

Chapter 4

Historical Background: The Anabaptist Movement in Switzerland

The 16th century marks one of the fundamental turning points in the history of Western civilization. Although there had been localized religious reform movements before this time (e.g. the Lollards in England, the Hussites in Bohemia), the reform movements of the 16th century converged with the broader groundswell of socioeconomic protest that had been building among the common people. When the two movements converged they created a tidal wave of upheaval that swept across central Europe.

Some historians have spoken of the crises of late feudalism which peaked at the dawn of the 16th century.¹ The commoners were increasingly being squeezed in a pincers of demands by the feudal nobility and the oligarchic city councils, which were tightening their control over the local populations.² Officials at all levels were raising taxes, rents, feudal tithes, and tolls, and they were passing ordinances to create exclusive monopolies on trade.³ Throughout southern Germany and Switzerland, in cities such as Freiburg, Augsburg, Constance, Bern and Zürich, the city councils were reaching out to control the economies of the surrounding rural villagers. In order to establish zones of economic domination, the city councils stamped out rural guilds and manipulated the growing economies outside their walls. They declared that the small landowners and tenant farmers in the surrounding villages were “out-burgers,” or non-residential citizens, which made them subject to new taxes and commercial regulations.⁴ Small farmers were forced to take out loans to pay these increased liabilities, and many were being reduced to poverty.⁵ Although serfdom had been abolished in some areas in the late 15th century, most notably Franconia, Thuringia, Tyrolia, and particularly in the Swiss cantons, these landless peasants comprised a growing under-class who lacked formal citizenship in the cities.⁶ Many of these displaced people gravitated to the cities in hopes of becoming craftsmen, but the majority simply became day-laborers, beggars, or vagabonds, always a potentially explosive element. Even these non-citizens (the *Beisassen* or *Hintersassen*) were squeezed for their meager resources. The city councils adopted the policy that non-citizens who resided in their jurisdictions for more one year and one day were subject to payment of an annual tax as a mark of their subservience, which was tantamount to creating a quasi-serf status.⁷

As the polarization in wealth and social privilege intensified, conditions were ripe for the outbreak of civil unrest.⁸ The nobility and the local governments were on permanent alert against revolts which began to flare everywhere. Initially the grievances were sparked by abusive taxation and interest rates, but these soon grew broader in scope and escalated into demands for the abolition of serfdom and class privilege everywhere. The legal basis for these claims to social

¹ See Scott 1986, Laube 1985.

² Scribner 1981.

³ For example, after 1471 the margraves of Baden began creating artificial scarcities by imposing high tariffs on imports and forbidding their subjects to sell products on foreign markets. Scott 1986; Laube 1987.

⁴ Scott (1986).

⁵ Laube (1987).

⁶ Midelfort 1978.

⁷ Scott 1986.

⁸ Laube 1987.

justice lay in old Germanic Common Law (*altes Recht*), which was based on ancient traditions of local autonomy and communal liberty in the German speaking regions.⁹ In the past the commoners had legal protections, rights to pasturage, use of the forest, and compensation for property loss, but over time these had been supplanted by seigniorial rights (*Herrschaftsrecht*). As the protests escalated, peasant leaders also appealed to the moral principles of Christianity (*göttliches Recht*), from which they derived the notion that there should be less monopoly of wealth and greater sharing of goods and resources. This appeal to Christian justice was especially timely because the forces of Reformation had been building, and there was a growing coalition between radical clergy and the peasantry.

Spark was set to this tinder by the chronic hostility that had prevailed for almost two centuries between the Swiss cantons and the imperial Habsburgs, who claimed feudal title to much of this region. The Swiss cantons had largely succeeded in breaking away from the Holy Roman Empire by the beginning of the 16th century, after a protracted period of struggle against the armies of the Habsburgs, but they were still nominally under the umbrella of the empire.¹⁰ The military campaigns against the Swiss were costly and these demands began to unravel the social fabric in the southern German realms. Discontent was especially intense in Alsace and the Breisgau, on both sides of the Rhine, which were being drained of manpower and resources in the futile effort to subjugate the Swiss. The neighboring Swiss cantons also were under great stress as the civil authorities intensified their demands for taxes and military levies for self-defense.

