

**An Examination of the Visions of Ursula Jost in the Context of Early Anabaptism and Late
Medieval Christianity**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of my thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

In early 1530, the lay preacher and recent Anabaptist convert Melchior Hoffman published a series of seventy-seven visions by the Strasbourg butcher's wife Ursula Jost. In its own day this series of visions, which is the longest extant sixteenth-century document written from the perspective of an Anabaptist woman, attracted the attention of Strasbourg's authorities and became popular among Dutch Anabaptists who followed Hoffman. In the twentieth century the visions have been studied by Klaus Deppermann and Lois Barrett, who came to widely diverging conclusions on Ursula's values and her place in the Anabaptist movement. Deppermann saw her as an angry, even bloodthirsty woman whose visions revealed "a murderous hatred of existing society" and inspired violent actions of the part of other Anabaptists, while Barrett argued that Ursula's visions reflected "the Anabaptist-Mennonite ethic of establishing the reign of God nonviolently."

In light of the radically different conclusions reached by Deppermann and Barrett, this study conducts a fresh re-examination of the visions of Ursula Jost in order to determine what Ursula's example reveals about sixteenth-century Anabaptism. It investigates her relationship to her own city of Strasbourg, the broader Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century, and the breadth of the late medieval religious tradition in which Ursula and her contemporaries were raised. Contra Barrett's claim that Ursula's visions uphold a nonviolent Anabaptist-Mennonite ethic, this study argues that, while Ursula belongs to the Anabaptist tradition, she does not belong to the Mennonite tradition. Instead, her example illustrates the diversity and heterogeneity of the first Anabaptists in contrast to the relative homogeneity of the Hutterite, Mennonite, and Swiss Brethren traditions that survived past the mid-sixteenth century, as well as the indebtedness of the Anabaptist religious tradition to the late medieval religious tradition that preceded it.

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Dedication

To my professors and mentors in the history faculties at St. Thomas University in Fredericton and at the University of Waterloo. I appreciate the way you go above and beyond in your willingness to offer support and advice and to challenge me. Thank you for helping me realize that there is nothing else I would rather be doing.

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INTRODUCTION

Historians of sixteenth-century Anabaptist women rely almost exclusively on chronicles, court records, letters, tracts, and sermons written and recorded by men. The majority of the relevant surviving sources are written to or about women, but rarely by them. Despite this limitation, a few sources survive in which women's voices can be heard more clearly. The longest of these sources, the visions of the prophetess Ursula Jost of Strasbourg, gives historians a rare opportunity to begin to examine the thought of a female member of the Anabaptist community in something close to her own words, despite the editorial touches provided by the Anabaptist lay preacher Melchior Hoffman, who saw the visions to publication and wrote their foreword and afterword.

Little is known of Ursula's life. She lived in or near the imperial city of Strasbourg in the first part of the sixteenth century and was an adult when the Reformation began to gain ground in the city. She was married to a butcher named Lienhard and, no later than 1524, Lienhard began to experience a series of visions that resulted in his incarceration in a Strasbourg mental institution. After his release, in late 1524, Ursula eagerly sought and soon began to experience her own visions. In 1530, Melchior Hoffman published her visions in a booklet entitled *Prophetische Gesicht unnd Offenbarung der Götlichen Würckung zu diser Letsten Zeit (Prophetic Visions and Revelations of the Divine Purpose in this Last of Times)*. He also published a book of Lienhard's visions, but no full copies survive. From Strasbourg, copies of the Josts' visions spread into the Netherlands, where Hoffman travelled as an itinerant preacher.¹

¹ Hoffmann's follower Cornelijs Poldermann testified to their popularity in the Netherlands in a letter to the Strasbourg Rat. See Manfred Krebs and Hans Georg Rott, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer. Vol. 8. Elsass II. Teil: Stadt Straßburg 1533-1535* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1960), 213.

In her own day, Ursula's visions aroused the suspicion of Strasbourg's magistrates and reformers and the interest of Hoffman's followers as far away as the Netherlands. In more recent historical scholarship, her visions received considerable attention from Klaus Deppermann in his 1979 study of the life and thought of Melchior Hoffman and formed the subject of a 1992 PhD dissertation by Lois Barrett. Deppermann focused on the Strasbourg prophets and their influence on Hoffman. He also provided much useful information about the growth of Anabaptism and other strains of religious dissent in sixteenth-century Strasbourg, which helped to contextualize Ursula and her thought. Deppermann took a negative view of the Josts' influence on Hoffman. Ursula's visions, he claimed, "[revealed] a murderous hatred of existing society and a willingness to resort to violence."² Under the influence of the Strasbourg prophets, he added, "militant-activist ideas infiltrated [Hoffman's] apocalypticism, whereas hitherto he had always urged caution."³ Deppermann also laid partial blame on the visions of Ursula (and the other Strasbourg prophets) for the apocalyptic fervour of the Dutch Melchiorites, who saw "apocalyptic signs in actual happenings; the excitement heightened by the visions thus found a release in action."⁴ In Deppermann's depiction Ursula emerged as an angry, even bloodthirsty, woman who inspired anger and militant action in others.

Lois Barrett's thesis situated Ursula within the broader Christian apocalyptic visionary tradition. She directly opposed Deppermann's portrayal of Ursula and argued that Ursula's work represented an example of an Anabaptist apocalyptic theology that was intimately connected

² Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation*, edited by Benjamin Drewery, translated by Malcolm Wren (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 210.

³ Deppermann, 218-219.

⁴ Deppermann, 206. Among the results of this action was the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster in 1534.

with “the Anabaptist-Mennonite ethic of establishing the reign of God nonviolently.”⁵ According to Barrett, Ursula’s visions belonged to a radical but ultimately pacifist genre of literature, and the examples of violence contained therein were not intended as calls to arms. Instead, the point of Ursula’s visions was to “exhort believers to anticipate a new heaven and a new earth and to experience a new birth...to follow the narrow way and to participate in the sufferings of Christ.”⁶

In light of the radically different conclusions reached by Deppermann and Barrett, Ursula’s visions deserve a fresh re-examination. This study will revisit who Ursula was, what she stood for, and why she mattered through a close examination of Ursula’s visions as well as an investigation of her broader sociopolitical and religious context. The first chapter will discuss the visions themselves in detail, with special attention to the symbols and themes that occur throughout them and the theological views that undergird them. The following three chapters will attempt to place Ursula and her visions in increasingly broader context. Chapter two will detail the major events that occurred in and around the city of Strasbourg from the inception of the Reformation to the publication of Ursula’s visions and will consider the degree to which those events—particularly the Peasants’ War and the persecution of the Anabaptists in 1529—shaped the content of the visions. Chapter three will examine the nascent Anabaptism of the 1520’s and 30’s and pinpoint Ursula’s place within the movement. Finally, the fourth chapter will consider how Ursula interacted with and borrowed from the late medieval religious tradition that preceded her, particularly on questions of wealth and poverty, direct revelation, and apocalypticism. In the end, this study proposes to address the following questions: Just who was Ursula? To what extent can she be considered Anabaptist? Which people, movements, and ideas

⁵ Lois Barrett, “Wreath of Glory: Ursula’s Prophetic Visions in the Context of Reformation and Revolt in Southwestern Germany, 1524-1530” (PhD diss., The Union Institute, 1992), 15.

⁶ Barrett, Abstract.

may have influenced her, and what kind of influence did she exert in turn? Finally, why does Ursula matter? What can a close examination of the visions of one woman tell us about sixteenth-century Anabaptism more generally?

CHAPTER ONE

URSULA'S VISIONS

Production and Publication

In early 1530, the radically-minded Strasbourg printer Balthasar Beck printed Ursula's visions in a booklet entitled *Prophetic Visions and Revelations of the Divine Purpose in this Last of Times, Which Were Revealed to a Lover of God Through the Holy Spirit Between the Years [15]24 and [15]30 of Which Seventy-Seven Are Recorded in this Book*. The newly Anabaptist lay preacher Melchior Hoffman (d. 1543) wrote a foreword and a conclusion to the visions, and it was his name that appeared on the pamphlet.⁷ Hoffman believed himself to be living in the last days before the second coming of Christ and his foreword referenced biblical apocalyptic literature, particularly John's Revelation. In view of Christ's perceived imminent return, Hoffman believed that in his own day "God's goodness [was] apportioned even more broadly" than when the biblical books themselves were written, and he anticipated a great contemporary outpouring of the Spirit.⁸ God had granted Ursula these visions (and presumably would continue to grant visions to her and others) "so that [God's faithful children]... are not led away from God to conjurors of nature, magicians, and astrologers seeking the power of life among the dead, but to look only to their God and eternal Father and to their Saviour, their power, strength, wisdom, life and eternal righteousness."⁹ He promised to publish the interpretations of Ursula's visions soon and to "offer explanation and disclosure wherein every good Christian may competently

⁷ Ursula Jost, *Prophetic Visions and Revelations of the Divine Purpose in this Last of Times, Which Were Revealed to a Lover of God Through the Holy Spirit Between the Years [15]24 and [15]30 of Which Seventy-Seven Are Recorded in this Book*, ed. Melchior Hoffman, trans. Walter Klaassen (Unpublished, property of Pandora Press), 1.

⁸ Jost, 1.

⁹ Jost, 2.

understand the power of God,” but he does not seem to have delivered the promised interpretation.¹⁰

Ursula initially remained anonymous, referred to only as a “lover of God” (*gottes liebhaberin*).¹¹ This may have been for her own protection; in April of 1530, in an effort to learn more about the book’s provenance, the Strasbourg magistrates interrogated the printers Balthasar Beck and Christian Engelhoff, who insisted that they knew nothing about Hoffman or “his woman.”¹² Ursula’s death later the same year, however, rendered any such protection unnecessary.¹³ Hoffman confirmed Ursula’s authorship in his 1532 tract *Van der Waren Hochprachtlichen Eynigen Magestadt Gottes und vann der Worhaftigen Menschwerdung des Ewigen Worttzs und des Aller Hochsten*, in which he reprinted two of Ursula’s visions in support of his Christology.¹⁴ The details revealed in the text of the visions—particularly her husband Lienhard’s 1524 incarceration in a mental hospital in Strasbourg—provide corroborative evidence of her authorship.¹⁵

Of the seventy-seven visions recorded in the pamphlet, the vast majority—fifty-eight, to be precise—took place in 1524-1525. After a hiatus of several years, in which she saw only one vision in early 1527, Ursula’s visions resumed “in the [15]29th year, eight weeks before

¹⁰ Jost, 2.

¹¹ Jost, 1.

¹² Manfred Krebs and Hans Georg Rott, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer. Vol. 7. Elsass I. Teil: Stadt Straßburg 1522-1532* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1959), 262.

¹³ George Huntston Williams lists the year of Ursula’s death as 1530. The date, or even the month, remains unknown. George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd edition (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth-Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 392.

¹⁴ Melchior Hoffman, “Van der Waren Hochprachtlichen Eynigen Magestadt Gottes und vann der Worhaftigen Menschwerdung des Ewigen Worttzs und des Aller Hochsten, ein Kurtze Zeucknus und Anweissung Allen Liebhabern der Ewigen Worheit (1532)” in S. Voolstra, *Het Woord is Flees Geworden: De Melchioritisch-Menniste Incarnatieleer* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1982), 229-245; Barrett, 4.

¹⁵ Barrett, 2.

Christmas.”¹⁶ They continued until early 1530, shortly before Beck published the visions.¹⁷ It is probable that at least some of Ursula’s visions were recorded long before their publication, and even long before she met Hoffman (who did not arrive in Strasbourg until 1529), since several of her visions from 1524-5 are precisely dated, and contain detailed descriptions of what she saw. Her vision of a deceptively beautiful green tree, a spider, and a serpent, for instance took place “eight days after Easter Monday” in 1525, and her vision of the dead rising from their graves took place the same year, on “the Sunday after Candlemas.”¹⁸ In all, she pinpoints an exact day for thirty-four of her visions from 1524-5, and it seems implausible that she simply committed this information to memory. Thus, as Hoffman readied the pamphlet for publication, it seems likely that he and the Josts had access to a preliminary record of at least some of Ursula’s visions. These visions may have been recorded by Ursula herself—there were some schools for poor children, male and female, in early sixteenth-century Strasbourg, and Ursula may have been a pupil and acquired basic literacy skills—or they may have been recorded by another member of the Josts’ circle.¹⁹ In any case, Ursula does not seem to have recorded every vision immediately after it took place. While many of her visions are dated, others are recorded without any indication of how much time had elapsed since the previous vision.

The visions, numbered from one to seventy-seven, appear to be arranged primarily in chronological order, since chronologically prior dated visions almost uniformly precede later dated visions. Whoever was responsible for the final order of the visions—likely either Hoffman or Ursula—did, however, deviate from chronological order on at least one occasion: Ursula

¹⁶ Jost, 24.

¹⁷ No exact publication date for Ursula’s visions is known, but they came to the Strasbourg city council’s attention at the latest on April 23, 1530, when Hoffman requested a church building for the city’s Anabaptists. See Barrett, 2.

¹⁸ Jost, 9; 19.

¹⁹ Barrett, 83.

revealed in the preamble to her first vision that her visions began “after the birth of Christ in the [15]24 year,” but immediately afterward she related her second vision, which took place in late September 1524.²⁰ The divisions between the numbered visions often seem arbitrary; for instance, the vision in which the Pope is dragged into hell and replaced by a young black-haired man appears to be a single vision, yet it spans the forty-first and forty-second visions.²¹ Conversely, Ursula’s seventy-seventh vision combines visions from both 1529 and 1530.²² Ursula or Hoffman may well have editorially divided the booklet into exactly seventy-seven visions for numerological reasons, given the association of the number seven with perfection and completion in Judeo-Christian thought.²³ This would certainly be consistent with both Hoffman’s and Ursula’s penchant for symbolism; the visions themselves are filled with richly symbolic images, although there do not seem to be any other obvious numerological references.

Symbols and Themes

The text of Ursula’s visions is evocative and full of rich and colourful imagery. Some of this imagery had recognizable biblical parallels. In her twenty fourth vision, for instance, Ursula described “two roadways. One of them, the smallest was fair and beautified. The other, to the left, was large and wide, and stretched from its entrance into deep darkness.”²⁴ This is almost certainly a reference to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in which the broad road leads to destruction and the narrow road leads to life.²⁵ Her sixty-seventh and sixty-eighth visions, in which she

²⁰ Jost, 3-4.

²¹ Jost, 13; 17.

²² Jost, 28-29.

²³ I am indebted to Lynda Weston for this suggestion. See Lynda Weston, *The World Turning Upside-Down: The Dreams/Visions of Ursula Jost* (Unpublished undergraduate paper: University of Waterloo RS 328, 1998). For more on the significance of the number seven, see Alva William Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 134-135.

²⁴ Jost, 13.

²⁵ Matthew 7:13-14, NIV.

heard trumpet blasts and saw the sun and the moon darken in the sky, echo apocalyptic prophecies from both the Old Testament book of Joel and the New Testament book of Revelation.²⁶ As for her seventy-third vision, the “flakes...which looked like snow” allude to God’s provision of manna for the Israelites in the desert.²⁷ Ursula, however, spiritualized God’s provision; she interpreted her vision as evidence that “God determined to feed his own who genuinely trusted in him with the eternal food of the Spirit and the true bread of heaven to overflowing.”²⁸

Other visions allude to Christian themes and images, if not to a specific Bible story or passage. The cross, for instance, makes an appearance in six of Ursula’s visions. In her eighth and tenth visions, the cross symbolized suffering and martyrdom, while in other visions it functioned as a triumphant symbol of God’s people.²⁹ In her sixteenth vision, the leader of a “large host who were very badly dressed but who were surrounded with much brightness” wielded a “fine cross of light” and, in her thirty-ninth vision, the cross even brought victory to a “great host of people” who, armed only with a large cross on a pole, faced a large group of soldiers.³⁰ In one later vision, a black cross stood atop a dungeon in which powerful men tortured prisoners.³¹ This black cross may be an inversion of the traditional Christian symbol and a recognition on Ursula’s part that those on every side of the sixteenth-century religious conflicts claimed the cross for themselves. In addition to her many visions of the cross, Ursula also

²⁶ C.f. Joel 2:31; Revelation 6:12; 8:6-13.

²⁷ Exodus 16.

²⁸ Jost, 27.

²⁹ Jost, 6-7.

³⁰ Jost, 9; 17.

³¹ Jost, 26.

experienced a vision of the future resurrection, in which the dead rose from their graves and “raised their hands to God.”³²

The most common religious theme in Ursula’s visions is that of reward and judgment. Examples of divine reward occurred in Ursula’s seventieth vision, in which a ladder made of bright rays descended from heaven and the Spirit of God led the elect up the ladder “with fullsome and exalted joy and jubilation,” and in her ninth vision, in which she saw a multitude of people being crowned before ascending to heaven.³³ Images of judgment recur even more frequently; the rod, a symbol of divine chastisement, appeared once in God’s own hand and once in the hand of a handsome youth, and in her thirty-eighth vision Ursula saw God the Father shooting fiery arrows.³⁴ Often, God’s judgment took the form of natural or unnatural precipitation, including rain, fire and brimstone, and boiling water poured over the earth.³⁵ Ursula also saw hell itself in her visions, and experienced demonic torment firsthand as a demonstration of “God’s divine judgment, his will, and his wrath.”³⁶

Throughout her visions, Ursula described visual dichotomies that reinforced the divide between good and evil. “A great, truly horrible darkness” surrounded a razed city and darkness preceded the entourage of a “great lordly leader” who left gloom in his wake, but the glory of the Lord often appeared surrounded by light.³⁷ The “beautiful bright white people” of Ursula’s twenty-first vision stood in sharp contrast to the black men who appeared throughout the visions, rarely in any positive light. She identified one such “horrible black man” as the “leader of the

³² Jost, 10.

³³ Jost, 6; 26.

³⁴ Jost, 15-16; 23.

³⁵ Jost, 14.

³⁶ Jost, 4; 16.

³⁷ Jost, 50, 64.

Turks,” and another black man turned into a stick covered with penises.³⁸ Unclean animals like toads and scorpions in Ursula’s fifth vision contrasted with the dovelike bird that carried the “cornerstone which God the Father has sent and laid in the foundation of Zion for the resurrection of many.”³⁹ Ursula generally correlated beauty with goodness, particularly in the case of the handsome young man who appeared throughout the visions. Conversely, she denounced the ugliest character in her visions, a “horribly misshapen old woman,” as a source of “false advice and cunning.”⁴⁰

Ursula’s visual contrast between good and evil was complicated, however, by the recognition that sometimes good outward appearances could be deceptive. In her seventy-fifth vision, Ursula saw “a large multitude of people [who]...appeared to be very humble” but who were in fact “sly villains and faithless reprobates whose hearts are unfaithful.”⁴¹ Sometimes, the same image could be positive or negative, depending on the vision in which it appeared. Ursula’s thirty-fourth and forty-seventh visions both featured a beautiful green tree: the first tree was life-giving, the source of a fountain that provided the common people with water, while the second tree was infested with poisonous animals (a spider and a snake).⁴² The second tree’s beautiful appearance was deceptive. It stood for “all those who are righteous in their own eyes. But before long their hidden malice denies God. Then the poisonous serpent comes and destroys everything in the apparently righteous person, and with its sting takes away everything in the heart that is good.”⁴³

³⁸ Jost, 9; 11; 27.

³⁹ Jost, 5; 20.

⁴⁰ Jost, 27.

⁴¹ Jost, 28.

⁴² Jost, 15; 19.

⁴³ Jost, 19.

Six common images recur frequently throughout Ursula's visions. The first of these, the handsome young man, appears to represent a quasi-messianic figure and is often depicted leading the elect. In Ursula's thirty-fifth vision, he was described as "exquisitely dressed," "shining with brilliant clarity," and holding rods—symbols of divine judgment—"with heroic strength."⁴⁴ In her fifty-third vision, Ursula depicted him riding and holding high a "large, beautiful banner, striped white and rosy-red," and in her fifty-ninth vision she saw him lying next to an old man and a man in armour.⁴⁵ The old man and the man in armour appeared dead, but the young man still looked healthy. In Ursula's twenty-first vision, the youth even assisted in punishing a fat (and therefore wealthy, given his ample access to food) man, and in her forty-second vision he succeeded the Pope, who had just been dragged into darkness.⁴⁶ God Himself approved the young man's replacement of the Pope, and "a crown was lowered from heaven and placed on his head by the glory without human hands."⁴⁷

Another common image that recurs throughout Ursula's visions is that of the wreath. The symbol of the wreath was common among Germanic-speaking peoples and symbolized victory, joy and salvation.⁴⁸ In Ursula's visions, the wreath generally served as a sign or even an embodiment of God's salvation. Sometimes the wreaths were green and leafy, and at other times they were immaterial, composed of light or rainbows. In Ursula's twenty-seventh vision, she saw two maidens wearing fiery wreaths—a possible inversion of the typical symbol of salvation, since the two women were promptly led to damnation by a strangely dressed man.⁴⁹ When the

⁴⁴ Jost, 15.

⁴⁵ Jost, 22=23.

⁴⁶ Jost, 11; 17.

⁴⁷ Jost, 17.

⁴⁸ Boris Matthews, *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols: Symbols from Art, Archaeology, Mythology, Literature, and Religion* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1993), 219.

⁴⁹ Jost, 13.

wreath was not worn by individuals, it was held out to them as a tangible symbol of salvation. In Ursula's sixteenth vision, she saw "a large host...surrounded by much brightness" and led by a young man carrying the cross. This group, which appeared to be a group of the elect, marched toward a man who holds a wreath on a stick, and the people raised their hands toward the wreath.⁵⁰ In Ursula's nineteenth vision, a wreath literally became a means of salvation for drowning people, who reached for it and were lifted from the water.

Children also appear throughout Ursula's visions and are always portrayed in a positive light. They appear to be representative of innocence and at times to stand in for the elect. Christ Himself took on a childlike form in Ursula's twelfth and twenty-second visions and, in her seventy-sixth vision, a "pure brightness" briefly took on the form of a child before becoming a beautiful wreath.⁵¹ On two occasions, Ursula depicted children ascending to heaven. Two rays of sunlight descended from heaven in her forty-ninth vision and formed a ladder that "young tender children" could climb.⁵² Her fifty-first vision likewise showed small children—this time graced with colourful wings—ascending on rays of sunlight and her fifty-fourth vision showed a bright and translucent stone taking in "a great host of people who were as tender as little innocent children."⁵³ Given the positive associations of bright light throughout Ursula's visions, this fate, although difficult to decipher, appears to be a good one.

A fourth common image throughout Ursula's visions is the ambiguous image of fire. Fire has many destructive properties, but can also symbolize purification—God Himself is portrayed as a "consuming fire" in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy and again in the New

⁵⁰ Jost, 9.

⁵¹ Jost, 8; 12; 28.

