

# 10 Theses on Anabaptism and Philosophy

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1. Anabaptism and philosophy are two *abstract nouns* that name a social, political, and religious movement and its reception (Anabaptism), and an academic discipline and style of reflection in the love of wisdom (philosophy).<sup>1</sup> Their interaction is conditioned by larger patterns in the relationships between academic disciplines like Christian theology, Early Modern and Reformation history, continental and analytic philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and philosophical theology. Without accountability and responsiveness to these discourses and disciplines, the interaction between Anabaptism and philosophy risks being impressionistic.
2. To speak of Anabaptism and philosophy is to speak of *interdisciplinarity*, which is never a matter of stable and immutable differences or perfect analogies between discourses and disciplines, but always a question of complex and contextual mediations between different languages, descriptive claims, and normative visions.<sup>2</sup> This means that it cannot ever be so simple as to say “Anabaptism is *x* while philosophy is *y*” without contextualizing what would qualify something as belonging to either category in a specific place and time.
3. For some, Anabaptism stands in sharp contrast with philosophy and the philosophers because of an *inflated distinction* between religious and secular ways of knowing.<sup>3</sup> For others, contact between the two discourses is acceptable, but only if Anabaptist visions put philosophy and philosophers to normative use for pre-decided theological purposes.
4. But beyond enmity with philosophy and the instrumental use of philosophical materials, is the possibility – already actualized by some – of *complex and contextual mediations* between specific philosophical visions and specific Anabaptist visions, where neither Anabaptism nor philosophy are positioned in competition with or at the expense of the other.<sup>4</sup>
5. For Anabaptism to truly meet philosophy – beyond the poles of irreducible difference or simplistic use-value – scholars of Anabaptism must first set aside suspicion that philosophy will somehow corrupt Anabaptist ways of knowing, and then release the Christian anxiety that arises when one strays “too far” from familiar theological territory. This requires a disposition of

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<sup>1</sup> See my entry “Philosophy.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. April 2020. Web.

<sup>2</sup> See my article “Anabaptism contra Philosophy” *Conrad Grebel Review* 40.2 (Spring 2022): 138-157.

<sup>3</sup> I dispute this distinction in my book *Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> I critique this “ontology of displacement” in my book *Ontologies of Violence: Deconstruction, Pacifism, and Displacement* (Leiden: De Gruyter Brill, 2023).

*dispossession* – what Travis Kroeker calls a critique of possessive desire<sup>5</sup> – that one could just as easily draw from Hartmut Rosa's *unverfügbarkeit* as from the Anabaptists' *gelassenheit*.<sup>6</sup>

6. Once Anabaptism and its representatives have begun to let go of their possessive anxieties, a myriad of *open connections* between Anabaptism and philosophy can unfold. Indeed, from the contacts between Mennonites in the Dutch Republic and philosophers of the Enlightenment (most especially Spinoza)<sup>7</sup> to the contemporary connections between post-Yoderian Mennonite theologians and philosophers (from Nietzsche to Bourdieu), to recent work on Schleithem and Giorgio Agamben, these sorts of connections are already being made.<sup>8</sup>
7. So, what is the future of the complex and contextual mediation between Anabaptism and philosophy? Elsewhere, I suggest that the *neither-nor* and *both-and* structures and patterns of Anabaptism (neither Catholic nor Protestant, yet indebted to both; embodying neither passivity nor violent retaliation, yet seeking both justice and peace) serve as distinctive markers and opportunities that can guide the discourse ahead.
8. I also suggest that the twin philosophical, theological, and political problems of *neutrality* (appealing weakly to a rarefied vision of “both sides” of an issue, or of the political spectrum) and *polarization* (stoking the fires of enmity through simplistic presentations of Left and Right) are the most important tensions facing our public sphere today, in both Europe and North America. So, what can a minor tradition offer such major conversations?
9. Informed by recent Anabaptist history<sup>9</sup> and Mennonite theology,<sup>10</sup> and in dialogue with philosophy and the philosophers, I contend that the task ahead is to pair the disinvestment in all investments that is called for by Anabaptists and philosophers alike, with an active and *critical political-philosophical programme*, with the aim of resisting neutrality and polarization in the scholarly and public spheres, in the interests of advancing peace and justice in our time.
10. This call requires a clearer reckoning with the deep toxicities of conservatism, the profound limits of liberalism, the decay of democracy and pluralism, and the global rise of authoritarian populism and the far-right. Make no mistake: these themes are problems for Anabaptism and for philosophy. What remains is *to ask and answer* the question of how the heirs of the “Radical Reformation” and the “Left Wing of the Reformation” (both terms that have been rightly criticized by historians, but which retain some potential) can return to their radical roots and provide a vision that moves beyond the strictures of *both* narrow theological language *and* empty secularist language, to connect with broader sociopolitical conversations.

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<sup>5</sup> See Travis Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (London: Polity, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> See Marius van Hoogstraten, “Unlearning Obedience: The Ecclesiological Critique of the ‘Sword’ in the Schleithem Articles,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 41(2), 115-136., and “Without Sovereign Guarantee: Reading Schleithem on the Oath with Giorgio Agamben,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 97 (2023), 367-382.

<sup>9</sup> See Astrid von Schlachta's *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century*. Trans. Victor Thiessen. Ed. Maxwell Kennel (Pandora Press, 2024) and Thomas Kaufmann's *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists*. Trans. Christina Moss. Ed. Maxwell Kennel (Pandora Press, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See David C. L. Driedger, *Nothing Will Save Us: A Theology of Immeasurable Life* (Pandora Press, 2025).