

Common People as Readers: South German Anabaptists and their uses of literature in the 16th century

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The current paper is a presentation of the topics of my doctoral dissertation, based much on my previous masters' thesis on the social relations of Common Anabaptists at the village level.¹ As I am only starting my work on the dissertation, I will rather raise questions than give exact answers. In this paper I will outline the types and uses of Anabaptist literature, the social context of reading and in the end give some examples of Anabaptist Bible reading.

My starting point is the forbidden sect of Anabaptists in southwestern Germany, the duchy of Württemberg, from the 1520s to the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. Anabaptism was the "*most important of the grass-roots movements of reform in the sixteenth century*",² and the study of Anabaptist reading patterns can give us clues to the connection between reading and behaviour in the early modern period also on a more general level.

The main sources for this paper are records of the biannual clerical visitations in Württemberg that sought to control the religious orthodoxy in the parishes since the Reformation of the duchy in 1534.

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My main interest does not lie in the literature as such, but in the *use* and the *interpretations* unlearned people made of it in their own social and cultural context — that of predominantly *oral communication*. However, we cannot distinguish literate from oral culture in the Reformation era without over-simplifying matters. Texts were usually read aloud to a listening audience and often discussed afterwards. The written and the oral existed side by side and should be seen as

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¹ *Uppiniskaiset ja uskolliset. Konfliktit ja solidaarisuus Württembergin herttuakunnan kastajien elämässä 1550–1620*. Department of History, University of Helsinki, April 2000.

² Snyder 1991: 385.

complementary, not opposite forms of communication.³ As the German historian Adolf Laube has put it, "*the majority of laymen and of half-educated persons undoubtedly acquired their views from life experiences and from social conflict, from the Bible, and from casual conversations with like-minded persons.*"⁴

Vernacular reading and interpreting the Bible often "*could not help but sharpen social and political conflict*".⁵ This is why the radicals of the Reformation were so feared by the governing elite. No matter how small the rebellious circles may have been, their *threat* to the organized society was real. Anabaptist sectarians were people who radically broke with their old lives and the theological, social and political norms of their time.

Types and uses of Anabaptist literature

One should distinguish between three kinds of (written) texts Anabaptists in Württemberg came in touch with:

- 1) *Normative texts from "above"*, i.e. texts that the worldly and clerical elite hoped the sectarians would read or listen to: before the Reformation in 1534 they were Catholic texts, after that Lutheran catechisms, treatises, pamphlets, sermons etc.
- 2) Texts from the Anabaptist circles, i.e. *texts created and distributed inside the religious community*: Anabaptist leaders' treatises, letters, pamphlets and hymns. Most of the literature composed by the Anabaptists themselves was in manuscript form. Only 76 Anabaptist works appeared in print before 1618, mainly theological treatises and songbooks.⁶
- 3) The book common to all Christian confessions: the *Bible*. The Bible was for the Anabaptists the only authority for both doctrine and life. The New Testament played a far more important role than the Old. Anabaptists tried to obey the commands of Christ and the teachings of the New Testament literally, which meant e.g. non-resistance or nonswearing of oaths. South

³ In co-existence with the printed world, there were *visual* forms (e.g. popular woodcuts), *participational* forms (e.g. popular festivals) and *oral forms* (e.g. the sermon, hymn-singing, discussions, rumours) of transmission of ideas. Scribner 1981: 50.

⁴ Laube 1988: 23. Cf. Scribner 1981: 51, 55.

⁵ Snyder 1991: 378, 380.

⁶ Clasen 1972: 349.

German Anabaptist usually used the German translation of Luther or a Swiss variant of it, the *Froschauer Bible*, popular because of its clear typography, pictorial decoration, and popular language.

Born in the same era and under similar circumstances, early Anabaptist texts were disseminated in the same ways as Lutheran pamphlets in the 1520s. Only when Lutheranism began to establish itself, the ways parted: Lutheran texts moved to the pulpit, Anabaptists stayed underground. How much and exactly what was accessible to the Anabaptists, we cannot know for sure. The court records of Württemberg tell us only about a few confiscated books. Yet it was clear to the authorities, that they only could lay hands on a small part of the writings circulating in the duchy.⁷

It is obvious that the *types and uses of literature changed over the period of a century* and were from the beginning different among different Anabaptist groupings. In general, theological tracts were written mostly in the early years — the late 1520s and early 1530s — when the need to define, explain and justify the own doctrine was the most urgent. Later on it became more important to preserve the formed tradition to following generations in forms of clearly structured devotional texts, hymns or chronicles.⁸

The *main goals* of texts used by Anabaptists in the religious community were to define and justify the doctrine, inform brothers and sisters in faith and strengthen their faith, devotion, inner solidarity and Anabaptist identity. If we take the Bible to illustrate the point, different passages were used for different ends. Sectarian identity was often strengthened with the example of the persecuted people of Israel⁹ and consolation was provided by biblical examples of God's love: God had not let Daniel down in the lions' cave, nor would he let the Anabaptists, the "true Christians", down.¹⁰ More theological debates were often based on the Gospels or the letters of the Apostle Paul.

