

Thinking inside the Cages

Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence

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ABSTRACT: This essay uses the method of historiographical criticism to reexamine the frameworks used to research the relationship between apocalypse and violence. Its focus is the presentation of Anabaptist rule at Münster in the mid-1530s. New religions scholars and historians alike often cite this case as evidence of how millenarian prophecy can lead believers to violent actions. The essay demonstrates that this view is based largely on anti-Anabaptist and anti-sectarian propaganda that has its origins in the medieval and early modern eras. Partly because of the popularity of Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), which translated older polemical interpretations of religious outsiders into a modern scholarly form, hostile assumptions about Anabaptist violence have found their way into academic debates today. The essay shows that the distorting effects of these kinds of assumptions are not limited at all to the case of Anabaptist Münster, but in fact shape unhelpfully the way scholars conceptualize more generally the relationship between dissenting "sects" and established "churches." "Thinking outside the cages" of polemically derived conceptualizations can form the basis for cross-disciplinary research on believers under siege.

KEYWORDS: Anabaptism, heresy, sectarianism, polemics, apocalypticism, violence, Reformation, new religions studies, anticult movement

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In a 2014 essay entitled “Migrations of the Holy,” Cambridge historian Alexandra Walsham asks: “How do we conceptualize and explain religious change in medieval and early modern Europe without perpetuating distorting paradigms inherited from the very era of the past that is the subject of our study?”¹ Max Weber (1864–1920) posed an earlier form of this question in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In a passage about the pursuit of wealth in his famous section on the “iron cage” from Talcott Parson’s translation, Weber wondered about what happens when an idea from the past is “stripped of its religious and ethical meaning” but retains significant power many generations later.² This article asks a similar question about “the pursuit of the millennium,” that is, about the supposed relationship between apocalyptic ideas and violence: What happens when older representations of violent apocalypse are imported into and refashioned for use in scholarship today? The purpose of the present essay is, like the other articles in this special issue of *Nova Religio*, to encourage more dialogue between historians and scholars of new religious movements, while also challenging or reframing conventional thinking on both sides.

Some important challenges to conventional representations in religious studies and historiography of medieval and early modern apocalypticism already exist. In *Visions of the End* (1979), Bernard McGinn showed that in the Middle Ages apocalyptic language was used by defenders of the status quo as much as or even more than by dissenters. In other words, expectations of the violent end of time and God’s rescue of the righteous were not the special domain of proto-revolutionaries of the premodern world.³ Robin Barnes used McGinn’s observation that “the influence of apocalyptic thought was predominantly conservative” in the Middle Ages as his starting point for a study of early modern Lutheran apocalypticism.⁴ Although the popular scholarly imagination does not so closely associate Lutheranism with Endtime beliefs, Barnes demonstrated how profoundly these beliefs pervaded Lutheran culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Others have pointed to the importance of apocalypticism in early modern Catholic cultures.⁵

But conventional preconceptions still thrive in scholarly discussions. The present article looks closely at the portrayal of violence and the Endtime, especially among early Anabaptist groups, whose supposedly violent millenarianism is cited from time to time by new religions scholars.⁶ An implication that readers can take from this essay’s argument is that before we accept claims about a special relationship between apocalyptic belief and violent action, we should check how dependent those claims are on propagandistic literature against believers who happen to hold beliefs about the end of days.

Anabaptist violence was a long-standing concern for early modern writers, and it remains one today for scholars. The work of Martin

Luther (1483–1546) provides numerous examples. In a September 1544 sermon on Revelation 12, Luther announced:

Those who wish may read the histories of the wars against heresies that have been fought since the beginning of the church as well as in our day in the last twenty years against two foes: the gangs who blaspheme against baptism and the sacrament [the Eucharist], and otherwise attack sermons [the spoken word, *das mundliche wort*]; and also against the large, powerful dragon, and the great angel of the Devil, the Pope.⁷

The earthly battles between good and evil to which Luther referred started around the time of the Peasants' War of 1524–1525. For Luther and allied opponents of “heresies” and “gangs,” there was a clear connection between the insurrections of 1525 and the spread of the Anabaptists' “heretical” practice of adult baptism. After all, during the Peasants' War the preacher whom Luther associated with the rebellion, Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525), had opposed child baptism, and in 1534–1535 a new episode of Anabaptist insurrection at Münster in Westphalia had to be beaten back by a coalition of Catholic and Protestant forces. Oxford theologian and church historian Christopher Rowland has continued the tradition of emphasizing the profound dangers of Anabaptism by claiming that the episode of Anabaptist rule at Münster “is the best example of the intertwining of the Apocalypse and violence in Christian history.”⁸

This last quotation is an especially clear statement of what I will label the “myth of Anabaptist violence” or “the myth of sectarian deviance and violence,” subcategories of what William Cavanaugh calls “the myth of religious violence.”⁹ By “myth” I do not mean to suggest that all discussions of Anabaptist violence were (or are) false. Instead, the term is meant to point to a rhetorical framework that powerfully shapes the interpretation of evidence and is very hard to escape. This kind of myth builds simple, familiar, convenient stories out of historical details, and because of their simplicity, familiarity and convenience these stories constrain intelligent people from considering alternative accounts. This kind of myth is far too easy to repeat, and its plausibility increases with the retellings.

The long-enduring myth of Anabaptist violence at Münster in 1534 and 1535 is the specific subject of this essay. Like anti-Catholicism and Islamophobia, anti-Anabaptism has its roots in apocalyptic fear-mongering spread by men such as Martin Luther, but today its most important spreaders are academics in secular universities who no longer consider anti-Catholic and anti-Islamic rhetoric acceptable. In other words, it is an example of a once-propagandistic category that—“stripped of its religious and ethical meaning”¹⁰—has found its way into academic discourse. Scholars might assume that because the category of the violent Anabaptist is employed by respected colleagues, it is reliable

enough to repeat without further careful, critical examination. It just seems trustworthy. Continued retelling of the myth of Anabaptist violence by supposedly unbiased modern scholars obscures the origins of this dark story of unholy rebellion. When the language and format of the old myth of Anabaptist violence and the related broader myth of sectarian deviance are adapted in modern works of history, theology, and sociology, these works end up preserving the assumptions of early modern polemical literature. For example, in his famous essay on “the Protestant ethic” and in lesser-known works such as *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber lent his scholarly authority to the once-polemical term “sect.”¹¹ The distorting effects of old, theologically based assumptions are found in very recent studies of the Reformation as well as in new religions studies. The first step to avoid “perpetuating distorting paradigms inherited from the very era of the past that is the subject of our study”¹² is to identify these paradigms clearly.

