

The Left Wing of the Reformation and their Understanding of Church in Relation to the State

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Abstract

The time of the Reformation has determined today's relationship between state and church. This is true, even though the society has gone through several stages of development and an individual's relation in a democratic context has also changed toward both, the state and the church. The article raises the question of on how especially early Anabaptists have positioned themselves in their relation to the state, calling for a clear separation between church and state. For centuries, this has resulted in persecutions of this group. Today, most of their positions on the separation of church and state are lived reality. In praxis and even in today's democratic contexts, this is difficult, as the case from the warzone of south-east Ukraine shows.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction: Anabaptist Movement in Time (from Reformation to present)

While the Christian world celebrates 500 years of Reformation, the Anabaptists started this year with a ‘Decade of Renewal’. An international group of Anabaptists met in February in Augsburg, a symbolic place, and initiated a set of activities spread over 10 years (‘Renewal Decade’ 2017). By 2027, after they will have met at different locations of the Anabaptist movement, like Zürich and other places, they will return to Augsburg. In 1527, Augsburg hosted the so-called Martyr’s synod. This Anabaptist synod was held 3 years prior to the pronouncement of the Augsburg confession (*Confessio Augustana*) 4 articles of which spoke out against the Anabaptists (‘Augsburg Confession (1530) – GAMEO’). The Augsburg Martyr’s synod has received its name because most members of the 50 teams of those who went out from the Synod to preach the Gospel were killed before Luther gathered those who formulated the Augsburg Confession in 1530. One of them was an Anabaptist leader from Strasbourg, Michael Sattler (Winter 1991:55). The original document which ordered his killing was signed by Martin Luther personally, even though friends of Luther, reformers from Strasbourg, tried to stop Luther doing it.

So the ‘Decade of Renewal’ for the present Anabaptist churches and groups means to remember the efforts of the early radical Reformation movement, and invites them to reconnect to the present discussion on the relationship of church and state. It also means to recognize some positive achievements as well as some mistakes in the area of understanding Scripture, church and society. Anabaptists have suffered much, and often were victims. But victims are not always without fault, and a balanced study is still needed. Sometimes Anabaptists have

provoked by their behaviour a different and better understanding of church and society (Schuurman 2007:245), sometimes they were persecuted because they were in the wrong. This paper will touch on the Anabaptist understanding of the church in relation to the state, with an attempt to contribute to the present discussion and to relate it to a particular current situation in Ukraine. The first three sections of this article are focused on the past and on the historical understanding, and the last two on present interpretations.

2. The Schleithem Confession and its Understanding of Church and State

The Schleithem confession was formulated by the radical Reformers as they gathered in Schleithem, Switzerland in 1527, just before the abovementioned Martyr's Synod in Augsburg. It is not a long text, but important in defining some issues related to church and state. The text of the confession includes seven articles (Schleithem Confession 1985):

1. Baptism
2. The ban (excommunication)
3. Breaking of bread
4. Separation from the abomination
5. Pastors in the Church
6. The sword
7. The oath

While the first five articles address issues of inner church order, the last two articles speak about the relationship to the world outside the church.

The text of the Confession and the seven articles define a clear separation between church and state. The church is considered an alternative community. The Anabaptists confess that they are not going to be active participants in the government by saying that they will not take up the 'sword' and will not participate in killings and war in the name of governments that come and go.² They will also not take an 'oath' in the way society requires it in order to make sure that truth is stated. Instead, an Anabaptist Christian's 'yes' is a 'yes' and a 'no' is a 'no', because truthfulness and moral ethics are central to a person who has been transformed by Christ.³ Niebuhr, therefore, in his models of

² Article VI: 'We are agreed as follows concerning the sword: The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and puts to death the wicked, and guards and protects the good. In the Law the sword was ordained for the punishment of the wicked and for their death, and the same (sword) is (now) ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates. In the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used for a warning and for the excommunication of the one who has sinned, without putting the flesh to death—simply the warning and the command to sin no more. The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christian's are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armour of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as in the mind of God toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed. For every kingdom divided against itself will be destroyed. Now since Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same, that His body may remain complete and united to its own advancement and upbuilding.' (Schleitheim Confession 1985)

³ Article VII: 'We are agreed as follows concerning the oath: The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God's Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who