In 1460 at Hegau, west of Lake Constance, the peasants seized the local Austrian officials and attacked several surrounding towns. This incident may have been triggered by the Swiss, who encouraged peasant unrest in Hapsburg territories just across their border. One of the most famous peasant uprisings was the *Bundschuh*, which broke out in Alsace near Selestat in 1493. Dissident peasants adopted a banner displaying the image of a commoner's shoe with long laces streaming from it, depicting the "bound shoe" worn by the peasants at that time, in contrast to the elegant "*Stiefel*" boots of the nobility. The peasant leaders planned to capture several cities in Alsace, then form an alliance with Swiss peasants in Zürich and Bern. The conspiracy was short-lived and most of the leaders were executed, but the *Bundschuh* message was not extinguished.

These rebellions targeted not just the secular authorities, but also the monasteries and the wealthy bishoprics. Religious visionaries fed the unrest by challenging both the church and the state. In one village, for example, the peasants desecrated the Eucharist on the altar and cut off the fingers of the parish priest when he tried to stop them.¹¹ In 1476 in the archbishopric of Würzburg, Hans Böhm preached that the apocalypse was at hand and he tried to incite a revolution, but he was burned as a heretic. Each spark led to another, all of which were precursors to the greatest conflagration of all, the Peasant War of 1525, which engulfed most of southern Germany.

The peasant rebellions were largely squelched by the authorities throughout the Holy Roman Empire, but they achieved greater success in Switzerland. Swiss peasantry shared similar grievances against the wealthy families who controlled city governments, monopolized resources and were trying to extend their control into the hinterlands of the cantons. The wealthy landowners were expanding the land-use fees paid by the farmers in the outlying villages. The canton governments were also increasing taxation and imposing annoying restrictions on

⁹ Swiss independence was finally recognized in 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War. See Robisheaux 1984.

¹⁰ Martin 1971; Luck 1985.

¹¹ Scott 1986.

hunting, fishing, and use of the forests. The city council in Zürich had forbidden the formation of rural guilds and discouraged all enterprises outside their control, such as the planting of new vineyards, the construction of oil-presses, and bath-houses.¹² The rural peasantry fought back. Bern was rocked in 1470 by the *Zwingherrenschafft* movement, which seized control of the the local government and invested it in an elected city council. As with the *Bundschuh* uprisings to the north, which proudly displayed the commoner's shoe as a symbol of unity, the Swiss peasantry also passed a series of ordinances prohibiting the wearing of ostentatious clothing, including shoes with buckles.¹³ Zürich too was rocked by an uprising in 1489, which forced the city council to make concessions to the rural peasantry.

The Swiss city-states were never able to exert the same degree of control over their hinterlands as was typical in other parts of southern Germany, where more people were kept in abject serfdom on large princely estates. The Swiss peasants in their high valley strongholds stoutly resisted these attempts at domination. The institution of serfdom was weakened even further by the ongoing struggle against the Habsburgs which required the support of the rural Swiss population. Serfdom was abolished earliest in the forest cantons after a series of local rebellions, and by 1485 it was abolished in most Swiss territories.¹⁴

The Anabaptist Message

The success of the Swiss in preserving independence from the Holy Roman Empire also allowed them to become a safe harbor for religious reformers. Although the forest cantons had provided the original nucleus for the Swiss confederation, the guiding forces were the major city-states -- Zürich, Bern, Basel, Luzern and Fribourg. Of these, Zürich was especially dominant due to its strategic location near the head-waters of the Rhine. Zürich was a major center for commerce as well as for new ideas, and the Reformation found its natural roots in such a place. Zürich also had convenient access to the talent from nearby Basel, which was a free imperial city state with a renowned university and several resident humanist scholars, most notably Erasmus.

