

## Article

# Menno Simons and the Sword: From Oldeklooster to Wüstenfelde

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**Abstract:** This article traces the evolution of the attitudes of Anabaptist Menno Simons with respect to state-sponsored violence by examining the theme through his written works over the course of his career as a reformer. Particular attention is given to the circumstances that surround key writings. Menno's sometimes deliberate ambiguity and the evolution in his beliefs reflect his precarious position as an itinerant preacher, as well as the fragile state of the group of would-be revolutionaries and other dissenters whose leadership he inherited shortly after renouncing his role as a priest. The position he ultimately took against the execution of criminals is unusual for his day and shows the extent of his thoroughgoing rejection of violence for Christians.

**Keywords:** Menno Simons; pacificism; capital punishment; religious toleration

## 1. Introduction

The state-sponsored violence that formed the backdrop of the religious transformations in sixteenth-century Europe had centuries of precedent. Christian theories legitimizing violence emerged fully in the wake of the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century C.E. and developed in myriad contexts over the ensuing eras, notably in medieval efforts to suppress heretical movements and to justify the Crusades. In the sixteenth century, even those Protestants who would eventually find themselves cooperating with magistrates to enact reform could not avoid the threat of violent persecution: Martin Luther was forced into hiding at Wartburg Castle to escape an imperial edict early in his career as a reformer, and John Calvin was forced to flee the violence directed toward Protestants in France for the safer havens of cities such as Basel and eventually Geneva. Religious conformity under threat of violence was a fact of life for nearly everyone. Many might debate the proper targets and severity of coercion, but few if any suggested the authorities bore the sword in vain.

How did those who previously supported the status quo of enforced religious conformity come to change their minds? The attitude of Catholic priest turned Anabaptist<sup>1</sup> Menno Simons (1496–1561) toward the magistracy and the power of the sword was formed in the context of persecution over much of his twenty-five years as a reformer. While he wrote no systematic work describing the ideal church–state relationship or the power of the magistracy per se, the question is woven through many of his writings and his constant appeals for toleration for those who were simply attempting to “fear the Lord from the heart and . . . preach the Word of God and do right” (Wenger 1956, p. 226). Menno, in a tone that ranged from pleading to demanding and even to haranguing, outlined the Christian's proper relation to the magistracy and the magistracy's responsibility toward the Christian. Although he was consistent in his plea for toleration, Menno's ideas on the role of the magistracy are fluid. His practicality as a theologian and pastor caused him to address his immediate situations, with the result that more ambiguity remains in his position than one finds in the more consistently pacifist convictions of later generations who took his name.

Menno's sometimes deliberate ambiguity and the evolution in his beliefs reflect his precarious position as an itinerant preacher, as well as the fragile state of the group of



**Citation:** McGinnis, Scott. 2024. Menno Simons and the Sword: From Oldeklooster to Wüstenfelde. *Religions* 15: 1356. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111356>

Academic Editor: Sharon L. Baker Putt

Received: 17 September 2024

Revised: 24 October 2024

Accepted: 31 October 2024

Published: 7 November 2024



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would-be revolutionaries and other dissenters whose leadership he inherited shortly after renouncing his role as a priest. His early interactions with the magistracy found him fighting for his life and hopeless that any government could or would be Christian. His later years, exposed to the benevolence and refuge of nobles such as Bartholomew von Ahlefeldt, seemed to inspire some hope that the state might indeed step up to its God-given role of providing for peaceful order without taking life. As his hope for the possibility of a Christian magistracy increased, so did his expectations of the magistrates.

## 2. Oldeklooster and the Shadow of Münster

The religious turmoil of the sixteenth century came with waves of apocalyptic fervor. The German lay Anabaptist preacher Melchior Hofmann spread an especially intense apocalypticism throughout the regions of the lower Rhine and the Low Countries beginning in about 1530. He and his followers proclaimed the imminent second coming of Christ, which was to be accompanied by a purging of the ungodly. Hofmann was eventually imprisoned in Strassburg, which had been entertained among his followers as the site of the New Jerusalem. Although the imprisonment of the prophetic leader was imagined to be a precipitating event, many became disappointed that Hofmann remained in prison after the predicted day of the Second Coming of Christ. Attention gradually refocused on the town of Münster in northwest Germany as the more likely site of the New Jerusalem.

