

Anabaptists: Persecuted by the Persecuted

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Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thousands of Anabaptists were persecuted and executed throughout many regions of Europe. Beginning with the martyrdom of Felix Manz, Anabaptists were executed in a variety of ways because their beliefs differed from the established church of the region. While other Christian groups across Europe were also persecuted, Anabaptists can be considered the most persecuted group of the reformation as other persecuted groups persecuted them.

Christian denominations have been persecuting each other for centuries. It is the groups that are disagreeing with the current church and power structures that are most persecuted. In many cases, religious groups that were once persecuting go on to persecute others that have theological or doctrinal differences. "Catholics have persecuted Protestants: Protestants have pursued Catholics: Lutherans have hunted Anabaptists; Episcopalians have burned Puritans; Puritans have hanged Quakers; Calvinists have tortured Unitarians."<sup>1</sup> With the exceptions of the of the pacifist denominations (the Quakers and the Anabaptists), those who were once persecuted appear to forget their once persecution and persecute others with different ideas.

As early as the reign of King Henry VII (1509-1547), there is documentation of oppression of Christians. During Henry VIII's reign Catholics in Britain and Ireland were persecuted after the king declared that the English crown was 'the only supreme head of the church in England' and any allegiance to the pope became

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, De Robigne Mortimer. *The Champions of the Church: Their Crimes and Persecutions*. New York: Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1878.

treasonous. The persecution of Catholics began under this act, and with the persecution and execution of the first Catholic martyrs, Thomas More and John Fisher. Catholic persecution continued with the executions of Jesuits at Tyburn, as ordered by Queen Elizabeth I. Shortly after, toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church, now no longer persecuted began persecuting. As the Catholic Church's reaction to the Protestant Reformation, Protestants were denounced as heretics and were subject to harassment in territories where Catholics held the dominant power, such as Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands.

In January of 1522, the Anabaptist movement began with the Baptism of Jörg vom Haus Jacob (commonly known as George Blaurock). "After prayer, George of the House of Jacob, stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God's sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained minister to perform such work."<sup>2</sup> Following Blaurock's baptism, he baptized other's present, marking the first rebaptisms of those who had been baptized as infants, and sparking the Swiss Anabaptist movement. Not long after the beginning of this new movement, its followers began to face incredible torment by Catholics and Protestants alike.

The leaders of the new Anabaptist movement were regularly harassed and threatened. Those dissenting against Ulrich Zwingli and other reformation leaders were often seized and imprisoned. Many were exiled from their homelands for their

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<sup>2</sup> Hutterian Brethren. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*. Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 1987.

beliefs. The Reformers fully embraced Augustine's advocacy of coercion in religious matters, and many regarded the death penalty for heresy as legitimate.<sup>3</sup> Protestant Reformation leader, John Calvin, wrote much against the Anabaptists. In a letter to the Marquis Paet, chamberlain to the King of Navarre, in 1561 he wrote, "Honor, glory, and riches shall be the reward of your pains; but remove all, do not fail to rid the country of these scoundrels [Anabaptists and others], who stir up the people to revolt against us." Likewise, Martin Luther too wrote against the German peasants and Anabaptists, and is credited with saying "They should be knocked to pieces, strangled and stabbed, secretly and openly, by everybody who can do it, just as one must kill a mad dog!"

Whether exiled or "persecuted in one region, they fled to another thus spreading their convictions."<sup>4</sup> The Anabaptist beliefs spread quickly throughout the regions. In some places, as fast as belief spread people were executed. Those persecuting the Anabaptists came up with false accusations in order to have the Anabaptists imprisoned. The city council of Zurich declared, on March 7, 1526, that anyone found guilty of rebaptism would be drowned. "The capital punishment reserved for women was typically drowning, which seemed more benign while the honourable kind of execution for men was to be burned."<sup>5</sup> The first person drowned for their belief in believer baptism was Felix Manz, a former student of Zwingli. He

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<sup>3</sup> Coffey, John. *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689 (Studies in Modern History)*. London: Longman Publishing Group, 2000. 23

<sup>4</sup> Pili, Toivo. "Christians as Citizens of a Persecuting State: A Theological and Ethical Reflection in an Historical Perspective." *Богословские размышления (Theological Reflections)- Euro-Asian Theological Journal* 6 (2006): 146-161.

<sup>5</sup> Roth, John D., and James M. Stayer. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007. 458

was arrested and held a number of times throughout 1525 and 1526. Every time he was arrested his sentence became more severe. Finally, in January of 1527 he was sentenced to death. On January 5, 1527 he became the first Anabaptist martyr. "He was drowned in Zurich in the middle of the Limmat (between today's Rathaus bridge and Rudolf-Brun bridge) and buried in the dump at St. Jacob's."<sup>6</sup> King Ferdinand I, king of Bohemia, Hungary, and Croatia, declared that drowning, flippantly called the third baptism, was the best antidote to Anabaptism. Though it was a popular and effective technique for the execution of dissenters, drowning was not the only method utilized by Catholics and Protestants.