In 1519 the city council of Zürich commissioned Ulrich Zwingli to be a "People's Priest" at the *Grossmünster* cathedral, and under his guidance Zürich became a center for reform. Zwingli sought to restore the church to the moral purity of the past and, in addition, to simplify the complex religious liturgy that had grown during the Middle Ages, most of which he rejected as not being biblically based. Eventually he advocated that the entire "idolatrous" ritual of the Mass should be abolished, along with all the sacraments, the veneration of saints, clerical vestments, chalices, crucifixes, religious art and even the singing of hymns. Zwingli - like Martin Luther - was a careful, methodical reformer who sought to bring about these changes from the top down, under the "magisterial" guidance of the city council. All citizens of the canton were expected to belong to the Reformed church of Zürich, regardless of whether they be sinners or saints.

There were many proselytizers during these early years of the Reformation throughout the German speaking regions, each promoting his own vision of a biblically correct Christianity. Although they differed in their creeds, the more radical reformers have been grouped by historians under the label of "Anabaptist." The term derives from their shared rejection of infant baptism and their belief in the "rebaptizing" of adults. The equivalent German term used by civil and religious authorities was *Wiedertäufer*, which literally means "rebaptizers." Anabaptism has

¹² Scott 1986.

¹³ Luck 1985.

¹⁴ Luck 1985.

been described as the “Radical Reformation” to distinguish it from mainstream magisterial reformers like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli whose goals were to reform the state churches.¹⁵ It has also been characterized as the “Protestantism of the Poor,” to emphasize its roots among the less privileged classes of society.¹⁶

Current opinions differ about how the movement can best be characterized. The lineal descendants today -- the Amish, the Hutterites, and the conservative branches of the Mennonites (the latter being a broad umbrella of affiliated groups) -- have to varying degrees preserved an emphasis on being “plain folk,” leading a simple, Gospel-based lifestyle, and practicing an ethic of non-violence, non-participation in politics, and passive separatism from the corruptions of modern society. However, the early founders of Anabaptism were much more zealous, and their fiery speeches stirred the masses during the revolutionary movements that swept southern Germany and Switzerland at that time. The recognition of this fact continues to stir some controversy in the ranks of church historians. An earlier generation of Mennonite historians tended to select those antecedents who most closely matched the characteristics of the Amish and conservative Mennonites today.¹⁷ Any historical ties with the peasant rebellions and the apocalyptic preachers like Thomas Müntzer were disparaged. Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), a proselytizer in Zürich, is usually singled out as the major precursor since he more clearly matched the desired image of a pacifist and an advocate for the establishment of a sectarian separatist religion. At the other extreme, Marxist historians embraced all evidence for linkages with the peasant upheavals. They regarded Thomas Müntzer, not Grebel, as the central figure of early Anabaptism, and they viewed the later pacifistic sectarian stage, ushered in by preachers such as Michael Sattler, as a futile attempt to continue the lost peasant revolution of 1525 through spiritual means.¹⁸

A synthesis has emerged in historical research since the 1970s.¹⁹ The diversity of the early Anabaptist movement is now commonly acknowledged. Anabaptism evolved during a period of ideological ferment and social upheaval and there was a broad spectrum of creeds circulating in the German speaking areas. Novel ideas spread rapidly through published tracts that were hotly debated in the universities. Out of this ideological seed-bed, variations on some common themes emerged from reformers in diverse areas. Heinrich Büllinger, Zwingli’s colleague and successor in the Reformed church in Switzerland, published the first systematic study of Anabaptism in 1560.²⁰ This work is flawed by bias, but it remains one of the most thorough descriptions of the movement at that time. He distinguished at least 13 groups, named after their founding ministers or their key doctrinal concerns. By 1589, over 40 groups were known, showing that there was ongoing diversification of creeds. Their critics among the Reformed clergy charged that one could never be sure precisely what each advocated since they varied so much in their beliefs.