⁵² Jost, 20.

⁵³ Jost, 21-22.

Testament book of Hebrews.⁵⁴ However, fire is also frequently associated with hell. In Ursula's visions, fire most often appeared as a manifestation of God's judgment. He rained fire from heaven in both Ursula's thirty-first and thirty-second visions, and He shot fiery arrows in her thirty-eighth vision.⁵⁵ However, in her forty-fourth vision, Ursula witnessed the harrowing of hell, in which God rescued people from fire; she saw a large and roaring fire filled with people, including the patriarchs, and watched as the Glory of the Lord led them out. At other times, the fire imagery was completely ambiguous, especially when paired with other unclear images. The lion who "sprayed fire on everyone until there was fire everywhere" in Ursula's seventeenth vision, for instance, could equally well represent Christ or Satan.⁵⁶

Ursula's visions also contain several military references to soldiers, cavalry, mercenaries, and military leaders. At times, Ursula explicitly (as in her seventy-fourth vision) or implicitly (like the "army of black men" in her sixth vision) identified these soldiers with the Turks.⁵⁷ Soldiers in Ursula's visions were never portrayed positively. They were proud—a company of mercenaries in her twenty-third vision all wore peacock feathers in their caps as a symbol of this—and caused great destruction.⁵⁸ In her thirty-ninth vision, the soldiers directly opposed (and were vanquished by) the host of common people carrying the cross.⁵⁹ However, the soldiers' violence sometimes served to bring about God's judgment; a black man riding on a horse turned

⁵⁴ Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrew 12:29, NIV.

⁵⁵ Jost, 14; 16.

⁵⁶ Jost, 10. The lion is both a positive and a negative symbol in the Bible. Jesus is referred to as the Lion of tribe of Judah (c.f. Revelation 5:5) while Satan is described as a "roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (c.f. I Peter 5:8).

⁵⁷ Jost, 5; 27.

⁵⁸ Jost, 12.

⁵⁹ Jost, 17.

into a scale—a symbol of justice—in Ursula’s seventy-second vision and, in her seventy-fourth vision, the power of God accompanied the Turkish military leader.⁶⁰

The final image that recurs throughout Ursula’s visions is the rainbow. The rainbow symbolizes hope—in the story of Noah’s Ark, God gave the rainbow as a symbol of His promise never to flood the earth again—and also judgment, since in medieval representations of the Last Judgment Christ was often depicted enthroned on a rainbow.⁶¹ In Ursula’s visions, the rainbows brought light and vivid colour; in her forty-fifth vision a rainbow’s light illuminated the entire earth, turning it “white and yellow in its brightness.”⁶² The rainbow in Ursula’s seventy-seventh vision formed a wreath, and Ursula heard God say: “If this wreath is put on the head and everyone is prepared for betterment, the Lord will be revealed and known and seen immediately in great power.”⁶³ In two of Ursula’s visions, rainbows even appeared threefold, possibly as a reference to God’s triune nature.⁶⁴

Ursula frequently described her visions in vivid colours, and these colours often had symbolic overtones. The abovementioned contrast of white and black is the most common, but not the only, example of this. In her vision of a wall covered in red and white roses, Ursula explicitly stated the symbolism of both colours: “The wall signifies our Lord Jesus Christ, the white roses his frail body and the red his rosy-red blood which he shed for the whole of Israel.”⁶⁵ Red often symbolized blood in Ursula’s visions—she even used the words red (*rot*), rose-red (*rosinrot*) and blood-coloured (*blutfarb*) more or less interchangeably. At other times, however,

⁶⁰ Jost, 27.

⁶¹ Genesis 9:12-16, NIV; Matthews, 155.

⁶² Jost, 18.

⁶³ Jost, 29.

⁶⁴ Jost, 12; 25.

⁶⁵ Jost, 23.

the colours did not seem to hold any latent symbolism and simply testified to Ursula's powers of observation and description.

Theology

Ursula's visions are by no means a work of systematic theology. Nevertheless, several of her visions—particularly those for which she provides an interpretation—offer insight into her beliefs about God, the supernatural, humanity, and more. On theological stances affirmed by Catholic, Protestants, and Anabaptists alike, such as the doctrine of the Trinity (the idea that the Christian God is one God made manifest in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), Ursula's visions generally demonstrated a basic understanding of the orthodox position.⁶⁶ In her eleventh vision, she saw an image of the Father holding the Son (presumably in the form of an infant, since the vision took place on Christmas Eve) on His lap, with the Holy Spirit hovering above them.⁶⁷ Her twenty-second vision evinced an even deeper understanding of the essential unity of the three persons of the Trinity.

At night on the Friday before St. Matthias' Day in the [15]25th year, in the evening at twilight, I saw the glory of the Lord coming to me, surround me, and open up to me. It divided into three parts. I saw three glories, one standing above the other. In the middle glory appeared a figure, as though a newborn child stood there, having just come from the mother's womb, so little it was. But it appeared with an exalted, clear brilliant light. After that I saw that the three glories merged again so that of the three glories only one was left.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ On the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, see Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007). The vast majority of sixteenth-century European Christians accepted the doctrine of the Trinity. Notable exceptions include the Aragonese intellectual Michael Servetus who was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553 and the Polish Brethren, who separated from Poland's Reformed Church in 1565 over the question of the Trinity.

⁶⁷ Jost, 7.

⁶⁸ Jost, 12.

The three glories appear to represent the three persons of the Trinity, and they are fundamentally of the same substance, just as in Trinitarian theology Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same divine substance, made manifest in three persons.

The persons of the Trinity also made individual appearances in Ursula's visions. She addressed God the Father throughout her visions, and saw Him appear alone in the third and thirty-eighth visions.⁶⁹ The most prevalent (though perhaps the least clearly defined) member of the Trinity in Ursula's writings, however, was the Holy Spirit, to whom she commonly referred as the "glory of the Lord." For Ursula and her husband Lienhard, the supernatural actions of the Holy Spirit were not relegated to a bygone era; they were a contemporary reality. The Holy Spirit did not need intermediaries such as priests, or even the written Word of God, to speak to God's people, but revealed truth to them directly by means of visions and other supernatural gifts. Precedents for such direct revelation existed not only in the biblical text, but in the ecclesiastical history of the Middle Ages. Men and women both—among them Hildegard of Bingen, Joachim of Fiore, and Catherine of Siena—experienced visions which they believed came from the Holy Spirit, and kept written accounts of those visions, which they sometimes circulated for the spiritual benefit of others. Instances of direct revelation could also heighten the apocalyptic expectations of those who were familiar with Joel 2:28-29, in which the Hebrew prophet described the outpouring of God's Spirit onto all people, regardless of sex or social station, as a sign of the last days.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Jost, 4, 16.

⁷⁰ Melchior Hoffman himself shared this expectation, and referenced the book of Joel as part of his justification (Deppermann, 64.) Ursula herself never makes mention of Joel—indeed, she does not make a practice of quoting Scripture in her visions—but the tone of her visions certainly indicates that she believed the time of God's judgment was close at hand.

Ursula did not simply receive her visions, but actively sought them. Lienhard had experienced a certain number of visions prior to 1524, and he and Ursula prayed together “to God the almighty, merciful Father, that he would grant [her] too to see the marvels of his hand.”⁷¹ That Ursula herself asked God for visions demonstrates that she believed them to be a plausible, or even likely, way for Him to interact with His people. Lienhard’s own supernatural experiences certainly contributed to Ursula’s confidence in God’s continued revelation, but she may also have been aware of the examples of some biblical or medieval mystics and visionaries such as Joachim of Fiore or Catherine of Siena.

Ursula herself enjoyed a highly interactive communion with God. While her experience mainly consisted of God showing her visions and sometimes speaking to her, it occasionally took less traditional forms. In her thirteenth vision, the glory of the Lord “shook [her] heart and...moved [her] gently to laugh.”⁷² Ursula’s forty-fourth vision had an even more playful character; after the glory of the Lord surrounded her she began to experience a tickling sensation, which persisted until she started to laugh.⁷³ Such moments of informality served to highlight the personal and intimate nature of Ursula’s interactions with God. Although her visions contain awe descriptions of His power, majesty, and wrath, they also show Him deigning to interact with one of His creatures on an individual level, and playfully spending time with her as well as showing her grandiose images and spiritual truths. God also intervened in the lives of His people as they sought to obey Him and live holy lives. She saw in her forty-sixth vision that God would

⁷¹ Jost, 3.

⁷² Jost, 8.

⁷³ Jost, 18.

“bestow upon [the righteous] his grace in eternity so that they [would] resist all temptation on earth.”⁷⁴

The most powerful supernatural being in Ursula’s visions was unquestionably God Himself and most supernatural aspects of Ursula’s visions—the Holy Spirit, heaven and hell, miraculous judgments, visions, and demons—had biblical attestation. However, she also briefly acknowledged the possibility of extrabiblical supernatural forces. Her second vision described an apparition which she thought was either a ghost or a “spectre of melancholy”; this apparition caused her to experience “great fear and dread.”⁷⁵

In her fourth vision, however, it was God Himself who inspired terror in Ursula. She and Lienhard prayed for God to show them “his divine judgement, his will, and his wrath.”⁷⁶ That night, she felt herself surrounded by a swarm of demons who attempted to drag her away, presumably to hell. She felt “great agony of heart” and prayed for God to save her from the evil spirits surrounding her. After she cried out three times the demons fell and were dragged away themselves.⁷⁷ Tellingly, however, Ursula connected the demons not with the evil work of the devil, but with the will and wrath of God. She seems to have believed that even the demons do the bidding of God in bringing judgment on sinners, though this does not suggest that she thought they obeyed consciously or willingly.

God could also find unwitting servants in the natural world, as was the case in Ursula’s seventy-fourth vision.

The glory of the Lord again appeared and opened itself to me and I saw a large

⁷⁴ Jost, 19.

⁷⁵ Jost, 4.

⁷⁶ Jost, 4.

⁷⁷ Jost, 4.

and spreading heath. On it I saw a big horrible black man riding toward me in gloomy darkness. A bright light preceded him. I wondered what this could mean when the glory of the Lord revealed to my heart that this man was the leader of the Turks and the light which preceded him the power of God. He will commit great violence and distress before he will bring about his own end.⁷⁸

Ursula was certainly not intimating that the leader of the Turks was righteous, or that he sought to obey God. After all, she referred to him as a “a big horrible black man,” and predicted that he would “bring about his own end.” Nevertheless, the “great violence and distress” he caused was God’s judgment on Europe and, as an instrument of God’s wrath, the leader of the Turks was preceded by the power of God Himself.

In most instances of divine wrath in Ursula’s visions, however, God enacted the punishments Himself. In her fifty-seventh vision, she saw a large hand holding a rod. The hand was later revealed to her as “the strong hand of the Most High, the God of Israel. His wrath is against all people. If they do not repent, he will punish them severely.”⁷⁹ This punishment took several forms. In the thirty-eighth vision, Ursula saw God shooting fiery arrows, while in the thirtieth vision boiling water flooded the earth.⁸⁰ In a scene reminiscent of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, “water, fire, sulphur, and pitch” rained from heaven in the thirty-first vision.⁸¹ However, God’s judgment was occasionally accompanied by an offer of mercy. In Ursula’s nineteenth vision, water poured from heaven and covered the earth until people began to drown. However, a large hand appeared from heaven holding a wreath, and those who swam towards it were saved.⁸² Ursula was certainly no believer in universal salvation—God poured out his wrath often in her visions, seemingly in a final manner with a

⁷⁸ Jost, 27.

⁷⁹ Jost, 23.

⁸⁰ Jost, 14, 16.

⁸¹ Jost, 14.

⁸² Jost, 10.

punitive purpose rather than temporarily with a restorative purpose. While He did sometimes provide a means of escape from His judgment, He only saved those who are willing to take initiative in moving toward that means of escape.

While the idea of a powerful God in control of the universe might terrify those who feared being sent to hell, it could also provide a great deal of comfort. Ursula's visions demonstrated a clear confidence in the sovereignty of God. He could bring His will to pass even through ungodly men like the leader of the Turks. He was also sovereign over the elements; in Ursula's forty-eighth vision God exercised His control over the weather, alternating wind, rain, sunshine, and clouds. "As it pleased the Lord, so it happened," Ursula summarized.⁸³ Her third vision, however, contains her clearest and most poetic description of God's sovereignty over the earth.

In the brightness of the glory I saw a figure that looked like a lattice, and in the spaces of the lattice there appeared stars, bright as burning candles. Then, inside the lattice I saw appearing a form like God the Father himself. He spread out his almighty right hand. In the left hand I saw what looked like a sphere. Then the glory of the Lord spoke to me and said: If I withdrew my hand what would all of you on the earth be? You would be altogether nothing.⁸⁴

In Ursula's view, the earth and all its inhabitants depended completely on God. Only thanks to the care He took for His creation did they amount to anything at all.

God's care for His creation also led Him to offer salvation to humanity and establish a community of saints on earth. Ursula believed that this salvation that God offered required both human and divine participation. Her forty-sixth vision and its interpretation provide the clearest explanation of her views on the subject.

⁸³ Jost, 20.

⁸⁴ Jost, 4. The sphere can be clearly identified with the earth.

Following that I saw in the glory of the Lord a great barrel lying on the ground. It was well held together with many hoops. I was amazed and considered what it might mean. The glory closed itself within me and said: The barrel signifies those people who are righteous in true faith and in the right words and works. God will bind them in many ways, that is, that he will bestow upon them his grace in eternity so that they will resist all temptation on earth.⁸⁵

God played a key role in the salvation process. He bound the elect, gave them His grace, and enabled them to resist temptation. Nevertheless, this divine provision was conditional. Only those who were “righteous in true faith and in the right words and works” could receive God’s salvation. For Ursula, salvation was a partnership between God and humanity, in which human beings chose to follow God in faith and deed and God’s freely given grace enabled them to do so.

In fact, some of the imagery in Ursula’s visions suggests that she also believed those who behaved unrighteously could lose their salvation. The symbol of the wreath, usually associated with salvation and righteousness, appears throughout Ursula’s visions. A wreath functioned as a life-saving device for drowning people on one occasion, and Ursula often described the wreaths as beautiful and those who wore them as handsome without any indication that such appearances were deceptive.⁸⁶ However, the wreaths were not necessarily a permanent guarantee. Her seventy-seventh vision even showed two men losing their wreaths.

I also saw in the [15]30th year that there was a small, narrow path in front of which stood two men crowned with green wreaths. They had spades and made a ditch for the small path. Then I saw a youth approaching who wanted to walk on the narrow path. But the two blocked his way and wanted to push him into the ditch which they had dug. After a while, however, the youth prevailed and walked steadily on the narrow path without interference. I saw that the two men remained at their ditch they had dug and that the green wreaths on their heads became quite

⁸⁵ Jost, 19.

⁸⁶ Jost, 10, *passim*.

withered as though they had been burned and withered by a hot fire.⁸⁷

By attempting to prevent the young man from walking down the narrow path (easily identifiable as the narrow path that leads to life, which Jesus mentioned Matthew 7:14), the men forfeited their own marks of salvation. The two young women who appeared in Ursula's twenty-seventh vision with their wreaths on fire similarly made a wrong choice by allowing themselves to be led into darkness down a wide path by "a man... who was wildly and oddly dressed."⁸⁸ In contrast with the narrow road mentioned above, the wide path led them to damnation.

Obedience to Christ was important for Ursula and her visions demonstrate her conviction that such obedience often entailed suffering and persecution. She probably viewed Lienhard's own stay in a mental institution as part of that persecution, since she referred to his experience as imprisonment (lit. *bestrickung*).⁸⁹ In her eighth vision she saw a martyr-figure hanging like Christ on a cross.⁹⁰ She increased her references to suffering and persecution in her later visions (those from 1529/30), which took place after the Strasbourg magistracy had begun to expel and imprison Anabaptist leaders. Her sixty-ninth vision emphasized the reality of suffering for every God-fearing individual.

Then, in the glory of the Lord I saw in the [15]29th year a large mountain the colour of blood. Near it I saw standing a man also red as blood. I was amazed by it and the glory of the Lord spoke in my heart and said: This mountain signifies the Mount of Olives of every person who walks in the fear of the Lord and in love. These too will sweat blood as Christ their Lord did on the same mountain.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Jost, 29.

⁸⁸ Jost, 13.

⁸⁹ Jost, 3.

⁹⁰ Jost, 6.

⁹¹ Jost, 26.

Her seventieth vision showed a form of suffering more familiar to her contemporaries: she saw a dungeon in which “many ferocious prominent men” tortured prisoners, who were presumably experiencing some of the earthly consequences of following Christ.⁹²

While Ursula viewed suffering as part and parcel of walking “in the fear of the Lord and in love,” she also realized that suffering often resulted from unjust actions on the part of other human beings. The theme of powerful men oppressing the common people recurred often in her visions. In addition to the prominent men who tortured the prisoners in the dungeon, she saw a vision of powerful clerics who had “ropes over their shoulders and to those ropes were tethered many common people...[whom they] pulled and dragged...over sticks and stones.”⁹³

She also felt that those in power tried to withhold from the common people things that might benefit them. In her thirty-fourth vision, for example, she described a beautiful tree with a fountain flowing from it. Two men then appear and block the fountain with sod.⁹⁴ God, however, sided firmly with the common people, and His purposes prevailed in spite of those who attempted to thwart Him.

Then I saw the water of the fountain rising above itself and flowed out to the branches a thousand-fold. Following that I saw coming a great host of people of the common sort. They drank the drops that dripped out of the branches and they all had enough. Then I saw that they raised their hands and heads to God the eternal Father and gave him exalted praise and thanks.⁹⁵

The exact meaning of the water flowing from the fountain is unclear: it may represent a spiritual resource such as the Holy Spirit or the Scriptures, or it may stand for the more basic needs of the common people. In either case, Ursula was keenly aware that powerful people tried to deny the

⁹² Jost, 26.

⁹³ Jost, 6.

⁹⁴ Jost, 15.

⁹⁵ Jost, 15.

commoners what God had provided for them, but that God's purposes would ultimately prevail. God also intervened on behalf of the oppressed in her seventieth vision, after the prisoners had been tortured by the prominent men. He caused rays of light to descend from heaven like ladders, and "led the elect up the ladder with fullsome and exalted joy and jubilation."⁹⁶ Ursula's visions demonstrate a decidedly apocalyptic outlook; she fully expects God to intervene powerfully to judge the wicked and rescue the oppressed.

If God worked on behalf of the oppressed in Ursula's visions, he rarely sided with the clergy, who often appeared as the oppressors. Her fourteenth vision showed many common people using various farming implements to "faithfully...[till] the whole earth;" while a "large host of bishops, spiritual prelates, and Scripture wizards (*schriftgelerten*)" merely stood and watched them, though they stood to benefit from the common people's labour.⁹⁷ In a more explicitly violent vision, the clergy dragged the common people over rocks using ropes.⁹⁸ The clergy's corruption, however, did not go unpunished. Ursula's twenty-first vision showed wealthy men and clergy members suffering in their turn.

Then, in front of the mountains I saw a heath on which appeared a large host of people who were all black. I observed that they were dragging a large fat man lying in a trough. Immediately I saw a youth approaching dressed all in white. He joined in, pushing the man in the trough from behind. I saw that they pushed him into a dark hole. Then I saw that after this a bishop with his head split open was pulled and dragged⁹⁹ on a large chair. He too was pushed into the dark where the other man was.

The fat man (who symbolized the wealthy) and the bishop were largely punished by the host of black people (the Turks), a sign of God accomplishing his purposes through the ungodly.

⁹⁶ Jost, 26.

⁹⁷ Jost, 8. Anabaptists often used the term "Schriftgelehrten" pejoratively to describe Reformed preachers, who knew the Scriptures but lacked the Holy Spirit to guide their interpretation.

⁹⁸ Jost, 6.

⁹⁹ Jost, 11.

However, a young man dressed in white also joined in the violence. The figure of the handsome youth, often dressed in white, appeared several times throughout Ursula's visions, and always as a positive (at times even messianic) figure.

In another set of visions, however, it was God who punished the clergy directly. In her forty-first vision, Ursula saw the Pope himself being dragged into darkness.¹⁰⁰ In the following vision, a handsome black-haired young man replaced the Pope, with God's own seal of approval. As Ursula watched, "a crown was lowered from heaven and placed on his head by the glory without human hands."¹⁰¹ This suggests that Ursula had no problem with the idea of a church hierarchy—after all, God replaced the Pope with another godly leader rather than abolishing the office completely—but felt that those currently holding clerical positions were not performing their duties properly.

The theology of Ursula's visions was unquestionably shaped by her identification with the lower classes. Ursula's God reigned over the planet and always saw the oppression of the common people. He was both willing and able to intervene on their behalf. He punished their oppressors and provided for their needs, both physical and spiritual. From beginning to end, Ursula's visions rang with the conviction that a just God governed the universe and, although the wicked might appear to prosper for a time, He would vindicate the oppressed through whatever means He chose, and He would do so promptly.

¹⁰⁰ Jost, 17.

¹⁰¹ Jost, 17.

CHAPTER TWO

URSULA AND THE STRASBOURG CONTEXT, 1520-1530

The decade in which Ursula experienced her visions was marked by social and religious upheaval. In her own town of Strasbourg, Ursula saw the introduction of evangelical reforms, culminating in the abolition of the Mass in 1529 and the removal of the images that remained in Strasbourg's churches in 1530.¹⁰² She witnessed the peasants of Alsace joining together in an uprising, and she and her fellow Strasbourgeois saw the influx of refugees who poured into the city a month later after the Duke of Lorraine crushed the peasant army at Saverne. She lived through the proliferation of new radical religious groups whose visions of reform—like her own—differed from those of evangelical preachers. In the midst of domestic upheaval, Ursula and her contemporaries also heard rumours of a Turkish invasion. While Ursula's visions by no means represent a chronicle of events in Strasbourg, the context in which they occurred did influence their content. This chapter will examine the socio-religious context in which Ursula experienced her visions and consider to what degree that context may have shaped them.

The Reformation Comes to Strasbourg

As was the case throughout the Holy Roman Empire, many varieties of anticlerical sentiment could be found in Strasbourg in the early years of the sixteenth century. Clergymen, magistrates, and common people alike raised stock criticisms of the clergy as a whole: they accumulated wealth at the expense of the poor, they lived immoral lives, and they rarely underwent sufficient discipline for their criminal actions. The case of Canon Johan Hepp of the

¹⁰² Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Strasbourg and the Reform: A Study in the Process of Change* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), 172; Lee Wandel Palmer, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126-127.

