

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

Anabaptist spirituality

Learning to pray the prisoners' way

Eleanor Kreider

A ROVING JOURNALIST, SEEKING OUT VARIETIES of Christian spirituality, might meet some of the million-member Mennonite family of faith in any of over fifty countries, in Colombia, Indonesia, Switzerland or Canada, for example. Staying and praying with the various groups, the journalist would distil a certain commonality, a recognizable family resemblance in their Mennonite piety and lifestyle. All of them orthodox Christians, these modern Anabaptists would nevertheless exhibit a cluster of similar spiritual patterns. To consider Mennonite spirituality requires us to grasp a thick historical cord which we can follow back into the confusing tapestry of medieval Europe and Reformation times, but also to draw on threads that bind contemporary Mennonites together in their prayer and lifestyle.

Anabaptism – a spiritual liberation movement

'It's coercive!' young followers of Hulderich Zwingli objected to infant baptism. 'It's the law!' civil and church authorities thundered back. In the mid-1520s these young Swiss Christians refused to have their babies baptized and they also redefined baptism. They perceived it as a sacrament for adult believers who were capable of genuine faith and voluntary discipleship of Jesus. Faith in Christ could never be forced. Baptism of infants was to them a sample of the many types of coercion that characterized Christendom-Christianity. For their outrageously oppositional stance they were dubbed Anabaptists (re-baptizers), a scornful epithet which across the centuries has tenaciously stuck to their spiritual progeny.

Anabaptists formed a kind of liberation movement. They declared God to be free – free from cramping religious systems. God is Spirit who may be approached freely by any who respond to God's love. The Spirit, they believed, was freely available to teach, inspire, encourage and unite through diligent and expectant perusal of the Scriptures.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Although variety of interpretation was inevitable, the centrality of Scripture, whose meaning the Spirit could reveal to any or all, was universal among groups of Anabaptists. They formed humble communities, reading the Bible and listening to the Spirit. Perhaps the Anabaptist principle could be stated as 'Scripture and Spirit together' rather than the Lutheran 'Scripture alone'.¹

Anabaptists declared that Jesus, in the name of the Father, calls his followers simply to love God, neighbour, self and the enemy. To live in such love had been the spirituality of Jesus, and it was the spirituality into which Jesus called his disciples. This costly way of Jesus, freely chosen, could entail challenge, conflict, persecution, exile, even death. It only made sense to Anabaptists that Jesus' disciples would walk the way he had walked. They would incur similar responses. 'The disciple is not above the master' (Jn 15:20). Jesus' way was costly, but its beauty, according to the Anabaptists, was that they did not tread the way alone. They were called as companies, as communities of disciples, to make shared pilgrimage of incarnated love. Their journey was oriented by the cross of Christ, which shed both light and shadow on the chosen way.

These, then, are the themes of Anabaptist spirituality to which all the documents of the movement reverberate: voluntarism, freedom, discipleship, Spirit, Scripture, community and cross. Unlike the theological writings of the major Reforming groups, the Anabaptists' witness comes down to us in a fascinating kaleidoscope of formats: records of court and interrogation proceedings, letters, devotional writings, tracts, hymns and martyr stories. Through their very own words we can hear the heartbeat of the prayer and piety of the Anabaptists.

The martyrs' hymnbook reveals their spirituality

In this article we will use as our source to tap Anabaptist spirituality the hymnal called *Ausbund*.² Its origins, in the years 1535–1540, were in a prison in the city of Passau (now in Austria). A group of religious prisoners produced fifty-one hymns. Through several decades this core collection was augmented with an additional hundred hymns and by mid-sixteenth century the *Ausbund* (literally, a chosen selection) was complete. The *Ausbund* hymns drew on the martyr experience of simple Christians in the Low Countries, Bohemia and North Germany. Surprisingly, it is in print and available today. Sunday by Sunday the Amish still sing hymns from the *Ausbund*, the oldest hymnal in con-

tinuous use in any Christian church anywhere in the world. Published in Pennsylvania, it remains in the German language, set in German type. A few of the hymns have been translated into English³ and appear in contemporary Mennonite and Baptist hymnals.

