social relationships, institutions, and cultural expectations. Nor

22. *Ibid.*, 48. "Simply put, this description of Anabaptist theology is framed by the theology of Christendom which accommodates violence, whatever complimentary remarks it might make about the ideal presented by Jesus' life and teachings" (48).

23. Arnold Snyder, "Anabaptist History and Theology: History or Heresy?" *Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 1998): 53–59. Snyder continues, "Those who argue against other people's narratives on postmodern grounds cannot then simply turn around and insist that their own particular narratives should be considered absolute and normative by everyone else. Invoking Jesus does not magically absolutize a particular narrative. . . . The story stands or falls by the sources in question. The matter of the sword had not been settled in the early movement, even though many other things had been" (57).

24. Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7–15.

25. *Ibid.*, 14.

does he deny that some early modern Christians used religion in deliberately manipulative ways.²⁶ But the “corrective to traditional confessional history is not atheistic history of religion, which substitutes one bias for another. What is needed is an approach that does justice to any and all evidence we might encounter without distorting the convictions of any of its protagonists.”²⁷ Believers in early modern Europe, he argues, died for convictions that they genuinely believed to be correct. Thus, the primary task of the historian is to reconstruct—not deconstruct—the commitments and experiences of sixteenth-century Christians, to *understand* them, as far as the evidence permits, in terms that “they would have recognized themselves.” “Not to take such people on their own terms fails utterly to comprehend them, the character of their actions, and the basis of their lives.”²⁸

III. CONCLUSION

In some important ways, basic historiographical themes within the radical reformation have not changed dramatically since the revisionist scholarship of the 1970s. Now, as then, scholars within the academy continue to integrate creatively the various radical movements of the sixteenth century into the dominant themes of early modern European scholarship, especially confessionalization, social discipline, state building and toleration. Now, as then, scholars within the Mennonite church continue to regard the Anabaptist story as a “living past,” capable of unifying the global Mennonite communion around a shared theological point of departure and helpful in contextualizing contemporary tensions and conflicts within a historical framework.²⁹

At the same time, however, the postmodern turn has opened up a space for a new rapprochement between academic and confessional approaches to the study of the radical reformation. Nearly thirty years ago, theologian Paul Ricoeur sought a way out of the paralyzing bind of the postmodern hermeneutical circle by advocating an approach to

26. “But this is a matter for empirical demonstration, not methodological assumption.”
Ibid., 15.

27. Ibid., 11.

28. Ibid., 10.

29. See, for example, Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 1999), a book solicited by the Mennonite World Conference and now translated into a half-dozen languages as a means of bringing the world-wide fellowship of Mennonites into a common conversation about historical origins. See also a series of recent special issues of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* on “Mennonites and Postmodernity” (Apr., 1997), “Mennonites and Institutions” (July, 1997), “Mennonites and Conflict” (Apr., 1998), “Mennonites and Architecture” (Apr., 1999), “Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition” (Oct., 2000), and “Mennonites and the Family” (Apr., 2001).

biblical studies that moved from “naïve understanding,” through “objective explanation” to the so-called “second naivete” of “appropriation.”³⁰ Whether the recent methodological critiques posed by Heilke, Weaver, and Gregory can reconcile these two parallel historiographical traditions into a creative new “appropriation” will be a central question of radical reformation scholarship in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

30. See Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).