Chapter of Saint Thomas exacerbated anticlerical feelings in Strasbourg. In 1513, Hepp seduced a young woman; she took ill while in his home, and she died shortly thereafter. Many Strasbourg citizens held Hepp responsible for her death. Strasbourg's civil authorities arrested him and delivered him immediately to the Bishop, who believed Hepp's plea of innocence and released him after a light penance. Hepp, however, held a grudge against the city's magistrates and launched a suit against them in Rome. He averred that they had violated clerical privilege by arresting him. He won his case after a protracted lawsuit, but even after Rome's courts had ruled in Hepp's favour Canons Jean-André and Côme Wolf of the Chapter of Young Saint Peter still felt the need for further action on his behalf. They targeted Johann Murner, the lawyer who had represented the city in Rome, for retribution and subjected one of his close female relatives to abuse. The chapter offered Murner financial compensation, but the incident nevertheless reinforced Strasbourg's citizens' anticlerical sentiments.¹⁰³

Some of the most virulent criticisms of Strasbourg's clergy, however, came from its own ranks. The priest Johann Geiler von Kayserberg enjoyed great popularity as a preacher in Strasbourg from 1478 until his death in 1510. Geiler remained a staunchly orthodox Catholic throughout his life, and he supported clerical immunity and opposed the expropriation of the church. Nevertheless, he was quick to criticize his fellow clerics for moral failings. He called on Strasbourg's bishop to reform the clergy; monks and nuns, he charged, lived together in sin and even killed the children that resulted from their illegitimate unions, and in return they received

¹⁰³ For the story of Hepp, see Francis Rapp, *Réformes et Réformation à Strasbourg: Église et Société dans le Diocèse de Strasbourg, 1450-1525* (Paris: Ophrys 1974), 485; William Stafford, *Domesticating the Clergy: The Inception of the Reformation in Strasbourg, 1522-1524* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1976), 115. Rapp and Stafford disagree over the victim's relationship to Murner. Rapp calls her his sister and Stafford his daughter. The exact nature of the abuses perpetrated against the unfortunate woman is not specified.

laughably light penances.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Geiler decried the fact that the Church poured its financial resources into Church buildings and ornamentations while the poor—who bore God’s image and needed the Church’s assistance—went hungry.¹⁰⁵ Although Geiler’s criticisms of the clergy stemmed from a deep respect for the “exalted, ‘separate’ character of the clergy,” they nonetheless added to already strong anticlerical sentiment in Strasbourg.¹⁰⁶ Geiler may even have realized as much; two years before his death, he decried from his pulpit the laypeople’s “ancient hatred” of the clergy.¹⁰⁷

Anticlericalism by itself proved insufficient to curtail the Catholic Church’s hegemony in Strasbourg, but it did provide fodder for the burgeoning evangelical movement that spread to Strasbourg in the sixteenth century. Strasbourg printers began printing Martin Luther’s new writings in 1519, and they circulated them throughout the city, along with anonymous pamphlets from other like-minded authors.¹⁰⁸ Several of Strasbourg’s intellectuals expressed an early interest in Luther’s teachings, among them the lawyer Nicolaus Gerbel and the Carthusian monk Otto Brunfels. Within two years, clergymen began to preach Luther’s doctrines to the people. The bishop of Strasbourg dismissed Peter Phillips von Rumersberg in 1520 and Tilman von Lyn in 1521 for their Lutheran preaching, but later that same year, when Matthis Zell read Luther’s work directly from his pulpit at St. Laurence chapel and defended the Saxon reformer publicly, he kept his post despite the bishop’s displeasure.¹⁰⁹ Zell garnered popular support in large part by capitalizing on existing anticlericalism, and other evangelical reformers soon joined

¹⁰⁴ Chrisman, 69.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Scott, “The Reformation Between Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Reflections on Recent Writings on the German Reformation,” *German History* 26:3 (Fall 2008): 411.

¹⁰⁶ Stafford, 196.

¹⁰⁷ Rapp, 419.

¹⁰⁸ Marc Lienhard, “Aufbruch und Entfaltung” in *Strassburg und die Reformation* (Kehl, Morstadt, 1982), 18.

¹⁰⁹ Chrisman, 99-100.

him. Martin Bucer, a former Dominican married to a former nun and Wolfgang Capito, a humanist scholar renowned for his proficiency in Hebrew, both arrived in Strasbourg in 1523. Bucer came to the city already committed to the evangelical movement, and Capito joined the evangelical movement within months of his arrival, bringing with him his protégé Caspar Hedio. The four of them spearheaded the Reformation in Strasbourg.¹¹⁰

The evangelical reformers began to break down some of the distinctions between themselves and the other Strasbourgeois. They purchased *Bürgerrecht* and thus placed themselves under the Strasbourg magistracy's authority and protection. Even more controversially, they began to take wives. Bucer arrived in Strasbourg in April of 1523 already firmly estranged from the Catholic Church. The former Dominican's marriage—to a nun, no less—had signalled a firm and irrevocable break with Roman tradition. The first clergyman to take such a step in Strasbourg was Anton Firn, the curate of St. Thomas. Firn defied canon law and married his housekeeper and long-time mistress in October of 1523, and his chapter promptly deposed him as a result. Firn refused to accept his deposition and continued to fill his priestly role.¹¹¹ Mathis Zell, on December 3 of the same year, followed suit and married Katharina Schutz, the pious daughter of Strasbourg artisans. As a further demonstration of their opposition to the Catholic Church and an implicit affirmation of the priesthood of all believers, the couple took communion in both kinds at their wedding.¹¹² Capito and Hedio both married the

¹¹⁰ Chrisman, 108-113

¹¹¹ Chrisman, 132-133; Bernd Moeller, "L'Édit Strasbourgeois sur la Prédication du 1er Décembre 1523 dans son Contexte Historique" in *Strasbourg au Coeur Religieux du XVIe Siècle: Hommage à Lucien Febvre: Actes du Colloque International de Strasbourg, 25-29 Mai 1975*, edited by Georges Livet (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1977), 51-52.

¹¹² Rene Bornert, *La Réforme Protestante Du Culte à Strasbourg Au XVIe Siècle (1523-1598): Approche Sociologique Et Interprétation Théologique* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1. The Protestant Reformers repudiated the standard Catholic ritual of communion, in which only the priest drank the communion wine. Instead, they followed the example of the Hussites in Bohemia and offered both the bread and the wine to the laity, which "did much to undermine the separation between priest and laity inculcated by the Catholic mass." See Amy Nelson Burnett, "The Social History of Communion and the Reformation of the Eucharist," *Past and Present* 211:1 (2011): 90.

following year. Meanwhile, the evangelical clergy continued their modifications of Strasbourg's ecclesiastical practices apace. Anton Firn and Diebold Schwartz both celebrated Mass in German in 1524, and Firn simultaneously offered communion in both kinds.¹¹³

The evangelical faction enjoyed a great deal of popular support in Strasbourg. Zell's 1521 sermon series on Romans—his first after his commitment to preach only “the pure word of Jesus Christ”—proved so popular that he moved from his chapel to the much larger Cathedral where Geiler had preached a decade earlier. When the canons refused to grant him access to Geiler's pulpit, some sympathetic carpenters built a portable pulpit for him instead, and he continued to preach to large crowds.¹¹⁴ Firn likewise retained the support of his parishioners after his marriage. They petitioned Strasbourg's magistrates to allow him to remain as their priest in spite of his deposition and even bore arms to church to ensure that their wishes were carried out.¹¹⁵ In certain cases, the people of Strasbourg were willing to act even more drastically than their reformers. From February 1524 to the spring of 1525, the first of two waves of popular iconoclasm took place in Strasbourg. In the earliest instances, the iconoclasts did not explicitly destroy Church property, but they took money from altars and collection plates and placed it in alms-boxes. Their iconoclastic actions rebuked the Catholic Church not only for its dependence on images, but also for its neglect and exploitation of the poor.¹¹⁶

Strasbourg's ruling class supported the evangelical reformers and their agenda more hesitantly than the majority of the population. In December of 1523, the members of Strasbourg's regime were embroiled in such bitter debates over the Reformation that one

¹¹³ Bornert, 1.

¹¹⁴ Chrisman, 100; Rapp, 476.

¹¹⁵ Chrisman, 133.

¹¹⁶ Palmer, 111-113.

member, Bernhard Wurmser von Vendenheim, requested that “my lords take care that they do not attack one another so violently in the Senate concerning the Lutheran affair.”¹¹⁷ Thomas A. Brady identifies three parties in Strasbourg in the 1520s, each with a distinct approach to the Reformation, which he calls the “Zealots,” the “Politiques,” and the “Old Guard.” The Zealots advocated for reform “regardless of external consequences,” the moderate Politiques favoured reform but also considered the city’s security and reputation abroad, and the Old Guard staunchly defended the Catholic faith.¹¹⁸ The moderate pro-reform faction had largely prevailed by 1525 and, as popular pressure in favour of reform mounted, Strasbourg’s magistracy “altered as little as possible but as much as necessary.”¹¹⁹

The ruling class found that, by guiding the pace of reform, they could mitigate its excesses. In 1524, they issued a decree which forced the clergy in the city to purchase citizenship, a move which gave them the freedom to discipline clergymen who disobeyed city ordinances without violating clerical immunity.¹²⁰ The Strasbourg magistracy went even further in support of evangelical reform in April of 1525 when it abolished the Mass throughout the city, with the exception of four churches.¹²¹ After the repression of the Peasants’ War in 1525, as popular demand for additional reforms waned, the promulgation of new reform ordinances slowed correspondingly. Those who favoured the full abolition of the Mass were not successful in their objective until 1529, when the city council referred the decision to the *Schöffen*, a larger council comprised of prominent guild members. The *Schöffen* voted by a strong majority that the Mass should be abolished “until it could be proved that it was a pious form of worship.” The

¹¹⁷ Cited in Thomas A. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime, and Reformation at Strasbourg, 1520-1555* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 205.

¹¹⁸ Brady, 209.

¹¹⁹ Brady, 205; 233.

¹²⁰ Brady, 203.

¹²¹ Brady, 204.

evangelicals, with the magistrates' help, had succeeded in purging the city of overt Catholic worship, at least temporarily.¹²²

Ursula's sixty-fourth vision, which took place in 1529 after the abolition of the Mass, suggests that she possessed little affinity for the ritual.

Once more the glory of the Lord appeared and unfolded to me, and I saw a horribly large and black man. He turned into a complete darkness which descended onto the earth. Dark shadowy tears sparkled behind the man and the darkness. The tears were full of floating communion wafers. Beyond the black tears and streams was a person dressed in white as with an alb. A veil hung before his eyes and he was occupied with an idol. He took it by the arm and set it in its place in order to worship it. But bright tears and streaming water appeared before him and knocked the idol from its place.¹²³

The veiled man wearing an alb was probably a priest, and the veil over his eyes may have symbolized spiritual blindness. The idol the priest-figure worshipped probably represented the Eucharist. Although the city's Protestant clergy eventually adopted a more Lutheran view of the Eucharist, as late as 1529 Strasbourg's evangelical reformers and radical religious leaders both emphatically rejected the idea that Christ was literally present in the communion elements.¹²⁴ Ursula seems to have shared their view, and consequently viewed the Mass as a form of idolatry rather than a pious ritual.

The Peasants' War

Rural areas throughout Alsace experienced growing unrest in the early sixteenth century. The late medieval economic downturn in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries had

¹²² For the purposes of this study, I only focus on the first decade of the Reformation in Strasbourg. Readers interested in the longue duree may be interested in Lorna Jane Abray, *The People's Reformation: Magistrates, Clergy, and Commons in Strasbourg, 1500-1598* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1985).

¹²³ Jost, 25.

¹²⁴ Deppermann, 173-174.

benefited the peasants, who received higher wages, paid lower rents, and gained greater communal autonomy. However, the situation began to reverse itself in the mid-fifteenth century, and the peasants' situation declined as population growth and economic growth led to inflation, increased rents, and lower wages.¹²⁵ The peasants of Alsace had previously staged a few abortive uprisings after poor harvests exacerbated their already tenuous economic situation. In 1493, and again in 1517, Alsatian authorities heard rumours of *Bundschuh* uprisings and moved immediately to crush them. The *Bundschuh*—a sturdy laced boot commonly worn by peasants—became the symbol of peasant uprisings. The uprisings seem to have targeted ecclesiastical lords especially, though not exclusively, and the peasants' rallying cries included disdainful references to priests (*Pfaffen*). Alsatian authorities swiftly arrested and punished the conspirators before either uprising gained enough momentum to result in a full-fledged revolt.¹²⁶

Although the authorities had thus far managed to crush the *Bundschuh* uprisings, they continued to dread the possibility of further revolts. When Zell began to preach Reformation doctrines in Strasbourg, his opponents accused him of “preaching the *Bundschuh*.”¹²⁷ Other evangelical figures also preached and published messages that alarmed ecclesiastical lords in particular. Otto Brunfels, an evangelical humanist and former Carthusian monk who served as director of one of Strasbourg's Latin schools published a tract “On Ecclesiastical Tithes” in which he argued that “those who compel the poor to pay tithes [under threat of excommunication,] and have no better justification for this than to sing mass seven times daily,

¹²⁵ Michael G. Baylor, “Introduction” in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 4.

¹²⁶ Rapp, 406-410; 436-437.

¹²⁷ Marc Lienhard, “La Percée du Mouvement Évangélique: Le Rôle et la Figure de Mathieu Zell” in *Strasbourg au Cœur Religieux du XVIe Siècle: Hommage à Lucien Febvre: Actes du Colloque International de Strasbourg, 25-29 Mai 1975*, edited by Georges Livet (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1977), 91.

are viler betrayers of Christ than Judas, yes worse than the godless priests of Baal.”¹²⁸ Zell, however, had no intention of encouraging armed resistance against secular lords, and even Brunfels simply urged that tithes go to secular rulers, who funded preachers and assisted the poor.

Nevertheless, landowners throughout Alsace had reason to fear the possibility of another peasant revolt. In the summer of 1524, peasants across the Holy Roman Empire began to stage protests against high taxes and labour dues, which they viewed as unjust. Spurred on by radical preachers with evangelical roots, among them Thomas Müntzer and Balthasar Hubmaier, the peasants organized themselves into regional bands and presented their lords with lists of demands. If negotiations failed, many of them were willing to resort to violence. The best-known list of demands, the “Twelve Articles” of the Upper Swabian Peasants, came out of an assembly of peasants held at Memmingen in March 1525. The furrier and lay preacher Sebastian Lotzer composed the Twelve Articles based on the grievances the peasants aired in the assembly, and the evangelical preacher Christopher Schappeler added scripture references. The prelude to the Twelve Articles sharply objected to criticisms that the peasants’ actions constituted rebellion or insurrection. The peasants simply wanted to live according to God’s Word, and thus “[could] not be called disobedient or seditious.” The fault lay instead with corrupt leaders who sought to prevent the peasants from fulfilling God’s will. The articles themselves championed the community’s right to select its own pastor and allocate its own tithe, demanded the abolition of serfdom and the death-tax, the restoration of communal property, equitable rents, and impartial justice for peasants accused of crimes, sought the right to hunt, fish, and gather wood on communal property, protested the unjust labour dues required of peasants, and requested that

¹²⁸ Cited in James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991), 46-47.

peasants have the freedom to perform labour at a convenient time and receive proper compensation. A final article stipulated that the peasants would willingly modify any article if their critics proved that it failed to accord with the Word of God.¹²⁹

Other peasant groups throughout the Holy Roman Empire adopted and modified the Twelve Articles. By the beginning of April 1525, the Peasants' War had reached Lower Alsace. Radical preachers mobilized the Alsatian peasantry and apprised them of their newfound rights and freedoms in light of the Gospel. Clemens Ziegler, a gardener from Strasbourg preached throughout the Alsatian countryside to audiences of hundreds of peasants and encouraged them to withhold their tithes, although he condemned the use of violence.¹³⁰ Andreas Preunlin, the new evangelical preacher at the lower Alsatian village of Dorlisheim, read the Twelve Articles to his congregation and preached from them on the Saturday of the Easter weekend.¹³¹ Peasant leaders in Alsace and Sundgau wrote their own more precise list of twenty-four articles, which elaborated on the twelve and added new demands, such as restructuring the judicial system to lessen the financial burden on accused and convicted peasants and their families. The Alsatian peasants continued to believe that their demands were just and reflected the will of God. Individual village bands often chose overtly religious slogans; the residents of Ebersheimmünster's banner read "the Word of God remains forever" and the villagers of Truttenhausen chose as their motto "Gospel, Christ, and Clemens Ziegler."¹³² The peasants also

¹²⁹ Sebastian Lotzer and Christoph Schappeler, "The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants, March 1525" in *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 76-82.

¹³⁰ Stafford, 225.

¹³¹ Franziska Conrad, *Reformation in der Bäuerlichen Gesellschaft: zur Rezeption Reformatorischer Theologie im Elsass* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1984), 118.

¹³² Conrad, 119.

looked to Strasbourg, the largest and most centrally located city in the relatively small region of Lower Alsace, for moral and material support.

Strasbourg's magistrates and preachers, however, were not convinced that God favoured the peasants' cause, particularly as their actions escalated from demanding negotiations to taking towns and monasteries by force. Zell, Capito, and Bucer disappointed the hopes of the Lower Alsatian peasants who had requested their support when they advised an end to hostilities and added that they "[had] found no Scripture which, to the honor of God and the common good, would justify the murder of unjust magistrates by the people."¹³³ Likewise, the city's magistrates granted asylum to landowners who sought refuge in the city when the violence began and refused to acquiesce to the peasants' demands that they hand over the landowners and their possessions.¹³⁴ The Strasbourg magistracy also intervened on April 24 when the peasants at Neubourg requested arms from the gardeners' and butchers' guilds and forbade the peasants from making any such requests in the future.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the peasants found ready supporters among some members of Strasbourg's lower classes. The butchers' and gardeners' guilds continued to support them verbally, if not financially, and a not insignificant number of artisans joined the peasants or plotted to let them into the city itself.¹³⁶

More than twenty of Ursula's seventy-seven visions took place in April and May of 1525, in the midst of peasant unrest in Alsace, and the visions' content often reflect contemporary events. Ursula's visions from those two months feature soldiers (Visions 39 and 43, both of

¹³³ Blickle, 111.

¹³⁴ Rapp, 478-479.

¹³⁵ Jean Rott, "Strasbourg et la Guerre des Paysans: Les Limites de l'Action de Strasbourg" in *Strasbourg au Cœur Religieux du XVIe Siècle: Hommage à Lucien Febvre: Actes du Colloque International de Strasbourg, 25-29 Mai 1975*, edited by Georges Livet (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1977), 76.

¹³⁶ Blickle, 112; Rott, 76.

which took place late April while the peasant leaders recruited troops in the Alsatian countryside), “many hosts of people who clashed violently” (Vision 53, which she experienced in late May after the peasant armies had been defeated at Saverne) and a city razed to the ground (Vision 51, which she saw in early May, when the peasants were beginning to take Alsatian towns and monasteries by force).¹³⁷ From her visions we can discern that Ursula, like many of her fellow lower-class Strasbourgeois, sympathized with the peasants. Not only did her husband Lienhard probably belong to the butchers’ guild, but her ninth and fourteenth visions (which she experienced in December of 1524 and in early 1525) both featured wealthy men, mostly from the clergy, who oppressed common people and benefited unjustly from their hard work.¹³⁸ In her thirty-ninth vision, which took place on the Wednesday after Easter (during the period of peasant mobilization in Alsace), Ursula saw

a great heath and on it a host of soldiers. Then I saw that from the city just mentioned a great host of people emerged. In the midst of the throng on a long, high pole, they carried a huge cross. When the soldiers saw it they fell down together with their horses and all their might and lay there, wallowing, as though they were wounded to death.¹³⁹

The great host of people did not have the combat training of the soldiers, but they had God’s support, and He intervened miraculously on their behalf. The vision suggests that Ursula expected God to intervene on behalf of the common people who, although untrained, supported their demands for change with the Gospel.

Other visions expressed support for the common man’s cause more obliquely. On the Wednesday before Palm Sunday of 1525, Ursula saw

¹³⁷ Jost, 14-22.

¹³⁸ Jost, 6; 8.

¹³⁹ Jost, 17.

a beautiful green tree with many thousands of green branches. I saw that a fountain flowed out of that tree. Then I saw two men approaching bringing beautiful green sod from the earth, and saw that with it they closed and blocked up that fountain. Then I saw the water of the fountain rising above itself and flowed out to the branches a thousand-fold. Following that I saw coming a great host of people of the common sort. They drank the drops that dripped out of the branches and they all had enough. Then I saw that they raised their hands and heads to God the eternal Father and gave him exalted praise and thanks.¹⁴⁰

This vision took place in early April, as the peasants were just beginning to mobilize, and Clemens Ziegler and Andreas Preunlin were preaching to peasants and reading the Twelve Articles. The tree may well represent the Gospel, and the hope for justice for the common people that the Gospel offered to participants in the Peasants' War.

In his monograph on the Peasants' War in Alsace, George Bischoff argues that the uprising did not properly qualify as a war until May of 1525, since the peasants remained largely peaceful and prepared to negotiate with their lords during the first few weeks of their mobilization.¹⁴¹ Negotiations proved inadequate to satisfy their demands, however, and the peasants began to take their landlords' goods and strongholds by force. The Alsatian peasants' war, once it became violent, showed a remarkable degree of military organization. Erasmus Gerber, the peasants' leader, issued an army ordinance requiring each village to draft a fourth of its able-bodied men each week, and to rotate the troops on the field frequently in order to allow village life to continue as normally as possible. He urged the villages to "remain united...in the name of Jesus Christ...to the praise and honour of God the Lord, in order to confirm his word

¹⁴⁰ Jost, 15.

¹⁴¹ Georges Bischoff, *La Guerre des Paysans: l'Alsace et la Révolution du Bundschuh, 1493-1525* (Strasbourg: La Nuée Bleue, 2010), 144-145.

and help the poor, common man.”¹⁴² By mid-May, the peasant armies controlled much of Alsace, including the cities of Wissembourg and Saverne.¹⁴³

In mid-May, however, Duke Antoine of the neighbouring duchy of Lorraine assembled an army to crush the peasant uprising, which had come perilously close to entering his territory with the capture of Saverne. The Strasbourg magistrates appealed to the peasants to desist and return home, but Gerber remained resolved to fight. On the May 15, Antoine’s forces laid siege to the city of Saverne, and Gerber attempted repeatedly to enlist Strasbourg’s help at the last minute on the grounds that he and his bands of peasants would be lost if they did not receive assistance.¹⁴⁴ His predictions proved correct. On the next day, Antoine’s forces battled the peasants at neighbouring Lupstein, and the casualties—eight of his men and four to six thousand peasants—testified to the unequal match. On the 17, Saverne itself fell to the duke’s armies, thousands more peasants died in battle, and the peasant uprising in Alsace was thoroughly crushed.¹⁴⁵ Those who sympathized with the cause of the common man were left with the option of providing poor relief. In Strasbourg, Zell’s wife Katharina and the welfare administrator Lukas Hackfurt set about caring for the refugees who flooded the city in late May 1525 after the peasants’ defeat.¹⁴⁶

The Beginnings of Anabaptism in Strasbourg

The Peasants’ War exacerbated the differences between the magistrates and evangelical clergy’s visions of reform and the visions of the common people. The peasants and their

¹⁴² Blickle, 129.