We begin exploring the *Ausbund* with the story of its origin. The time is 1535 and the setting is Passau, a fortress city, a necessary place of passage on the lower Danube between Moravia and South Germany. The local prison is crowded. A group of about fifty people have been caught by guards, arrested and imprisoned. Who are these people?

Some time earlier they had left their homes in South Germany and gone to Moravia where they settled in farm-colonies, families living in extended communities of two to three hundred. Persecution had set in and they had been expelled from their lands. Making their way back up the Danube toward their places of origin in South Germany, they were arrested, imprisoned and interrogated at the border city of Passau.⁴

Guard: 'What is your contact with the events at Munster?' (This was the city in which 'Anabaptists' were besieged by its prince-bishop and which became an all-embracing by-word for fanaticism and disorder.)

Prisoner: (Indignant reply) 'None whatsoever! Genuine Christians would rather suffer than ever use brute force.'

Guard: 'What about the Turks – do you support the Turks? Have any of your number ever joined the Turks?'

Prisoner: (Adamant reply) 'Absolutely not. This question reveals a gross misunderstanding of our true intentions. We have simply been living in farm-colonies as pious Christians.'⁵

Suspicious, unsure what to do with these people, the guards threw them into the prison at Passau. After court hearings, there were no death sentences, but the prisoners were simply held in dungeons for many years. Some were released. Though a few recanted, most eventually died in prison. This was the group of Christians who produced the original nucleus of fifty-one *Ausbund* hymns.

This oldest core-cluster of hymns reveal the characteristic spirit of early Anabaptists. The hymns reflect their suffering, individually and as families and communities. A strong tone of great sorrow, often of overwhelming loneliness, pervades many of the texts. The hymns protest vigorously against the wickedness of the persecuting world. The dominant tone, however, is of confidence that God will not forsake them.

The handwritten hymns were smuggled out of prison, copied and circulated among sympathetic people. They were useful to comfort

prisoners and to prepare detainees for forthcoming interrogations. For obvious reasons, singing out loud was more safely done in prison than in worship meetings outside prisons. Proscribed groups had to meet as unobtrusively as possible – in barns, caves, under bridges, in rowing boats in the middle of a river, in forests.

'The Gmund Seven's hymn': Ausbund 61⁶

This hymn, although written in the late 1520s, was one of the second cluster of eighty hymns brought into the collection twenty years after the original cluster from Passau. The hymn had been circulating widely and was considered valuable. The text is a reworking of a well-known hymn, based on Psalm 130, by Martin Luther: 'Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu Dir'. In the prison of Gmund, a town twenty-eight miles east of Stuttgart, seven prisoners worked out one stanza each. They sang it to its well-known tune. The first two lines are identical to Luther's: 'I cry to you from deepest need. O God, hear my call'.

1. I cry to you from deepest need/O God, hear my call
Send your Holy Spirit to us/To comfort our deepest despair
As you have done to now, Christ/We rely on your command
But now they want to kill us
2. The flesh is weak, as you know/It fears the smallest pain
So fill us with your Spirit/We pray from our hearts
So that we may remain until the end/And go bravely into suffering
And not fear the pain
3. The spirit is surely willing/To undergo suffering
Hear us, O Lord/Through Jesus Christ your beloved Son!
We pray also for our enemies/Who know not what they do
And think not of your wrath
4. We ask you, Father and Lord/As your loving children
Kindle the light through Jesus Christ/Even more in your little flock
That would be our hearts' desire/That for which we hunger and thirst
And would bring us greatest joy
5. You have received us in grace/And made us your servants
This we have all done willingly/And fulfilled with your help
Keep us pure in your word/We want to be obedient to you
Give us aid and comfort

2. O God, keep my heart and mouth/Watch over me, Lord, always
Do not let me part from you/Whether in anguish, fear or need
Keep me pure in joy
10. If you hold back your food from us/Then all is lost and for nothing
We can accomplish nothing without you/We hope in you through your grace
That we have not been mistaken
11. I do not doubt the power of God/Truthful is his judgment
He will forsake no one/Who is firm in faith
And remains in truth
12. Be comforted, you Christians/And always be joyous through Jesus Christ
He gives us love and faith/God comforts through his holy word
And we must trust in it
13. I bid God and his church/That he be today my guardian
For his name's sake/My Father, let it be so
Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