At the time, the population of Münster was divided between Catholics and Protestants, and thus Anabaptists were able to enjoy some degree of tolerance in the uneasy religious setting. Soon their fortunes improved even more as the number of Anabaptists in the city swelled, and they were able to assume power in the city in early 1534. Among the radical prophets and leaders that surfaced in Münster, two emerged as key: John Mattijs, a Dutch baker, and his main disciple and tailor's apprentice John of Leiden. In short order, Catholics were expelled from the city, as were Protestants who refused to comply with the two Johns' radical vision of austere biblicism. Sculptures, paintings, and all other trappings of traditional religion were destroyed. Later, when the supply of men dwindled due to losses in battle, polygamy was instituted in keeping with the Old Testament models. Meanwhile, the ousted bishop laid siege, and Catholics and Protestants fought side by side to retake the city. The inhabitants were slowly starved and grew increasingly disillusioned with their leaders. When John Mattijs was killed in battle, John of Leiden took over and declared himself the King of New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

By spring 1535, the outlook for the struggling bibliocracy was grim. The city had been completely surrounded since December of the previous year, and the siege was beginning to take its toll. A serious shortage of food and the consequent weakening of morale began to undermine the already unstable government. King John attempted to buoy the hopes of the people by promising deliverance by Easter, but circumstances seemed to predict otherwise. In a last attempt to gather more of the Dutch Anabaptists to join in the resistance, emissaries were dispatched to rally support.

The most visible evidence of their success occurred at Oldeklooster (Old Cloister), a Cistercian abbey near Bolsward. The fact that the emissaries' journey coincided with the required annual Easter Mass appeared to have made recruitment easier. Authorities tended to use acceptance or refusal of the Mass as a litmus test for loyalty, so when several dissenting Anabaptists "who didn't want to go to the sacrament" gathered at the village of Tzum, they were promptly attacked by soldiers of the stadtholder (Stayer 1978, p. 53). The success of the dissenters, who numbered about 200 men and 100 women, in repelling the attackers inspired them to ever greater ambitions, for they were then able to seize and occupy the Oldeklooster abbey on 30 March. The abbot and monks, not inclined to participate in the revolution, were quickly expelled, and the revolutionaries set about fortifying their defenses in the monastery, which was well-built and surrounded by moats. The group sent out a call to rally like-minded locals to come and join, an appeal that no doubt further concerned local officials who had suddenly seen the fanaticism of Münster settle perilously close to home.

Although the siege of Oldeklooster, lasting just over a week, would not approximate Münster in terms of its duration, the complete carnage that was its conclusion did foreshadow the fate that would come to the inhabitants of the larger “New Jerusalem” in less than three months’ time.<sup>3</sup> The first attempts by troops to retake the cloister were rebuffed, and nervous local officials went so far as to contact Hapsburg officials in Brussels for money and reinforcements. Finally, on 7 April, however, with advice from one of the monks, the siege cannons found their mark, boats transported the troops across the moats, and a brief but bloody battle ensued. Most of the defending Anabaptists were either killed in the assault or taken as prisoners, the majority of whom would face quick justice and summary execution by hanging, beheading, or drowning (Stayer 1978, pp. 53–55).

For the Catholic priest Menno Simons, whose parish of Witmarsum lay within the sound of a cannon shot from Oldeklooster, the slaughter was doubly tragic: not only were several members of his flock among those who were killed, but he also lost a brother, quite likely the Peter Simons who was one of the leaders sent out from Münster and who is known to have died at Oldeklooster.<sup>4</sup> While Menno did not and would never condone the use of force to further the Anabaptist cause, his sympathy with the group’s ideas emerged when he wrote that

the blood of these people fell so hot on my heart that I could not stand it, nor find rest in my soul. I reflected upon my unclean, carnal life, also the hypocritical doctrine and idolatry which I still practiced daily in appearance of godliness, but without relish. I saw that these zealous children, although in error, willingly gave their lives and their estates for their doctrine and faith. And I was one of those who had disclosed to some of them the abominations of the papal system. But I myself was continuing in my comfortable life and acknowledged abominations simply in order that I might enjoy physical comfort and escape the cross of Christ (Wenger 1956, p. 670).

For Menno, the admittedly misguided convictions of the revolutionaries exposed his own inadequacies as a minister, a topic that he would return to in future discussions around ministerial qualifications.