¹⁴³ Blickle, xviii; Bischoff, 190.

¹⁴⁴ Bischoff, 193-194.

¹⁴⁵ Bischoff, 195-199.

¹⁴⁶ Elsie McKee, introduction to *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12.

supporters had hoped and fought for more drastic and more rapid changes to the social and religious order than the evangelical preachers were willing to allow. In addition, some of Strasbourg's more radically minded citizens had begun to question whether even Strasbourg's ecclesiastical reforms had gone far enough. Clemens Ziegler, for example, called into question the scriptural validity of infant baptism, and some of Strasbourg's commoners refused to have their children baptized.¹⁴⁷ A large enough number of Strasbourg's residents questioned infant baptism to draw a concession from the evangelical reformers in 1524 that Christians could undergo adult baptism provided it did not lead to "the destruction of Christian love and unity."¹⁴⁸ The failure of the Peasants' War struck a blow to those who had hoped that an uprising might bring about a new social order, but the incipient radical tendencies of some of Strasbourg's populace had not been entirely crushed. They were simply in flux, seeking a new expression.

The Anabaptists who began to visit Strasbourg in the latter half of the 1520's thus found several potential coreligionists among the Strasbourgeois. Balthasar Hubmaier, the theologian from Waldshut, published his *Von dem Christlichen Tauff der Gläubigen* in the city in 1525, in which he affirmed believers' baptism and community of goods.¹⁴⁹ Hubmaier may or may not have visited Strasbourg personally and proselytized there. Miriam Usher Chrisman credits him with founding the city's first Anabaptist congregation in 1525, but Klaus Deppermann dates the foundation of a "permanent, separatist Anabaptist community" to 1526.¹⁵⁰ In March of 1526, the Swiss Anabaptist Wilhelm Reublin visited the city and baptized Clemens Ziegler's brother Jörg, who went on to debate Strasbourg's evangelical clergy on baptism and host several travelling

¹⁴⁷ Deppermann, 177-178.

¹⁴⁸ Deppermann, 171.

¹⁴⁹ John David Derksen, *From Radicals to Survivors: Strasbourg's Religious Nonconformists over Two Generations, 1525-1570* (Goy-Houten, Netherlands: Hes & de Graaf Pub., 2002), 37.

¹⁵⁰ Chrisman, 183; Deppermann, 178.

Anabaptist leaders in his home.¹⁵¹ The sectarian community that Reublin founded bore a strong resemblance to the Anabaptist Swiss Brethren and, in addition to adult baptism, remained committed to the ideals of biblicism and pacifism.¹⁵²

Hans Denck's arrival in Strasbourg in November 1526 led to the formation of a new spiritualist strand of Anabaptism in Strasbourg. To the consternation of Bucer, who by the mid-1520s was beginning to edge out Wolfgang Capito as the de facto leader of the city's evangelical clergy, the charismatic and articulate Denck found a favourable reception among many of Strasbourg's citizens, including the city notary Fridolin Meyger.¹⁵³ Denck insisted that his doctrines were compatible with those of Bucer and Strasbourg's other Magisterial Reformers, but Bucer disagreed. He and the rest of Strasbourg's Protestant clergy called for a disputation and, on 22 December 1526, Bucer and Denck engaged in a debate over Denck's latest book in front of an audience of some 400 people.¹⁵⁴ Bucer convinced the city council members in attendance that Denck's doctrines were not only theologically flawed, but also dangerous to the city's welfare.¹⁵⁵ The council summarily banished Denck, and he left the city on Christmas Day 1526. After Denck's departure, Jakob Kautz, a preacher from Worms, assumed the leadership of Strasbourg's spiritualist Anabaptists.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ John Derksen, "Nonviolent Political Action in Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg: the Ziegler Brothers," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78:4 (Oct 2004): 551-552.

¹⁵² Deppermann, 179. Derksen argues in *Nonconformists*, 16 that there were in Strasbourg sectarian Anabaptists, spiritualist Anabaptists, and apocalypticist Anabaptists. While he adds that the boundaries between the groups could be fluid, and Anabaptism was not a prerequisite for either spiritualism or apocalypticism, Derksen's categories are useful for making sense of the diverse phenomenon of Anabaptism.

¹⁵³ Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptists and the Civil Authorities of Strasbourg, 1525-1555," *Church History* 24:2 (June 1955): 102; Deppermann, 184.

¹⁵⁴ Kreider, 102, Deppermann, 184. Deppermann notes that Gerbel spoke of 200 in attendance, but that the city council's records suggest an audience of 400.

¹⁵⁵ Kreider, 102.

¹⁵⁶ Deppermann, 185.

If any Anabaptist substantiated Bucer's fears that the radicals would create disorder in the official church, Hans Wolff, who arrived in Strasbourg in 1526 after having been banished from Schlettstadt and Ettenheim, certainly did. Wolff accused the evangelical reformers of hypocrisy and a half-hearted commitment to reform, since, he argued, they railed against images and the mass even as injustice and prostitution continued to thrive in Strasbourg. His theology had a strong apocalyptic and universalist bent, and he anticipated the coming of the millennium and the salvation of everyone—even the devil—in 1533.¹⁵⁷ Wolff caused an even greater stir when he interrupted the prominent evangelical preacher Matthis Zell mid-sermon and tried to command the reformer to let him speak by the authority of the Holy Spirit. The Strasbourg authorities promptly imprisoned and then banished Wolff, and even the mild-mannered Capito expressed amazement at his “self-pride and vanity.”¹⁵⁸

The Swiss Anabaptist Michael Sattler, who visited Strasbourg as Capito's houseguest in late 1526, made a much more favourable impression on the reformers. Despite their theological differences of opinion, the reformers held Sattler in high esteem and called him a “martyr for Christ” and “God's beloved friend” after his execution in May 1527.¹⁵⁹ However, Sattler could not persuade them to extend the same tolerance to his coreligionists. During Sattler's stay in Strasbourg, the authorities banished Hans Denck and imprisoned the sectarian Anabaptists Jakob Gross, Wilhelm Echsel, and Matthis Hiller at the reformers' instigation. When he could not persuade them to change their minds, Sattler left voluntarily.¹⁶⁰ Gross, Echsel, and Hiller also left under compulsion in early 1527. Moreover, in July of the same year, the city council issued a

¹⁵⁷ Derksen, *Nonconformists*, 43; Deppermann, 180.

¹⁵⁸ Chrisman, 185; Deppermann, 179-180; Derksen, *Nonconformists*, 44.

¹⁵⁹ Deppermann, 184.

¹⁶⁰ Deppermann, 180-181.

mandate (again at the instigation of the clergy) that forbade residents of Strasbourg and its territories from housing, feeding, or otherwise having contact with Anabaptists.¹⁶¹

Despite the mandate, Anabaptists from throughout the Holy Roman Empire continued to flock to Strasbourg. The mandate itself offered only the vague promise of punishment rather than the threat of specific consequences to those who aided Anabaptists, and it seems not to have been enforced stringently. Compared to other edicts against Anabaptists throughout the Holy Roman Empire, Strasbourg's policy remained appealing to Anabaptist refugees.¹⁶² In large part, the city council adopted a laissez-faire attitude toward the Anabaptists because it remained divided over the question of the abolition of the Mass. The city council supported the preachers—albeit somewhat grudgingly—when they felt that public opinion demanded it, but there remained a faction devoted to the Old Church and determined to slow the pace of reform. The pro-Catholic magistrates unwittingly became the Anabaptists' *de facto* allies, since any conflict between Catholics and evangelicals deflected attention from the growing Anabaptist population.¹⁶³

Among the Anabaptists who immigrated to Strasbourg because of religious persecution were hundreds of lower-class refugees who fled Augsburg in 1528. Many of the Augsburg refugees numbered among the followers of the South German Anabaptist leader Hans Hut, who had formerly fought in the Peasants' War. Hut continued to believe that godless rulers should be overthrown but, after the failure of the Peasants' War, he channeled his hopes for change in an apocalyptic direction. Hut believed that the Turks would invade the Holy Roman Empire and

¹⁶¹ Marc Lienhard, "Les Autorités Civiles et les Anabaptistes: Attitudes du Magistrat de Strasbourg (1526-1532)" in *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism: with an Extensive Bibliography*, ed. Marc Lienhard (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1977), 204.

¹⁶² Lienhard, "Autorités Civiles," 204-205.

¹⁶³ Lienhard, "Autorités Civiles," 199. In 1529, the council deferred the decision to the *Schöffen*, who voted to abolish the Mass.

slay the godless and that, once they left, the Anabaptists would emerge from hiding and finish what the Turks had begun. The apocalypse would end in 1528, according to Hut, and the millennium would begin.¹⁶⁴ The Augsburg Anabaptists—who by 1530 numbered about one fourth of all Anabaptists in Strasbourg—may have begun to question aspects of Hut’s thought, particularly his chronology, by the time they immigrated to Strasbourg in 1528. Nevertheless, they did bring with them several of their spiritual leader’s ideas, and they formed a new group of Anabaptists distinct from both the sectarian and spiritualist communities already in Strasbourg.¹⁶⁵

The Anabaptist cause in Strasbourg was bolstered when even the magisterial reformer Capito found himself drawn to radical religious ideas. Capito’s approach to religious dissenters involved dialoguing with them and attempting to convince them to change their minds, but the relative openness such an approach required left him vulnerable to the adoption of convincing new ideas. He took in apocalyptic spiritualist Martin Cellarius as a houseguest in 1527, and the Silesian spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld also stayed with Capito for two years after his arrival in Strasbourg in 1529.¹⁶⁶ Capito wrote a favourable preface to Cellarius’ *De operibus Dei*, a book that called into question the validity of infant baptism. Moreover, although he took a spiritualist view of baptism and minimized the importance of external rites, Capito acknowledged that baptism ought to be reserved for those who understood the message of the Gospel—a view which necessarily conflicted with infant baptism. Although he still disliked their sectarian tendencies, he began to speak and write more positively about Anabaptists; they were

¹⁶⁴ Deppermann, 200.

¹⁶⁵ One estimate from the Augsburg shoemaker Jakob Walch places the number of Augsburg refugees at 500 by August of 1528. A non-Anabaptist witness reported that Anabaptists in Strasbourg numbered about 2000 in 1530. This suggests that Anabaptists comprised a substantial minority of the city’s twenty to twenty-five thousand inhabitants. See Derksen, *Nonconformists*, 53; Abray, 51.

¹⁶⁶ Deppermann, 192; McKee, 21.

dutiful and moral people who offered the Church valuable criticisms.¹⁶⁷ Bucer solidified his position as the leader of Strasbourg's reforming clergy at Capito's expense and, by 1532, Capito had become discouraged by the failure of his efforts to mediate between the evangelicals and the religious radicals and aligned himself firmly with his fellow preachers. Capito's sympathies for religious radicals, however, led him to undermine Bucer's attempts to extirpate Anabaptism from Strasbourg and may have helped to legitimize Anabaptism in the eyes of some of Strasbourg's residents.

Despite the relatively favourable conditions for Anabaptists in Strasbourg, they did face arrest if they ran afoul of the civil authorities. Forty Anabaptists were arrested in spring 1528 for refusing to take a civic oath, and in October of the same year Reublin (who had returned to Strasbourg to lead the sectarian Anabaptists there) and Kautz were both arrested and imprisoned for three months before their expulsion from the city. After Strasbourg abolished the Mass in February 1529 and polemical writings against the authorities surfaced, the magistrates became alarmed and ordered the arrest and questioning of another forty-four religious radicals, some of whom belonged to Anabaptist groups.¹⁶⁸ The Rat returned to their usual laissez-faire approach to religious dissent once the crisis had passed, but their participation in the persecution seems to have made an unfavourable impression on Ursula. She saw "many ferocious prominent men" torturing a group of prisoners in a dungeon in her seventieth vision, which took place the same year and was likely prompted by this brief period of intensified persecution.¹⁶⁹

In June of 1529, Melchior Hoffman arrived in Strasbourg. An erstwhile Lutheran lay preacher in Livonia, Hoffman had fallen out of favour with Luther owing to his allegorical

¹⁶⁷ Deppermann, 193-195.

¹⁶⁸ Derksen, *Nonconformists*, 53-55.

¹⁶⁹ Jost, 26.

methods of biblical interpretation and his rejection of the Wittenberg reformer's teaching on the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Hoffman was in the process of re-evaluating his theology when he arrived in Strasbourg, and it was there that he became involved with Lienhard and Ursula Jost and the religious circle to which they belonged. The Strasbourg prophets, as they have come to be called, had strong enthusiastic and apocalyptic leanings, and believed that Hoffman was the prophetic Elijah-figure they had been awaiting.¹⁷⁰ By the early 1530's, Hoffman had emerged as the leader of the apocalyptic strand of Anabaptism within the city of Strasbourg. Lienhard and Ursula Jost, along with the rest of the Strasbourg prophets, were firmly established as his followers.

It is unclear whether the Josts were already Anabaptists when they joined with Hoffman, or whether they followed him after his conversion, and the specific details of their baptisms remain unknown.¹⁷¹ However, Ursula's visions suggest that she felt little sympathy for the evangelical reformer even before the foundation of Strasbourg's Anabaptist community. In her anticlerical fourteenth vision from early 1525, she criticized *schriftgelerten*, a term commonly applied to the evangelical reformers because of their familiarity with Scripture, along with

¹⁷⁰ Deppermann, 218. It is unclear how many members the Josts' religious circle comprised before Melchior Hoffman joined them and promoted their visions, since all sources on the Josts and the other Strasbourg prophets date from 1529 or later. If, as I suggest above, Ursula dictated her visions periodically to another literate individual, then we can assume that she had at least a small following before Hoffman popularized her work. However, it seems unlikely that this following was particularly large or influential, since we have no records to indicate that she came to the authorities' attention before the publication of *Prophetische Gesicht*. Lienhard, for his part, acquired a reputation as a crazy man among Strasbourg's reformers for his claims to a prophetic gift. He spent a few months in a mental hospital in 1524, and Martin Bucer referred to him as *verrucket* (insane) in a 1533 polemic. See Deppermann, 205; Krebs and Rott, *Elsass II*, 113.

¹⁷¹ It should also be noted that, both Hoffman and the Josts placed great emphasis on the marks of the Spirit in believers, and none of them prioritized physical baptism to the same degree as many of their sectarian counterparts. Ursula's visions never mention water baptism, adult or infant, and Melchior Hoffman even suspended water baptism in 1531 when several of his converts faced execution. See Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 212.

Catholic clergymen.¹⁷² In a later vision that followed the publication of *Prophetische Gesicht*, Ursula even saw the evangelical reformer Kaspar Hedio fall from his pulpit.¹⁷³ However, the apocalyptic overtones in her visions long predated her encounter with Hoffman; as early as 1525 her visions contained images of the dead rising from their graves and of “water, fire, sulphur, and pitch” falling from heaven.¹⁷⁴ This suggests that, if she was not already associated with the apocalyptically-minded Anabaptists when Hoffman arrived in Strasbourg, she was at least predisposed to join them.

The Turkish Apocalyptic Threat

Even as residents of the Holy Roman Empire faced religious change and social upheaval within their own borders, they also feared the consequences of renewed enmity with the Turks. In 1520, Suleiman I (remembered in the West as Suleiman the Magnificent) became the tenth Ottoman Sultan. His grandfather Mehmed II had captured the Byzantine capital city of Constantinople in 1453, leaving open the way for Ottoman expansion into southeastern Europe, and Suleiman took advantage of the opportunity to make further inroads into Christendom. He advanced into the Balkans and, in August of 1521, captured the city of Belgrade.¹⁷⁵ Less than a year later, Suleiman’s armies laid siege to Rhodes, the principal Christian port in the Eastern Mediterranean. The newly elected Pope Adrian VI attempted to persuade Henry VIII of England, Francis I of France, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to jointly mount a crusade to combat the Turks and keep Rhodes firmly in Christian hands. The European monarchs, however,

¹⁷² Jost, 8.

¹⁷³ Marc Lienhard, Stephen F. Nelson, and Hans Georg Rott, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer. Vol. 15. Elsass III. Teil: Stadt Straßburg 1536-1542* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1986), 112.

¹⁷⁴ Jost, 10; 14.

¹⁷⁵ Vernon J. Parry, “The reign of Sulaimān the Magnificent, 1520-66” in *The History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730*, edited by Michael A. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 79.

were occupied with fighting amongst each other and attempting to stop the spread of the new Lutheran heresy, and no concrete plans for a crusade materialized. After a protracted siege, Rhodes fell to Suleiman's forces on 22 December 1522.¹⁷⁶

While Charles fought with Francis I over Italy and attempted to rein in the princes who supported Luther, his brother Ferdinand I of Austria feared the possibility of a Turkish advance into Hungary. The 1515 Treaty of Vienna had guaranteed a double marriage alliance between the Habsburgs and the Hungarian royal family; Charles' and Ferdinand's sister Mary married King Louis of Hungary and Bohemia and Ferdinand married Louis' sister, Anna.¹⁷⁷ Ferdinand worried that an Ottoman takeover of Hungary would materially damage Habsburg interests in Eastern Europe, and he tried repeatedly to garner financial and military support from the German princes. The German princes, however, considered the religious situation in the Holy Roman Empire a more pressing concern. When Suleiman resumed his westward expansion after three years of focusing on the Middle East, the princes recognized the wisdom of swift intervention; Ferdinand promised to call a council by the end of 1527 and offered the Lutheran princes the freedom to rule their subjects as they saw fit in the meantime, and the princes, satisfied by the religious compromise he offered, agreed to send 24,000 soldiers to assist the Hungarians.¹⁷⁸ Their aid came too late. Before the German troops even reached Hungary, Suleiman's forces defeated King Louis II and his army at Mohacs on 29 August 1526, and Louis himself died in battle.¹⁷⁹

Since Louis had died without issue, Ferdinand laid claim to the Hungarian throne on behalf of his wife Anna, the only surviving child of Ladislas II. The Hungarian nobles, however,

¹⁷⁶ Parry, 80; Stephen A. Fischer-Galati, *Ottoman Imperialism and German Protestantism, 1521-1555* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 13.

¹⁷⁷ Fischer-Galati, 8; Jean Bérenger, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1273-1700* (New York: Longman, 1994), 147.

¹⁷⁸ Fischer-Galati, 25-26.

¹⁷⁹ Fischer-Galati, 27.

opposed Habsburg rule in Hungary and instead supported their leader John Zapolya in his bid for kingship. The Ottoman Porte in Constantinople formally recognized Zapolya's claim to the throne in 1527 and Ferdinand promptly went to war to defend his competing claim, without even securing the support of his brother and the German princes. Despite this, his campaign met with success, and the Western part of Hungary came under Habsburg rule.¹⁸⁰ His mission to convince the Porte to acknowledge his rule, by contrast, met with a less favourable outcome. Suleiman continued to support Zapolya's claim to the throne, and he threatened Ferdinand with military action unless the Habsburgs ceased meddling in Hungarian politics. Ferdinand refused to acquiesce to their demands and so the Ottoman armies began to march toward Vienna. They reached the city in September of 1529 and laid siege to it for a month. Although the Turks retreated without capturing the city, Western Europe was shaken by the realization that Turkish conquest remained a real possibility, and Ferdinand even offered to pay the Ottomans tribute in exchange for their recognition of his claim to Hungary's throne.¹⁸¹

After the Turkish capture of Belgrade, polemical pamphlets (called *Türkenbüchlein*) on the Turks and the threat they posed to Christendom began to appear in print throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In addition to the *Türkenbüchlein*, the Turks and their military expansion even became the subject of popular songs.¹⁸² While some writers extolled the virtues of the Turks in order to shame Christians into righteousness and repentance, others saw Ottoman society as rife with moral decay and sexual perversion. Tales of Christian captives in Turkish lands provided fodder for sensational rumours. The Muslim practice (or at least toleration) of polygamy also met with the righteous scorn of Western European Christians. John Calvin was not the first European

¹⁸⁰ Fischer-Galati, 31.

¹⁸¹ George C. Kohn, *Dictionary of Wars* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 46.

¹⁸² Albrecht Classen, "Life Writing as a Slave in Turkish Hands: Georgius of Hungary's Reflections about his Existence in the Turkish World," *Neohelicon* 39 (2012): 57.

Christian to express his distaste when he called Muhammad a “corrupter of conjugal faithfulness” for “[allowing] men to practice brute licentiousness when they collect wives by buying them.”¹⁸³ However, polygamy was the least of the Turks’ sexual crimes. An anonymous 1526 polemical tract even claimed that sodomy (broadly defined to include homosexuality, bestiality, and deviant heterosexual relations) originated with the Turks, who then spread it into Christian territories.

If someone has a young boy, the child is taken from him and to the sultan's houses, where he has a number of beautiful boys whom he uses for special purposes as he would women. And here this is a sign of great magnificence, yet at the same time this shameful vice of sodomy or dumb sin with boys, women, and mindless animals is entirely common. It is committed on and on without shyness or any punishment, and as is said, this vice originated in Turkey, and from here it has also traveled to many other places in Christendom, as you may know.¹⁸⁴

Perceptions of Turkish sexual misbehaviour were so widespread that “Turkish” became synonymous for “sexually deviant” in common parlance. Luther himself employed that usage in a 1530 address to clergy at Augsburg.¹⁸⁵

Ursula’s sixteenth vision suggests that she also viewed the Turks as unrestrainedly lascivious. In the winter of 1525, she saw

a large host approaching dressed in many colours. Walking ahead of them was a tall black man. As I watched he and the host with him were wrapped in gloom. Then I saw that the man turned into a stick and his head into nothing but penises (*eitel bauchzapffen*.)¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Jan Slomp, “Calvin and the Turks,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 19:1 (2009): 62.

¹⁸⁴ Cited in Silke R. Falkner, ““Having It off” with Fish, Camels, and Lads: Sodomitic Pleasures in German-Language Turcica,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13:4 (Oct. 2004): 426.

¹⁸⁵ Falkner, 411.

¹⁸⁶ Jost, 9.

Elsewhere in her visions, Ursula explicitly identified the figure of the black man as “the leader of the Turks”—probably a reference to the Turks’ darker skin tone (and that of their fellow Muslims, the Spanish Moors), although black could also connote evil or darkness. That the Turk’s head turned into a bunch of penises implies that Ursula believed his sexual passions ruled him. Whether she read accusatory *Türkenbüchlein* or simply heard anti-Ottoman rumours or popular songs, she seems to have been aware of the Turks’ purported sexual deviance.

