

Anabaptist Critique

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What to do with the fact that five hundred years of Anabaptism have passed? Commemoration seems to be the path forward, at times despite the complexities of the tradition's origins in place and time.¹ Amidst the many memorial events and reflections,² one thing is clear: Anabaptism has become global and diverse in this century, and historical reflection on Anabaptist history has emphasized similar characteristics. Much ink has been spilled in recent histories and historiographies of Anabaptism on the themes of geographical and temporal complexity and diversity, and rightly so. Anabaptism did not begin in one place or one time (such as the first believers' baptisms or the oft-cited regional centers), but it had many paths of influence from before and after its primary places and dates (mysticism, pietism, spiritualism, and so on). Even as Anabaptism charted a way apart from, yet indebted to, both Catholic and Protestant movements (as a "third way" or "left wing" of the Reformation), it combined unities and differences, moving between stability and change as all social and religious movements do. But however much the Anabaptists were diverse and interiorly differentiated, some continuities remain that one can emphasize without doing so at the expense of complexity. One such defining feature that I contend is underappreciated in our time, is *critique*.

As I understand it, critique is not merely the negative project of pointing out problems and highlighting absences, but it is also the work of exercising discerning and distinguishing judgment to expose complexities in origins and ends, tensions in theory and practice, and conflicts of values, in both a deconstructive and constructive spirit—with neither

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¹ Consider the reframing cautions voiced by Michael Driedger in "The Year 1625, the Dutch Republic, and Book History: Perspectives for Reframing Studies of Mennonites in Early Modernity," *MQR* 97 no. 1 (Jan. 2023). [<https://www.goshen.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2022/12/4DriedgerJan23.pdf>].

² See *Mennonite Life* 71 (2017) [<https://mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2017/>], *Vision* 25 no. 1 (2024) [<https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/issue/view/77>] and *The Anabaptist Lodestar: Interpretations of Anabaptism on the Eve of a 500-Year Celebration*, ed. and trans. Leonard Gross (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

being positioned at the expense of the other. We live in a world that is not defined by unities, stable categories, common sense, or defensible conventions, but instead by conflicts of values and normative contestations over what is normal, natural, or neutral. Despite our desires to insulate against challenge and change, we repeatedly find ourselves in values-conflicts, even in nations that once understood themselves to be pluralistic and tolerant western democracies.

The Anabaptists were not defined by their unity with other groups or their agreement with the social and political norms of their times, but by critique—the reforming and revolutionary impulses to challenge, resist, and question the received knowledge and common practices of their contexts, very often with insistence on a far greater pace and severity of reform compared to their contemporaries. The Anabaptists were defined by their challenges to the social and political stabilities of their time, especially in their resistance to infant baptism—that defining feature of sixteenth century personhood, religiosity, and citizenship which was the site of such weight-bearing sunk-cost investment that to challenge it was to invite death. Critique was fundamental to Anabaptism. The Anabaptists would not have endured hateful polemic,³ refused to swear oaths to their masters,⁴ and been persecuted en masse, unless they were serious about criticizing the religious and political structures and strictures of their day. The Anabaptists were *distinctive*, and they stood out from the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions because of unique and radical criticisms of the normative bases of their societies.

Why then does the Mennonite reception of Anabaptism in the present involve so much capitulation to convention, so much “both-sides have a point” equivocation, so much relativization of values like anti-violence, and so much avoidance of conflict and political dissent? This question has long guided me—personally and professionally—in my journey through church and academy, in connection to the Anabaptist past and its reception and reinterpretation by Mennonites in the present. Below I offer a few normative assertions in the name of “Anabaptist Critique” that I believe are essential today.

CRITICAL DISTINCTIVES WITHOUT SUPERIORITY OR TRIUMPHALISM

The first step for Anabaptist critique is to regain the ability to make fine distinctions, value-judgments, and condemnations, without the trappings

³ See Gary Waite, *Anti-Anabaptist Polemics: Dutch Anabaptism and the Devil in England, 1531-1660* (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2023).