In this selection of stanzas the imprisoned Annalein fervently clings to Christ, willing to doubt herself (v 10) but never to doubt God's faithfulness (v 11). At the end she prays comfort for all suffering Christians and commits herself to God's mercies (vv 12, 13). An atmosphere of fervent love for God infuses the hymn, surely the song of one who knew a heart 'pure in joy' (v 2).

Severe conflicts but no revengeful prayer

A continued survey of the *Ausbund* texts would reveal further traits of Anabaptist spirituality, forms of prayer and praise which sustained them in their fragile and vulnerable lives. Prominent were expressions of joyful thanks to God for blessing and faithfulness. Petitions cried out for grace and nurturing, for guidance from the Word, for constancy in times of pain and weakness, for forgiveness for the persecutors. Always there was confidence that Jesus, who had gone this way of suffering before them, would show them the way to persevere in faith.

These hymns reflect deep religious conviction and purpose. They faithfully represent the convergence of principal themes from a variety of the early Anabaptist groups: the centrality of following Christ in life, mutual assistance, nonviolence, a plea for non-interference from civil authorities in matters of worship and prayer, and simple dependence upon God. It is fascinating to notice that no violent emotions are expressed.

In the debates and writings of the Anabaptists and in their controversies (preserved in court records of their trials) with Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed there was plenty of polemic – scathing denunciations of leaders, of doctrines of the Catholic Church or even of Lutheran Reformers. In debates they had to take a lot, and they gave a lot, too. Verbal coinage of the period had pretty rough edges! Within the first decade (up to the mid-1530s) the first generation of educated Anabaptist leaders, students of Zwingli, former priests, theologians, and monks, had been executed. Simpler folk survived and had to find their own forms of leadership and catechism. They had to learn from each other's experience how to face their interrogators, how to stand up before courts, how to face pursuers and torturers. There must have been every human tendency toward retaliation.

But in their hymns the Anabaptists sang out of no spirit of revenge or retaliation. They observed that Jesus did not retaliate against his persecutors, so how could Jesus' disciples retaliate or take revenge?

The ecumenical impulse of Anabaptists

The compilers and editors were understandably reticent about signing their names. To this day, Mennonites in Switzerland have no written lists of membership, no written records, precisely because of the memory of their need to protect their people from arrest. In none of the European editions of *Ausbund* were personal names given – no editors, no named group for which the collection was intended. But the subtitle of the *Ausbund* declares impartially: 'most useful to all Christians of whatever denomination'. These people of the *Ausbund* strongly claimed connection with orthodox Christians, whoever they might be. Others might marginalize them, but their own sense was of direct connection with historic and orthodox Christianity.

Anabaptists repeatedly stated that they were part of the one holy body of Christ – *una sancta*. The great Church's history was their history. They accepted the ecumenical creeds. Evidence exists of the creeds used as guides for various confessions of faith and for teaching. Because of Anabaptists' non-liturgical approach to worship, versified creeds (set to familiar tunes) functioned to provide help in prison interrogations and in apologetic writing. They served in baptismal and eucharistic settings as well as in teaching formulated doctrine.

A spirituality of 'the new monks'

A fascinating line of investigation has been the connection of early Anabaptism with a vision for a renewed monasticism. A number of the early leaders such as Michael Sattler were monks. Sometimes disparagingly called 'new monks', Anabaptists developed a form of lay community which was more than an extension of monastic life to lay people. Their vision was that spiritual life was carried out within a body of self-confessed believers. The Holy Spirit energized a life of discipleship, making it possible to follow Jesus' teaching and example. In this emphasis they were conservative – retaining a connection to a monastic, ascetic ideal for Christian life. But theirs was to be a new kind of community – composed of men, women, children, singles and families – a community of faith where people lived in obedience and simple dependence on God and each other. Truth telling, nonviolence, poverty, mutual aid, sharing of suffering – these were the realities through which their community vision would be realized. In order to achieve this kind of community, Anabaptists rejected their own participation in state authority. They cast aside accretions of church tradition and the sacramental system of the medieval Church. This was a spiritual movement and a communitarian movement. Though it was theologically conservative in some ways, it was nevertheless a radically reforming movement. And all of this led to their terrible persecution.