The tragedy of Oldeklooster proved to be a galvanizing event not only for Menno but also for the then much variegated Anabaptist movement as a whole. Menno, whose doubts about the Mass and baptism had developed several years prior, had nevertheless remained within the Catholic church, though he had preached enough moderate reform up to that point to gain a reputation as an “evangelical preacher”, a title which Menno later denied was accurate at the time (Wenger 1956, p. 668). In hindsight, however, he judged himself inadequate, without courage, and unworthy of the name. As he recounted the story of his conversion, Menno claimed that the events at Oldeklooster gave him strength to act on his evolving convictions. Thereafter, he began to preach openly the evangelical ideas of “true repentance, . . . the narrow path, . . . the true baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (Wenger 1956, p. 671). with all the fervor he could muster without regard to consequence for his own safety. Somewhat curiously, he was able to keep his pulpit for several more months in 1535 until finally, in January 1536, he felt it wise to resign.

In addition to serving as the more immediate cause of Menno’s break with Rome, Oldeklooster and the similarly bloody and subsequent fall of Münster in June 1535 earned for Anabaptists a reputation that could not be escaped. They were already viewed as treasonous by some for their refusal to baptize infants and their rejection of the mass, and bloody revolts like Oldeklooster and Münster only confirmed the worst fears of the magistrates and other civic authorities. Disloyalty in matters of faith did indeed, they argued, lead to violent acts against the government. Although Anabaptists would continue to exist as separate groups with sometimes diverse beliefs, henceforth authorities would regularly paint them all with the same broad brush of sedition. For the rest of his life, therefore, Menno would alternately attack the Münsterites and their revolutionary descendants and defend himself and his followers against the charge that they too were simply impatient revolutionaries hiding behind a thin veil of biblicism.

### 3. Against “Strange Doctrines of Swords”

The uprising at Oldeklooster likely coincided with Menno’s first known writing, *The Blasphemy of John of Leiden*, written in 1535.<sup>5</sup> This polemical work attacks the methods and the ideology of the self-proclaimed king of Münster. Since “Christ is King both of all the earth and of His believing church”, Menno asked, “how can John of Leiden call himself a joyous king of all?” (Wenger 1956, p. 35). Christ and Christ alone possesses all authority in heaven and on earth, and to claim otherwise is to usurp Christ and speak contrary to God’s Word. Menno’s biblicism, a consistent factor in his writings throughout his life, is readily apparent in this early work. He noted that Paul testified in Ephesians that the Lord has raised up Christ to sit at his right hand, a position far above any earthly power or principality. Moreover, Christ is the only head of his body, the church, which is above all a spiritual kingdom. All believers are “the sheep of Christ and there is but one fold, of which Christ is the Shepherd” (Wenger 1956, p. 40). Blasphemers like John of Leiden who claim the preeminence meant only for Christ are nothing more than antichrists, wolves who come in sheep’s clothing.

The Münsterites’ use of the earthly sword also shows their misguided hermeneutic, one that favored the Old Testament over the New. One should not imagine that “the figure of the Old Testament is so applied to the truth of the New Testament that flesh is understood as referring to flesh”, that is to say, that the sword used by the godly kings in the Old Testament can justify taking up the sword in the present. Instead, Christians were to fight “with the Word of God which is a two-edged sword” (Wenger 1956, pp. 42–43). In so doing, Christians conform to the image of Christ, not returning evil for evil. “Take heed”, he instructs, “it is forbidden for us to fight with physical weapons”. The result may very well be that true Christians suffer, but such has been the lot of the godly throughout time. To suffer is to identify with Christ, however, and the only solace Menno offered was that “we count them happy that endure” (Wenger 1956, p. 45).

Despite his harsh words against John of Leiden, Menno did not believe all those associated with Münster were equally to blame; many were simply misled by false teachers who trafficked in strange doctrines. Unfortunately, “even if they do it with good intentions, they nevertheless with Uzzah lay their hands to the ark of God” (Wenger 1956, p. 46). Christians should be content to let God punish the ungodly in his own time and not forget that the final punishment of evildoers will not take place until Christ comes again, something that the Christian cannot bring about by his own actions. Referring to the parable of the sower, Menno compared faithful Christians to the good seed that is sown; Christians should not fancy themselves as the reapers. The *Blasphemy* closes with an appeal to all to “guard against all strange doctrine of swords and resistance which is nothing short of a fair flower under which lies hidden an evil serpent” (Wenger 1956, p. 49). One sees in this plea, likely written before Menno had made his decisive break with Rome, a foreshadowing of Menno’s reconstructive leadership among the Anabaptists. While he wanted to condemn the revolutionary leaders, he felt compassion for their misguided followers who lacked the guidance of a good shepherd.