¹⁵ Williams 1962.

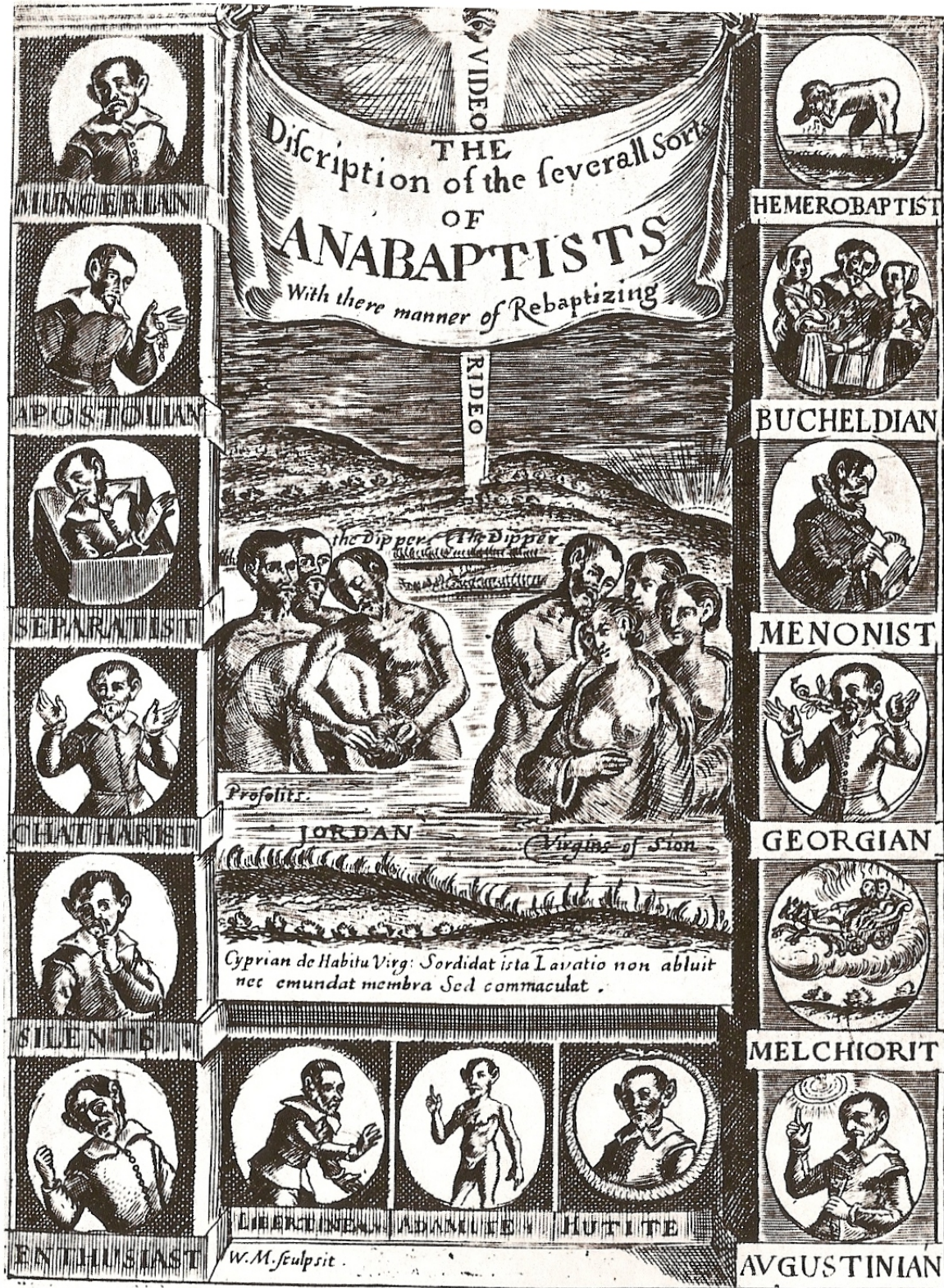
¹⁶ Stayer 1982.

