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 haußfrauenn 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 möhe," 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 six-
teenth century had its opponents, only the Anabaptists were universally
condemned by all other faiths. In fact, it could be said that denounc-
ing 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 allhie, dann sy sey wol vier jar an ir predig ganngen,
hab ainer das, ain ander ain anders gepredigt, ainem im Sacrament ain zeichen, der ander flaisch und
plut wellen haben. Also wider ain annder gepredigt, umnd sy guennzt irr gemacht, da sy nit gewifft,
was sy glauben solle, und deffhalben begert die anndern auch zuhoren,” StadtAA, Reichsstadt,
Urg. 14 May 1528, Agnes Vogel.