Not only did *Türkenbüchlein* authors portray the Turks as sexually depraved, they also described acts of wanton cruelty committed by Turkish armies. Hans Goldenmunde’s 1530 engraving of the Turkish army in the Vienna woods showed the Turks as bloodthirsty conquerors. In Goldenmunde’s engraving, adults lay dead on the ground while the Ottoman soldiers impaled babies and small children. To the top left corner of the engraving, Goldenmunde added a poem which read:

O Lord God in the highest throne
Look upon this great misery
That the Turkish raging tyrant
Has done in the Vienna forest
Wretchedly murdering virgins and wives
Cutting children in half
Impaling them on posts
O our shepherd Jesus Christ
You who are gracious and merciful
Turn your wrath away from the people
Save us out of the hand of the Turks¹⁸⁷

The idea that the Turks were a visitation of God’s wrath pervaded the *Türkenbüchlein*. In his 1518 *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, which predated even Suleiman’s accession and

¹⁸⁷ Cited in Gregory J. Miller, “Luther on the Turks and Islam” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 191n.17. The woodcut itself is pictured in Miller, 194.

the fall of Belgrade, Martin Luther referred to the Turks as “the lash [through which God] Himself punishes us for our iniquities, because we do not punish ourselves for Him.”¹⁸⁸ Once Luther began to gain a substantial following, Lutheran and Catholic polemicists each argued that their opponents’ heresies had incurred the wrath of God and caused (at least partially) the renewed Turkish military onslaught on Christendom.¹⁸⁹ They also turned their attention to sin in their own camps as a possible reason for God’s apparent support of the Turkish campaign. The anonymous Catholic author of the 1522 *Türcken biechlin* decried the corruption of the popes, who “[received] large revenues from all over Christendom and [wasted] these sums upon their own sinful pleasures.”¹⁹⁰ The Protestant Justus Jonas, in a 1530 polemic, vehemently criticized those among the evangelicals’ supporters who “[sought] in the gospel nothing but carnal liberty” and wondered how such impiety could “fail to provoke hard, terrible punishment and visitation of divine wrath.”¹⁹¹ Luther and other polemicists, however, had no doubt that the Turks, although they served God’s purposes, ultimately belonged to the devil. In his 1529 treatise *On the War Against the Turks*, Luther called the Turks “the wrath of the Lord our God and a servant of the raging devil.”¹⁹² He urged Christians to repent and live righteously, a strategy that promised to defeat their Ottoman foe by allaying God’s wrath and curtailing the devil’s power.¹⁹³

Ursula’s seventy-fourth vision (from 1529) offers insight into how she thought about the Turkish advance from her home in Strasbourg, at the opposite end of the Habsburgs’ territories from Vienna.

¹⁸⁸ Cited in Rollin Armour, *Islam, Christianity, and the West: A Troubled History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 116.

¹⁸⁹ John W. Bohnstedt, “The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 58:9 (1968): 25.

¹⁹⁰ Bohnstedt, 30.

¹⁹¹ Bohnstedt, 30.

¹⁹² Cited in Armour, 117.

¹⁹³ Armour, 117-118.

The glory of the Lord again appeared and opened itself to me and I saw a large and spreading heath. On it I saw a big horrible black man riding toward me in gloomy darkness. A bright light preceded him. I wondered what this could mean when the glory of the Lord revealed to my heart that this man was the leader of the Turks and the light which preceded him the power of God. He will commit great violence and distress before he will bring about his own end.¹⁹⁴

Like the *Türkenbüchlein* authors, Ursula conceived of the Turk as part of God's divine purposes, but not as His willing servant. The power of God preceded the leader of the Turks, presumably as he brought God's judgment on impious Christians, but he was ultimately doomed to self-destruction. Although, as a resident of Strasbourg, Ursula lived nearly as far from the invading Turks as was possible for a citizen of the Holy Roman Empire, she—and presumably her fellow Strasbourgeois—were aware of the threat of Turkish invasion and did not take it lightly.¹⁹⁵ Even Ursula, who expressed a confidence that God was sovereign and the leader of the Turks would eventually “bring about his own end,” believed that “great violence and distress” would befall Europe first.

Conclusion

While not all of Ursula's visions can be explained in terms of the socio-religious context in Strasbourg and the Holy Roman Empire, contemporary concerns certainly influenced some of them. The events of the Peasants' War, the brief persecution of the Anabaptists in 1529, and the threat of a Turkish invasion all figured in the visions. Moreover, the visions illuminate how Ursula felt about and reacted to contemporary events. She believed that the clergy oppressed the poor and she held the hope that God would support the Peasants' War, as one of her visions which took place at the height of peasant mobilization in Alsace illustrates. The vision showed a

¹⁹⁴ Jost, 27.

¹⁹⁵ As an Imperial city, Strasbourg did have an obligation to provide military and financial aid to the campaign against the Turks if the Emperor requested it of them.

large group of common people who vanquished a host of soldiers simply by holding up the cross.¹⁹⁶ She displayed far less enthusiasm for the evangelical reformers' agenda, although she did voice a criticism of the Mass. She shared many of her contemporaries' perceptions of the Turks, and incorporated the threat of a Turkish invasion into her apocalyptic worldview. Ursula's visions contain social and religious commentary from a non-elite member of society, and are thus a valuable resource for historians of popular religion who seek to know how common people viewed the early years of the Reformation.

¹⁹⁶ Jost, 17.

CHAPTER THREE

URSULA AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANABAPTISM

Since the publication of the seminal article “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis” in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* by James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann in 1975, most historians of Anabaptism have agreed that the movement had multiple points of origin in the sixteenth-century and took shape in three discernible, although at times interconnected, streams: a Swiss stream begun by radical former colleagues of the Zurich reformer Huldrych Zwingli, a South German and Austrian stream heavily indebted to Thomas Müntzer, and a North German/Dutch stream established through the missionary efforts of Melchior Hoffman.¹⁹⁷ Anabaptists from all three streams differed amongst themselves in matters of theology and ecclesiology even as they shared a common commitment to the establishment of a visible church comprised of regenerated believers who had received baptism upon their profession of faith. This chapter will delineate the early history of Anabaptism and some of its core theological distinctives and will discuss how Ursula fits into the broader movement.

Swiss and South German Anabaptism

The Swiss stream of Anabaptism preceded the other two chronologically. By 1523, Swiss reformers who shared Zwingli’s views on the authority and accessibility of the Word of God had begun to disagree with him on how that Word ought to be interpreted and applied to ecclesiastical practices. Simon Stumpf, the evangelical preacher for the village of Höngg, began already in 1522 to question from the pulpit the Scriptural necessity of paying tithes, and, in 1524,

¹⁹⁷ See James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49:2 (April 1975): 83-121.

Wilhelm Reublin faced discipline from Zurich's city council for preaching against infant baptism to his parishioners in the neighbouring village of Zollikon.¹⁹⁸

Members of the reforming movement within the city of Zurich itself, including Felix Mantz and Conrad Grebel, who had studied the Scriptures and the biblical languages together with Zwingli in a humanist sodality, began to put pressure on the leader of Zurich's Reformation to justify the practice of infant baptism from Scripture—a task they felt was impossible. Zwingli responded in December 1524 with a pamphlet entitled *Those Who Give Cause for Uproar*, in which he likened infant baptism to the Old Testament practice of circumcision, and again on January 17, 1525 in a private disputation.¹⁹⁹ The next day, Zurich's city fathers issued a mandate in which they ordered all parents to have their children baptized as soon as they were born and gave theretofore recalcitrant parents eight days to comply with their edict.²⁰⁰ They specifically targeted those who had agitated against infant baptism in a second decree on January 21, in which they ordered Mantz and Grebel not to speak further on the issue and banished Reublin and other non-citizen agitators. That evening, Mantz, Grebel, and a small group of their supporters met in a private home and performed the first adult baptisms.²⁰¹ The Anabaptist movement had begun.

The Anabaptists began the next day to evangelize and baptize in the village of Zollikon, whose inhabitants had already proven receptive to Reublin's anti-pedobaptism message. The Anabaptist community in Zollikon remained strong, in spite of sustained persecution from the Zurich authorities, and Anabaptist emissaries also travelled into Basel, Bern, St. Gall, Appenzell,

¹⁹⁸ Arnold Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings" in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, edited by John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 51; 59.

¹⁹⁹ Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings," 63.

²⁰⁰ Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings," 64.

²⁰¹ Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings," 64.

and into the Northern Swiss regions of Schaffhausen, Hallau, and Waldshut.²⁰² In Northern Switzerland, the Anabaptists encountered the Peasants' War, and the two movements largely coexisted until the peasants' defeat in late 1525. The Anabaptist movement met with particular success when it gained official recognition for a time in the village of Waldshut, where Grebel and Reublin won the leading reformer Balthasar Hubmaier over to their cause. Hubmaier baptized most of the town's adult inhabitants in April 1525 and subsequently became a prolific defender of Anabaptism in his writings.²⁰³ However, the continued hostility of the Zurich city council combined with the peasants' defeat and the Austrian victory at Waldshut itself on December 5, 1525 dashed any hopes of establishing an Anabaptist state church in the Swiss cantons along the lines of Hubmaier's Waldshut.

Some individuals with pacifist and separatist tendencies had been involved with the Swiss Anabaptist movement from its inception, but the movement as a whole did not take on those characteristics until after the peasants' defeat.²⁰⁴ In the post-1525 period, the former Benedictine monk Michael Sattler gained increasing influence in the Swiss Anabaptist community. He preached and baptized in Northern Switzerland and Southern Germany and, in February 1527, he and a group of Swiss Anabaptist leaders met in the Northern Swiss village of Schleithem where they established a series of seven articles in order to define their theology and ecclesiology in opposition to both the established Catholic and Protestant/Reformed churches

²⁰² Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 107.

²⁰³ Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings," 69.

²⁰⁴ Snyder concludes in his study of Swiss Anabaptism that "a careful review of the evidence confirms and strengthens a 'two phase' narrative of Swiss Anabaptist beginnings," and the separatist Anabaptist ecclesiology came to prominence in the second (post-1525) phase, not the first. Snyder, "Swiss Anabaptism: The Beginnings," 78-79.

and to Anabaptists they deemed “false brothers.”²⁰⁵ In addition to believers’ baptism, those present at Schleithem affirmed church discipline in the form of the ban, the celebration of the Lord’s supper as a memorial meal, separation from the world and the evil therein, and the election of pastors by their congregation and forbade the elect from bearing the sword or swearing oaths.²⁰⁶ Thereafter, the seven Schleithem articles became integral to the ecclesiology of the Swiss Brethren, as they came to be called.

The South German/Austrian stream of Anabaptism emerged in late 1525 after the Peasants’ War had largely run its course, although it involved several of the war’s participants. The first prominent South German leader to accept adult baptism was Hans Denck, a schoolteacher who had been expelled from Nuremberg in January and by fall was living in Augsburg. He probably accepted baptism during his stay in the city, although the date of his baptism and the identity of the man who performed it remain unknown.²⁰⁷ Denck remained in Augsburg until mid-1526, and he also spent time in Strasbourg in late 1526 where he made several converts to Anabaptism and aroused the suspicion of the city’s authorities, who banished him in late December.²⁰⁸ After his banishment from Strasbourg, Denck spent the first half of 1527 in Worms, where he continued to preach and spread Anabaptism. A prolific writer, Denck published several works of theology before his death of the plague in late 1527. Most

²⁰⁵ C. Arnold Snyder, “The Swiss Anabaptist Context” in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 21.

²⁰⁶ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 114.

²⁰⁷ Until the latter half of the twentieth century, most secondary sources assumed that Balthasar Hubmaier had baptized Denck. However, Werner Packull has demonstrated that the surviving evidence is insufficient to support such a claim. See Werner O. Packull, “Denck’s Alleged Baptism by Hubmaier: Its Significance for the Origin of South German-Austrian Anabaptism” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 47:4 (October 1973): 327-38.

²⁰⁸ Deppermann, 184-185

significantly for the spread of Anabaptism in South Germany and Austria, however, Denck baptized Hans Hut, who had fought alongside Thomas Müntzer in the Peasants' War.²⁰⁹

As a result of his influence on Hut, the South German/Austrian movement owes a significant ideological debt to the radical Protestant Thomas Müntzer, even though—despite his reservations about pedobaptism, he never became an Anabaptist himself.²¹⁰ Müntzer placed the authority of Scripture above that of the Catholic hierarchy, but he also took a mystical spiritualist approach to Scripture and emphasized “the direct teaching by the Spirit of God as the true Word.”²¹¹ Moreover, he strongly believed that he lived in the Last Days, and held high apocalyptic hopes for the Peasants' War, which in his region of Saxony culminated in the May 1525 battle of Frankenhausen, which resulted in thousands of peasant casualties and Müntzer's own arrest and execution.²¹² Hut continued to propagate many of Müntzer's apocalyptic and mystical ideas in his new capacity as an Anabaptist apostle. He continued to believe that Christ's return was imminent and that, as the End Times unfolded, the elect would use the sword to against the godless. However, the failure of the Peasants' War had taught him a measure of caution, and so he urged his followers to provisionally obey their secular authorities and keep their swords sheathed. The Turks, he believed, would invade Europe as part of God's judgment and, once they had left, God would call the elect to exterminate the surviving godless men.²¹³ He expected this to happen no later than 1528.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 126-127.

²¹⁰ Snyder, “The South German/Austrian Anabaptist Context” in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 71.

²¹¹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 55-56.

²¹² Snyder, “South German/Austrian Anabaptist Context,” 71.

²¹³ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 275-277.

²¹⁴ Deppermann, 200.

From his baptism to his death in an Augsburg prison in 1527, Hut labored tirelessly as an itinerant Anabaptist missionary. He established congregations in cities and villages throughout Austria and South and Central Germany, including Nuremberg, Nicholsburg, Passau, Vienna, and Salzburg. After Hut died and his apocalyptic calculations proved incorrect, the South German/Austrian Anabaptist movement splintered into several distinct groups. Hut's erstwhile colleague Augustin Bader, convinced that he was a prophet who possessed the spirit of Elijah, came to believe that his newborn son was the messiah and future ruler of the world during God's millennial kingdom. Bader gathered a small group of Anabaptist followers, but his movement ended with his 1530 execution.²¹⁵ Melchior Rinck, another former associate of Müntzer, took on the leadership of Hut's followers in Central Germany, the Tirolean engineer Pilgram Marpeck led Anabaptist congregations in Southern Germany, and Jacob Hutter in Austria founded the Hutterian brethren (also known as the Hutterites), a strictly separatist group of Anabaptists who practiced full community of goods.²¹⁶

Although distinct, the Swiss and South German Anabaptist movements came into contact over the course of their missionary expansions and, especially in cities like Strasbourg and Augsburg which attracted Anabaptist refugees, members and leaders from both groups sometimes worked together. While imprisoned in Strasbourg in 1529, the Swiss Anabaptist Wilhelm Reublin and Denck's follower Jakob Kautz even wrote a joint confession of faith.²¹⁷ Both movements also became increasingly sectarian and separatist, although this process began somewhat earlier among the Swiss Brethren than among the South German and Austrian

²¹⁵ On Bader, see Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 42-45.

²¹⁶ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 135.

²¹⁷ Deppermann, 190.

Anabaptists. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the movements' occasional cross-pollination, the two developments occurred parallel to each other but separately.

North German/Dutch (Melchiorite) Anabaptism

The North German/Dutch stream of Anabaptism emerged about five years later than the other two. Its founder, Melchior Hoffman, arrived in Strasbourg in mid-July as a disgraced former Lutheran lay missionary. He remained in Strasbourg until April 1530 and, over the course of his stay in the imperial city, his theology underwent several important shifts. While he had held to the doctrine of predestination as a follower of Luther, in Strasbourg he read the works of Hans Denck and came to accept the doctrine of the universality of grace and the freedom of the will; he now believed that God desired all men to be saved, and that the power of God enabled people to do salvific good works.²¹⁸ From discussions with the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld, Hoffman developed a Christology unique to himself and his followers. He came to the conclusion that Christ had not taken human flesh from Mary but instead had passed through her “like water through a pipe.”²¹⁹

Hoffman also added to his comprehensive view of the End Times while in Strasbourg. He came to Strasbourg already convinced that the Last Days were imminent, and he had predicted as early as 1526 that the world would end in 1533, a belief he held until time proved it false.²²⁰ However, while in Strasbourg Hoffman encountered Lienhard and Ursula Jost and the Strasbourg prophets, a group of apocalyptic enthusiasts who believed that Hoffman was the promised prophet Elijah and accepted him as their leader. Hoffman published and promoted the

²¹⁸ Deppermann, 190.

²¹⁹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 380.

²²⁰ Deppermann, 180.

visions of both Josts. From Lienhard, he adopted the idea that Strasbourg was the “spiritual Jerusalem,” that the Emperor would unsuccessfully besiege that city, and that, once Strasbourg had defeated the “bloodthirsty hordes of Zwinglians and Lutherans,” baptized apostolic messengers from Strasbourg would spread the knowledge of Christ and believers’ baptism throughout the whole earth.²²¹

When exactly Hoffman became convinced of the rightness of adult baptism and who baptized him remains unknown, but by the publication of his 1530 tract *The Ordinance of God* the transition was complete. In the tract—his first Anabaptist writing—he argued that water baptism followed repentance and conversion and advocated for the celebration of the Lord’s supper as a memorial meal and for internal discipline in Anabaptist churches.²²² In April 1530, he petitioned Strasbourg’s city council for a church building where the city’s Anabaptists could meet for worship, a request that met with a prompt denial.²²³ The authorities intended to arrest him, but Hoffman fled the city, and returned to the work of itinerant preaching, this time as an Anabaptist.²²⁴ He began by preaching in the city of Emden, where he reportedly baptized 300 people including the Dutch shoemaker Jan Volkerts, who became a Melchiorite apostle and led the congregation in Emden.²²⁵

For the next three years, Hoffman divided his time between Strasbourg and the Netherlands, where his preaching mission found a ready reception among many of the Dutch people, partly because of the prevalence of Sacramentarian tendencies in the region.²²⁶ In

²²¹ Deppermann, 211.

²²² Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 211.

²²³ Krebs and Rott, *Elsass I*, 261-2.

²²⁴ Deppermann, 218.

²²⁵ Ralf Klötzer, “The Melchiorites and Münster” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700*, edited by John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 220-221.

²²⁶ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 212.

addition to performing water baptisms, he spread his own apocalyptic predictions and the prophecies of Lienhard and Ursula Jost. The Dutch Anabaptist Cornelius Poldermann's claim in his 1533 letter to the Strasbourg Rat that the Netherlands were full of the Josts' books, although obviously hyperbolic, nevertheless testifies to their popularity.²²⁷ In December 1531, however, ten Anabaptists including Volkerts were executed and Hoffman suspended water baptism as a precaution.²²⁸ He continued to write and publish and act as an apostle for Anabaptist congregations until May 1533 when, encouraged by a prophecy from one of his Frisian followers that God had ordained for him to be imprisoned and that his imprisonment would usher in the Last Days, he all but turned himself in to the Strasbourg authorities.²²⁹ When his disgruntled ex-follower Claus Frey accused him of inciting rebellion, Hoffman "went willingly, cheerfully, and well-comforted to prison."²³⁰ His imprisonment proved to be of a much less fleeting nature than he had expected, and he remained incarcerated in Strasbourg until his death a decade later.²³¹

After his imprisonment, Hoffman was unable to provide apostolic guidance for his followers in the Netherlands, although he had continued contact with Cornelius Poldermann. Without Hoffman's sustained input new Melchiorite leaders arose and claimed authority for themselves. Foremost among these men was Jan Matthijs, a baker from Haarlem, who believed he had the spirit of Enoch. This statement contradicted Hoffman's belief that Poldermann was the Enoch to his Elijah, but Matthijs won over the initially reluctant Melchiorites and convinced them to accept his leadership.²³² Matthijs reinstated baptism, and one of his first acts as an

²²⁷ Krebs and Rott, *Elsass II*, 213.

²²⁸ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 212.

²²⁹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 213.

²³⁰ Obbe Phillips, "A Confession," cited in Deppermann, 293.

²³¹ Deppermann, 380.

²³² Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 214-215. Obbe Phillips states in his *Confession* that Matthijs "carried on with much emotion and terrifying alarm, and with great and desperate curses cast all into hell and to the devils

Anabaptist apostle was to baptize Jan Bockelson von Leiden. Both went on to play key roles in the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster.

The Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster

The Melchiorites' apocalyptic expectations culminated in the takeover of the city of Münster. Prior to 1530, the Westphalian city's reform movement had remained staunchly Catholic, but in 1529 Bernhard Rothmann, who became the city's leading civic reformer, took the post of assistant priest at the nearby church of St. Mauritz.²³³ Despite attempts on the part of the local Catholic hierarchy to silence him, the evangelical reform movement that Rothmann spearheaded made significant gains in Münster. On July 15, 1532, the Münster city council bowed to popular pressure and agreed to "ban all doctrines but the gospel *as taught by Rothmann*" and to appoint evangelicals to preach in the city's churches.²³⁴ Within months of the edict, Rothmann's preaching and practices began to show signs of Sacramentarianism. His modification of the communion ritual in Münster led to a letter from Luther in December 1532 in which the Wittenberg reformer admonished Rothmann not to inadvertently promote "Zwinglian or other enthusiastic" heretical doctrines about the Eucharist.²³⁵ Rothmann's colleague Hendrik Roll and his followers also began to publicly agitate against infant baptism, which precipitated a break between the city's moderate Lutheran reformers and a powerful more radical reforming faction supported by Rothmann.²³⁶

to eternity who would not hear his voice and would not recognize and accept him as the true Enoch." Cited in Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 215.

²³³ Willem de Bakker et al., *Bernhard Rothmann and the Reformation in Münster, 1530-1535* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2009), 53.

²³⁴ de Bakker et al., 80.

²³⁵ de Bakker et al., 99-100.

²³⁶ de Bakker et al., 110.

By the time Jan Matthijs' followers arrived in Münster in January 1534, the ongoing antagonism between the city's Catholic, Lutheran, and radical Sacramentarian factions made it difficult for the city's authorities to effectively enforce anti-Anabaptist imperial mandates. Hundreds of Melchiorites from the Low Countries flooded into Münster, and members of the local population joined with them after Rothmann and his followers welcomed the Anabaptist emissaries and accepted believers' baptism for themselves.²³⁷ Alarmed by the new radical religious developments in Münster, the prince-bishop Franz von Waldeck began to make military preparations for a siege of the city.²³⁸ His strategy had the effect of galvanizing anti-episcopal resistance in Münster. Moderate citizens preferred to support the Anabaptists rather than the bishop, and Catholic supporters, who found themselves outnumbered and increasingly powerless, simply left the city.²³⁹ The Anabaptists won the council elections on February 23, and, together with the new burgomaster Bernd Knipperdolling, Matthijs and Rothmann assumed the spiritual and political leadership of the city.²⁴⁰

Matthijs and his followers believed that Münster was the New Jerusalem. Apocalyptic expectations ran high; Matthijs announced that Christ would return by Easter Sunday, which in 1534 fell on April 5.²⁴¹ In the meantime, Matthijs and his followers sought to bring God's kingdom to Münster and purify its citizenry. A mere four days after the February 23 city council elections that secured the Anabaptists' dominance, all adult residents of Münster were forced to undergo baptism. Those who refused were expelled from the city and forced to leave their belongings—an unpleasant fate, but a mitigation of Matthijs' original suggestion that all

²³⁷ de Bakker et al., 3.