### 4. Sheathing the Sword of Persecution

In *The Blasphemy of Jan of Leiden*, Menno proscribed the use of the sword by Christians. He did not comment on if or when the sword may be properly employed by the magistracy. Four years later, in the first edition of his *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, Menno did address the matter of the magistrates’ role directly. The intervening years had seen his decisive break with Rome in January 1536, his ordination by Obbe Phillips about a year later in early 1537, his marriage to his wife Gertrude, the beginning of his itinerant preaching ministry, and perhaps most decisively, several personal encounters with persecution by the state. In January 1539, a man whom Menno had baptized, Tjard Reynders, was executed on the wheel for providing shelter to Menno while the authorities were searching for him.<sup>6</sup> Other Anabaptists faced similar perils. Thus, the Menno who wrote the *Foundation* is more aware

than ever of the need for the restraint of the power of the state, even as he struggled to escape the Anabaptist associations with Münster and Oldeklooster.

In order to persuade authorities that the Christians he led were not a danger to society, Menno laid out key tenets of his faith in what is the most systematic of his writings. The three main sections of the *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* are “A Call to Biblical Faith”, which comments on issues of grace, salvation, and baptism; the “Refutation of Roman Catholicism”, which addresses the Lord’s Supper and the ministry of preaching; and “Appeals for Toleration”, in which Menno addressed magistrates, “learned ones”,<sup>7</sup> common people, and the “corrupt sects”.<sup>8</sup> Menno called on the magistracy to “sheath [their] sword”, since though they do not know it, their persecution of the Anabaptists is a persecution of Christ himself. Magistrates should recognize that they were appointed by God and will be judged by him as well. Menno pointed out that the state quite naturally deals with any uprising that challenges its authority. In the same way, Christ will punish those who “hurl Him from the seat of His divine majesty . . . as though Christ Jesus, the eternal wisdom of God, were unfit for the heavenly government” (Wenger 1956, p. 119). Menno insisted that he and his followers are not asking for mercy like criminals, since indeed they have done nothing wrong. They “resist neither the emperor, the king, nor any authority in that to which they are called by God; but . . . are ready to obey to the death in all things which are not contrary to God and His Word” (Wenger 1956, p. 118).

“That to which they are called by God” was, of course, the crux of the matter. For Menno, it included only the punishing of criminals, namely “thieves, murderers, Sodomites, adulterers, seducers, sorcerers, the violent, highwaymen, [and] robbers”; bringing about justice between citizens; delivering “the oppressed out of the hand of the oppressor”; and restraining the “manifest deceivers who so miserably lead poor helpless souls by hundreds of thousands into destruction” (Wenger 1956, p. 193). With this last category, he certainly had violent revolutionaries in mind. However, as James Stayer has noted (Stayer 1976, pp. 317–18), a significant change occurred between the 1539 edition and the revised *Foundation* published in 1558. Whereas in 1539, Menno did not qualify the manner in which the magistrates might go about suppressing false teaching, in 1558, he specified “reasonable means, that is, without tyranny and bloodshed”, with the result being that “in all love, without force, violence, and blood, you [the magistrates] may enlarge, help, and protect the kingdom of God with gracious consent and permission, with wise counsel and a pious, unblameable life” (Wenger 1956, p. 193). The shift is significant, as it appears to limit the tools the magistrate may employ against religious dissenters, even those who are themselves prone to violence.

While in his early writings, Menno seemed primarily concerned with avoiding persecution when he calls on the magistrates to act in a Christian manner, later, the goal of involvement of the magistrates in matters of religion appears to be more than simply eliminating the vestiges of Catholicism and suppressing groups such as the Münsterites. By 1558, Menno seemed to envision rulers who not only protect but also further the kingdom of God through advice and by personal example; that is to say, he envisioned a godly prince. Earlier, Menno tended to define the church (and by extension Christians) and the state (and by extension magistrates) as mutually exclusive spheres. Christians avoided the sword at all costs; magistrates, by necessity, exercised their admittedly God-given role of wielding the sword of justice. One might be tempted to see in Menno’s moderation on the issue of the use of force in religious matters solely the influence of his twenty years as an outlaw, were it not for the fact that his move toward a kinder, gentler magistracy occurs within the context of his opposition to capital punishment in general.<sup>9</sup> This correlation seems to suggest that Menno chose to resolve the tension present earlier in his works between denial of the sword to Christians and the call for a Christian magistrate by finally denying the sword of justice to the magistrate. Christian magistrates, he concluded, should not be thirsty for blood.