Michael Sattler's hymn – Ausbund 7⁸

Born in 1490 in south Germany, Sattler trained as a priest and became prior of a Benedictine monastery near Freiburg-im-Breisgau. In his writings, he expressed dismay at the unspiritual life of the monks and priests around him. In 1525 he finally left the monastery and went to Zurich where he met and joined Anabaptists. In 1527 Michael Sattler presided at a conference of like-minded Swiss and South German groups who framed a document called the Schleithem Confession. This documented areas of agreement among Anabaptists in that geographic area.

Sattler was arrested and tried in Rottenburg in May of 1527. Two years had elapsed between his departure from his monastic house and his ultimate execution.

The charges against Sattler along with his innovative and able defence, have been the focus of various scholarly studies. Sattler was condemned to a particularly horrible death. The court devised this

plan: On his way to the stake, his tongue was to be progressively cut out, piece by piece. He was to have two pieces torn from his body by glowing tongs, and then burned five times with the tongs at other places on his body. Finally, he was to be bound with ropes to a ladder and pushed into the fire.⁹

Here is his song:

1. As Jesus with his true teaching/Gathered to himself a small flock
He told them that each with patience/Should daily carry his cross
2. And he said, You my beloved disciples/You should always be glad
On earth love nothing else/Thank me and following my teaching
3. The world will persecute you/And mock and scorn you
Hunt you and publicly say/You have Satan in you
4. When others blaspheme and mock you/For my sake persecute and strike
you
Be glad, for your reward/Is already prepared for you in heaven
5. Look to me, I am God's Son/And have always done well
I am the best of all/But was killed anyway
6. Because the world called me/An evil spirit and seducer of the people
And denied my truth/It will not be easy for you either
7. But do not fear the man/Who can only kill the body
But fear only the true God/Who has power to judge
8. God tests you as gold/And holds you as his children
If you keep my teachings/I will never leave you
9. For I am yours and you are mine/Where I am, there you should be
And who touches you touches my eye/And will be punished on judgment
day
10. Your misery, fear, anxiety, need and pain/Will then turn into joy
And you will receive praise and honour/Before the hosts of heaven
11. The apostles took such on/You should teach it to everyone
Whoever will follow the Lord/Should expect the same
12. O Christ, help your people/Who follow you truly
So that through your bitter death/They will be saved from all need
13. Praise be to God on his throne/And to his beloved Son
And to the Holy Spirit also/Who draws many to his kingdom.

A Mennonite ponders her spiritual heritage

What connections do contemporary inheritors of linear Anabaptism (Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish) make with our martyr tradition? How was the martyrs' spirituality transformed after severe persecution ceased, after the toleration and the non-coercive voluntarism which the movement called for became commonplace in our modern democracies?

Just as with Anabaptism, which was a scattered movement, so it is unwise to generalize on global Mennonite spirituality. In some countries the spirituality which was born in times of vicious persecution was transformed into a spirituality of humility. Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites became 'the quiet in the land'. An earthy spirituality developed – living out the Sermon on the Mount, serving and aiding the weak, healing and helping the needy. Some criticize this as a 'spirituality of doing', perhaps flawed by activism and verbal reticence.

These days Mennonites in many countries are praying and serving the world through a newly energized spirituality of peacemaking. Mennonites have transformed what we used to call 'biblical non-resistance' into positive programmes of conflict transformation. These are theologically rooted in the mission of God, the great Reconciler, and in the incarnational and redemptive work of Christ. Mennonite spirituality is simply (and most profoundly) walking together the way of love into which Jesus invites us: love for God, for neighbour, for selves and for the enemy.