**THE TENSION BETWEEN NORMAN COHN’S
THE PURSUIT OF THE MILLENNIUM (1957)
AND *EUROPE’S INNER DEMONS* (1975)**

Many new religions experts will be familiar with (and some attracted to) the scholarship of Norman Cohn (1915–2007). On the surface, Cohn might seem a most unlikely scholar to perpetuate the persecutory paradigm of early modern polemicists, but he is my prime example. Cohn was a historian of amazing range and depth. In his long career he led a research group at the University of Sussex on persecution and genocide, held posts at numerous distinguished universities, and published books on medieval prophecies and persecutions, ancient biblical literature, and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹³ Throughout his career he was concerned with exposing and making sense of “the underside of Europe’s history.”¹⁴

As important as his later work was, none of his subsequent books and projects was as influential as his first book. Cohn initially published *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in 1957, and since then it has gone through two further editions and many reprints. As a testament to its incredible influence, the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) placed it on its 1995 list of top one hundred books published since World War II.¹⁵ In the foreword to reprints of the third edition from 1993 and 2004, Cohn wrote of the reaction to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*:

The book has been criticized for presenting a very one-sided version of the apocalyptic tradition in Europe. So it does—but then, I was not concerned with that tradition as such. My concern was to show how again and again, from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, some freelance prophet would

proclaim that, in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, the Jews, the clergy, or else all the property-owners, must be exterminated; and to describe what happened then. I also suggested, in the Conclusion, what bearing that story might have on the terrible fanaticisms which ravaged Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

The very suggestive subtitle of the 1961 edition is *Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*. Cohn changed the subtitle of the 1970 edition to *Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. Despite this removal of references to modern totalitarianism, that edition ended with a sentence that emphasized one of its author's original, central, and sustained points since 1957: "For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still."¹⁷ Cohn seems never to have abandoned this thesis about the world-historical dangers of millenarian prophets, not even later in his long career.

Cohn found powerful support for his thesis in medieval and early modern polemical literature. For example, the preaching of Thomas Müntzer during the Peasants' War and the destructive rise to power of Jan Bockelson van Leiden (1509–1536) as king of the Anabaptists at Münster were the major subjects of the last two chapters in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Cohn's careful endnotes make clear that he relied more heavily on *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* by Hermann von Kerksenbrock (1520–1585) than on any other source for his portrayal of Anabaptist Münster.¹⁸ Like any conscientious historian, Cohn strove for the highest standards of source criticism. He was aware of the potential distortions that might result from his use of polemical accounts of medieval and early modern heresies. This is clear from a passage he included in an earlier section of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* about an antinomian heresy condemned by Pope Clement V (c. 1264–1314) in the fourteenth century:

The heresy of the Free Spirit has long been regarded as one of the most perplexing and mysterious phenomena in medieval history and its nature has been much debated by historians. It has often been suggested that no such movement existed at all outside the polemics of ecclesiastics whose one concern was to defame and discredit every venture in dissent. But these doubts could exist only because no attempt was ever made to use all the sources available. Hostile sources . . . are not really (as has often been believed) the only sources which exist.¹⁹

While the existence of the Free Spirit heresy remains a subject of historical dispute, no historian has ever doubted that Münster's reformation went through an Anabaptist phase, or that Jan van Leiden claimed for the better part of a year to be its king. Cohn consulted and even quoted

from works by Anabaptists, such as Münster's chief reforming preacher, Bernhard Rothmann (1495–1535). As good scholars should, Cohn also reflected on the biases of his sources. About his main source he wrote:

As a boy of fifteen Kerksenbroch witnessed the beginnings of the revolution. He also became a distinguished scholar; and when in the 1570s he came to write his history he made use of a great number of documents from the time of the revolution, many of which are no longer extant. Although a strong partisan of the Catholic cause, Kerksenbroch was on the whole conscientious in his handling of his material.²⁰

In short, Cohn made a conscious decision to trust Kerksenbroch as his primary source, even though Kerksenbroch was a strongly partisan historian who wrote his account several decades after the events in question, and therefore was not the author of a “primary” source in the sense of a source created by a sustained eyewitness of events in the 1530s. But Cohn did not rely on Kerksenbroch alone. He also consulted the best and latest scholarship of the mid-twentieth century and made efforts to corroborate details as much as possible.

Despite all his scholarly efforts, Cohn made no serious attempt to question Kerksenbroch's basic story of the Anabaptists' mad rise to power and their violent downfall. Some of Kerksenbroch's *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* sounds plausible to a modern historian, but other parts are noticeably dated and alien. For example, Kerksenbroch devoted a short but prominent chapter to the theme: “States Are Overthrown by God Because of Their Sins.” Another chapter was about “Omens and Prodigies that Foretold Uproars in Westphalia and the Destruction of the City of Münster.” Cohn decided not to recount Kerksenbroch's claims in these two chapters, but in many other regards the modern historian did repeat the valuations of the earlier polemicist. In other words, to parody the last sentence from the 1970 edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (“For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still”²¹), Cohn used Kerksenbroch's *Narrative* only after he had stripped it of its original supernatural sanction. His “disenchanted” version remained deeply dependent on Kerksenbroch's hostile, propagandistic account.

According to the parts of *The Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* that Cohn accepted, the root cause of the chaos at Münster were innovations imposed by foreigners in the early 1530s. Kerksenbroch's villains were Anabaptist criminal-heretics from the Low Countries—men such as Jan Matthijs (1500–1534) and Jan Bockelson van Leiden. Toward the beginning of his *Narrative*, Kerksenbroch labeled Jan van Leiden “the chorus master, head and king of all monstrosities” in Münster.²² After foreign prophets like Jan van Leiden and his confederates “deceive[d] the unwary by spewing out their doctrine”²³ and seduced enough local

residents into accepting the illegal and anti-Christian re-baptist faith, they overthrew the ancient Christian order that had been the basis of the Westphalian city's prosperity over many centuries. Kerssenbrock recounted the city's fall from glory; in his history, he took great delight in highlighting the lurid, debauched excesses he thought were the natural outcomes of evil leaders and a people "set ablaze with enthusiasm."²⁴ He described the torture and execution of Jan van Leiden and two of his associates, whose dead bodies were displayed in iron cages, now infamous, hanging even to this day on the tower of St. Lambert's Church in central Münster. The author even opened the *Narrative* with a poem in the voice of the caged corpse of the "King of the Anabaptists." One couplet read: "With murder I seized the throne and with sexual acts unspeakable, I was not a *basileus* [monarch] but a *basilisk* [monster]."²⁵ Above all else, Hermann von Kerssenbrock was a highly motivated, anti-Anabaptist and anti-Protestant polemicist, and Münster's long-defeated movement for civic independence from Roman Catholic episcopal rule provided him an easy target for his *Narrative*.