²³⁸ de Bakker et al., 4.

²³⁹ Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of Savage Wolves: Anabaptist Münster and the German Reformation During the 1530's* (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000), 11-12.

²⁴⁰ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 4.

²⁴¹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 219.

unbelievers should face execution.²⁴² The city's leaders also abolished private property for those who accepted baptism and remained in Münster.²⁴³ As Easter approached, the Münsterites eagerly awaited Christ's return. When April 5 arrived without any sign of His imminent arrival, Matthijs stepped outside the city walls with a small band of men and led a charge against the bishop's besieging forces. The bishop's forces swiftly overpowered Matthijs' men, and they killed the Haarlem prophet and mounted his head on a lance.²⁴⁴

Despite the loss of their leader and the failure of Christ's prophesied return, the Münsterites simply revised their estimate of the Second Coming's date and accepted Jan Bockelson van Leiden as Matthijs' successor. Under his leadership, Münster's Anabaptists began a campaign to win converts from outside the city and gain financial and military assistance from Melchiorites in Northern Germany and the Low Countries. Through a series of aggressive proselytization attempts in April and May of 1534, they won 200 mercenaries to the Münsterite cause.²⁴⁵ Their attempts to gain reinforcements from other parts of the Holy Roman Empire met with less success. Jan van Leiden appointed missionaries to spread the Münsterite agenda in the Holy Roman Empire, but they soon faced execution. The only surviving missionary, Heinrich Graes, began to act as an informant for the bishop.²⁴⁶ However, Jan van Leiden's emissaries did manage to smuggle out a thousand copies of the polemical tract *Von der Wracke* by Rothmann, who served as the Münster regime's chief propagandist. In his tract, Rothmann called the elect to

²⁴² Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 12; Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95-96.

²⁴³ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 12.

²⁴⁴ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 219.

²⁴⁵ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 13.

²⁴⁶ de Bakker et al., 5.

join with Münster's inhabitants and take up arms in order to enact God's vengeance on the unrighteous.²⁴⁷

Within the city itself, Jan van Leiden cemented his authority by marrying Matthijs' widow Divara in order to establish himself as the Haarlem prophet's successor.²⁴⁸ He disbanded the city council and instead selected twelve men to serve as elders, and, following a prophetic announcement in September 1534, he described his own role as "King over the New Israel and over the whole world."²⁴⁹ He saw himself as a new King David; like the Old Testament ruler, he was called to wage war in order to make way for the peaceful kingdom of Christ, the new Solomon.²⁵⁰ In the city itself, likely as a way of bringing the substantial female population under control since women outnumbered men two to one, Jan van Leiden instituted polygyny in July 1534.²⁵¹ He ordered all women over the age of twelve to marry, and those who refused his order faced imprisonment or execution.²⁵² Nor was the institution of polygamy the only controversial aspect of his reign; the ostentation of his rule and his establishment of a royal court drew complaints from some of Münster's residents, and dissatisfaction mounted as the prince-bishop's forces managed to block the city off from its sources of outside supplies.²⁵³ The king urged his subjects to have hope and prophesied that the city would be liberated by Easter 1535. His

²⁴⁷ Housley, 96.

²⁴⁸ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 219.

²⁴⁹ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 13; Snyder, 219.

²⁵⁰ Klötzer, 243.

²⁵¹ C. Arnold Snyder, "The North German/Dutch Anabaptist Context" in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 251. The institution of polygyny may have been prompted in part by the desire to curtail future actions such as those of Hille Feicken who, in June 1534, left the city of her own initiative in an unsuccessful attempt to kill the prince-bishop. An account of Hille Feicken's attempt to rescue Münster can be found in Marion Kobelt-Groch, "Hille Feicken of Sneek" in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 288-297.

²⁵² Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 14.

²⁵³ Klötzer, 243; Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 15.

prediction proved no more accurate than Matthijs' the previous year.²⁵⁴ By late spring of 1535, even members of Jan van Leiden's household had grown dissatisfied with his rule. In May of 1535, his tenth wife Elisabeth Wandscheer accused him of cruelty toward his subjects and requested permission to leave the city. Enraged, the king ordered her beheaded.²⁵⁵

After a siege that lasted longer than a year, the prince-bishop's forces captured the beleaguered city—with inside assistance—on June 25, 1535. They put every man in the city to death, and they tortured and publicly humiliated Jan van Leiden and Knipperdolling before executing them in front of the city cathedral in January 1536.²⁵⁶ The Melchiorites in the Netherlands had already experienced intensified persecution as a result of the Münster uprising and continued to arouse the suspicion of the local authorities—the Anabaptist takeover of Münster served to reinforce Catholics' and Protestants' fear of Anabaptism. The Melchiorites themselves, jaded by their failed attempt to usher in the Kingdom of God through violent means, turned to new leaders for guidance. Dirk and Obbe Philips and David Joris, pacifists who had voiced opposition to the Münster regime at its height, began the work of unifying the Melchiorites under new leadership. Joris met with some initial success, but retreated into Nicodemite Spiritualism after the Strasbourg Melchiorites, at the prophetess Barbara Rebstock's insistence, declined to accept his spiritual authority.²⁵⁷

Obbe Philips' disciple Menno Simons, a former priest from Friesland, became the new leader of most of the remaining Melchiorites—this number did not include Lienhard Jost and his

²⁵⁴ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 16.

²⁵⁵ Anthony Arthur, *The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 1999), 158-159.

²⁵⁶ Haude, *Savage Wolves*, 16; Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 221.

²⁵⁷ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 224.

second wife Agnes, who renounced Anabaptism in 1539.²⁵⁸ Menno urged his followers not to take up the sword. Moreover, although he, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, expected Christ's imminent return, he refused to assign a date to the hoped-for event or to precipitate it through human force.²⁵⁹ A small group of Melchiorites under the leadership of Jan van Batenburg eschewed Menno's pacifism and continued to wage covert warfare on the ungodly and practice polygamy. They persisted in small pockets as late as 1580, but had little influence in the broader Anabaptist movement.²⁶⁰ Apocalyptic excess in sixteenth-century Anabaptism had largely run its course. The Anabaptist groups that remained after the mid-sixteenth century—the Mennonites, the Swiss Brethren, and the Hutterites—all shared a marked sectarian character and a strong commitment to nonviolence.

The question of whether and to what degree Hoffman and the Josts can be held responsible for the events of Münster remains a matter of some debate. As for Hoffman himself, he did not directly authorize Matthijs' leadership. Matthijs claimed the role of the prophet Enoch, but Hoffman had assigned that role to Cornelis Poldermann.²⁶¹ He certainly never encouraged anything akin to the polygamy Jan von Leiden instituted. In fact, when his follower Claus Frey took a second wife in 1533, Hoffman and the Strasbourg Melchiorites ejected him from their assembly, and Hoffman denounced Frey as a "robber of God's honour and a Satanic whoremonger."²⁶² Moreover, despite his desire to see the righteous avenged and the godless judged, Hoffman stopped short of ordering his followers to take up a sword themselves; that role,

²⁵⁸ This was the case with many of Strasbourg's Melchiorites, since the Anabaptist leaders Johann Eisenberg and Peter Tasch joined forces with Bucer and convinced many of their followers to recant. Those who did not recant remained loyal to the imprisoned Hoffman, whose influence elsewhere had largely waned. He died in prison in 1543. Deppermann, 369-380.

²⁵⁹ Klaassen, 21; 32.

²⁶⁰ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 223.

²⁶¹ Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 215.

²⁶² Deppermann, 292.

in his view, fell to the godly magistrates, who would defend the righteous against their enemies.²⁶³ However, Klaus Deppermann notes three important Melchiorite ideas that influenced Matthijs and his followers: the idea that the destruction of the godless would precede the Last Judgment, the idea that a global theocracy would usher in Christ's second coming, and the idea that Christ's "apostolic messengers" would be "invulnerable and invincible."²⁶⁴ Deppermann takes an even more critical view of the Josts' influence on the Münsterites. He lays responsibility for the "militant-activist ideas [that] infiltrated [Hoffman's, and by extension the Dutch Melchiorites'] apocalypticism" on the Strasbourg Prophets.²⁶⁵ He sees in Ursula's visions "a murderous hatred of existing society and a willingness to resort to violence" and credits her visions with stoking the apocalyptic excitement of Melchiorites in the Netherlands, who saw "apocalyptic signs in actual happenings; the excitement heightened by the visions thus found a release in action."²⁶⁶

Lois Barrett offers a contrasting view of Ursula's visions in her 1992 PhD dissertation. She argues that Ursula's work represents an example of an Anabaptist apocalyptic theology intimately connected with "the Anabaptist-Mennonite ethic of establishing the reign of God nonviolently."²⁶⁷ In support of this claim, she asserts that none of the violence in Ursula's visions occurs at the hands of the elect.²⁶⁸ Moreover, Barrett cites Ursula's seventy-fifth vision as possible evidence of her disapproval of violent actions. In her 1529 vision, Ursula saw a crowd of deceptively humble people from "distant places" and, as she watched, the Spirit of God

²⁶³ Deppermann, 388-389.

²⁶⁴ Deppermann, 390.

²⁶⁵ Deppermann, 218-219.

²⁶⁶ Deppermann, 206; 210.

²⁶⁷ Barrett, 15.

²⁶⁸ Barrett, 240. Barrett notes the possible exception of the young man clad in white who participates in the violent punishment of the fat man, but adds that "the nature and identity of the young man is not completely clear."

revealed to her that “These [were] they who [took] on themselves the yoke of Christ and his cross and who [mingled] with his sheep as though they were gentle, but in fact they [were] sly villains and faithless reprobates whose hearts [were] unfaithful.”²⁶⁹ Barrett identifies the crowd in Ursula’s vision with the followers of Hut from Augsburg who sought refuge in Strasbourg in large numbers in 1528—an interpretation Deppermann shares—and posits that Ursula specifically disapproved of Hut’s followers willingness to take up the sword.

Barrett functions as a useful corrective to Deppermann, who overemphasizes the “bloodthirsty” nature of Ursula’s visions. Her assertion that the elect themselves do not commit violence in the visions is mostly borne out by the text itself, although in one vision a young man dressed in white (a quasi-messianic figure who appears throughout the visions) joined in violence against a “large fat [presumably wealthy] man.”²⁷⁰ However, in an effort to connect Ursula to the later Mennonite tradition, Barrett overemphasizes the presence of pacifist ideas in the visions. Although, with the exception of the young man in white, the elect did not generally commit violence in Ursula’s visions, the wicked uniformly experienced violent punishment rather than being brought to repentance—something Ursula did not seem to regret. In Ursula’s view, the punishment of the wicked was certainly among the purposes of God, and, although she did not clearly call for the elect to take up the task themselves, she offered no explicit condemnation of violence that served these ends. Due to their ambiguity, her visions probably simply reinforced the existing views of their readers. The Anabaptists who flocked to Münster to usher in God’s kingdom may well have drawn encouragement from Ursula’s visions—given

²⁶⁹ Jost, 28.

²⁷⁰ Jost, 11. It should also be noted that the fact that God sometimes overthrows a people’s enemies violently without their participation does not necessarily require that people’s commitment to pacifism. Even a cursory examination of the Old Testament texts on the Israelites’ military campaigns reveals that, despite God’s frequent miraculous intervention on their behalf, the Israelites often fully participated in violent military encounters.

their popularity among Hoffman's Dutch followers, it seems likely that some of the Münsterites had read them. However, an Anabaptist inclined to wait peacefully for God to bring about His justice could easily find spiritual sustenance in the same text.

Women in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism

The question of the relative freedoms enjoyed by Anabaptist women in comparison to their Protestant and Catholic counterparts has been the subject of considerable debate over the second half of the twentieth century. Joyce Irwin, who in 1979 published a collection of primary sources on *Women in Radical Protestantism, 1525-1675*, maintains that, however counter-cultural male Anabaptist theologians may have been in some respects, their views on women tended to uphold the status quo, which severely limited the participation of women in church leadership. While she acknowledges that there is no "direct correlation between the actual status of women among sectarians and the expressed male position regarding that role," Irwin adds emphatically that "male attitudes had significant influence in determining which role options would be open to women."²⁷¹ George Hunston Williams puts forth the opposite view in his comprehensive account of *The Radical Reformation*. He argues that "the Anabaptist insistence on the covenantal principle of the freedom of conscience for all adult believers, and thereby the implicit extension of the priesthood of the Christophorous laity to women, made women, in at least the role of confessors, the spiritual equals of men. Nowhere else in the Reformation era were women conceived as so nearly companions in the faith, mates in missionary enterprise, and

²⁷¹ Joyce Irwin, introduction to *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), xix.

mutual exhorters in readiness for martyrdom as among those for whom believers' baptism was theologically a gender-equalizing covenant."²⁷²

At least as concerns the roles of Anabaptist women in marriage, Irwin's assessment that Anabaptists upheld the patriarchal status quo appears largely apt. Anabaptist women could disobey or even leave unbelieving husbands with their congregation's blessing, but they were expected to remarry swiftly within the Anabaptist community.²⁷³ Perhaps the most extreme application of patriarchal marriage and family principles occurred in the kingdom of Münster after Jan van Leiden instituted polygamy in July 1534. He not only forced the unmarried women in the city to take husbands, but also forced women whose husbands had fled Münster to remarry.²⁷⁴ Not all women forced to take part in polygamous arrangements had given their consent; Heinrich Gresbeck's account Münsterite Anabaptism mentions women who committed suicide, reportedly over the polygamy ordinance.²⁷⁵ Jan van Leiden, the most powerful husband in the city of Münster, even executed his wife Elisabeth Wandscheer for her defiance.²⁷⁶ However, while all Anabaptists were urged to marry, not all Anabaptist marriages were characterized by patriarchal subjugation. Lienhard and Ursula's own relationship, from the admittedly limited evidence that survives, appears to have been mutually beneficial, and they supported each other's spiritual callings to serve as prophets and visionaries.

Anabaptist women also played key, if often unofficial, roles within their congregations.

They housed travelling Anabaptist preachers, hosted meetings in their homes, and spread the

²⁷² Williams, 762.

²⁷³ Sigrun Haude, "Anabaptist Women—Radical Women?" in *Infinite Boundaries: Order, Disorder, and Reorder in Early Modern German Culture*, ed. Max Reinhart (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1998), 325

²⁷⁴ Heinrich Gresbeck, "Meister Heinrich Gresbeck's Bericht von der Wiedertaufe in Münster" in *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, 1525-1675*, edited by Joyce Irwin (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 51.

²⁷⁵ Gresbeck, 51-52.

²⁷⁶ Arthur, 159.

Anabaptist message through word of mouth. In this, the persecuted nature of the Anabaptist movement made the contributions of women essential—Catholic and Protestant women rarely needed to offer their homes and centers of worship and teaching, since their faiths could be taught overtly. Anabaptist women also faced martyrdom for their faiths as bravely as any of their male counterparts. A third of the 803 martyrs profiled in Thieleman Jansz von Braght’s 1660 *Martyr’s Mirror* were women.²⁷⁷

In her 1998 essay “Anabaptist Women—Radical Women” Sigrun Haude argues that “the greatest freedom enjoyed by women can be found in those Anabaptist groups that emphasized visions, prophecies, and the Spirit.”²⁷⁸ This was particularly true in Melchior Hoffman’s circle. Hoffman devised a fourfold-ecclesiastical hierarchy: the “throng of apostolic messengers” who travelled and preached the Gospel had the highest authority, followed by the prophets, the pastors who led individual congregations, and the members of the congregations themselves.²⁷⁹ The first office was filled almost exclusively by men, although Ernst Crous found mention of a female apostle named Bernhartz Maria of Niederrollesbroich in his studies on Anabaptism in the Northern German town of Schleiden-in-the-Eifel.²⁸⁰ The prophetic office, however, remained open to women as well as men. Ursula Jost and Barbara Rebstock both managed to exert considerable influence in their capacity as prophetesses. Ursula appears to have died not long after the publication of *Prophetische Gesicht*, and so did not have the opportunity to provide much new guidance to the growing Melchiorite congregations, but her published visions

²⁷⁷ Donald B. Kraybill, *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 130.

²⁷⁸ Haude, “Anabaptist Women,” 318-319.

²⁷⁹ Deppermann, 264-265.

²⁸⁰ Ernst Crous, “Anabaptism in Schleiden-in-the-Eifel” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 34:3 (July 1960): 189.

continued to inspire Anabaptists in the Netherlands.²⁸¹ Barbara Rebstock maintained a position of considerable influence among Strasbourg's Melchiorites throughout the 1530's, and the extent of her clout became apparent in 1538 when David Joris visited the Strasbourg Melchiorites in an attempt to establish himself as Hoffman's successor. Her strong disapproval proved sufficient to thwart Joris' attempts, and he commented bitterly in his foreword to his account of his meeting with the Strasbourg Melchiorites that "[Barbara's] dreams, visions and words [the Strasbourg Melchiorites] hear and believe as they do God."²⁸² The Strasbourg prophetesses are best known to posterity, but other Melchiorite women also claimed a prophetic role; Aeffgen Lystyncz of Amsterdam organized Melchiorite conventicles in Limmen in 1533 and resurfaced the following year in Münster as a prophetess.²⁸³

However, even the Anabaptist female prophet often served to legitimate rather than challenge her own group's apostolic leadership. Barbara Rebstock experienced a series of visions which led her to affirm Melchior Hoffman as Elijah and Cornelius Poldermann as Enoch.²⁸⁴ Ursula's visions also became useful to Melchior Hoffman, even in ways she probably had not intended. In his 1532 tract *Van der Waren Hochprachtlichen Eynigen Magestadt Gottes und vann der Worhaftigen Menschwerdung des Ewigen Worttzs und des Aller Hochsten*, Hoffman used her eleventh and twenty-second visions, both of which depicted the Trinity, to support his Christology.²⁸⁵ Both visions originally occurred in 1525, before the Josts met Hoffman and even

²⁸¹ Williams, 392. Williams lists 1530 as the year of Ursula's death.

²⁸² David Joris, "Disputation" in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris* trans. Gary K. Waite (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1994), 185.

²⁸³ Keith L. Sprunger, "God's Powerful Army of the Weak: Anabaptist Women of the Radical Reformation" in *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History*, edited by Richard L. Greaves (Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 54.

²⁸⁴ Lois Y. Barrett, "Ursula Jost and Barbara Rebstock of Strasbourg" in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 278-279.

²⁸⁵ Hoffman, 229-245. Hoffman incorrectly numbered them as her twelfth and twenty-sixth visions.

before Hoffman had formulated his Christology, and they contained stock Trinitarian images which could equally well have applied to orthodox formulations of the Incarnation. As such, Hoffman's use of Ursula's visions in his 1532 tract appears to have been an appropriation rather than an exposition of her thought. Even when Hoffman originally published Ursula's visions in 1530 he reserved the right to interpret them himself.²⁸⁶ The prophetic role offered women the opportunity to take an important place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but ultimate authority remained with the male apostles.

Similarities and Differences Between Anabaptist Groups

Despite their different points of origin, Swiss, South German, and Dutch Anabaptists' theologies and ecclesiologies resembled each other in several important ways. The most obvious of these similarities was the practice of believers' baptism, but the resemblance did not end there. Many of the Anabaptist leaders, including Grebel, Hubmaier, and Hoffman, spent some time taking part in the official Protestant Reformation before concluding that Zwingli and Luther provided nothing better than the Catholic Church they sought to replace. Even as they questioned some of the reformers' deeply-held beliefs, the Anabaptists maintained others, albeit sometimes in a modified form. In his essay "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," Arnold Snyder identifies three theological points on which the Anabaptists took their point of departure from Protestants rather than Catholics: belief in *sola scriptura* over the claims of the Catholic hierarchy, and acceptance of salvation by faith through grace, and a rejection of sacramentalism (including Zwingli's view of the Eucharist as a

²⁸⁶ Jost, 2.

memorial meal rather than Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation.)²⁸⁷ On the last point Ursula added her voice in her sixty-fourth vision, where she associates the Eucharist with idolatry.²⁸⁸

Snyder also identifies several “particular Anabaptist emphases” in his essay. First, all Anabaptists shared a “lively pneumatology.” They believed in the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers and even the most biblicist Anabaptist viewed the inspiration of the Spirit as necessary for the proper interpretation of Scripture.²⁸⁹ Some Anabaptists, Ursula among them, further believed in the importance of contemporary direct revelation from the Holy Spirit; a 1533 ecclesiastical document from Strasbourg even charged that Hoffman equated the prophecies of the Josts with those of Isaiah and Jeremiah.²⁹⁰ Secondly, Anabaptists shared a soteriology that viewed repentance, regeneration, and obedience as necessary corollaries of salvific faith. This led to two related anthropological points: the necessity of living a life of yieldedness to God (*Gelassenheit*) and the freedom of the human will.²⁹¹ As for their ecclesiology, Anabaptists shared a commitment to water baptism, the establishment of visible church, and to “baptism of blood”—a daily dying to self through obedience to Christ and an ultimate willingness to suffer martyrdom if God required it.²⁹²

As for theological differences between Anabaptists, Snyder suggests a continuum model for understanding the range of views on a particular topic. One of his examples, the Spirit/Letter continuum, relates to how Anabaptists interpreted Scripture, although he notes that all Anabaptists believed that the Spirit empowered believers to interpret the Scriptures, and that a

²⁸⁷ Arnold Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, edited by H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 13.

²⁸⁸ Jost, 25.

²⁸⁹ Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis,” 13.

²⁹⁰ Krebs and Rott, *Elsass II*, 186.

²⁹¹ Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis,” 14-15.

²⁹² Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis,” 15-16.

common person who possessed the Spirit of God was a more reliable exegete of the Scriptures than an educated theologian who did not.²⁹³ He further pinpoints three broad approaches to Scripture along the spirit/letter continuum: a literal interpretative strand (adopted, among others, by Balthasar Hubmaier, Michael Sattler, and Menno Simons), a spiritualist or mystical interpretative strand that prioritized the inner Word (the spirit) over the outer Word (the letter), and an apocalyptic or prophetic strand (adopted by Hoffman and the Josts) that emphasized the imminence of the Last Days and believed that God's Spirit inspired new revelations that complemented Scripture.²⁹⁴

The differences between the initial Anabaptist groups became less marked as the sixteenth century progressed. The principal Anabaptist groups that survived into the 1560's—the Swiss Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites—adopted several emphases that had not been universally held by the first generation of Anabaptist leaders. On the spirit/letter continuum of biblical interpretation they shared a literal approach to Scripture coupled with an interpretive lens that prioritized the life and teachings of Christ.²⁹⁵ The emphasis on continued prophetic activity, so prevalent among the initial followers of Hoffman and the Josts, became increasingly marginalized. Instead, the Mennonites, Hutterites, and Swiss Brethren focused on building separate and holy churches, committed to the observance of the Lord's Supper and church discipline in addition to believers' baptism, and firmly opposed to the taking of oaths and the wielding of the sword.