⁷ In the village of Urbach, with an exceptionally high Anabaptist population of 9%, the authorities confiscated five books in 1598: the *Fundamentbuch* of Menno Simons (a theological treatise), a hand-written and three printed song-books. *Quellen zur Geschichte der Wiedertäufer I* (= QGT I): 738.

⁸ Clasen 1972: 352–353.

⁹ E.g. Wolf Kürschner's letter to the council of Güglingen 1535. QGT I: 995.

¹⁰ Paul Glock's letter to the congregation in Moravia, 14.4. 1563. QGT I: 1066.

The social context of reading

What was the social context of Anabaptist reading: when, where and with whom were texts read and discussed? It seems that Anabaptists read mostly among like-minded, friendly people. They were often brothers and sisters in faith, but also possible future converts were a good party. We know of masters reading and explaining the gospel to their family and servants,¹¹ of friends meeting up to read and talk, even though only some of them actually belonged to the sect,¹² and of mothers reading and teaching the Bible to their children¹³. Two imprisoned Anabaptist leaders read and sung together to pass time.¹⁴ Even solitary reading could be a public act: some read at church, during the Lutheran sermon.¹⁵

But not all reading situations and uses of literature were as peaceful as the above-mentioned. The persecuted sectarians also had to defend their faith in front of Lutheran churchmen and magistrates. In these critical situations it was necessary to defend and define the own faith with the authority of the Bible. The missionary Paul Glock, a former shoemaker, provided his examiners in 1563 with a lengthy hand-written declaration of his Anabaptist faith, carefully argued with citations from the Holy Book.¹⁶ Being imprisoned with a member of a competing Anabaptist group, Glock also offered his rival ink and paper to write down the errors he claimed to see in Glock's group.¹⁷

More often Bible citations were performed "live" in front of the authorities. One former member of the village council in Urbach, for instance, declared in his interrogation in May 1598 that Lutheran churchmen were like Pharisees who had Christ crucified and would never go to Heaven, as "*it is written in the end of Luke 11*".¹⁸ It was, however, exceptional that the examined Anabaptist

¹¹ Visitation record of the district Maulbronn, autumn 1575, report of the abbot of Maulbronn on Peter Ehrenpreis, 30.7. 1596. QGT I: 461, 689.

¹² Visitation record of the district Maulbronn, autumn 1575. QGT I: 462–463.

¹³ Decree on the Anabaptists of Urbach, 5.7. 1620. QGT I: 896–897.

¹⁴ Paul Glock's letter to Peter Walpot in Moravia, 23.2. 1576. QGT I: 464.

¹⁵ Visitation record of Urach, 1610. QGT I: 822.

¹⁶ Paul Glock's letter to Leonhard Lanzenstil in Moravia 7.6. 1563. QGT I: 1079.

¹⁷ Paul Glock's letter to Peter Walpot in Moravia, 2.4. 1573. QGT I: 365–367.

¹⁸ Visitation record of Urbach, 30.5. 1598. QGT I: 728. He further referred directly to the letter of Jacob, the first letter to the Corinthians and Acts 19 in the same interrogation: Jac 2:22, 1 Cor 13:2 and Acts 19:5–6. QGT I: 729.

explicitly referred to specific Bible chapters or verses. Usually biblical citations were delivered without naming the passage.

Examples of Anabaptist Bible reading

Common Anabaptists referred in their interrogations directly to Mark 16:16 to justify adult baptism (*"The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned"*); the passage indicates the correct order for faith and baptism).¹⁹ There were other passages repeatedly quoted in interrogations by common Anabaptists such as Luke 22:19–20²⁰ or 1 Cor 11:27–29 for Communion or Romans 13²¹ for questions of worldly authority and warfare.²² This shows that Anabaptists had memorized a great deal of what they had read or heard and indicates that certain biblical passages acted as "oral texts" or core ideas defining the Anabaptist key doctrines among the unlettered.