Like Kerssenbrock with his story of "the Anabaptist plague"²⁶ afflicting the unwary, Cohn wanted to tell a story of the Anabaptists' "veritable contagion of enthusiasm"²⁷ that overwhelmed "the perturbed, disoriented masses."²⁸ Kerssenbrock's story allowed Cohn to emphasize for a modern audience the dangers he believed charismatic prophets posed:

In fact—like many other *propheta* from Tanchelm [a twelfth-century monk] onwards—Bockelson [Jan van Leiden] seems to have been a megalomaniac, whose behaviour cannot be adequately interpreted either simply as sincere fanaticism or simply as calculating hypocrisy. This much at least is certain: it was no commonplace personality that could induce a little town of some 10,000 inhabitants, of whom only 1,500 were capable of bearing arms, to hold out against a coalition of principalities, and through appalling hardships, for well over a year.²⁹

According to Cohn, it was the internal logic of millenarian prophecy and the resulting mass delusion—a cultural logic replayed again and again in the Middle Ages, and since, he claimed—that explained the period of Anabaptist rule at Münster.

Cohn's determination to repeat the broad contours of Kerssenbrock's anti-Anabaptist polemic, and to stand by this narrative throughout his long career, is all the more noteworthy in light of his treatment of heresy in *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (1975). Cohn opened that book with a quotation from the essay "Of Custom" by Michel Montaigne (1533–1592):

For truly, Custome is a violent and deceiving schoole-mistris. She by little and little, and as it were by stealth, establisheth the foot of her authoritie in us; by which mild and gentle beginning, if once by the aid of time, it

have settled and planted the same in us, it will soone discover a furious and tyrannical countenance unto us, against which we have no more the libertie to lift so much as our eies.³⁰

Cohn's purpose in quoting the 1603 translation of Montaigne by John Florio (1553–1625) was to suggest that a medieval culture of persecution (the subject of his 1975 book) shaped and distorted European behaviors toward minorities into the modern era. Claiming that the new book built upon the former, he wrote that both were related in a deeper sense. "Fundamentally, both are concerned with the same phenomenon—the urge to purify the world through the annihilation of some category of human beings imagined as agents of corruption and incarnations of evil."³¹

It is true that, like his 1957 *Pursuit of the Millennium*, his 1975 *Europe's Inner Demons* covered largely the same period of Europe's medieval past, but the differences are significant. What is unique with the later book is that Cohn focused on the persecutory tendencies not of revolutionary prophets but of "the Establishment" (Cohn's popular 1970s shorthand, in his preface, for ecclesiastical and territorial authorities). While the book's main subject is the witch hunts, it begins with two important chapters on "The Demonization of Medieval Heretics." Cohn had already acknowledged the violent power of the state in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. For example, in his introduction to the history of Anabaptist Münster he wrote, "Most Anabaptists were peaceful folk who in practice were quite willing, except in matters of conscience and belief, to respect the authority of the state."³² But because of authorities' fear of Anabaptists, "Even the most peaceful Anabaptists were therefore ferociously persecuted and many thousands of them were killed."³³ In this passage, however, he quickly shifted his attention to the dangers of Anabaptist millenarianism. By contrast, not once in *Europe's Inner Demons* did Cohn address the persecution of Anabaptists, and very seldom did he address the persecution of any of the other "heretics" he had discussed in his earlier book. In effect, Cohn created two distinct classes of heretics: those who were so dangerous that authorities were right to suppress them, and those whose persecution was an early testament to the dangers of state violence. In the first case, he relied upon old polemical narratives; in the second, he exposed their dangerous consequences. In other words, he was very aware of the tyranny of polemical "Custome," but he chose only selectively to expose it.

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY BAPTISTS³⁴

To adapt one of the central arguments from *Europe's Inner Demons*, official fear of Anabaptism was built on a myth or "fantasy" (Cohn's

term) that was “preserved in a literary tradition, which can be traced through many centuries in the polemical tracts of theologians.”³⁵ Even though it had been practiced by John the Baptist and accepted by Jesus, the act of baptizing adults was an ancient heresy that orthodox Christians had long associated with the Donatists and Manicheans, famously denounced by Church Fathers such as Augustine of Hippo (354–430). But more than this, it was a crime according to the ancient Roman legal codes that enforced early Christian orthodoxy.³⁶

In the sixteenth century, anti-Anabaptist fears increased, and the literary as well as legal opprobrium against them intensified. Some early Protestant reformers—such as Thomas Müntzer, one of Luther’s competitors for leadership of an emerging reforming camp in central Germany in the early 1520s—opposed child baptism without actually practicing the anathematized ritual of adult baptism.³⁷ Müntzer was executed in 1525 for his participation in the Peasants’ War. Some of his contemporaries, who were one-time supporters of ecclesiastical reform of Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) in Zürich, were the first people in the era of sixteenth-century reform movements to actually practice adult baptism. Conrad Grebel (1487–1526) and other early Zürich reformers pushed Zwingli to be more thoroughgoing in his establishment of biblical ordinances. For its advocates in the earliest years of the Reformation, the baptism of adults was the only apostolic, biblically sound form of the sacrament. Child baptism was no baptism at all. In this view, true Christian disciples needed to accept baptism as ethically aware believers, not as infants. But acceptance of the ancient heresy of “believer’s baptism” was a step too far for Zwingli. When his former supporters took this step in 1525, he backed their criminalization for upsetting Christian order and unity. With Zwingli’s blessing, Zürich authorities in January 1527 executed Felix Mantz (b. 1498), one of Grebel’s close associates among Zürich’s reformers, using the bitterly ironic method of drowning.

While today the name “Anabaptist” may be a harmless- or neutral-sounding English word, its use had chilling legal and cultural weight in the early modern world. The concepts that sixteenth-century officials used to make sense of and try to control the then-recurring ancient crime of “re-baptism” (*Wiedertäuferei*) were all negative. In the aftermath of the Peasants’ War, imperial authorities sharpened ancient legal codes. Part of a 1529 edict read: “We therefore renew previous imperial [ancient Roman] law . . . [that] every Anabaptist and rebaptized man and woman of the age of reason shall be condemned and brought from natural life into death by fire, sword, and the like. . . .”³⁸ Not only was “Anabaptism” defined as a capital crime in the empire, but the rhetorical associations with it also escalated over the course of the sixteenth century. Luther and his allies were quick to defame Müntzer’s name, as they also defamed the very first people to practice baptism of adults in the era of the Reformation. In their eyes, Müntzer and his “offspring”

were “fanatics”—*Schwärmer* or *Schwarmgeist*, from the root *Schwarm* (swarm), conveying the image of an inhuman threat worthy of eradication. In the early modern polemical imagination, fanatics were associated closely with heretics, sodomites, libertines, wild enthusiasts, or sectarians.³⁹