Ursula Jost, Anabaptist?

²⁹³ Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis," 18.

²⁹⁴ Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis," 18-19.

²⁹⁵ Menno Simons took his interpretive motto from 1 Corinthians 3:11. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." See Daniel Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spiritual Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 248.

The question of how Ursula fits into the Anabaptist tradition, which must be answered primarily from her visions, is complicated by the fact that *Prophetische Gesicht* is more a set of writings by a future Anabaptist than it is a specifically Anabaptist writing. They influenced Anabaptists in the Netherlands, but the degree to which the visions themselves were inspired by other Anabaptists remains unknown. Certainly all her visions from 1524 and 1525, which comprise 58 of the 77 visions recorded in the book, predate the establishment of an Anabaptist community in Strasbourg. In light of this, the absence of any reference to baptism in her visions is unsurprising.²⁹⁶

Nevertheless, the ideas present in Ursula's visions even as early as 1525 show an affinity for certain Anabaptist theological emphases. She unquestionably had a lively pneumatology and believed in contemporary direct revelation; so certain was she of the Spirit's ability and desire to grant visions to any willing Christian that she earnestly prayed to receive her visions.²⁹⁷ Ursula's soteriology as described in her vision of the barrel also echoed Anabaptist soteriology; she believed that salvation—though a work of God—required human participation and that salvific faith enabled believers to resist temptation by God's grace.²⁹⁸ Finally, although the Anabaptist terminology of the baptism of blood is foreign to Ursula's visions, the idea is not. She interpreted her sixty-ninth vision, in which she saw a mountain and a man the colour of blood, as evidence that those who "[walked] in the fear of the Lord and in love" would "sweat blood as Christ their Lord did" on the Mount of Olives, an interpretation which foreshadowed both suffering and martyrdom. Had Ursula lived longer and recorded more visions, we might have been able to observe whether her theology changed as she participated in her Melchiorite Anabaptist

²⁹⁶ Lienhard's visions, which survive only in excerpted form, do mention water baptism. See Krebs and Rott, *Elsass II*, 184-185.

²⁹⁷ Jost, 3.

²⁹⁸ On the vision of the barrel, see above, 22.

congregation. From the visions we have, however, we can observe her affinity for Anabaptist ideas and beliefs even before she joined the movement.

However, while she belongs in the story of Anabaptism's origins, and she and Lienhard could even be considered founders of the North German/Dutch stream of Anabaptism along with Melchior Hoffman, Ursula's brand of Anabaptism differed considerably from that of the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites, and even of the Mennonites who were Melchior Hoffman's heirs. Menno Simons adopted some of Hoffman's beliefs—most notably his Monophysite Christology. However, the contributions of Ursula and Lienhard, such as their enthusiasm for continued prophetic activity among God's people and their apocalyptic hopes, did not survive as Mennonitism became the dominant form of Anabaptism in North Germany and the Low Countries. The Josts had once been leaders of a burgeoning diverse movement, but as the movement's views became more focused and less diverse in years following Ursula's death Lienhard and his second wife found themselves increasingly marginalized. In 1539, he parted ways decisively with the movement and renounced Anabaptism.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ Deppermann, 369.

CHAPTER FOUR

URSULA AND LATE MEDIEVAL PIETY

Ursula was born and came of age into a late medieval Catholic society. Even as she consciously rejected the existing Church hierarchy, she continued to absorb and interact with some aspects of late medieval piety. She developed her views on poverty and God's justice in a religious context shaped by centuries of debate among Christians on the spiritual merits of wealth and poverty; men and women both within and outside the Church had criticized its leaders' tendency to accumulate wealth. Moreover, as a woman and a visionary, Ursula benefitted from the Church's acceptance—however tenuous at times—of men and women who claimed to have received visions and revelations directly from God. Finally, Ursula's apocalyptic enthusiasm had late medieval precedents throughout Europe, and disenfranchised groups from England to Bohemia hoped that God's justice would prevail and even took arms against their oppressors in an effort to precipitate God's judgment. Ursula did not merely copy the views of her predecessors, and it is difficult to know to what degree she was aware of them, but the late medieval religious climate into which she was born and raised nevertheless provided her with the point of departure from which she built her own ministry.

Wealth and Poverty in the Late Medieval Church

Since its inception, Christianity has fostered strains of piety that imbued poverty with dignity and sanctity, and both the Old and New Testaments are replete with evidence of God's concern for the poor and warnings against rich oppressors. Christ Himself had a simple, itinerant ministry; He and His disciples received some financial support from dedicated followers such as Joanna and Susanna, but He nonetheless warned those interested in following Him that “foxes

have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.”³⁰⁰ When a rich young ruler asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life, Jesus advised him to “go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”³⁰¹ The young man left, unwilling to part with his wealth, and Jesus used the opportunity to teach His disciples “how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”³⁰² So difficult was it, he added, that a camel could pass through the eye of a needle more easily.³⁰³ Jesus’ teachings told a very different story about the poor, however. The poor were blessed, and the kingdom of God belonged to them.³⁰⁴

Out of a desire to please God and follow Christ’s example, several early Christians lived ascetic lifestyles, both as individuals or as part of larger communities. The third-century Egyptian abbot Anthony, for instance, inspired by Jesus’ command to the rich young ruler, sold his family property and spent the rest of his life first as a solitary hermit and later as the spiritual leader of a band of desert-dwelling ascetics.³⁰⁵ He inspired imitators during his lifetime and his *vita*, written by Athanasius of Alexandria in 356, continued to do so even well after his death. The plethora of languages into which the text was translated—Greek, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Old Slavonic, and Ethiopian versions existed even before the Middle Ages—testify to its influence. The sixth-century abbot Benedict of Nursia likewise greatly influenced the

³⁰⁰ Luke 8:3; 9:58, NIV

³⁰¹ Mark 10:21, NIV

³⁰² Mark 10:23, NIV

³⁰³ Mark 10:25, NIV

³⁰⁴ C.f. Luke 6:20, NIV

³⁰⁵ Peter H. Görg, *Desert Father: Saint Anthony and the Beginnings of Monasticism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 9-10.

medieval monastic tradition through his authorship of a rule which became normative for monastic houses throughout Europe.³⁰⁶

Poverty existed throughout Europe, but in the early medieval period those who courted it for religious reasons could join communities of monks or nuns and become part of the regular clergy. Members of these communities lived together in convents and monasteries and pledged themselves to lifelong obedience to a religious rule, which placed greater demands on them than the standards to which ordinary lay Christians were held. The oldest of these, the rule of St. Benedict, mandated poverty and simplicity, along with chastity and obedience, for its adherents, who were to spend their days in prayer, devotion, and manual labour.³⁰⁷ By the twelfth century, the rules late medieval monasteries observed varied in strictness; those connected to the Burgundian abbey of Cluny continued to observe the rule of St. Benedict, while the stricter Cistercians (and their parallel order of nuns, the Bernadines) followed a modified Benedictine rule called the *Carta Caritatis*.³⁰⁸ The most austere of the medieval monastic orders, the Carthusians, required its adherents to live as quasi-hermits, who retreated from their rooms only for communal worship.³⁰⁹ Poorer laymen, who often lacked the means to become monks, could nevertheless attach themselves to a monastic community by becoming *conversi*. *Conversi* often came the ranks of the peasants who lived in the monastery's vicinity and performed manual labour in the monasteries and on their grounds, but, although they made vows of chastity and

³⁰⁶ An English translation of the rule can be found in Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, translated by Timothy Benedict (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

³⁰⁷ Judith M. Bennett and C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 10th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 58-59.

³⁰⁸ Bennett and Hollister, 195; Frank K. Flinn, *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 162.

³⁰⁹ Bennett and Hollister, 197.

obedience, they were not required to undergo the most rigorous spiritual disciplines required by the Cistercian or Benedictine rule.³¹⁰

Unlike members of the regular clergy, however, members of the secular clergy who served as priests and bishops took no vows of poverty. Those in the upper echelons of the church hierarchy in particular usually had noble blood, considerable political power, and wealth commensurate with their influence. In addition to their luxurious lifestyles—which were in themselves enough to indict those whose religion was built on the teachings of a poor carpenter from Nazareth—the vast amount of wealth held by the upper clergy could often breed corruption, as noblemen attempted to purchase ecclesiastical appointments.³¹¹ Not even the regular clergy were exempt from allegations of luxury and corruption. Individual monks took vows of poverty, but monasteries and abbeys accrued considerable property as a result of donations, and abbots and abbesses belonged to the rural landholding class. The ultimate example of ecclesiastical opulence was the Pope himself, whose court could rival that of any European ruler.³¹²

To many medieval observers, the Church's wealth seemed to indicate that it had lost its spiritual moorings. Pious laypeople who desired to live lives of Christlike poverty drew their inspiration from sources other than the ecclesiastical hierarchy and began to found their own movements. Waldensianism, one of the best-known of these medieval movements was founded by the Lyons merchant Peter Valdesius. According to an anonymous chronicler from Laon, in the late twelfth century Valdesius, who had acquired his wealth partly through usury, became

³¹⁰ Bennett and Hollister, 197-198.

³¹¹ Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 72.

³¹² The papal court drew particular criticism during the years of the Avignon papacy. Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church, 590-1500* (New York: Routledge, 1969), 167.

anxious about the state of his soul. When he heard the story of the rich young ruler from the synoptic gospels, Valdesius took the injunction to “sell all you have and give to the poor” to heart. Once he had made provisions for his wife and daughters and had given the rest of his wealth away, he set about living an apostolic life.³¹³ Although he had read vernacular translations, Valdesius had no formal theological training nor had he taken holy orders. Nevertheless, he began to preach publicly and disseminate his newfound convictions about apostolic poverty. He gained a following of men and women, many of whom likewise began to preach publicly without having taken holy orders.³¹⁴ Valdesius and his followers initially sought the church’s approval; at least some Waldensians attended the Third Lateran Council in 1179. In their overtures toward the ecclesiastical hierarchy they met with only partial success. Although Pope Alexander III had no wish to discourage their pursuit of apostolic poverty, he refused to give them the right to preach except at the request of a priest.³¹⁵

Valdesius’ followers, it seems, were not all willing to comply with papal restrictions. When the council of Verona met five years later in 1184, it issued the decree *Ad abolendam*, which anathemized Valdesius’ followers and forbade, under threat of anathema, any unlicensed public or private preaching.³¹⁶ Although the Waldensians retained a largely orthodox theology, they refused to comply with the Catholic hierarchy and faced ecclesiastical repression accordingly. Nevertheless, the movement spread from Lyons into northern Italy, Germany, Austria, and Bohemia, merging with local movements along the way.³¹⁷ The diffuse and decentralized nature of the Waldensians makes it difficult to identify a unique Waldensian

³¹³ Euan Cameron, *Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 12-13.

³¹⁴ Cameron, 15.

³¹⁵ Cameron, 16-17.

³¹⁶ Cameron, 21.

³¹⁷ For maps showing the geographic diffusion of the Waldensians, see Cameron, 111; 138; 167.

theology, but the emphasis on Christ-like poverty (and the corresponding critique, whether explicit or implicit, of wealthy clergymen) remained a central Waldensian teaching. While the Waldensian movement had petered out by the end of the fifteenth century in Germanic-speaking regions, the Piedmont region of the Southern Alps remained home to a network of clandestine Latin Waldensian congregations.³¹⁸ When the Piedmontese Waldensian leaders, or *barbes*, emerged from hiding in 1530 to seek the support of the Protestant reformers, they remained dedicated to a life of poverty and simplicity and supported themselves through manual labour.³¹⁹

Catharism, the most persistent heterodox movement of the Central Middle Ages, provoked the church's ire for its dualistic teachings, but it also stressed poverty and anti-materialism. Ordinary Cathars were not required to live lives of poverty and asceticism, and so, despite Catharism's anti-wealth teachings, the movement gained ground not only among the lower classes in Southern France but also among the nobility. The Cathar *perfecti*, a small group of spiritual elite, renounced all wealth and intercourse and even, as much as possible, food.³²⁰ Popular anticlericalism fed the growth of Catharism in Southern France; many of the common people resented the wealth and influence of the Catholic clergy and the strict asceticism of the *perfecti* provided a compelling alternate vision of holiness.

The mendicant orders founded in the thirteenth century by St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic became part of the Church's strategy to combat the growing influence of Waldensianism and Catharism. Franciscans and Dominicans retained the vows of poverty common to monastic life—indeed, unlike the monastic orders they practiced corporate as well as

³¹⁸ Treesh, 64-65.

³¹⁹ Giovanni Gonnet, "Strasbourg et les Vaudois" in in *Strasbourg au Coeur Religieux du XVIIe Siècle: Hommage à Lucien Febvre: Actes du Colloque International de Strasbourg, 25-29 Mai 1975*, edited by Georges Livet (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1977), 481.

³²⁰ Bennett and Hollister, 193-194.

personal poverty—but they rejected clausturation in favour of life in the world.³²¹ Dominic began his ecclesiastical life as an Augustinian canon. Early in Innocent III's papacy (1198-1216), he travelled to southern France to preach against the Cathars. He gained a reputation as an effective anti-heresy preacher, and his life of poverty earned him the respect of Christians who had become suspicious of wealthy priests and bishops. In 1216, Dominic obtained permission from Pope Honorius III to found the Order of Friars Preachers, an order which combined an ascetic lifestyle—in addition to the usual vows of chastity and poverty, Dominicans were required to abstain from meat and take lengthy vows of silence—with a missionary and pastoral focus.³²² As pastors and inquisitors, they dedicated much of their energy to bringing heretics back into the Catholic fold, and their devotion to public poverty and asceticism facilitated this task.

St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Order of Friars Minor, was born to a wealthy merchant in Assisi and as a young man underwent a dramatic religious conversion similar to that of Valdesius. He left his family home, renounced his wealth, and began to minister to the poor and the sick. In 1210, he received permission from Innocent I to found an order of friars who lived a life of apostolic poverty and preached to and served the poor and sick. Francis and his first followers sought to imitate Christ in His poverty. They dressed simply and travelled throughout Europe and even into North Africa and the Middle East, preaching and serving the poor. Francis' personal devotion to poverty took eccentric forms, such as dressing in rags and living in huts assembled from twigs and branches. After his death, his followers, who already numbered in the thousands, adopted a less radical approach. They continued to serve the poor and advocate for voluntary poverty, but, much to the consternation of a radical faction which

³²¹ Bennett and Hollister, 208.

³²² Bennett and Hollister, 208.

remained devoted to absolute poverty and came to be known as the Spiritual Franciscans, they began to own enough land and houses to establish a practical base of operations.³²³

While monastic rules could be easily adapted to suit women, Francis' and Dominic's female followers were prevented from following them in several significant ways. Catholic churchmen (some more grudgingly than others) accepted the fact that the Holy Spirit could reveal truth to a woman and that she could teach that truth to others with proper supervision. However, the Pauline prohibitions against women who wield authority over men and the weight of church doctrine prevented women from holding official positions that required them to teach with authority.³²⁴ As such, they could not preach like Dominican or Franciscan friars. Instead, the mendicants' female counterparts lived cloistered lives, much like the female members of monastic orders. The Franciscan women first organized themselves under the leadership of Francis' associate Clare of Assisi. Clare and her followers accepted claustration in 1215, but they sought to maintain the ideal of evangelical poverty within their convents and, when Innocent IV attempted to force them to own communal property in 1247, they resisted. In response to Innocent, Clare drafted her own rule for her cloister, in which she insisted that her nuns would own neither personal nor communal property, but would instead receive alms from Franciscan friars.³²⁵ By 1300, several hundred Poor Clare convents could be found across Europe.³²⁶

Laywomen who admired the Franciscans or Dominicans but rejected claustration (or simply could not afford the dowries required to enter a convent) could also become members of

³²³ Bennett and Hollister, 213.

³²⁴ Bernard McGinn, "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism" in *Church History* 65:2 (June 1996): 209. McGinn cites the thirteenth-century theologian Henry of Ghent, who distinguished teaching *ex beneficio* from teaching *ex officio*, and added that women ought not to be barred from the former if they possessed sound doctrine.

³²⁵ Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder: The Poor Clares between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 49-53.

³²⁶ Roest, 79.

tertiary mendicant orders. Women (and men) who became tertiaries continued to live in their respective homes and pursue their respective careers, but they placed themselves under the spiritual supervision of Dominican or Franciscan friars and sought to live lives that embodied their order's ideals. Unlike friars and nuns, tertiaries made no vow of celibacy and thus had permission to marry, although not all did. The Franciscan tertiary Angela di Foligno, to her shame, had a husband and children, while the Dominican tertiary Catherine of Siena remained in her parents' home and adamantly refused to marry.³²⁷

Moreover, from the twelfth century onward, increasing numbers of laywomen—referred to as beguines—opted to dedicate themselves to a chaste and pious life of poverty without taking formal vows or associating themselves with any particular order. Some beguines left their families and lived with other like-minded women in houses and communes called beguinages, while others remained at home or lived on their own. Unlike cloistered nuns, the beguines did not follow a religious rule and, although they vowed to practice chastity while living as beguines, remained free to abandon their vows.³²⁸ They lived modestly, but in most cases opted to work for their living rather than beg for alms; many beguines worked in hospitals and in the cloth trade, while more educated women could serve as teachers or governesses.³²⁹ Their less numerous male counterparts, the beghards, dedicated themselves to poverty, chastity, and the apostolic life but, unlike the Franciscan and Dominican friars, took no holy orders.³³⁰

³²⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 143; Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 1350-1550* (New York: Crossroad, 2012), 200.

³²⁸ Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 13; Tanya Suella Stabler, "Now She is Martha, Now She is Mary: Beguine Communities in Medieval Paris, 1250-1470." (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2007), 215.

³²⁹ Fiona Bowie, introduction to *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology*, (London: SPCK, 1989), 25.

³³⁰ Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 205.

Marie of Oignies, who came from a well-to-do family in Nivelles (in modern-day Belgium), represented “the archetype of the early stages of beguine life, and especially of beguine spirituality.”³³¹ Shortly before the turn of the thirteenth century, the newly married Marie convinced her husband that they should make a joint vow of chastity and devote themselves to God’s service. They left their home and moved to a leper colony, where they tended to the sick. Her husband seems to have either died or left in the following decade, but Marie remained at the colony until about 1207. Her reputation as a holy woman grew and men and women, who hoped to benefit from proximity to a living saint, visited her in increasing numbers. In 1207 she moved to the nearby town of Oignies, where she led a community of beguines and frequently visited the sick and dying.³³²

Marie, renowned for her dedication to both the contemplative and the apostolic life, caught the attention of the French nobleman Jacques de Vitry. He became a priest at her instigation, and throughout his career he zealously advocated for his beguine mentor and her female followers.³³³ He penned a *vita* of Marie of Oignies in 1216, three years after her death, in which he attempted to convince his fellow churchmen of the beguine movement’s value to the Catholic Church’s fight against heresy. The Cathars had female as well as male clergy (called *perfecti*, or Good Men and Women), and the female Cathar leaders achieved a reputation for sanctity.³³⁴ Jacques de Vitry’s *vita* of Marie of Oignies provided an exemplar of orthodox piety—exhibited by a laywoman, no less—and a new model of sanctity for women who had been

³³¹ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 33.

³³² McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 33-34.

³³³ Bowie, 16.

³³⁴ For more on Cathar women, see Anne Brennon, “The Voice of the Good Women: An Essay on the Pastoral and Sacerdotal Role of Women in the Cathar Church” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, edited by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 114-145.

seduced by the Cathar heresy.³³⁵ Through his writings and advocacy on behalf of the beguines, Jacques de Vitry gained papal approval for beguine communities from Pope Honorius III in 1216, despite the church hierarchy's hostility to new religious developments.³³⁶

Over the course of the thirteenth century the beguine ideal rapidly gained popularity throughout Western Europe and found supporters from all echelons of society.³³⁷ King Louis IX of France himself founded and supported a beguinage in Paris, and the inhabitants of Cologne, between 1250 and 1350, founded enough beguinages to house one thousand beguines—a not insignificant portion of the city's thirty thousand inhabitants. In Strasbourg itself, the beguine lifestyle seems to have gained currency in the mid to late thirteenth century, especially among the city's poorer women; city records show that Strasbourg's beguines at first came predominantly from the city's artisan class or had emigrated from areas outside the city. While some twenty beguinages were founded in Strasbourg before 1320, many of Strasbourg's first beguines pursued a chaste, simple, and holy lifestyle independently, and lived either on their own or with a few friends or family.³³⁸ They remained part of the common people, not set apart from them.

It was in a milieu profoundly affected by these developments that Ursula wrote her visions, and she echoed the concerns about the Church's accumulation of wealth that others both inside and outside the Catholic Church, including the Waldensians, Cathars, Dominicans, and

³³⁵ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 37-38.

³³⁶ Bowie, 17. The Fourth Lateran Council, convoked the previous year, had recently prohibited the foundation of new religious orders.

³³⁷ Initially, most beguines belonged to the nobility or the middle class, but they gradually became popular among the artisan classes as well. See Emilie zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), xxi.

³³⁸ Dayton Phillips, "Beguines in Medieval Strasbourg: A Study of the Social Aspect of Beguine Life," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1941), 226. This table shows the chronological distribution of beguines in Strasbourg as well as their social class.

Franciscans, had expressed before her. She criticized “bishops and spiritual prelates” and depicted them receiving their just deserts.³³⁹ She probably envisioned regular as well as secular clergy, since abbots and abbesses were part of the landowning class in rural Alsace. The convent of St. Stephen, for instance, founded in the eighth century by Duke Adalbert of Alsace and led by a long line of aristocratic women, survived the beginnings of the Reformation and the Peasants’ War and its abbess Anna von Schellenberg raised a formidable opposition to religious and social dissenters into the 1530’s.³⁴⁰ However, her visions also offered hope for those who lived in poverty; she saw God imbuing the common people with dignity and meeting their needs. Ursula’s God did not simply promise the poor a heavenly reward.³⁴¹ He promised to judge their wealthy oppressors harshly, and her twenty-first vision showed two rich oppressors—a fat man and a bishop—receiving their just deserts.