⁴ See Edmund Pries, *Anabaptist Oath Refusal: Basel, Bern, and Strasbourg, 1525-1538* (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2023).

of moral superiority or triumphalism. A pattern in recent Mennonite theologizing is to reject the idea that one should emphasize Anabaptist distinctives—a trend that likely responds to the often-reductive works of Stuart Murray in *The Naked Anabaptist* and Palmer Becker in *Anabaptist Essentials*,⁵ as well as to the moral superiority of some Mennonite theologians in the era of John Howard Yoder and following. Although a corrective against the notion that Mennonites possess some unique and sovereign truth about the world may once have been necessary, its moment of need has now passed, and those in the liberal Mennonite milieu find ourselves in need of tools for distinctive defense of basic values like antiviolence, antiracism, criticism of genocide, efforts to increase class-consciousness in societies of inequality, embrace of intersectional LGBTQ2SL identities, and so on.

Resistance to Anabaptist distinctives comes from an understandable set of values and ideals. For J. Alexander Sider, the rejection of Mennonite distinctives comes from his assumption that such distinctives come at the expense of victims of oppression.⁶ For him, Mennonite distinctives are characteristic of “a brand of white heteropatriarchal Mennonite theology and ethics” that deals in “exclusion and methodological violence,” functioning as a “privilege engine” that creates marginalized identities who need to prove themselves against a normative vision and leads to “privileged squabbling about the right way to state whatever normative version of Mennonitism is under consideration.” I also want to resist such things, but I contend that the way to do so is not to reject the assertion of Mennonite distinctives, but to examine *how* distinctives and distinctions are used and abused, and then to set forth a critical and constructive vision of how Mennonites and Anabaptist sympathizers should respond critically from the very values that Sider holds (resistance to heteropatriarchy, humble opposition to moral superiority, etc.).

The retreat from distinctiveness has consequences that are more serious than they first appear, and although it is tempting to think that withdrawing from the project of articulating Mennonite distinctives will help answer the question “How can I live my life without victimizing others?” (as Sider argues in his conclusion), the opposite is true: the only way to work against violence and toward a world with no more victims is to articulate distinctive positions that are characterized by critique and resistance.

⁵ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), and Palmer Becker in *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2017).

⁶ J. Alexander Sider, “Self and/as Victim: A Reflection on ‘Mennonite’ Ethics” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 27–39.

In several recent articles on the five hundred year anniversary of Anabaptism, Mennonite theologians echo this idea that articulating distinctive Mennonite beliefs and practices will lead to exclusionary results for those Mennonites who do not affirm such distinctives.⁷ Indeed, distinctives can never fully capture the complex constellation of identities that fall under categories like “Anabaptist” or “Mennonite” (as Laura Schmidt Roberts rightly points out)⁸ but there is no need to collapse the pursuit of distinctive and critical values, beliefs, and practices into its most simplistic and exclusive manifestations, nor to draw sharp distinctions between doctrine and narrative. Better to undertake a subtle and critical project of articulating Anabaptist and Mennonite identities that mediates between the demands of unity and difference, is able to make hard and incisive distinctions, and employs precisely those values that motivate the critique of distinctives in service of their critical ends.

It is the careful and critical contestation about what Mennonite distinctives ought to be that allows us to come together in diversity across the lines of global Mennonite identity. In withdrawing from the project of critique and distinction, Mennonite theologians who reject distinctives risk ignoring the normativity of all things and being party to what Rahel Jaeggi calls “the myth of moral abstinence” where the rhetorical question “Who am I to judge?” conceals the fact that we are always already engaging in judgment by virtue of our decisions and actions.⁹ By contrast, and in the spirit of critique, I want to make four related assertions:

- *Without distinctives we cannot set meaningful boundaries.* If we withdraw from the project of articulating distinctive and distinguishing values, beliefs, practices, narratives, interpretations, and identities, then we will inhabit a place that deceptively presents itself as neutral or morally abstinent, preventing the maintenance of healthy boundaries and critical oppositions to violence and injustice.¹⁰
- *Flight from distinctives does not reflect historical Anabaptism.* It is contrary to the practices of the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century and onward to absent ourselves from public, political, theological, and social debates and conflicts about what should

⁷ Sarah Kathleen Johnson, “Tradition and hope: A Mennonite chain of memory” *Vision* 25, no. 1 (2024).