Part of the tragedy of Münster’s attempted reformation with believer’s baptism as a central feature is that it took place in the immediate wake of the re-criminalization of Anabaptism in the Holy Roman Empire. Anabaptist Münster had a reforming history that went back at least to the early 1530s, but it became an “Anabaptist” city and thus outlawed only in February 1534, when its leading reformer, Bernhard Rothmann, and his supporters had themselves publicly baptized.⁴⁰ Shortly thereafter, an adult baptizing majority was chosen to the city council in a regularly scheduled election. By selecting a “rebel” council, the city’s leading property-owning men were asserting what they thought was their ancient right to urban independence from the regional lord. But more than this, they increasingly associated urban independence with their obedience to God’s law in the Bible, which Rothmann and his followers thought gave no sanction to child baptism. In the early months of 1534, the city’s territorial overlord, the prince-bishop Franz von Waldeck (1491–1553), threatened the disobedient city with violence if it did not retreat from its resistance to his orders. Despite the dangers, many hundreds of pilgrims from the Westphalian countryside and the Low Countries joined the local defenders of Münster. The prince-bishop’s forces responded by putting the city under siege.

During the siege—which lasted from February 1534 through June 1535—one of the weapons of war was propaganda.⁴¹ The media campaign against Münster had been fierce even before the first baptisms of adults in the city, because von Waldeck had used the specter of heresy to put pressure on city officials, with whom he had been in an escalating power struggle since at least 1532. Anti-heretic fears had propelled the hostilities, but this military action marked a very serious escalation.

Now that it was under a powerful existential threat, the urban community required greater resolve and unity. As outside defenders joined the city’s inhabitants to defend Münster, residents who opposed the new council or who feared the prince-bishop’s growing forces were either expelled or left voluntarily. Hermann von Kerksenbrock’s family was among them. A majority who remained were women, who significantly outnumbered men. To adapt to the limitations of resources, the defenders instituted a community of goods. To maintain social order (and in accordance with patriarchal norms), they decided that all women must have husbands, and polygamy became a new norm. Their leaders gave biblical rationales for both innovations, which nevertheless were also “rational” responses for maintaining public order in the face of a real threat. In short, the baptist cause in Münster was a religion of the

besieged, and the violence of the siege armies should never be minimized or forgotten. Nothing about the defenders' actions or ideas makes sense without attention to the threats under which they lived.

Amid the violence of the siege, defenders increasingly saw their suffering in apocalyptic modes of interpretation. This response to crisis was quite typical for Christians in the medieval and early modern eras (as Bernard McGinn, Robin Barnes and others have pointed out), but Münsterite beliefs did have their unique features. In the tradition of baptist prophet Melchior Hoffman (1495–1543), their apocalyptic rhetoric initially remained largely focused on the hope of God's intervention to save his peaceful, suffering, faithful flock, and the need for repentance and holy living.⁴² Only when the siege tightened and the defenders became more hopeless and hungry did their rhetoric—and actions—become more violent. In December 1534, Bernhard Rothmann published probably the most infamous of his writings, *Van der Wrake* (A Consoling Message of Vengeance), writing to baptist readers outside of Münster: "Now, probably, many are of the opinion, indeed expect confidently, that God himself and his angels will come from heaven to punish the godless. No, my dear brothers, he will come, that is true. But the punishment must first be executed by God's servants, and injustice justly punished as God has ordered."⁴³ If we read statements like these without paying attention to the realities of the siege, they might sound like the ranting of a violent madman. But Rothmann was responding to a real, worsening threat. His urgent demands for violence in this pamphlet make more sense as a desperate, biblically inflected call to potential allies for help in a battle against a dangerous and immediate foe. Seen in light of the siege army's threats and the biblical-rhetorical norms of the day, it is not so easy to dismiss as "mad" or "fanatical" the actions or language of either Bernhard Rothmann, Jan van Leiden, or the many other defenders of the city who refused to submit. In short, we should not allow the myth of Anabaptist violence to distract our attention from the anti-Anabaptist violence that provoked it as a response.

While the defenders repelled several concerted attacks from the siege forces, their situation deteriorated with time. When a disaffected inhabitant betrayed the city in June 1535 by exposing a weakness in its walls,⁴⁴ besieging troops were able to overwhelm Münster's inhabitants, ending their attempt at a reformation. The city was re-Catholicized, and the prince-bishop's authority was reimposed. Part of the ritual reimposition of order was the judicial torture and execution of three of the captured Anabaptist leaders in January 1536. They were Jan van Leiden, who quickly became known by polemicists across Europe as the pretender-king of Münster's fanatical Anabaptists, Bernd Knipperdollink (c. 1495–1536), a long-time citizen of Münster and van Leiden's close ally over the many months of the siege, and Bernd Kretchlink. After hours of public abuse while all three were still barely alive, their corpses were



Photo 1. *Three cages hanging from the tower of St. Lambert's Church in central Münster. Photo by Dietmar Rabich. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

displayed in iron cages that the prince-bishop's officials hung from the tower of St. Lambert's Church. Although now empty, the original, restored cages are there even today.⁴⁵

TRANSLATION OF THE MYTH OF ANABAPTIST VIOLENCE INTO MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

If there is any lesson to be learned from the revised picture of "Anabaptism," it is that "it" cannot be understood in isolation from the heated and even violent interactions amid which both the practice of

adult baptism and the myth of Anabaptist violence spread. Another way of framing this point is that all studies of the groups covered in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* need to pay close attention to the violence that was part of the demonization of medieval heretics, a central theme of *Europe's Inner Demons*. While study of the figure of the dangerous rogue prophet is worth investigation in this revised view, it is crucial to remember that the main sources researchers have for this subject are all propagandistic attacks against "Anabaptists" and other "sectarians." In fact, Catholic propagandists had made such attacks against Luther.⁴⁶ In other words, Kerksenbrock's *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* is only one source among many from the medieval and early modern world in which the myths of Anabaptist and sectarian violence are reproduced.⁴⁷

Older polemical literature is largely forgotten today by scholars who learn about or repeat the myths of Anabaptist and sectarian violence. For most who know of it, Norman Cohn's often republished 1957 book is usually their most authoritative introduction to medieval and early modern heresy. Of course, not all scholars have such a limited view. Like *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, *Europe's Inner Demons* has inspired waves of further research and scholarly reflection by medievalists, early modernists, and modern historians. Some of this expert work is very good and important, such as studies like Bernard McGinn's of medieval varieties of apocalypticism.⁴⁸ What strikes me, however, is that few scholars who cite his work have noted the potentially deep tension (explored above) between the perspectives Cohn took in his two influential books. Perhaps this should be no surprise, since Cohn himself did not acknowledge the tension. In fact, most scholars who cite *The Pursuit of the Millennium* show little knowledge of Cohn's other writings. The non-medievalists who cite Cohn's account of Anabaptist rule at Münster usually do so to repeat his version of the myth of Anabaptist violence. Published examples include works by well-established professors in fields as varied as history, economics, theology, political philosophy, and terrorism studies.⁴⁹

A particularly clear repetition of myth is from a book by a sociologist of religion who is well-known in new religions studies: *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* by Lorne Dawson. In his chapter on new religious movements and violence, Dawson begins a subsection on apocalyptic beliefs with a statement about the ancient roots of apocalyptically inspired violence in the Christian tradition. He includes the following illustration:

In 1525, for example, during the Protestant Reformation, visions of a new age and the final triumph of good over evil inspired the radical and charismatic Protestant theologian Thomas Münster [*sic!*] to lead a mass revolt, known as the Peasants' War. This ill-conceived venture resulted in his own execution and the deaths of tens of thousands of his followers.