### 5. Ministers of the State and a “Doctrine of Blood”

The popularity of Menno’s *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* and his work *The True Christian Faith*, written in 1541, shows that Menno was emerging as the chief spokesman of Anabaptism in the Low Countries, but the position was a precarious one. Dutch authorities saw fit to put a price of five hundred gold guilders on his head in 1542. Nevertheless, despite the offer of the reward and the torture of many imprisoned Anabaptists, Menno managed to elude capture, and later Anabaptist martyrologies include stories of those who died protecting him (Williams 1992, p. 595). In just a few short years, he had gone from his relatively comfortable position as a Catholic priest to a life on the run. His travels eventually led him to the northwestern German territories, where Anabaptism had developed a foothold and where the emperor’s edicts were not enforced. His pragmatism again comes to light here: although he was no coward, neither did he seek martyrdom. Menno saw his mission as providing leadership among Anabaptists disillusioned after the revolts of the mid-1530s and defending the Anabaptist cause in print. He decided that these tasks could best be accomplished elsewhere, so in the fall of 1543, Menno left Holland for Germany, where he would spend the rest of his life and ministry.

By late 1543, Menno and his family had arrived in East Frisia, which was ruled by the reform-minded Countess Anna of Oldenburg. Anna was in the process of converting her realm from Catholicism to Protestantism, and to oversee the task she had employed the Polish reformer John Łaski. Łaski was a nobleman whose education included study with Erasmus in Basel. He had even arranged to purchase the great humanist’s library after Erasmus’s death in 1536 (Williams 1992, p. 733). Łaski’s Reformation ideas were most closely allied with Swiss Reformed teaching, including his support of a state church.

During the tumultuous year of reform in the early 1540s, however, East Frisia had managed to attract a variety of Anabaptists, including Batenburgers, Davidians, and the more irenic Anabaptists with whom Menno associated. To Łaski’s credit, and unlike many magisterial Protestant leaders of the day, he did distinguish between the more revolutionary sects of Anabaptists and those who posed less of a threat to the existing order. Upon hearing of Menno’s arrival in the territory, Łaski invited Menno to meet in Emden, the capital of the region. From 28 to 31 January 1544, Menno met with Łaski and other Reformed ministers in what was really more of a semipublic interview than a debate or disputation. The topics included many of the standard points of Reformation discussion: original sin, sanctification, baptism, and the calling of ministers, as well as the less frequently discussed issue of the Incarnation. Agreement was found on the first two but not on the remaining, although the discussion was apparently not heated. Łaski concluded by requesting that Menno write out a statement to present to the authorities for the purposes of clarification of his beliefs.

Three months later, Menno sent Łaski his *Brief and Clear Confession*, which focuses on the Incarnation and the calling of ministers. In the introduction, a brief reference does show that at this point (1544), Menno still held to his earlier opinion that the Christian was to reject violence completely but that the “sword of the magistrate” was allowed, though in what circumstances he does not specify (Wenger 1956, pp. 423–24). In the second section, Menno took up the issue of the state church and its ministers. State support of ministers ran the risk of attracting the faithless to the work of ministry, though who would rely on the power of the state to proclaim the gospel? Most important to his discussion with Łaski, however, was Menno’s belief that ministers should

look wholly to God (who by his grace created, delivered, regenerated, and sent them to His service) for their daily needs, diligently supporting themselves as much as is possible by the grace of the Lord, from their own or their rented farm, or from working at their trade; lest they be found selling the free Word of God which was given them without price, and living on shameful gain, robbery, and theft (Wenger 1956, p. 442).

In the subsequent denouncement of ministers who are motivated by their desire for money and thus place themselves at the mercy and direction of the state, one senses not a little bit of self-castigation on Menno’s part for his own tardiness in leaving the employ of a

state church. He would later write that his own delay had been due to his desire for “gain, ease, favor of men, splendor, name and fame”, the same charges that he now leveled against the ministers of the state church in Frisia and elsewhere (Wenger 1956, p. 669). Moreover, the sins of the ministers affect the discipline (or lack thereof) of the congregations. For these reasons, Menno and his followers could not associate with the Reformed state churches.