⁸ Laura Schmidt Roberts, “The workings of tradition: From ‘distinctives’ to a living tradition” *Vision* 25, no. 1 (2024).

⁹ See Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018).

¹⁰ In my *Ontologies of Violence: Deconstruction, Pacifism, and Displacement* (Leiden: Brill, 2023) I argue that without critical boundaries, the concept of violence risks losing meaning.

distinguish some forms of life from others. Anabaptist identities were both critical and challenging and are never easily compatible with present ways of thinking and acting in response to conflicts of values.¹¹

- *There can be no movement beyond neutrality and polarization without distinctives.* Without the careful, critical, and constructive project of articulating distinctive ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, the twin afflictions of neutrality (in the face of justice) and polarization (that entrenches oppositional politics) will go unopposed in the public sphere and among Christian groups. It is a matter of how to articulate distinctive and critical ideas and practices that are capable of second-order distinctions, not whether we should articulate distinctives.¹²
- *Flight from distinctives may rob us of diversity.* There is richer diversity in environments where people and groups understand their interior differences and feel no essential pressure to fully agree or fully disagree, than there is in groups that avoid conflicts of values for fear of conflict, exclusion, and contradiction. We must trust that we can disagree about what our distinctive values and beliefs are, without feeding the engines of privilege and exclusion.

DISTINCTIVE MARKERS OF ANABAPTIST CRITIQUE

Once it is possible to return to distinctives without moral superiority or final judgment, Anabaptist critique can extend its potential in several ways. The following four markers are just a few of many that could be articulated based on the distinctive histories and characteristics of the tradition. The key is to see these as distinctive without seeing them as exclusive claims that are made at the expense of all others (what I call a violent “ontology of displacement” in my book *Ontologies of Violence*). Put differently, just because I emphasize or assert these distinctions does not mean that I do so at the expense of someone else’s expression of a different set of distinctives. What matters is that we can make such assertions and

¹¹ The Anabaptists moved between persecution and toleration, settlement and migration, consolidation and renewal, acculturation and differentiation, each of which rest on dialectical movements of distinction. See Astrid von Schlachta, *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*, ed. Maxwell Kennel, trans. Victor Thiesse (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

¹² For more on this argument see my essay “Pacifist Historiography: Anabaptist History between Normativity and Description and beyond Neutralization and Polarization” *Angelaki* (forthcoming 2025).

arguments in a pluralistic and open context. In that spirit, here are four distinctive markers of Anabaptist critique:

- *Challenging Oppositions*: Anabaptists were indebted to, mediated between, exceeded, and distinguished themselves from the Catholic establishment and Protestant reformations of their day. Careful study of how they moved both between and beyond the oppositional frameworks of their day could give models for present-day social critique and depolarization.¹³
- *Constructing Careful Representations*: The Anabaptists were interiorly diverse in origin, place, belief, and practice, and yet the same term has been used to name them for five hundred years. Critical and detailed study of how Anabaptists were represented and how they represented themselves amidst continuity and change can yield insights for understanding intersectional identities in our time.¹⁴
- *Resisting Demonization*: The Anabaptists were viciously scapegoated and demonized because they undercut the foundations of personhood in the sixteenth century, rejecting the combination of church and state identity-formation in infant baptism. The Anabaptists critically distinguished themselves at their own existential risk, and their struggle may resonate with contemporary groups whose challenge to something like the simplistic male/female gender binary puts them at risk of retaliation by authorities and majorities.¹⁵
- *Encountering Difference*: The historical Anabaptists were strange to those who encountered them and should remain challengingly different from any preconceptions that overly normative confessional approaches would have us believe. One lesson that the scholarly study of Anabaptism can teach students and confessional adherents today is that historical groups will always resist our attempts to