A similar gruesome fate befell the Anabaptist followers of Jan Matthys, as mentioned in Chapter 6.⁵⁰

Chapter 6 is Dawson's analysis of the charges of sexual deviance so often leveled against "cults." Early on in that chapter he writes about how the prophets Jan Matthijs and Jan van Leiden

seized control of the German city of Münster in 1534. Enraptured by visions of the impending apocalypse and the final triumph of good over evil, they declared Münster to be the New Jerusalem and instituted an order of Christian communism and free love. Based on a literal restoration of Old Testament times, polygamy was introduced to the city, and in the domestic confusion that followed something close to total promiscuity reigned for a time. This attempt to usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth soon degenerated into a reign of terror at the hands of the Anabaptists, and they were eventually slaughtered by the besieging army of the German princes.⁵¹

Much of the "information" Dawson provides in these passages is simply inaccurate or even a gross exaggeration. However, that is not why I am quoting the passages at some length. More than their details, these passages are problematic because of the unquestioning reproduction of a narrative that has its origins in Reformation polemics.

Norman Cohn is almost certainly the scholar upon whose authority Dawson bases his claims, even though indirectly. While Dawson lists *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in his bibliography, he does not cite it in the passages on Anabaptists. But his two sources for the passage—Gunter Lewy in *Religion and Revolution* (1974),⁵² and Paul Boyer in *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (1992)⁵³—do acknowledge their direct debt to Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium*. Based on a quick survey of significant-looking "evidence" like these works by Lewy and Boyer, both highly respected and much-published scholars, a reasonable newcomer to the subject (such as Dawson) might conclude that there are sufficient grounds to retell Cohn's story yet again. In this scholarly game of "telephone," however, modern scholarship has, in good faith, helped breathe new life into dubious stories told originally by propagandists hundreds of years ago.

Dawson ends *Comprehending Cults* with a caution against "Our Skewed Perspective," which is the first subtitle of his concluding chapter, "What Is the Cultural Significance of New Religious Movements?" In the penultimate sentence to the chapter and the book, Dawson writes: "I hope it is now clear that we possess the means to understand cults without indulging our fears or prejudices."⁵⁴ While Dawson certainly does challenge many persistent modern anticult misconceptions, he perpetuates older anti-Anabaptist and anti-sectarian ones. In short, his work is an example of the unintended reproduction of deeply rooted, fear-mongering,

prejudicial, polemical narratives—that is, narratives that run counter to the basic message of his book.

Comprehending Cults is by no means the only example of the unwitting repetition of polemicist thinking. Another is Philip Jenkins' *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*. One of the main purposes of the book, in fact, is to avoid the worst distortions of anti-fanatic and anticult rhetoric. Jenkins suggests that careful attention to the strange past-ness of this hostile rhetoric is a good antidote to its potentially seductive claims. "Though many anticult assumptions have now acquired the status of orthodoxy for both media and policymakers, tracing the development of these ideas shows how dubious and ill founded their origins often were."⁵⁵ A major theme of the chapter that begins immediately after this statement is that, "Modern opposition to cults and cultlike behavior has deep historical roots," and that "the stereotypes applied to modern 'Moonies' and 'Hare Krishnas' find parallels dating back many centuries."⁵⁶ In effect, Jenkins is proposing a historical-genealogical analysis of anticult attitudes.

Even though he is acutely aware of the role the polemical literary tradition had in shaping hateful actions and modern anticult assumptions from Augustine of Hippo onwards, Jenkins is not immune to the myth of Anabaptist violence. An example comes from a chapter entitled, "False Prophets and Deluded Subjects: The Nineteenth Century," which includes a short but insightful section of polemical literature during the seventeenth-century English Civil War, and the persecution of Quakers in England and early America. But before he writes about these subjects, Jenkins begins a subsection on "Prophets and Fanatics" with a paragraph about ancient and medieval prophets. In the paragraph he switches between vague statements in the passive voice about the charges of polemicists and the supposed beliefs of those they attacked: "Prophets were also accused of sexual unorthodoxy, of orgies or plural marriage. These deviant practices were sometimes justified by antinomian ideas, the view that moral laws had been repealed by the new revelation."⁵⁷ Jenkins cites Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* for the statement about a presumed reality behind the stereotype of antinomianism. Then, predictably, following the narrative logic of Cohn's history, Jenkins includes a paragraph in which he connects the "military millenarians" of Münster with their supposed modern equivalents, Jim Jones and David Koresh. This kind of account blurs the line between the critical reflection on stereotypes and myths as they developed in the past and their uncritical retelling in the present. Jenkins, as much as Dawson, is guilty of repeating an old storytelling tradition founded by polemicists, even though it is profoundly in tension with his central scholarly purpose of exposing anticult assumptions and their historical precursors.

PRESERVATION OF ANTI-SECTARIAN TYPOLOGIES THROUGH THEIR REVALUATION⁵⁸

The tradition of anti-Anabaptism and anti-sectarianism survives in modern scholarship in other ways besides the repetition of the myth of Anabaptist violence and variations of it. Although Jenkins repeats aspects of Norman Cohn's version of Kerssenbrock's *Narrative*, he does include another noteworthy statement in his paragraph about Anabaptist Münster: "The Anabaptist sects became over time a far gentler breed, whose modern heirs are found among the Amish and Mennonites. . . ." ⁵⁹ What Jenkins is referring to is an anti-polemical, apologetic strand of history writing championed mainly (but not exclusively) by Mennonites and other "Anabaptist" successor groups from the middle of the sixteenth century onward. Menno Simons (1496–1561), the namesake of the Mennonites, was in fact one of the first in a long tradition of "Free Church" historiographers. Another famous contribution to this tradition is the Mennonite martyrology first published in 1660 in Amsterdam, and republished many times afterwards in Europe and North America: *The Martyr's Mirror*.⁶⁰ In literature like this, the figure of the obedient, suffering believer replaced the fanatical prophet. While Mennonite historians generally accepted the anti-Anabaptist polemicists' portrayal of Jan van Leiden as a criminal-heretic, they denied any connection between false, fanatical re-baptizers and proper baptizing disciples of Christ. In this way, generations of Mennonite church historians helped preserve the literary myth of Anabaptist violence at Münster.