¹⁷ Bender 1950.

¹⁸ Brady 1981.

¹⁹ Two more recent scholars who have written about the early Anabaptist movement are Packull 1977 and Stayer 1976.

²⁰ Büllinger 1560.



98 The proliferation of Anabaptist sects became at last a subject for ridicule: title-page of Daniel Featley's Description of 1645, known also as 'The Dippers Dipt'

The Anabaptists shared a profound belief in biblical literalism, which paradoxically became one of their major sources of diversity. The Bible (particularly the New Testament) was used as an inflexible moral guide. Great importance was placed on each turn of phrase and every nuance of meaning. One extreme example were the "Apostolics," who supposedly wandered about without staff, girdle, shoes or money, in obedience to Matthew 10:9, and some preached from the roof tops, following the dictates of Matthew 10:27. Others took to heart the remark by Jesus that children should be their guides, and supposedly "played, babbled, or whimpered like infants."²¹ The "Holy, Sinless, Baptists" omitted the phrase "forgive our sins" from the Lord's prayer because they felt they were beyond sinning after their rebaptism experience.²² Anabaptists of all persuasions were intensely devoted to the study and memorization of long passages from the Bible, which they mustered for offense or defense during debates. Most Reformed ministers and Catholic priests found themselves ill-prepared against the encyclopedic knowledge of these fervent adversaries.

The Swiss brethren were initially followers of Ulrich Zwingli, who was the prime mover of the religious reform movement in canton Zürich. One of the core members was Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), who became part of Zwingli's circle by 1521. Zwingli developed a special bond with Grebel, and he seems to have been grooming him for an appointment in the new theological school that was to be founded in Zürich. During the next three years several priests were also drawn into this loose-knit circle, most of them having recently left the Church because of their religious convictions. These included Johannes Brötli, Wilhelm Reublin (Röubli), Simon Stumpf, Georg Blaurock, Ludwig Haetzer, and Michael Sattler. All of them played leading roles in the further development of the Anabaptist movement.

Zwingli's followers were eager to carry out his reform principles, but Zwingli fell behind the pace of change. They grew impatient with him and wanted to introduce more radical changes at a faster pace than what he was prepared to accept. Reublin, for example, had been expelled from the priesthood at Basel after he began protesting the Mass, the Catholic liturgy, the veneration of relics, and the Eucharist enshrined in the monstrance, which he felt should not be esteemed above the Bible itself. On Corpus Christi day, June 13, 1522, he marched in front of the traditional procession, carrying a Bible and shouting, "this is your Venerable -- this is your Sanctuary -- all else is dust and ashes."²³ Some of the brethren refused to fast during Lent and they began disrupting Catholic worship services.²⁴ The Zürich city council was disturbed by the fury of the ongoing verbal attacks against the monks and they held a public hearing on the issue on July 21, 1522. This was an ominous foreboding of ill will against Zwingli's more radical followers. During the hearing, the exchanges became quite heated. One of the councilors, referring to Grebel, remarked that "the Devil sits in the Council chamber." Grebel responded, "the Devil not only sits in the chambers, but he also sits among my Lords; for one...[of you] has said, 'the Gospel should [not] be preached in a cow's ass.' And in so far as my Lords do not allow the Gospel to progress further, they will be destroyed."²⁵ It is not clear whether Grebel meant that the councilors would be destroyed by God's wrath or by social upheaval, but either way his thinly veiled threat reveals the extremist mood of the brethren at this early stage of the Zürich Reformation.

²¹ Williams 1962, p. 830.

²² Smith 1950, p. 79.

²³ Eshleman 1917, p. 14.

²⁴ Gäbler 1986.

²⁵ Walton 1967, p. 65.

