CHAPTER THREE

ANABAPTISTS: A SPECIAL CASE?

[Magdalena Wisingerin] was not ashamed of doing what honored God. She had given herself to the Lord. She would die in prison as gladly as anywhere else.¹

Sedelmairin told Magdalena Seizin, who had no more than one underskirt, that if she let herself be baptized, she would bring her a whole arm full of clothing.²

When speaking of their religious life, some Anabaptists revealed passionate commitments to their faith while others seem to have been inspired more by worldly concerns. Their statements hint at the wide variety of interests that might lead someone to follow a religious movement. As we will see, the numerous records collected on Anabaptists in Augsburg show that in this way, as in others, Anabaptists were not as different from other contemporary Christians as sometimes thought. They did not live in isolation from the rest of the city but intermingled with non-Anabaptists on a daily basis, and the record of their activities gives us a chance to see how religious communities form within a larger urban setting. The followers of the movement do not fall neatly into the categories of either theologians or martyrs, rather they were like Augsburger, ordinary people living in extraordinary times.

Of the various religious movements that appeared in Augsburg in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists present a special case in some respects. Only they were systematically prosecuted for their faith. While a supporter of reform might get arrested for criticizing the city council or insulting the Catholic Church in public, he would not be arrested simply for supporting Luther or Zwingli. For a brief time, between 1537–1547, people could get into trouble for leaving the city to attend Catholic services, but there was no concerted effort to uncover circles of secret Catholics. The Anabaptists, on the other

¹ “… dann sy schem sich nit was got zu lob kom, sy hab sich dem herren ergeben, sy welle gleich als gern in der fengknus, als anderstwa sterben, es gelt ir alles gleich,” StadtAA, Reichsstadt, Lit. 1528, March–April, Magdalena Wisingerin, 15 April 1528.
² “Die Sedelmairin hab der Magdalena Seitzin ir der Butzin haúßfrauenn so nicht mer dan ein under rock gehabt sie soll sich tauffen lassen so welle sie ir ein ganzen arm vol claider bringen, was sie ertragen mòhe,” ibid., Anna Butzin, 16 April 1528.
hand, could be arrested merely for meeting with friends to read and discuss the Bible. In fact, an imperial mandate from February 1527 demanded that Anabaptism be banned and its followers punished; Augsburg’s council eventually followed up with its own prohibition on 11 October 1527.

Although each of the various Christian faiths growing in the early sixteenth century had its opponents, only the Anabaptists were universally condemned by all other faiths. In fact, it could be said that denouncing the Anabaptists was one of the few things on which Catholics and Protestants could agree. Up to 1537 Augsburg still tolerated Catholic worship in eight churches while supporting evangelical preachers in the churches’ preaching houses. In that atmosphere, people were exposed to a variety of religious messages which could lead people in many directions. The Anabaptist Agnes Vogel gives us an idea of how the confusion of religious messages in the early reformation could affect people.

She was moved to this baptism by the preachers [in Augsburg], because she attended their sermons here for a good four years. One preached this, the other that; one held the Sacrament for a symbol, the other for flesh and blood. So, they preached against one another and confused her so much that she didn’t know what she should believe, and, therefore, wished to hear the others as well.³

Vogel sought spiritual guidance from the preachers in Augsburg but wound up going elsewhere. Fortunately for us she speaks more directly than most about her own feelings regarding her spiritual life. She was disappointed by the officially accepted preachers and did not trust them. How could she know who was right when all the preachers claiming to know the true Gospel disagreed with each other so vehemently? When an Anabaptist minister read to her from the Bible, he persuaded her that the way to salvation lay in being baptized. Like others, Vogel sought out answers in a variety of places. In her case, it led to Anabaptism.

In this twilight state before abolishing the Mass in 1537, the city council expected citizens of different religious inclinations to live and let live. By its own prohibition, however, it would not tolerate Anabap-

³ “Zu solhem tauff haben sy bewegt die prediger alhie, dann sy sey wol vier jar an ir predig ganngen, hab ainer das, ain ander ain anders gepredigt, ainer im Sacrament ain zaichen, der ander flaisch und plut wellem haben. Also wider ain annder gepredigt, umnd sy gannz irr gemacht, da sy nit gewifß, was sy glauen solle, und deßhalben begert die annndern auch zuhoren,” StadtAA, Reichsstadt, Urg. 14 May 1528, Agnes Vogel.