There are further ways that scholars sympathetic to Mennonites and other persecuted groups from the era of the Reformation have contributed to a translation of early modern polemical literature into modern scholarship.⁶¹ In fact, some of the most widespread, "value-neutral" sociological and historiographical typologies are positive revaluations of the basic structures of polemical literature. Two examples are the sociology of sects (which Andreas Pietsch and Sita Steckel also address in this special issue),⁶² and the history of the Radical Reformation.

In 1957—the same year Norman Cohn published *The Pursuit of the Millennium*—American Mennonite scholar Guy F. Hershberger (1896–1989) wrote an essay on the state of Anabaptist and Mennonite studies, to honor the accomplishments of church historian Harold S. Bender (1897–1962). Hershberger praised the famous writings on Protestantism of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923): "With the publication of these works during the first quarter of the century the foundation for an objective Anabaptist historiography was finally complete. The next quarter century was now in a position to reap the fruits of generations of painstaking scholarship."⁶³ Among his reasons were that Weber and Troeltsch, unlike many of their contemporaries, did not accept the

polemics' descriptions of heretics, enthusiasts, or fanatics. Like the early twentieth-century German scholars, post-war Mennonite academics such as Hershberger and Bender thought that, even though small in number, "sects"—understood in a new, mid-twentieth-century, sociologically redefined, "value-neutral" way—had played a world-historical role in the rise of Anglo-American modernity. In this interpretation, Mennonites and their peaceful baptist forebears, together with their English and American Quaker cousins, had been pioneers in the separation of church and state, and other cherished modern constitutional ideals. What is worth highlighting, however, is that while the early twentieth-century German sociological typologies of sects were largely "neutral," even positive, in their treatment of "sectarians," these typologies preserved the basic distinction between established ecclesiastical institutions and breakaway, voluntary, upstart communities of believers—a distinction central to the polemicists of the early modern period.

The modern sociology of sects is related to another typology more commonly used today among historians of the early modern world: the Radical Reformation. In his writings on church history, Troeltsch had made distinctions between medieval Catholicism, early sixteenth-century mainstream Protestantism, and seventeenth-century independent or sectarian Protestantism. Although other historians such as Roland Bainton (1894–1984) and Heinold Fast (1929–2015) had adapted this kind of a framework in their accounts of a so-called "left-wing of the Reformation,"⁶⁴ George Huntston Williams (1914–2000) is the one who did the most to establish this category in scholarly discourse. He published a book by the title of *The Radical Reformation* in 1962, and revised it twice (in 1983, and just before his death in 2000).⁶⁵ A central contention in this book is that there were many varieties of "radicals." A life-long Unitarian, Williams identified three main groups in terms similar to Troeltsch's sectarian sub-categories as Anabaptists, Spiritualists (who preferred direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit rather than scriptural evidence for knowledge of God), and pious rationalists such as the Socinians (Antitrinitarian Protestant reformers). Yet, despite this great diversity, Radical Reformers were united by a set of basic beliefs—among them, the separation of church and state. In Williams' view, these beliefs allowed historians to write about the Radical Reformation as a distinct branch of sixteenth-century Christian reform that was opposed by the Magisterial Reformation (i.e., Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists) and the Catholic or Counter-Reformation.

The tripartite set of basic typological distinctions in *The Radical Reformation* might sound similar to Martin Luther's distinction between his faith and that of papists and heretics (see the quotation in the introduction to this essay). This is not entirely a coincidence. In fact, Williams readily acknowledged his debt to Reformation-era, anti-sectarian frameworks:

The historiography that separates the radical Reformation as a conceptual unity distinct from magisterial Protestantism was, ironically, inaugurated in the comprehensive but polemical treatment of “Anabaptism” by the Reformed divine Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) of Zurich. To him, the radical Reformation was a many-headed monster reared up against the true Reformation, and the unitive principle was demonic.⁶⁶

In the concluding chapter to *The Radical Reformation* Williams wrote: “Even though Bullinger was inadequate in his classification and typology, and wrong also about the genesis and the interrelationship among the main groupings, he was right in sensing that however great the variety, there was something at work among all the radicals that set them apart.”⁶⁷ Williams made it his scholarly project not to reject the basic classificatory categories that sixteenth-century polemicists had first articulated but rather to reinterpret or revalue these categories. Their hateful and therefore inappropriate motivations aside, these early polemicists were on the right track, he thought. His life’s work was to complete this project more adequately using a positive, modern, scholarly approach. Therefore, much like the project of the sociology of sects, the history of the Radical Reformation is built on a conceptual foundation established by the opponents of the early modern men and women it claims to study.

THINKING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CAGES

In Münster, the original metal cages that once held the corpses of three broken Anabaptist leaders are still hanging from the tower of St. Lambert’s Church. These cages seem to me an apt metaphor for the form-giving authority that old polemical literature still has in some scholarly quarters. The literary “cages” confine and constrain the ways scholars today imagine the “Anabaptist” past, and though the physical cages might let light through, they seem to cast a long metaphorical shadow. Just a short distance from the church tower is Münster’s historic city hall, one of the sites of the signing in 1648 of the Treaty of Westphalia, wherein Europe’s sovereigns set in place what many regard as the foundations of the modern state system. The treaty recognized the public rights of Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Protestants, but it did not extend these rights to Jews or “sectarians.” This legal framework removed some former “sectarians” from the old polemical gaze, and these (Lutherans and the Reformed) are the groups that George H. Williams and many others generally agree are members of the “Magisterial” or mainstream Protestant Reformation. These kinds of old legal distinctions with polemical roots have caged the conceptions of European historians for generations. For example, although both Bernhard Rothmann in Münster and Jean Calvin (1509–1564) in Geneva were contemporary reformers in embattled cities who demanded that their followers adhere

to a strict biblical code of conduct, very few scholars today think that these two are taxonomically related in any close way.⁶⁸

Because of the weight of accumulated scholarship that repeats polemically derived narratives, it is not easy to think outside the cages. But is it possible? Historians of medieval early modern religious “heretics” and new religions scholars certainly have a shared interest in finding ways to do so. After all, by studying sectarians as Radical Reformers who were supposedly different fundamentally than Magisterial Reformers, or by comprehending cults as new religious movements supposedly different fundamentally than “normal” religious groups,⁶⁹ scholars run the risk of accepting some of the foundational assumptions of anti-sectarian and anticult frameworks of analysis. While newly revalued, scholarly frameworks such as the Radical Reformation are certainly much preferable to the old and obviously polemical ones, we have to consider the ways that clear typological distinctions constrain research. For me as a historian but a relative newcomer to religious studies, the dialogue with scholars of religion has been very helpful in making me more aware of the ways that thinking in my field (including my own thinking) has been constrained by inherited categories and distinctions. In particular, I find Bruce Lincoln’s ninth thesis on method (“Critical inquiry need assume neither cynicism nor dissimulation to justify probing beneath the surface, and ought probe scholarly discourse and practice as much as any other”) to be a valuable touchstone.⁷⁰ In other words, the starting point for thinking outside the cages is to expect that cages exist, to pay close, critical attention to them, and to point them out to others. This essay is a record of my ongoing efforts to probe beneath the surface in my own field of research.