However, tracing patterns of "Anabaptist reading" is difficult. We very rarely know which texts Württemberg Anabaptists actually had at hands, except maybe for the Bible. We do not have one single written treatise that would have clearly defined "official" Anabaptism in Württemberg.²³ But I think we can assume that *'knowledge organized in an oral context often revolves around central themes, mnemonic devices and repetition of core concepts, ideas, words and phrases.'* So there should be a relatively stable core of Anabaptist ideas we can draw on.²⁴

¹⁹ Bernhofer-Pippert 1967: 166, Snyder 1995: 390.

²⁰ 22:19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 22:20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

²¹ Eg. Rom 13:1–5: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 13:2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 13:3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 13:4 for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 13:5 Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

²² Bernhofer-Pippert 1967: 166–170.

²³ We can outline some kind of a Hutterite doctrine in the late 16th century (e.g. on the basis of Paul Glock's letters or the doctrinal writings of the Moravian leaders like Peter Riedemann), because they formed a fairly homogenous group, but when it comes to other groups, we must be content with vague assumptions.

²⁴ Snyder 1991: 387–388.

Let's take for example the apostle Paul's words on Communion in 1 Cor 11:27–29. Many of the common people examined as Anabaptists in the late 16th century claimed that they couldn't partake in Communion, because they couldn't live free from sin or according to the Ten Commandments.²⁵ A few examples will illustrate how the original text was reproduced in front of the investigating authorities.²⁶

TABLE 1. *1 Cor 11:27–29 and examples of its references in visitations.*

1 Cor 11:27–29	Hans Fritz 1565	Paul Widemann 1584	Hans Golch 1598	Katharina Zehender 1598
11:27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. 11:28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 11:29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.	<i>Ich gehe nicht zum nachtmal, dass ich es nit mit fiessen tret, dann wer unwürdig zum nachtmal geet oder dazu hilft, der tritt es mit fiessen. So lasst ihr pfarrer iedermann zu, wer es sei und woher er sei, und machen also die frummen mit den gottlosen gemeinschaft, welches die schrift verbeut.</i>	<i>Zudem lehren wir [Lutheraner], wer es unwürdig empfangt, der empfangt ihm das Gericht. Nun könne er [Widemann] nicht leben, wie Gott erfordere. Wann Gott ihn aber einmal ermahne, so wolle er sehen.</i>	<i>...hat dafür gehalten, wenn ein Frommer mit einem Gottlosen kommuniziere, so schade es ihm.</i>	<i>...hat in 4 Jahren nicht kommuniziert, weil sie unwürdig und nicht tüchtig gewesen sei und dafür gehalten hat, dass die Unwürdigen nur Brot und Wein empfangen.</i>

None of these four Anabaptists quoted directly 1 Cor 11:27–29, but we can see the connection. The core idea of this passage could be something like “don't go to Communion, unless you lead a good Christian life”. The interpretation of the passage had concrete effects on the daily lives of these four people: they changed (or at least justified) their behaviour after reading or hearing about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Hans Fritz connected his interpretation with the actual situation in his home

²⁵ Several visitation records, e.g. QGT I: 216, 426, 568, 582, 704, 714–730.

²⁶ The table texts are direct quotations from visitation protocols. QGT I: 242, 568, 725–726.

village. The three others referred to Corinthians more loosely: sinful living was for them simply a hindrance to take Communion and the passage was interpreted to support other common Anabaptist teachings or "slogans" such as separation from the ungodly, inner guidance from God or the denial of the Real Presence of Christ in Communion.

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I have here outlined the key questions I will tackle in my dissertation. My main interest is the social context of reading. *What texts were read and discussed, where and with whom? How did it affect the interpretations and lives of common Anabaptists?*

Until now I have only analysed and the material printed in the series *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*: mainly visitation records and letters of Anabaptist missionaries and Lutheran magistrates. To get a complete picture it is necessary to draw on a wider range of sources:

In addition to printed court records I go through records in the archives of Stuttgart (the *Hauptstaatsarchiv* and the *Landeskirchliches Archiv*). As for the texts used by the Anabaptists, I look at the Bible, texts that made up the Anabaptist "canon", and other relevant texts like songbooks, catechisms, and books of homilies. In order to get a picture of the religious norms and the ideals of the authorities and how the Anabaptists differed from them I examine laws and orders given by the Württemberg dukes in the 16th century as well as theological writings of the Lutheran reformers of the duchy.

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