Łaski received the treatise, prepared a response, and promptly published both without Menno’s permission. Even though he disagreed with Menno on the issues of the Incarnation and the calling of ministers, Łaski did treat Menno and his followers with some amount of tolerance. It was he who first used the term Mennisten, or Mennonites, in an official document to describe the peaceful branch of Anabaptists then resident in the territory. When the Countess Anna issued a decree that all radicals had to leave her territory, Łaski lobbied for some amount of tolerance for the Mennisten, subject to his personal examination. George Williams suggests that this tolerance was due at least in part to Łaski’s desire to win Menno and his followers to the Reformed cause. While this never occurred and both Menno and Łaski would subsequently leave East Frisia, Menno’s relationship with Łaski was not as bitter as with some.<sup>10</sup>

Among the Reformed ministers present at Menno’s meeting with John Łaski at Emden in 1544 was Gellius Faber, a former priest from the same region in The Netherlands that Menno had previously served. Like Menno, Faber had chosen to break with Rome based on concerns over the Sacrament and other doctrinal disputes, but unlike Menno he had chosen the path of Zwingli and the state church. In 1552, after having read an Anabaptist tract, Faber published a bitter treatise attacking the Anabaptists on several issues. Menno, though not directly involved, felt obliged in his role as leader and chief writing Anabaptist to respond. The resulting *Reply to Gellius Faber*, published in 1554, was Menno’s longest work, though in several places it simply repeats ideas he had outlined elsewhere.

As might be expected, much of the discussion between Faber and Menno centered around the nature of the church. Faber envisioned a territorial corpus christianorum. Menno’s response is easily anticipated: Faber and company do not build their church upon the true cornerstone which is Christ, they abuse the sacraments, and they ignore church discipline. Unless one is born of God and his Word, driven by the Spirit, changed into Christ’s nature and disposition, neither “emperor nor king, doctor nor licentiate, pope nor Luther, makes any difference” (Wenger 1956, p. 752).

With respect to state violence, Faber also suggested that the magistracy does the right thing by suppressing the dissenters, though it must be done with some restraint to avoid being labelled as persecutors. Menno charged that Faber is promoting a “doctrine of blood” and asked when did Christ or his apostles ever encourage magistrates to protect the true church? This role is given only to Christ himself and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the magistrates, who are listening too closely to the “learned ones” who supposedly are charged with the care of their souls, should consider carefully the advice they are receiving. In Menno’s opinion, the magistrates would be better off dead than to attempt to use worldly power to meddle in spiritual matters (Wenger 1956, p. 779).

## 6. Spring Souls Purchased with Precious Treasure

The third Reformed theologian with whom Menno would have extended contact was Martin Micron, who like Gellius Faber was also an associate of John Łaski. Micron had been pastor of the Strangers’ Church in London while Łaski was superintendent and had also been forced to leave London when Mary came to power in 1553. Micron also had ties with the Reformation in Geneva.

Menno encountered Micron during a brief stay in the Hanseatic city of Wismar on the Baltic Sea during the winter of 1553–54. On two separate occasions, Micron met Menno for theological discussions at the house where Menno was staying, although Micron first had to pledge not to reveal the location to the magistrates. The topics were much the same as Menno’s discussions with Łaski some ten years earlier at Emden, and the result was also similar. Apparently, Menno had not intended to write as a result of the meeting, he at the

time being immersed in conflict among his followers over the application and the extent of the ban. However, when Micron published his own account of the meeting two years later in 1556, Menno once again felt obliged to write in order to correct the portrayal Micron had given of his position. He published two works, *Reply to Martin Micron* and *Epistle to Martin Micron*, both in 1556.