Visionaries, Mystics, and Prophets in the Medieval Church

The elusive third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, may have remained persistently difficult to quantify and contain, but the late medieval Catholic Church nevertheless affirmed His existence and His continued work among believers. Part of His work included revealing truths to men and women, who then felt responsible for sharing the message they had received with others. The Catholic Church forbade women from holding a public teaching office, but women could teach *ex beneficio* (from grace or divine revelation).³⁴² Communications from the Holy Spirit frequently took the form of visions, which could be corporeal (experienced by the

³³⁹ Jost, 6; 11.

³⁴⁰ Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 110; Derksen, *Nonconformists*, 207-217.

³⁴¹ For images of God rewarding common people, see Jost, 6. For images of God meeting His people’s physical and spiritual needs, see Jost, 15; 27.

³⁴² McGinn, “Late Medieval Mysticism,” 209.

visionary as part of his or her physical environment), spiritual (perceived by the visionary in his or her soul), or intellectual (in which the visionary comes to understand a divine truth).³⁴³ Under favourable circumstances, visionary literature provided women with the tools to influence and even teach the Church. Historians who study visions from the Middle Ages are necessarily limited to such written accounts as survive, whether first-hand or second-hand, but the growth of vernacular literacy beginning in the thirteenth century significantly broadened the scope of available literature.³⁴⁴ This helps to account for the “flood of visionary narratives, especially by and about women, that [began] to appear shortly after 1200.”³⁴⁵

The subjects of the visions found in late medieval visionary narratives varied. The tour of heaven and hell proved a popular visionary motif in the late twelfth century, and, throughout the later Middle Ages, a form of vision that “involved ecstatic transport to the supernatural realm, where a revelation in pictorial form was given to the seer, most often by a heavenly being” grew in importance.³⁴⁶ Depending on the nature of the revelation the visionary received, this topos could blur the distinction between intellectual and spiritual visions. Frequently, Christ Himself appeared to visionaries; the thirteenth-century Cistercian nun Gertrude of Helfta had a vision during Lent in which Christ stood before her and showed her a pure, crystal-clear stream of water that flowed from his side.³⁴⁷ The Franciscan tertiary Angela di Foligno experienced visions of Christ as well, but also frequently saw St. Francis of Assisi, who reassured her that she was his true follower.³⁴⁸ Furthermore, visions could provide guidance and express God’s will for the visionary’s life. The thirteenth-century Franciscan beguine Douceline of Digne, for instance,

³⁴³ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 155.

³⁴⁴ On the growth of vernacular literacy in the thirteenth century, see McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 3.

³⁴⁵ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 25.

³⁴⁶ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 27.

³⁴⁷ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 277.

³⁴⁸ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 145.

founded a beguinage after she saw in a vision three women in black habits with white veils who informed her that they belonged to “the order that pleases God” and entreated her to join them.³⁴⁹ Even visions of hell could be seen to come from God. The letters of the thirteenth-century beguine Christina of Stommeln make little mention of Christ, but describe frequent visions and experiences of demonic harassment. Neither she nor her hagiographer viewed these experiences as a sign that she herself was damned; instead, they served as a cautionary tale and a reminder of God’s judgment.

Visions have been commonly associated with mysticism, but not all visions have a mystical element. In his magisterial series *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn argues that “the mystical element of Christianity...centers on a form of immediate encounter with God whose essential purpose is to convey a loving knowledge (even a negative one) that transforms the mystic’s mind and whole way of life.”³⁵⁰ Only visions that match those criteria qualify as mystical. McGinn’s broad definition allows for mysticism to take a variety of shapes, depending on the knowledge God imparts and the way in which the mystic’s life is transformed.

A common feature in late medieval mysticism was the quest for union with Christ. Like many of their contemporaries, Gertrude and the other nuns of Helfta experienced this union through frequent reception of the Eucharist and through meditation on Christ’s passion, and Gertrude developed such a devotion to the wounds of Christ that, in one of her visions, she sensed Him piercing her heart the way His had been pierced on the cross.³⁵¹ The French beguine Marguerite Porete (whose *Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, despite her 1310 execution for

³⁴⁹ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 137-138.

³⁵⁰ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 26.

³⁵¹ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 270; 276.

heresy, survives in no less than four languages in six editions) taught that complete unity with God required annihilation of the self and absorption into His will.³⁵² “He is,” wrote Porete, “And I am not, and so it is indeed right that I do not possess myself.”³⁵³

To the roles of the mystic and the visionary could be added a third, overlapping role: the role of the prophet who, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, “conveys a message from God about the past, present, or future”³⁵⁴ The prophetic role remained an option for women—albeit a risky one, given the male-dominated ecclesiastical hierarchy.³⁵⁵ The theologians who studied the Latin Vulgate could find examples of female prophets in both testaments; Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah graced the pages of the Old Testament, while in the New Testament the four unmarried daughters of Philip had the gift of prophecy.³⁵⁶ Even the Apostle Paul—who famously forbade women to teach—granted that they could prophesy.³⁵⁷

The role of the female prophet lapsed during the early part of the Middle Ages, but the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen reasserted the role of the prophetess “sent by God to instruct, to warn, and to correct an errant male-dominated church” and, particularly during the troubled period of the Avignon papacy, other holy women followed suit.³⁵⁸ The noblewoman Birgitta of Sweden, inspired by a series of divine revelations, moved to Rome in 1349 to work for the return of the papacy from Avignon and the reform of the Church. Birgitta saw herself as God’s “channel,” and her revelations addressed parts of the Church as

³⁵² McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 244; 251.

³⁵³ Cited in McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 251.

³⁵⁴ Bernard McGinn, “‘Trumpets of the Mysteries of God’: Prophetesses in Late Medieval Christianity” in *Propheten und Prophezeiungen: Prophets and Prophecies*, ed. Matthias Riedl and Tilo Schabert (Wüzburg: Köigshausen & Neumann, 2003), 125.

³⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas acknowledged that women could act as prophets in a private capacity, but

³⁵⁶ Exodus 15; Judges 4; 2 Kings 22; Acts 21.

³⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 11. Paul does not forbid women to prophesy, but censures those who do so without a head covering.

³⁵⁸ McGinn, *Vernacular Mysticism*, 193.

well as individuals. No member of the Church, not even Pope Gregory XI, was too powerful for Birgitta to confront. Spurred by commands given to her by Christ and Mary in visions, she urged the pope to work for the Church's renewal and to return immediately to Rome, lest he face God's judgment.³⁵⁹ The Italian mystic and visionary Catherine of Siena did not consciously fashion a prophetic identity for herself in the same way as Birgitta did, but she also played a prophetic role when she admonished Gregory to return to Rome with the papal curia.³⁶⁰ Birgitta, who died in 1373, did not live to see the Pope return to Rome in 1377, but Catherine did.

Although mystical, visionary, and prophetic literature provided women with an acceptable channel by which to make their voices heard in the late medieval Church, the female visionary nevertheless undertook a great risk by making her revelations public. Both by virtue of their gender and of the nature of their writings, female visionaries incurred suspicion from members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who feared the spread of heterodoxy. Beguine mystics—who had the added disadvantage of not belonging to an official order—came under increased scrutiny near the beginning of the fourteenth century when they were accused of propagating the so-called Heresy of the Free Spirit. The Heresy of the Free Spirit coupled a mystical emphasis on oneness with God with libertinism, sensual indulgence, and a rejection of the established Church.³⁶¹ The French beguine Marguerite Porete garnered accusations of such heresy after she wrote and disseminated her book *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*, and her 1310 inquisitorial trial culminated in execution at the stake.³⁶² The decrees of the Council of Vienne, which convened the following year, aimed to rein in men and women who pursued lives of

³⁵⁹ McGinn, *Vernacular Mysticism*, 193-194.

³⁶⁰ McGinn, "Prophetesses," 133.

³⁶¹ On the Heresy of the Free Spirit, see Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent, c. 1250-c. 1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 308-410.

³⁶² Murk-Jansen, 75-76.

public piety (and especially those who sought to teach) without official church sanction. The Vienne decree *Ad nostrum*, which became part of canon law in 1317, condemned the “abominable sect of certain evil men called beguards” and “some faithless women called beguines” for adhering to and propagating the Heresy of the Free Spirit.³⁶³

Individual theologians as well as papal councils applied their theological acumen to a careful scrutiny of women’s writings. In the early fifteenth century, the French churchman Jean Gerson waged a campaign to curtail the influence of mystics—predominantly female—who expressed their sanctity through ecstatic displays and claims of divine possession. He urged the church to practice rigorous discernment of spirits and reminded his readers of the possibility that mystical experiences that appeared to be of divine origin might in fact be from the devil. Gerson failed to provide the church with an objective method to test whether a mystic’s appearance of sanctity had a divine or diabolical origin, but he did succeed in heightening his fellow churchmen’s suspicions concerning female mystics. Fifteenth-century female mystics and ecstasies had a much more difficult time finding ecclesiastical support than their predecessors in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.³⁶⁴ However, the popular cults of female saints such as Catherine of Siena and the French warrior-mystic Joan of Arc continued to provide early modern women with models of women who derived a form of spiritual authority from divine revelation. Fifteenth-century female mystics even found an unlikely ally in the Dominican Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, author of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, who actively promoted several of his contemporaries, including the Dominican tertiaries Osanna Andreasi and Stefana Quinzani.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 63.

³⁶⁴ Moshe Sluhovskiy, “Discerning Spirits in Early Modern Europe” in *Demons, Spirits, Witches: Communicating with the Spirits*, edited by Eva Pocs and Gabor Klaniczay (Budapest, Central European University Press, 2005), 56.

³⁶⁵ Tamar Herzig, “Witches, Saints, and Heretics: Heinrich Kramer’s Ties with Italian Women Mystics”

The exact influences of Ursula and her visions are difficult to trace. It is impossible to know precisely of which specific mystics and visionaries she was aware. Even though Ursula's visionary experiences differed significantly from some of her more mystical predecessors', the fact that Catholic theology affirmed the reality of continued direct revelation from the Holy Spirit and made allowances for women who taught *ex beneficio* (from the gift of grace) created a context in which Ursula felt entitled to experience and share spiritual revelations and to challenge her contemporaries with what she had learned. Ursula situated herself in a prophetic tradition begun by her biblical and medieval forebears. Her visions contained both implicit and explicit messages from God for His Church. Images of His wrath and of His rewards for faithful common people emphasized the imminence of His judgment. One of the most demonstrably prophetic of Ursula's visions was her fifty-seventh vision, for which she also received an interpretation. In her vision, Ursula saw a large hand holding a rod. The Glory of the Lord revealed to Ursula that the hand was "the strong hand of the Most High, the God of Israel" and added the following warning: "His wrath is against all people. If they do not repent, he will punish them severely."³⁶⁶

Ursula's visions fit less neatly within the mystical visionary tradition. Many of her visions contained no interpretation and thus cannot be said to convey a "loving knowledge...that transforms the mystic's mind and whole way of life."³⁶⁷ Unlike many of the medieval mystics, Ursula seemed utterly unconcerned with achieving a mystical union with God, and she remained an entity fully distinct from Him throughout her visions. She did, however, encounter Him in tangible ways, with all her senses. Not only did He show her visions and sometimes speak to her,

<http://magic.pennpress.org/PennPress/journals/magic/sampleArt3.pdf>, 24 June 2013.

³⁶⁶ Jost, 23.

³⁶⁷ McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 26.

He even tickled her once and moved her to laugh.³⁶⁸ Moreover, although Ursula was not a mystic in the same way as the women who achieved a reputation for sanctity in the late medieval period, her third vision does fall into the mystical genre.

Following this, still on my bed, I saw the glory of the Lord come over me and appear to me in the form of a cloud. This cloud filled the whole room. It separated or divided and opened itself and I saw in it an inexpressible brightness, like the brilliance of the sun. In the brightness of the glory I saw a figure that looked like a lattice, and in the spaces of the lattice there appeared stars, bright as burning candles. Then, inside the lattice I saw appearing a form like God the Father himself. He spread out his almighty right hand. In the left hand I saw what looked like a sphere. Then the glory of the Lord spoke to me and said: If I withdrew my hand what would all of you on the earth be? You would be altogether nothing.³⁶⁹

This vision bears remarkable similarity to one experienced by the fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich. Julian saw a small round object the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand. As she wondered what it would mean, she was told that “it is all that is made...it lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it.”³⁷⁰ Given the extremely limited circulation of Julian’s visions, it is practically impossible that Ursula would have been aware of them, but the similarities between the two visions suggest that a broadly comparable view of God’s sovereignty and loving care informed both.³⁷¹

Apocalypticism and Chiliasm

The late medieval prophetic tradition overlapped significantly with the apocalyptic visionary tradition. Apocalypticism, in the words of Bernard McGinn, is “an attempt by each era

³⁶⁸ Jost, 18.

³⁶⁹ Jost, 4.

³⁷⁰ Cited in Liz Herbert McAvoy, *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Rochester, New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 157.

³⁷¹ On the textual transmission of Julian of Norwich’s visions, see McGinn, *Vernacular Mysticism*, 426.

to understand itself in relation to an all-embracing teleological scheme of history.”³⁷² For Christian theologians, God guided history inexorably toward its End, and apocalyptic seers perceived that End as imminent and interpreted contemporary events through the lens of their eschatology. Apocalypticism had been a hallmark of Christian theology since its beginning in first-century Judaea, and it remained important in the late medieval period.³⁷³

Of the numerous apocalyptic thinkers and seers of the Middle Ages, none had a more lasting influence than the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore. Joachim divided history into three overlapping states or eras, each associated with a member of the Trinity. He and his contemporaries lived in the era of the Son and looked forward to the defeat of the Antichrist, which would usher in the utopian era of the Holy Spirit and the peaceful reign of a renewed Church. Joachim also predicted that a group of hermits and a group of preachers, known collectively as *virī spirituales*, or spiritual men, would lead the fight against the Antichrist.³⁷⁴ Joachim’s prophecies fascinated successive generations of clergymen. The Spiritual Franciscans—a radical subgroup of the Franciscan order dedicated to maintaining Saint Francis’ initial vision of absolute poverty—saw themselves as Joachim’s *virī spirituales* and viewed their devotion to apostolic poverty as a “unique apocalyptic sign” that proved their status.³⁷⁵

Apocalypticism’s close cousin, millenarianism or chiliasm—the belief that the End of history would be marked by the establishment of God’s kingdom on Earth—likewise remained important for medieval Christians, both the disenfranchised and the powerful.³⁷⁶ According to

³⁷² Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), xiv.

³⁷³ For a survey of apocalypticism in Judaism and early Christianity, see McGinn, *Visions*, 2-14.

³⁷⁴ McGinn, *Visions*, 128-129.

³⁷⁵ McGinn, *Visions*, 203.

³⁷⁶ McGinn, *Visions*, 29.

Norman Cohn, medieval millenarian movements were united by a common view of God's salvation: salvation was to be experienced by the collective of the faithful rather than simply by individuals, it was to be realized on earth, it was imminent, it was to usher in a state of perfection—not a mere improvement or reform—and it was to come about by miraculous means.³⁷⁷ Millenarian movements were not necessarily violent, but the temptation to speed the process of history through violent means remained ever-present. The hope of an imminent earthly utopia held particular appeal for disgruntled members of the lower classes, whose “desire...to improve the material conditions of their lives became transfused with phantasies of a world reborn through a final, apocalyptic massacre.”³⁷⁸ Not all medieval peasant uprisings were chiliastic in nature—many simply aired specific local grievances—but around the end of the fourteenth century revolutionary peasant groups began to conceive of an egalitarian state not merely as an idealized mythic past but as a future reality achievable through revolt.³⁷⁹ During the English Peasants' War, for instance, popular preachers extolled the virtue of community of goods and, believing that God had appointed their time for a restoration of His original created order, called the peasants to “cast off the yoke they had borne for so long and win the freedom they had always yearned for.”³⁸⁰

In Bohemia, one of the more prominent medieval chiliastic movements even succeeded for a time in establishing its own—albeit small—polity. The Czech Catholic priest John Hus gained a large following at the turn of the fifteenth century. This alarmed ecclesiastical authorities, since Hus virulently criticized the corruption he saw in the priesthood and in the papacy itself and insisted that the pope's authority over Christendom hinged on his devotion to

³⁷⁷ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 13.

³⁷⁸ Cohn, 14.

³⁷⁹ Cohn, 198.

³⁸⁰ Cohn, 199-200.

Christ.³⁸¹ In 1415, the Council of Constance declared Hus a heretic and ordered him burned at the stake. Far from silencing pro-reform Bohemian agitators, Hus' death propelled his followers to more radical acts of rebellion. Hus the martyr, it seemed, proved more useful to those inclined to revolution than Hus the man.³⁸² Under the leadership of general John Zizka, the leader of the Taborites—the most radical of the Bohemian reforming factions—the Hussites mounted an active resistance to the emperor Sigismund's crusade to force the Bohemian Church to comply with Rome's decrees. They defeated Sigismund in July 1420 and secured for the Bohemian Church the right to maintain its unique character (marked especially by its practice of offering communion in both kinds to the laity).³⁸³

The Taborites displayed a strong apocalyptic fervour. They believed that they were the last saved remnant in a world ruled by Antichrist and that they were responsible for cleansing the world in preparation for Christ's return. They withdrew from the Bohemian feudal order, sold their lands and possessions, and built a fortified city, named Tabor after the mountain on which Jesus had been transfigured, in Southern Bohemia, where they lived a communal lifestyle.³⁸⁴ From their base at Tabor the radical Hussites commissioned missionary priests and sent raiding parties to spread their teachings into the rest of Europe. In 1431 the Taborites commissioned the erstwhile Waldensian pastor Friedrich Reiser to serve as a missionary priest to Germanic-speaking Europe.³⁸⁵ He travelled throughout the Holy Roman Empire, making converts and spreading Taborite literature even after the Taborite base sustained military defeats at the hands

³⁸¹ Craig Atwood, *The theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), lxxxvii.

³⁸² Atwood, xciv.

³⁸³ McGinn, *Visions*, 261-262.

³⁸⁴ McGinn, *Visions*, 261.

³⁸⁵ Cameron, 147-148.

of more moderate Hussite factions.³⁸⁶ He was executed in Strasbourg in 1458, six years after the final destruction of Tabor by the Hussite leader George Podebrady in 1452.³⁸⁷ The Taborites' campaigns did not successfully establish a new order in Europe, but they did spread their Hussite apocalyptic hopes as far as Paesana in the Po River Valley. According to early fifteenth-century inquisitorial documents, the Peasanese Waldensians anticipated the coming of "a certain king of Bohemia" who would overthrow the Church, kill its leaders, cure the people's diseases, and institute community of goods.³⁸⁸

Ursula's visions contain definite apocalyptic overtones, as might be expected from a booklet entitled *Prophetic Visions and Revelations of the Divine Purpose in this Last of Times*. Her eighteenth vision showed the dead rising from their graves in a depiction of the future Resurrection, and in her thirty-second visions God caused water, fire, sulphur, and pitch to fall from heaven and spread over the earth in a seemingly final judgment.³⁸⁹ Her husband Lienhard developed his apocalyptic predictions more clearly. He believed that Strasbourg, the "spiritual Jerusalem," would suffer a siege from the emperor (whom Lienhard identified with the dragon in Revelation), but would prevail and serve as a sending base for the 144,000 apostolic messengers foretold in the book of Revelation.³⁹⁰ Whether the Jost's hopes had a specifically millenarian bent, at least by Cohn's definition, is less clear, since in Ursula's visions the poor do not usually receive terrestrial rewards but instead ascend into heaven.³⁹¹ However, the Josts' writings did serve to fuel the millenarian excitement of the Münsterites who, much like the Taborites a

³⁸⁶ Cameron, 148.

³⁸⁷ McGinn, *Visions*, 262.

³⁸⁸ Susan K. Treesh, "Europe's Peasant Heretics: The Waldensians, 1375-1550" (PhD diss., Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 1988), 223-224.

³⁸⁹ Jost, 10; 14.

³⁹⁰ Deppermann, 211.

³⁹¹ Jost, 6; 10; 26.

century earlier, created their own society and attempted through force to spread it throughout the earth in preparation for Christ's return.

CONCLUSION

Who, then, was Ursula? She was, along with her husband Lienhard, an influential voice in the nascent Melchiorite Anabaptist movement. Her visions reminded her fellow Melchiorites of the importance of the contemporary activity of the Holy Spirit, of God's desire for justice for the poor and disenfranchised, and of His impending judgment of the unrighteous. Her influence, however, did not last beyond the first generation of Melchiorites. Under Menno Simons' influence, the Anabaptist prophetic tradition waned in the post-Münster period. While the Mennonites retained aspects of Melchioritism, including Hoffman's Christology, they abandoned the contributions of Ursula and Lienhard Jost along with the ideas of the Münsterites. Her window of opportunity as an influential voice in the Anabaptist community in Strasbourg and beyond was ultimately brief.

Nevertheless, as a concrete example of an eventually marginalized facet of the movement, Ursula matters to the study of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. First, she serves to illustrate the heterogeneous nature of first-generation Anabaptism, particularly in comparison to the more homogeneous Anabaptist groups that survived past the mid-sixteenth century. In the initial years of the movement, a common commitment to believers' baptism inspired the fervour of men and women as diverse as Balthasar Hubmaier, Michael Sattler, Hans Hut, Melchior Hoffman, and the Josts. Even the Anabaptists' commitment to believers' baptism varied in intensity; Ursula's visions never addressed baptism at all, and Melchior Hoffman suspended water baptism indefinitely in 1531 after the execution of several of his Dutch followers. The first Anabaptist leaders also differed amongst themselves on questions of biblical interpretation and on the Christian's proper attitude toward violence. Ursula's particular visionary and apocalyptic brand of Anabaptism, while it captivated many of the first Melchiorites in the Low Countries,

largely made way for the pacifist, biblicist, and separatist ideals of the Swiss Brethren, Hutterite, and Mennonite traditions that became the face of the Anabaptist movement in the latter half of the sixteenth century. She represents one of the paths not taken and highlights the difference between the initial diversity of Anabaptism and the consensus achieved by the surviving traditions.

Moreover, Ursula illustrates the continuity between Anabaptism and late medieval religiosity. Like her fellow first-generation Anabaptists, Ursula came of age in a late medieval religious context and began to ponder religious questions long before her conversion to Anabaptism. The majority of her visions almost certainly predated her conversion, and many of the themes touched upon in her visions had already been explored by some of her medieval predecessors, both staunchly Catholic and outside the bounds of orthodoxy.³⁹² Ursula grappled with questions of poverty and wealth, apocalyptic enthusiasm, and direct revelation not in a vacuum, but as an heir to a long tradition preoccupied with apostolic poverty, anticipation of God's coming Kingdom, and experience of His Holy Spirit. She and her fellow Anabaptists may have chosen to break from the Catholic Church rather than remain within its fold, but they nevertheless represented one of the possible expressions of the spiritual and reforming currents that had already begun to coalesce within the Church for centuries.

³⁹² On the probable timing of her conversion relative to her visions, see above, 79.

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