The Swiss brethren were clearly not just a passive, apolitical, separatistic and voluntary sect, as is best modeled by the Amish today.²⁶ They were convinced that all civil authority was soon to be toppled by the impending Second Coming of Christ, and they felt that they were harbingers of this transformation. As events spiraled out of control in the 1520s with the peasant rebellions in southern Germany, the brethren debated intensely the appropriate methods for change. At this stage they had not yet rejected the hope of total societal transformation, but most of them clearly rejected violence as a means for obtaining their goals. Zwingli's model of reformation was predicated on a theocratic union of church and state, so in the beginning it was natural for the brethren to think in terms of instituting their reforms within the framework of the regional government and church. They grappled with the issue of worldly power (*weltliche Obrigkeit*), which they debated under the symbolic name of taking up the "Sword" (*Schwert*). The *Schwertlers*, such as Balthasar Hubmaier, felt that the seizure of power was justified. Extremists, such as Simon Stumpf, advocated the use of violence. Zwingli accused him of urging the execution of priests and all others who stood in the way of change. Stumpf appears to have been in the minority and he was expelled quite early from the brethren in Zürich. Conrad Grebel had clearly set his mind against the Sword by 1524 when the peasant rebellions erupted.²⁷ The brethren were in contact with radical reformers in southern Germany, such as Andreas Karlstadt, whose treatises they had read with great interest. Karlstadt's rejection of infant baptism and the sacraments and his belief in simplification of the liturgy won their approval, as did his commitment to non-violent reformation. By late 1524 they also were in communication with Thomas Müntzer, the most notorious of the religious revolutionaries. The brethren agreed with Müntzer that the world was in the "Fourth Kingdom of Jerome" and that the "idol with clay feet" would soon be smashed. However, they rejected his message of violent purification and seizure of the governments. Grebel and his colleagues even co-signed a letter to Müntzer in 1525 stating their position that such means were not in accordance with Christian principles.

In summary, despite their differences in beliefs about the use of the "Sword," there were several points of theological similarity that justify including these proselytizers under the label of Anabaptist. All shared a deep commitment to the Bible as the ultimate validation for belief (although they differed in interpretations). They emphatically rejected the Vatican, the "Whore of Babylon," as well as the Reformed state churches established by Luther and Zwingli. They were fiercely anti-clerical, a sentiment which was widely popular among the rebellious peasantry. The clergy were regarded as "immoral, false prophets, Pharisees, hypocrites and tearing wolves."²⁸ Reacting against hierarchical authority, they sought to restore the simplicity of early Christianity which was based on local congregations of believers. Religious rituals and liturgy were severely simplified, and religious art was rejected as idolatrous and in many cases destroyed. Infant baptism was rejected and replaced with adult "believer" baptism, which was a cathartic experience of being born again and cleansed of sin (they differed in minor details such as the degree of submersion in water, or indeed whether a baptismal ritual of any kind was necessary, some preferring just an inner experience). Another central creed in Anabaptism was its strong emphasis on proselytizing and recruitment, which brought them into direct conflict with the established state churches. They were willing to accept suffering, or even martyrdom, in this pursuit. Salvation was not to be achieved through individualistic mystical experience, but within a communal context. The congregation (*Gemeinde*) of like-minded believers was central to the

²⁶ Stayer 1982.

²⁷ Stayer 1976.

²⁸ Packull 1992, p. 12.

creed. In accordance with the biblical injunction, Anabaptists believed in greater sharing of worldly goods and rejection of profit making. Generally the creed was most popular among the lower echelons of society, although as the creed spread into the Netherlands where the Mennonite sects developed, some Anabaptists became wealthy citizens. Even there, however, it was unfashionable to display overt wealth. The Anabaptist ambivalency about wealth was usually shown in their plain modes of dress and by extensive charity funds in most congregations. In a few cases -- most notoriously the Münsterites -- there were experiments in communal ownership of property, which has persisted today with the Hutterites.²⁹ Finally, the belief in the imminent Second Coming of Christ seems to have been virtually universal among the early Anabaptists, a point which has been denied until quite recently.³⁰

²⁹ Williams 1962.

³⁰ Friedmann 1973.