As an inheritor of this spiritual tradition, it is important to me to remember the stories of the origins of the Anabaptist movement. Not to reinvent the polemic, not to engender negative emotions toward inheritors of the traditions which persecuted the early Anabaptists. I want to remember these stories because they have helped to shape the identity and fuel the persistence of the linear community to which I belong. Along with other collections of letters, court records and martyrologies, the *Ausbund* hymns are a vital link into that memory. They remind me of costly faith.

They call my present-day community to dependence upon God. They teach us what it means to follow Jesus in his nonviolent but vigorous resistance to evil. These hymns are prophetic expressions of resistance. They are vehicles of worship and prayer which can illuminate for us, and make specific implications for us of the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven.'

But is it healthy for Mennonites to pray through martyr hymns? Aren't they morbid? Might they perpetuate a martyr complex among those who sing them? I suggest that, almost five centuries after its formation, *Ausbund's* hymns may still be relevant to our prayer and life.

The Anabaptist hymn-writers were not seeking persecution and death. They were not longing to be drowned or beheaded, burnt and exiled. They had one desire, as we have read in their hymns – to be true to Christ, and to follow him in their life. That quality of faithfulness to conviction translates directly into any other geographic place or period of history. 'For me to live is Christ' and '[he or she] who would follow Christ in life must follow him in death' are Anabaptist mottoes, inviting and challenging us to put our prayer exactly where our daily life is.

If a community today has only triumphant stories to tell, what will help them when they encounter times of trouble? The Anabaptist martyr stories are not all glorious. Some adherents recanted, some betrayed sisters and brothers in their communities. But what are the resources for us when we fail, when human weakness overtakes us? We need difficult stories, sober stories, to prepare us to face the hard realities of life, whatever the time and place. The Anabaptists can help us to pray in our weakness and to learn to rely on God's strength alone.

These Anabaptist stories and hymns can link us with Christians, individuals and communities, in our own time who are living under pressure, who are imprisoned, helpless, despairing, and in need of our prayers and support. There are more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in the whole of Christian history up to 1900. These hymns can help to sensitise our consciences and our prayers. Singing the martyr hymns can help deepen our solidarity with suffering, innocent people of faith.

The Anabaptists' story, in their own words, is a part of the Reformation story of Europe. For too long their story was told only by their enemies. For centuries it has been ridiculed, ignored, suppressed, or passed over as irrelevant. But for the health of the global Christian community the witness of this strand of spirituality needs to be incorporated and drawn upon. As Christians face the challenges of the new century, let us learn each other's hymns, and encourage all the parts to sing out with freedom and joy. Let us sing with Ambrose, Ephraem, Bernard, Luther, Wesley, Watts, Routley and Wren. But let us also sing with Michael and Annalein and the seven brothers in the prison of Gmund.

Eleanor Kreider is based at Regent's Park College, Oxford, where she serves as a church musician and lecturer in liturgy. Her most recent book is *Given for you: a fresh look at communion* (IVP, 1998).

NOTES

- 1 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist history and theology: an introduction* (Kitchener, Ontario, 1995), p 88.
- 2 *Ausbund, das ist: etliche schoene Christliche Lieder, wie sie in dem Gefaengnis zu Passau in dem Schloss von den Schweizer-Brueder und von anderen rechtgläubigen Christen hin und her gedichtet worden, allen und jeden Christen, welcher Religion sie seien, unpartheilich sehr nuetzlich* (thirteenth edn, Lancaster PA: Verlag von den Amischen Gemeinden, 1973).
- 3 Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist spirituality: selected writings* (New York, 1994).
- 4 'Ausbund', *The Mennonite encyclopedia* vol I (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1955), pp 191–192.
- 5 I constructed this 'interrogation' on the basis of William I. Schreiber, 'The hymns of the Amish Ausbund in philological and literary perspective' in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (January 1962), p 38.
- 6 English translation appears in Liechty, pp 58–60.
- 7 English translation appears in Liechty, pp 56–58.
- 8 English translation appears in Liechty, pp 53–56.
- 9 Liechty, p 54.