Much of the discussion addresses Menno's view of the Incarnation, but more relevant to the topic at hand is an evolution that occurs in Menno's belief about the magistracy and the use of the sword. Previously, we have seen that Menno rejected the sword for Christians but preserved the sword of justice for the magistracy. The sword was only to be applied in criminal, not religious, matters. At this point, however, Menno's opinion on the use of the sword by the magistrate evolved into a wholesale rejection of capital punishment: "it would hardly become a true Christian ruler to shed blood". In the *Epistle to Martin Micron*, he reasoned as follows regarding capital punishment: If a criminal has repented of his crime and become a Christian, then it is hardly fitting that a Christian would harm a fellow believer, who is now of "one heart, spirit, and soul with him". On the other hand, if a criminal has not repented, then killing him would "unmercifully rob him of the time of repentance" and denigrate the sacrifice of Christ, who purchased the criminal's soul at so great a price (Wenger 1956, pp. 920–21). Thus, in either instance, whether the criminal be Christian or not, capital punishment is not the proper course for a Christian magistrate.

Although it may seem a natural evolution to modern readers opposed to state violence, the move was striking for the day, one that took Menno well beyond the mainstream. To argue for tolerance for oneself or one's followers in the face of persecution was not unusual and even expected. Moreover, many humanists among the magisterial reformers were uncomfortable with executing those accused of heresy as a matter of principle. Thus, Sebastian Castellio challenged the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 by Genevan authorities under the leadership of John Calvin by arguing that heretics should be defeated by words, not the sword, but he did not deny the latter to the magistrate in all cases. By denying the sword to magistrates who claimed to be Christian, Menno implicitly raised the question of whether any magistrate could or would be Christian.

In 1554, following his discussions with Micron at Wismar, Menno made what would be his final move. The authorities in Wismar had become aware of his presence in the city, and prudence suggested that it was time for him to leave. At age fifty-eight, after more than twenty years on the run and with his health beginning to fail, Menno looked for a place of relative peace to settle. He found refuge on the estate of Bartholomew von Ahlefeldt, a nobleman in the region of Holstein. As a young man, Ahlefeldt had been a soldier in The Netherlands and had seen the execution of many Anabaptists whom he came to believe had done nothing seditious. In his later life, he had resolved to create an asylum for the fugitive Anabaptists on his estate. Menno moved to Ahlefeldt's estate near the small village of Wüstenfelde, where he would live out his final years in a small cottage. Although he was crippled in later life, Menno would continue to be involved in the leadership of the Anabaptists. Controversies regarding the ban occupied many of his final years, though he would also actively continue his writing. At least ten works were published between 1554 and his death on 31 January 1561, only twenty-five years after his final break with Rome.

## 7. Conclusions

Like many others of his day, Menno Simons does not always display in his writings the type of consistency that attracts historians, who are sometimes prone to coax systematic concepts from writings that are anything but. For instance, the idea that that Menno's "teachings on church-state relations were true to the insistence of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists on complete religious freedom and separation of church and state" is difficult to sustain in light of the evolution and qualifications examined here (Estep 1988, p. 364). Such a claim seems to stem more from a desire to discover in the past the convictions of the present than from a comparative reading of Menno's sometimes reactive writings on the subject of the magistracy, the sword, and the true church.



Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the situated nature of Menno's writings, an Anabaptist movement with a demonstrated potential for violent apocalypticism transformed into something else entirely. His own writings reflect this transformation. Menno's early encounters with the revolutionaries of Münster and the loss of his brother at Oldeklooster might seem to have been sufficient reason to forswear use of the sword in all contexts, but this was not his immediate response. Initially, he argued the sword of justice wielded by the magistrates was needed, if only to control revolutionaries like John of Leiden. Menno was consistent in his denial of the sword to those he deemed as true Christians, however. Early in his career, the contradiction between non-resistance by Christians and the call for a godly magistrate was simply not at the forefront of his mind, since the possibility of a truly Christian (in the Anabaptist sense of the term) magistracy seemed remote indeed. Later in his career, his shifts on issues of capital punishment and the magistracy's handling of religious dissent reflect what was likely the combination of his experiences as a fugitive, his pragmatism, and perhaps even his hope for a Christian magistrate that might by example help to transform society. In a very real sense for those who would seek inspiration as peacemakers today, Menno's struggles reflect the broader problem faced by many Christians vis-à-vis society: how to balance the call to separate from the world with the impulse to change it.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** All sources I used are published already and widely available via libraries.