¹³ For an historical example, see Edgar Metzler, *Let's Talk About Extremism*. Originally published in 1968 in the Herald Press Focal Pamphlet series, 25 pp., ed. Maxwell Kennel, *Anabaptist Historians* (January 2021). <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2021/01/07/edgar-metzlers-lets-talk-about-extremism-1968/>.

¹⁴ Kat Hill concludes that "To appreciate how Anabaptists and other non-conformists evolved and functioned and how they came to occupy the position of the 'radicals' of the Reformation, scholarship must deconstruct the process of naming in relation to questions of social interaction, memory, and identity, and with a wide frame of reference to the broader cultural and intellectual contexts of Reformation Europe" in "The Power of Names: Radical Identities in the Reformation Era," in *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2017).

¹⁵ See Alicia Dueck-Read, "Breaking the Binary: Queering Mennonite Identity" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015).

foist our categories upon them,¹⁶ and so, the critical study of Anabaptism can reveal our own prejudices and show us other ways to pursue political change in the present that do not rest on ideal types.

BAPTIZING AGAIN: CONTEMPORARY ANALOGIES

One conclusive way that Anabaptist critique can be renewed today is by considering that infant baptism reigned as the standard model for Christian identity and personhood for over fifteen hundred years, until it was challenged by the Anabaptists and others on the basis of scripture and emerging ideas about voluntary agency. As Thomas Kaufmann notes, “The refusal of infant baptism was a dramatic proposition.”¹⁷ If it was both a social and political good, and a theological and religious form of faithfulness, that the Anabaptists went against the grain and baptized adults, then what contemporary analogies might there be with this foundational Anabaptist act?

Baptism does not mean the same thing today as it did in the sixteenth century. Our major and formative concepts of identity are different, and yet they form us all the same. When I talk to my friends, or when I observe the culture wars that mar the public sphere, I notice that our present weight-bearing concerns do not concern baptism. Instead, they have to do with where people stand in relation to a few key distinctions and tensions: gender and sexuality, religion and secularity, the liberal/conservative, right/left political spectrum, and the acceptance or rejection of nationalism.

If I may be permitted a bold suggestion: Anabaptism today is not about baptism itself (given that adults can now be baptized or rebaptized). Instead it is about understanding which weight-bearing investments and sedimented categories of identity and society need to be critiqued and overturned in the name of life (if one is a secular Mennonite) and in the name of the good news of Jesus Christ (if one is a confessional Mennonite).

What idolatrous strongholds of overly simplistic thinking would an Anabaptist critique overturn today if the same spirit of “neither/nor” was advanced subtly, carefully, but persistently? We are presented with simplistic options—Are you male or female? Are you gay or straight? Are you religious or secular? Are you Left or Right?—and each of these containers and representations corral us into ways of thinking and acting that reduce the richness and fullness of human experience to an either/or.

¹⁶ See, for example, the introduction to Thomas Kaufmann, *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists*, trans. Christina Moss (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

¹⁷ Kaufmann, *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists*. Trans. Christina Moss (Hamilton, ON: Pandora Press, 2024).

Perhaps there is an analogy to be made that allows Anabaptist critique to develop plural distinctive approaches to pressing social and political problems by acknowledging value and indebtedness to the “sides” we are presented with, while pushing decisively beyond them with emancipatory third ways that neither sit on the fence between two bad options nor absent themselves entirely from the poles of our debates. If refusing infant baptism and conducting believers’ baptisms was so revolutionary 500 years ago, what must be refused and reconstructed today in the name of Anabaptist and Mennonite identities whose diversity is a critical distinctive?