Many of those persecuted were tortured with thumbscrews, stretched on the rack, whipped, burned at the stake, beheaded, and buried alive. Legal documents concerning the death suffered by Anabaptists report that "Some of them were racked and stretched so much that the sun could shine right through them, some were torn apart and died under torture, some were burned to ashes and dust as heretics, some were roasted on spits, some were ripped with redhot pincers, some were imprisoned in houses and then burned together as a group, some were hanged from trees, some were executed by the sword, were strangled or were cut to pieces."<sup>7</sup> While most of the territories being governed by Protestants did not execute those Anabaptist who recanted, many Catholic governments still did. These harsher Catholic governments also preferred to carry out the execution through fire.

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<sup>6</sup> Hershberger, Guy. *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Wolkan, Rudolf. *Geschichtsbuch der Hutterischen Brüder*. Macleod, Alberta, and Vienna, 1923. 184.

Shortly following Manz's execution, Michael Sattler, a leader in the Swiss and South German Anabaptist movements, while in Exile from Zurich, was apprehended by Austrian authorities, placed on trial, and executed. While on trial, Sattler defended himself and the others on trial against "the nine charges, seven against all fourteen defendants, two specifically against Sattler."<sup>8</sup> The judges of his trial deliberated for only 90 minutes before they announced the verdict and thereby the manner of execution. Though executed in Ensisheim, a town in Catholic Austria, Sattler was not drowned, as Ferdinand I had suggested, but rather he was executed in a much more dishonorable and more painful manner. Sattler's tongue was cut out, his flesh was cut with hot irons, and he was then burned at the stake.

Sattler's wife, Margaretha, was also on trial for participating in Anabaptist activities. She was drowned eight days following her husband's death. Though the Countess of Zollern, wife of the presiding judge, tried to persuade her to recant, Margaretha Sattler remained steadfast with her convictions. Martyrdom was the one way in which men and women were fully equal. Often women were given the choice to recant or to die for their beliefs. The torture inflicted upon women required the same perseverance that was required of men. Many of those who were executed professed their faith up to the moment of their death. Often, women were denied the right to publicly pronounce their faith. In some ways, "woman's testimony was more

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, George H, and Angel M Mergal. *SPIRITUAL AND ANABAPTIST WRITERS: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*. London, and Philadelphia: S.C.M Press, Ltd. And The Westminster Press, 1957. 136-144

threatening than man's."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, women were often executed in secret whereas the execution of men was much more public.

Some records insinuate that thousands of Anabaptists were martyred for their beliefs, though there is no official accurate count. James Stayer states that it is certain that at least 679 were executed in Switzerland and Southern Germany between 1527 and 1533. Some scholars estimate 4,000 Anabaptists were martyred while others estimate that it could be double or triple this figure. *The Bloody Theater or The Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*, is a compilation of accounts of oppression and execution of over a thousand named and unnamed Anabaptists in the Low Countries between 1524 and 1660. Through these accounts we know of at least these stories though there are many others.

In spite of the cruelty, and in many ways because of the testimony of the persecution, the movement spread quickly from Switzerland to Strasbourg and into the Low Countries. Despite the fact that they refused to defend themselves with political or military powers, their witness spread under persecution. The Burgrave of Alzey is recorded as saying "What shall I do? The more I cause to be executed, the more they increase."<sup>10</sup> Many felt that it was their duty as a Christian to suffer the persecution and possible execution.

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<sup>9</sup> Leona Stucky Abbot, "Anabaptist Women of the Sixteenth Century", (masters thesis, Eden Theological Seminary, 1979) 55.

<sup>10</sup> van Braght, Thieleman J. *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the*

Large portions of the Anabaptist community interpreted their experience of being persecuted within a Christological perspective. Menno Simons, a Dutch priest who became one of the main Anabaptist leaders in the Low Countries, and whose followers became today's Mennonites, wrote of his belief that Christ's own suffering and execution was an example that His disciples ought to follow. The literal interpretation of Jesus' words became the main ethical guideline for Menno Simons as well as the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites. Christ suffered and therefore his followers would also have to suffer. Furthermore, the writings of many of the major leaders of the movement, from prison, encouraged those under the persecution. Thomas Müntzer wrote to the people of Mühlhausen, from his prison cell in Heldrungen, "For this, like all deeds God has accomplished, must be judged not by its outward appearance but in the truth. Do not allow my death, therefore, to be a stumbling block for you, for it has come to pass for the benefit of the good and the uncomprehending."<sup>11</sup> and to those in Sangerhausen, he wrote, "You should take no offense at this, for the godless will cast you out of the congregation; indeed the hour is coming when they will believe, as they strangle you, that they are doing God a service. You should take these words to heart and lock them away in the ground of your heart, because the dangerous time of which St Paul spoke is now upon us; when any who wants to do the right thing and to revere the holy gospel is bound to be regarded by the godless as a heretic, a rascal, and a wretch, or anything else they

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*testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660.* Lancaster County, PA: David Miller, 1837. 437.

<sup>11</sup> Müntzer, Thomas. *The collected works of Thomas Müntzer.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988. 160



can think up.”<sup>12</sup>The words of Müntzer and others helped those being persecuted to understand what would come as well as to remember the suffering of Christ and the suffering as foretold in the bible. Adding this Christological lens helped them endure the torture.

Through out the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Christians were oppressed and often martyred in many parts of Europe. Often the Christian group that was recently oppressed went on to persecute others, as is the case with the Catholic Church and the Lutherans and Calvinists of the Protestant Reformation. Of the persecuted groups of this time, the Anabaptists were the most persecuted, being oppressed by both Protestants and Catholics alike.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 87

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