CHAPTER SIX

THE MELCHOIRITES AND MÜNSTER

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Raging Anabaptists?

In the early 1530s the apocalyptic prophet, Melchior Hoffman, traveled from his base in Strasbourg, to win a considerable fraction of the supporters of church reform in East Friesland and the Netherlands to believers’ baptism, a practice outlawed throughout the Holy Roman Empire. The focus of his appeal was the message that biblical prophecy foretold the second coming of Christ for 1533 or shortly thereafter. Going beyond Hoffman’s expectations, the Anabaptists in Münster under the influence of Dutch Anabaptists set up a militant community in February 1534, which soon aspired to prepare the way for the promised lordship of the returned Savior through the kingdom of Jan van Leiden. Münster was besieged by the troops of its prince bishop but was able to hold out for sixteen months before it fell on June 25, 1535. Most of the male defenders were killed. Jan van Leiden and his fellow prisoners Bernd Knipperdollinck and Bernd Krechtinck were publicly executed in Münster on January 22, 1536.

The Anabaptists in Münster departed markedly from contemporary social norms. Besides requiring adult baptism, they destroyed public documents and records as well as learned literature, abolished the money economy and introduced polygamy for men. They responded to internal resistance with executions. They defended much of what they did as God’s will, transmitted to them by the prophets Jan Matthijs and Jan van Leiden. The king Jan van Leiden set up a royal court, took sixteen wives and performed several executions personally. That such facts are well-suited to stimulate the imagination of chroniclers and the general public is amply demonstrated by

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2 Mellink (1953); Stayer (1986).
the numerous recurrences of the theme of Münster Anabaptism in literature, theater, music, painting and graphic art.\(^3\)

Many observers have viewed the actions of these Anabaptists with revulsion. Martin Luther said that in Münster “the devils sit upon each other like toads.”\(^4\) Hermann von Kerssenbrock described the event in the title of his 1573 chronicle as “the raging of the Anabaptists.”\(^5\) Even in the late twentieth century historians expressed their aversion for the “hideous, perverse orgies” in Münster, for the “foolish delusions” of the people and the “base lust for power” of the “ring-leaders.”\(^6\) A historiography that took a more detached attitude towards the Münster Anabaptists set in with Carl Adolf Cornelius in the nineteenth century. Among the sources published by Cornelius, Heinrich Gresbeck’s account of Anabaptist Münster is particularly important.\(^7\) In contrast to the often fanciful presentation of Kerssenbrock, who left Münster as a boy at the beginning of Anabaptist rule, this chronicle has the credibility of an eyewitness narrative. Nevertheless, despite improved accessibility to sources the flood of censorious presentations at first swelled in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The assessments of the social innovations were also problematic. Karl Kautsky classed the Anabaptists among the “forerunners of modern socialism,” and Gerhard Brendler forced the Anabaptist rule into the Marxist concept that regarded the Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution.”\(^8\)

Scholars in the free church tradition generally referred to the peaceful Mennonite part of the Dutch Melchiorite tradition as the norm, and dismissed Münster Anabaptists as an aberration.\(^9\) Only with the general turn towards social history was it possible once again to build upon Cornelius’ initiatives for a critical estimate of the Anabaptists in Münster.\(^10\) Great progress came with the studies of the social structure of Anabaptist Münster by Karl-Heinz Kirchhoff, who showed that numerous members of the leading socio-economic

\(^3\) Das Königreich, Vol. 2 (2000); Schupp (2002).
\(^5\) Hermanni a Kerssenbroch (1899–1900).
\(^7\) Berichte (1983), 1–214.
\(^8\) Brendler (1966), 9.
\(^9\) Stayer (1986).
\(^10\) Jelsma (1998); Stayer (1976); van Dülmen (1977).