Historians and new religions scholars who share this goal of probing beneath the surface of scholarly assumptions more broadly have a strong basis for cross-disciplinary dialogue. On the important subject of the relationship between apocalypticism and violence (including state violence), historians and new religions scholars could of course discuss many more cases in addition to Anabaptist Münster. After all, there have been many other settlements of believers under siege (literally) from Jerusalem and Masada in ancient times to the Branch Davidians’ Mount Carmel in ours.⁷¹ In this shared project, Norman Cohn’s warnings from *Europe’s Inner Demons* to beware of demonizing propaganda used as a weapon against “heretics” is a better model than his far-too-uncritical dependence on demonizing literature in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

ENDNOTES

¹ Alexandra Walsham, “Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies*

44 (May 2014): 241. Walsham borrowed her title phrase “migrations of the holy” from John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 8.

² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958), 155–83, esp. 182. Regardless of whether Parsons was conscious of the possible reference to the Anabaptist cages of St. Lambert’s when he rendered *stahlhartes Gehäuse* as “iron cage” instead of “steel-hard housing,” we nonetheless might be able to recognize a strange, dark poetry in the context of histories of Anabaptist Münster, since Weber’s sociology of sects has played a major role in perpetuating old conceptual divides in Anabaptist studies. See the later parts of the present essay for more on Weber’s influence in Anabaptist studies; and for more on the significance of the translation, see Peter Baehr, “The ‘Iron Cage’ and the ‘Shell as Hard as Steel’: Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,” *History and Theory* 40 (May 2001): 153–69, esp. 163.

³ Bernard McGinn, ed., *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

⁴ Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 18.

⁵ For example, see John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970 [1956]); and Karl A. Kottman, ed., *Catholic Millenarianism: From Savonarola to the Abbé Grégoire* (Boston: Kluwer, 2001).

⁶ For a nuanced view of early Anabaptist beliefs about this subject, see Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of Ages: Apocalyptic Expectations in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992).

⁷ Martin Luther, *Eine Predigt vber die Epistel, so man liestet von den heiligen Engeln, Apoc. XII* [A Sermon on the Epistle, concerning the Holy Angels] (Wittenberg, 1544). “Hie von lese wer da wil, die Historien, was fur Krieg von anfang in der Kirchen gewest ist, wider allerley Ketzerey, Vnd jtz zu vnser zeit, nu vber zwentzig jar, wider vnser Rotten, so die Tauffe vnd Sacrament lestern, vnd das muntliche wort wegwerffen, vnd sonderlich wider den grossen, mechtigen Drachen, vnd grossen Engel des Teuffels, den Bapst.” The translation in the main text is my own.

⁸ Christopher Rowland, “Apocalypse and Violence: The Evidence from the Reception History of the Book of Revelation,” in *Apocalypse and Violence*, ed. Abbas Amanat and John J. Collins (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 2004), 1–18.

⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For another book by a well-known author who builds upon Cavanaugh’s arguments, see Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

¹⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 182.

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹² Walsham, “Migrations of the Holy,” 241.

¹³ In addition to Cohn's books discussed in this essay, see *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1967); *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (1993); and *Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (1996), all published by Yale University Press.

¹⁴ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), xiii.

¹⁵ Reprinted in "The Hundred Most Influential Books since the War," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49, no. 8 (1996): 12–18.

¹⁶ Norman Cohn, "Foreword," to *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Random House, 2004), 9.

¹⁷ Last sentence of Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Paladin, 1970), 286. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from *The Pursuit of the Millennium* are from this edition.

¹⁸ The Latin original of Keressenbrock was composed over the course of the 1560s and 1570s, and preserved in manuscript form. German-language translations appeared in print in 1771, 1881, and 1929. Heinrich Detmer's modern scholarly edition of the Latin original manuscript was published at the end of the nineteenth century. See Heinrich Detmer, ed., *Hermannii a Keressenbroch anabaptistici furoris Monasterium inclitam Westphaliae metropolim evertentis historica narratio* (Münster: Theissing, 1899). Most recently, Christopher Mackay (University of Alberta) has provided a serious, scholarly translation into English of the Latin original. All citations will be from Hermann von Keressenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Münster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia*, trans. Christopher S. Mackay (Leiden: Brill, 2007), with page references to the 1899 Detmer edition in parentheses. Cohn cited the Detmer edition.

¹⁹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 149.

²⁰ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 366. Cohn used an alternative spelling for Keressenbrock. The teenaged Keressenbrock was one of those who left Münster after the new city council took power in February 1534; hence, he relied partially on vague memories but mostly on other sources to write his *Narrative*.

²¹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 286.

²² Keressenbrock, *Narrative*, ch. 9, esp. 181 (123).

²³ Keressenbrock, *Narrative*, 622 (708).

²⁴ Keressenbrock, *Narrative*, 499 (509).

²⁵ Keressenbrock, *Narrative*, 80 (2).

²⁶ This description of the Anabaptists is from the first sentence of Keressenbrock's opening chapter in *Narrative*, 85 (7).

²⁷ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 260.

²⁸ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 253.

²⁹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 268.

³⁰ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, v.

³¹ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, xiv. For another study that provides a critical analysis of Cohn's 1957 and 1975 books, but with a different emphasis (i.e., Cohn's treatment of Gnosticism), see Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³² Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 254.

³³ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 254.

³⁴ In this section, I will make a distinction between the "Anabaptist," an enemy defined by orthodox clergymen and in legal codes, and "baptists," who actually supported and practiced the baptism of adults but fit the classifications of their enemies only very problematically. This distinction is similar to those made in Dutch and German between *wederdoper* / *Wiedertäufer* (rebaptizers) and *doper* or *doopsgezinden* / *Täufer* (baptists or baptism-minded people). Unless otherwise noted, the source for this section (although not for the conceptual distinction) is Willem de Bakker, James Stayer, and Michael Driedger, *Bernhard Rothmann and the Reformation in Münster, 1530–35* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2009). Another reliable, recommended account in English is Ralf Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster," in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, ed. John D. Roth and James M. Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 217–56.