**Acknowledgments:** The author acknowledges with appreciation the useful queries and comments of the anonymous reviewers.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The debate surrounding the term Anabaptism and the origins of the movements it attempts to encompass is beyond the scope of this essay, but the reader deserves to know where the author's sympathies lie. As a general observation, one should note at the outset that Anabaptist historiography has been shaped by debates between confessional and non-confessional historians and theologians, resulting in historical judgments that often carry implications for modern confessional identities. What role did violent revolutionaries play in the origins of what are today pacifist movements? An example of this tension is documented in an article that forms an essential inflection point for the debate: (Stayer et al. 1975). As the title implies, the article documents the move to a more complex, nuanced, and historically situated understanding of Anabaptist origins, without the clean lines imposed by later divisions.

In what follows, I have been informed by approaches outlined in (Williams 1992). Williams sees the Radical Reformation "conceptually as having taken place within the social interstices between the classical/territorial Magisterial Reformation and the Counter-Reform of the Council of Trent" (1). His use of the term "social" is crucial here, since Williams pays much attention to the social, political, military, and persecutorial forces that give context to and help shape radical ideas. In attempting to give shape to his unruly subject, Williams established the heuristic categories of Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Evangelical Rationalists, categories which themselves have become subject to later debate. Williams' *magnum opus* is encyclopedic rather than definitive, however, and the very vastness of the territories it covers invites further research and debate. Accordingly, see the historiographical discussion in the introduction to the handbook edited by (Roth and Stayer 2007), who suggest that the "very term 'Anabaptism' may be ripe for re-examination" (p. xvii).

The unstable origins of the received categories and labels of historians may be seen in the fact that the first "Anabaptists" did not understand themselves to be "re-baptizers" as the term implies, since they did not accept their initial baptism as valid. Thus, as is the case with many terms that are initially deployed in a pejorative sense (e.g., "Puritan"), Anabaptist was birthed in controversy and remains a controversial term to this day.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise overview of the Münster "debacle" (as historians of the pacifist Anabaptist tradition are inclined to call it), see (Williams 1992, pp. 553–88).

<sup>3</sup> In 1535, two deserters who wearied of King John's excesses opened the Münster city gates to the bishop's army, and the city fell. In the ensuing battle, most of the remaining inhabitants were killed. John was captured and exhibited throughout Northern

Germany as an example of what would become of such violent traitors. He was finally tortured with red-hot tongs on a platform for all to see in Münster on 22 January 1536. Their seared bodies were placed in iron cages and suspended from the tower of St. Lambert's Church. The cages remain to this day.

<sup>4</sup> Menno alludes to, but does not name, a brother who died at Oldeklooster in the course of replying to the charges of Gellius Faber, a Reformed minister who accused Menno of being associated with the revolutionaries of Münster and Oldeklooster. Menno remarked that his "poor brother, whom he [Gellius Faber] so hatefully brings up, did no greater wrong than that he erroneously, alas, defended his faith with his fist" (Wenger 1956, p. 775).

<sup>5</sup> This work, generally attributed to Menno, is not universally accepted as authentic. The *Blasphemy* first appeared in print in 1627, and the lack of a sixteenth-century edition led some to suggest that it might have been written by a later follower in Menno's style (an idea first proposed by Christiaan Sepp in the late nineteenth century). Others hold that the work's distinctly Frisian style and its structural similarity to an early work by Bernhard Rothmann, *On Vengeance*, which was not known in the seventeenth century but to which the *Blasphemy* appears to respond, make its forgery an impossibility. In any case, the *Blasphemy* did appear in the 1646 and 1681 editions of Menno's complete works. See (Horst 1962, pp. 117–18), who is non-committal on the issue; (Stayer 1978, pp. 65–67), who judges Menno as the most likely author; and (Stayer et al. 2015), wherein the authors debate differing circumstances for its composition but reject the idea of it being a seventeenth-century forgery.

<sup>6</sup> See the biography by Harold S. Bender in (Wenger 1956, p. 16).

<sup>7</sup> Menno's term for the scholars and clergy of the state church, including Roman Catholics and magisterial reformers.

<sup>8</sup> By which he referred to the militant and revolutionary Anabaptists sects, such as Münsterites, Davidians, and Batenburgers.

<sup>9</sup> See discussion on Martin Micron below for details of this shift in Menno's thinking about capital punishment.

<sup>10</sup> Łaski left East Frisia in 1548 at Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's request to go to London as superintendent of the Strangers' Church, a congregation of continental Reformed exiles. When Mary acceded to the throne in 1553, Łaski and company were forced to flee London in the fall of the year. After their ship later became frozen and stranded in Wismar harbor, Menno and his followers gave them assistance. See (Williams 1992, p. 734).

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