



The Münster-Rebellion: Interview with Dr. Andreas Pietsch

Dr. Andreas Pietsch

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[Photo: Holger Arning]

by Marc Kaiser and Manuel Brombach

Interview

The empire of the Anabaptists in Münster during the 1530s belongs to the darker chapters of the city's history. Which ideas and movements of the Middle Ages formed the breeding ground for their ideology, radicalisation and reign of terror?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: *"There are many possible explanations and factors: On the religious side anticlerical tendencies and criticism of the church of the late Middle Ages are always mentioned. Such ideas lead to the Reformation in the early 16th century. On the other hand the increased inwardness of late medieval piety paved the way for the Anabaptists' ideas. Ideas were floating around that salvation depending on what and how individuals believe and act ? downplaying the role of the church which administer the sacraments for the faithful. Economical and political aspects can be added as well. This intensified the opposition between the city council and the bishop."*

Even today many religious communities herald the end of Western capitalism, the return of a king and the coming of a divine kingdom. Which ideas formed the philosophy of the ?Community of Christ? around Jan van Leyden?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: *"Jan van Leyden is characterized by individualized piety of the late Middle Ages. He thought that the believer was an instrument of God, who should live according to the Bible and should improve the world. In this sense Jan van Leyden is part of the Reformation, which had already reached Münster. What makes him different from other reformers like Luther, however, is that he believed himself to be a prophet of God. But if we read the New Testament, we can quickly find all of these demands: a radical change in lifestyle, penance, the imminent end of the world and ultimately the return of Christ, who would replace all the current worldly powers - even the power of a bishop."*

The interpretation of the Bible was extremely radicalised by the Anabaptists. That led to a strict regime terrorizing the inhabitants. How could that happen? What were the motivations?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: "It is difficult to identify the exact motivations. Almost all reports about the time were written after the events and they stem from opponents of the Anabaptists. So we have to use them with caution, because they use well-known stereotypes of defamatory stories about heretics. They reveal, however, that it probably was a gradual process which led to a rigid and very radicalized rule in Münster in the end, tolerating progressively less counter-opinions."

Münster fought back. Who organised the resistance, how was the city reconquered?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: "If you follow the stories I mentioned, most were written by defectors to the Episcopal camp. There was a small opposition in the city. But this opposition was strongly supported by the bishop, who tried to retake Münster by the help of military means in order to regain his power. The bishop, who was also the secular leader of Münster, was supported by other princes of the Empire, who did not tolerate such a rebellion. Today one would probably call it "terroristic acts of religious revolt". The Anabaptists therefore were generally threatened with death by imperial law."

This was a terrible end. Can any influences of the ?Community of Christ? be found in active religious communities?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: "The Anabaptists as a Christian community still exist today. But historically most of them depend on the generation after the events of Münster. The Mennonites for example, one of the major groups of modern Anabaptists, name themselves after the Dutchman 'Menno Simons' who lived in the middle of the 16th century."

Medieval reign of terror by the Roman Catholic Church versus reign of terror by the Anabaptists ? are there any attempts in literature to justify or rehabilitate the ?Community of Christ?, which often used the same violent methods as the Catholic Inquisition?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: "It is noticeable that strong sentiments about the 'terrors of Münster' are still prevalent. Even in the Anabaptists own historiography they are staying well clear of it. Other historiography in general embraced the negative descriptions of events, unlike with the evaluation of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525, which has also been seen as a positiv development. Also as a historian, I have problems with the term ?reign of terror?, but you are right that it was basically was a very violent century. Just think of the retribution of episcopal power after the reconquest of the city: the cages at Saint Lamberti still testify to their violence."

Taliban versus USA ? even today radicals murder in the name of God. The United States try to establish a new world order. Can the community of the Anabaptists be understand as a historical terrorist network?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: "Just recently historians worked a lot on communication forms the Anabaptists used among themselves. Especially after the events of Münster they had to live in the underground and

constantly had to protect themselves from persecution. So they made use of letter networks and the dissemination of writings appeared in secret printing presses. But terror network is certainly the wrong word. We should not forget that Christian pacifism received new impetus from the Anabaptists and from the Quakers. Not all Anabaptists were violent, in fact even the most strict of them refused any form of violence."

Are there any aspects of this historical event which particularly fascinate you as a historian?

Dr. Andreas Pietsch: *"It is this tension-filled relationship between religion and politics, which occupies us here at Münster University particularly: How fast and how vehemently political systems can be influenced and changed by religious ideas.*

On the other hand, the viability and strength of historical narratives - the stories which make history - is fascinating. The cages at Saint Lamberti evoke a story even today that let the viewer cringe. Hardly anyone thinks of the essential brutality of the episcopal side, but rather of the deserved punishment of the rioters. Some even think wrong that the cages were hung up by the Baptists' Kings themselves. So you see: historical propaganda has worked very well."

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