³⁵ Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, xi.

³⁶ For more background on Roman laws against heresy from the early Christian era, see Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Michele Renee Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the 'Theodosian Code,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42, no. 3 (1993): 362–78; and George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), 360–61. Versluis, *The New Inquisitions*, also includes details about legalized persecution of heretics in late Imperial Rome.

³⁷ On Müntzer's attitude toward baptism in the early 1520s, see Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 125.

³⁸ Quoted in Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 359.

³⁹ See Michael Heyd, "Be Sober and Reasonable": *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, eds., *Enthusiasm and the Enlightenment in Europe* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1998); Helmut Puff, *Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland, 1400–1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010); and John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration, and Early Enlightenment Culture: Religious Intolerance and Arguments for Religious Toleration in Early Modern and "Early Enlightenment" Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. ch. 5.

⁴⁰ On the siege, see Günter Vogler, *Die Täuferherrschaft in Münster und die Reichsstände: Die politische, religiöse und militärische Dimension eines Konflikts in den Jahren 1534 bis 1536* [Anabaptist Rule in Münster and the Imperial Estates: The Political, Religious, and Military Dimensions of a Conflict in the Years 1534 to 1536] (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014).

⁴¹ Sigrun Haude and Günter Vogler provide excellent analyses of this propaganda. See Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of "Savage Wolves": Anabaptist Münster and the German Reformation during the 1530s* (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000); and Günter Vogler, "Das Täuferreich zu Münster im Spiegel der Flugschriften" [The Anabaptist Kingdom at Münster as Portrayed in Pamphlet Literature], in Hans-Joachim Köhler, ed., *Flugschriften als Massenmedium der Reformationszeit* [Pamphlets as a Mass Medium in the Era of the Reformation] (Stuttgart: Klett, 1981), 309–51.

⁴² For more on Melchiorite Anabaptism, see Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation*, trans. Malcolm Wren (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987).

⁴³ Cited from de Bakker, Driedger, and Stayer, *Bernhard Rothmann*, 193.

⁴⁴ For an account of Anabaptist Münster by the man who claimed to have betrayed the city, see *False Prophets and Preachers: Henry Gresbeck's Account of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster*, trans. Christopher S. Mackay (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2016). Like Kersebrook's history, Gresbeck's account is an anti-Anabaptist polemic.

⁴⁵ On the history of the cages, see Karl-Heinz Kirchhoff, *Die "Wiedertäufer-Käfige" in Münster: Zur Geschichte der drei Eisenkörbe am Turm von St. Lamberti* [The "Anabaptist Cages" in Münster: On the History of the Three Iron Baskets on the Tower of St. Lambert's Church] (Münster: Aschendorff, 1996).

⁴⁶ For example, see the famous title illustration of the seven-headed Martin Luther in Johannes Cochlaeus' 1529 pamphlet, *Sieben Köpffe Martini Luthers* [The Seven Heads of Martin Luther]; image available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sieben_K%C3%B6pffe_Martini_Luthers.jpg, accessed 2 January 2018.

⁴⁷ For examples from early modern England, see Ann Hughes, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and David Loewenstein, *Treacherous Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For more on this polemical tradition, particularly its relationship to Kersebrook's history of Anabaptism, see Michael Driedger, "Against 'the Radical Reformation': On the Continuity between Early Modern Heresy-Making and Modern Historiography," in *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, ed. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 139–61.

⁴⁸ For excellent studies on the historical connection between the demonization of Anabaptists and witches (a subject Cohn could have but did not address), see two books by Gary K. Waite: *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and *Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). For a very good application of the thesis in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* to the study of modern anti-colonialism, see Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ For examples besides those discussed in this essay, see Michael Driedger, "Münster, Monster, Modernity: Tracing and Challenging the Meme of Anabaptist Madness," in *European Mennonites and the Challenge of Modernity over*

Five Centuries: Contributors, Detractors, and Adaptors, ed. Mark Jantzen, Mary S. Sprunger, and John D. Thiesen (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2016).

⁵⁰ Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 146.

⁵¹ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 126–27.

⁵² Guenter Lewy, *Religion and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁵³ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 199.

⁵⁵ Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 25.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 26.

⁵⁸ The argument of this section echoes Johannes Wolfart's view, from his article in this special issue of *Nova Religio*, that some scholars of religion "have insisted on a moral reevaluation of the beginning and ending in the entropic narrative, simply redescribing 'loss' as 'gain.'" See Johannes C. Wolfart, "Increasing Religious Diversity: Historiographical Criticism of a Current Paradigm," *Nova Religio* 21, no. 4 (May 2018).

⁵⁹ Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 26.

⁶⁰ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004).

⁶¹ A further subject I could (but will not for the sake of space) analyze in this subsection is the ways in which Marxist historians have turned old polemical narratives into new and more positive ones about the rise of oppressed peoples who express their progressive dissent using nonconforming religious ideas.

⁶² Andreas Pietsch and Sita Steckel, "New Religious Movements before Modernity? Considerations from a Historical Perspective," *Nova Religio* 21, no. 4 (May 2018).

⁶³ Guy F. Hershberger, "Introduction," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 5.

⁶⁴ Roland H. Bainton, "The Left Wing of the Reformation," *Journal of Religion* 21, no. 2 (1941): 124–34; and Heinold Fast, *Der linke Flügel der Reformation: Glaubenszeugnisse der Täufer, Spiritualisten, Schwärmer und Antitrinitarier* [The Left Wing of the Reformation: Witnesses of Faith of the Anabaptists, Spiritualists, Fanatics and Antitrinitarians] (Bremen: Schönemann, 1962).

⁶⁵ George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000).

⁶⁶ Quoted from George Huntston Williams, "The Radical Reformation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 376.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 1294.

⁶⁸ For a good discussion of the parallels between Anabaptist Münster and Calvinist Geneva, see Diarmaid MacCulloch's chapter on Calvin in *All Things*

Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55–69. For further discussion of MacCulloch’s interpretation of Münster and Geneva, see the conclusion in Driedger, “Against ‘the Radical Reformation.’”

⁶⁹ See James A. Beckford, “The Continuum between ‘Cults’ and ‘Normal’ Religion,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 30. In their article in this issue, “New Religious Movements before Modernity?” Pietsch and Steckel provide examples of the overlapping boundaries of excluded and “normal” religion in Europe before 1700.

⁷⁰ Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996), 225–27.

⁷¹ For two recent examples of studies by historians of early modern France of believers under actual siege, see Amy Elizabeth Houston, “Defending the City, Defending the Faith: The Sieges of the French Civil Wars, 1552–1628,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2010; and Adam Duker, “Providence under Pressure: Israelite Identity and Siege Warfare in France and Geneva, 1562–1602,” Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2016. For further noteworthy discussions of believers under siege, see Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).