Christ in relation to culture would place Anabaptists into the ‘Christ against culture’ model (Niebuhr 2001). But Anabaptists always felt that their way of expressing their beliefs rather fit, speaking in Niebuhr’s terms, into the ‘Christ transforming culture’ model. There is an aspect of separation and there is also a transformative role for and by the church in society (Biesecker-Mast 2006:24). It is sometimes claimed or assumed that the Anabaptists distanced themselves from the powers of state and became pacifists in response to the violent uprisings in the German city of Münster that ‘destroyed the reputation of virtually all Anabaptist groups for decades to come’ (Geraerts 2012:8). This argument often misses the fact that the Schleithem confession was formulated several years before the devastating Münster events were organized by a particular radical reformers’ group.

The transformation of both individuals and the community, in the Anabaptist view happened first of all in the church. A person joins the church through baptism and is transformed by Christ (Johnson 1994:23). Anabaptists have always underlined that Christ is not just their Saviour and Redeemer, but also a defining model for living in faith while the church community is a place of discipleship (Bush 1993:31 and Colwell 1987:120). The person who wants to join the community of believers through baptism is then expected to demonstrate a commitment to follow Christ and imitate Christ in their life. The unity of the church is a central point, and ‘by baptism into one body of Christ which is the church of God and whose Head is Christ’ believers are one, sharing in this unity in one Spirit the bread as ‘remembrance of the broken body of Christ, and [the] ... one drink as a remembrance of the shed blood of Christ’. This defines them as a

teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to his (followers), whether true or false...’ (Schleithem Confession 1985).

unified community separated from the world outside. The church, therefore, becomes an alternative community (Wilkinson 2014:209–211). Being baptised and belonging to the body of Christ while participating in the breaking of bread draws a line between the church and the world. The 4th Article on the separation adds to this definition by emphasizing that a follower of Christ lives according to the teachings of Christ, and through forgiveness and freedom in Christ stays away from a sinful life (Wilkinson 2014:203). The pastors are called to lead the local community according to the Scriptures and by implementing the Anabaptist understanding of it (Colwell 1987:123). The Schleithem confession touches only briefly on the issue on local church leadership and does not say much, for example, on possible church hierarchy. The church structure is, therefore, flat and allows each member of the community to be directly involved and to minister (Winter 1991:61).

The overall impression of the Schleithem confession is that it discusses issues of the faith community and the state that were disputed between the Anabaptists and controversial among the magisterial Reformation and the radical Reformers in the wider European context at that time. Schleithem positions, representing the view of the radical Reformation, were then also picked up and criticised in the *Confessio Augustana* by reformers like Luther and Melanchton. But both documents, the *Confessio Augustana* and the Schleithem confession, respond to the world in which they find themselves and both need to be re-interpreted with their different times and governmental and societal structures in mind. The interpretation key is, how would Reformers and the Radical Reformers see the church in relationship to the state of today? It may be

that they would find much more mutuality today than in their day during the Reformation.⁴

3. The Church Practising Life

There are many key people who are known as leaders of the Anabaptist movement. Many have not survived very long after embracing the movement, such as Michael Sattler, Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, Georg Blaurock among others. This article will specifically focus on and evaluate two persons, also well known among the Anabaptists: Balthasar Hubmaier and Menno Simons. Balthasar Hubmaier has often been claimed by Baptists as their Anabaptist patron, and Menno Simons initiated a particular direction inside the Anabaptist movement called Mennonites. Both were not part of the Schleithem meeting and the Augsburg Synod, but they represent some of the diversity of the radical Reformation. Hubmaier had missed the gathering and about a year after Schleithem on March 10, 1528 was burned at the stake just outside Vienna (Funk 2006:37). In this way he represents an early, controversial and somewhat experiential Anabaptist branch. Menno Simons represents one of the major movements of Anabaptists that had

⁴ The *Confessio Augustana* comments in ‘Article XVI.—Of Civil Affairs: Concerning civil affairs, they teach that such civil ordinances as are lawful are good works of God; that Christians may lawfully bear civil office, sit in judgments, determine matters by the imperial laws, and other laws in present force, appoint just punishments, engage in just war, act as soldiers, make legal bargains and contracts, hold property, take an oath when the magistrates require it, marry a wife, or be given in marriage. They condemn the Anabaptists who forbid Christians these civil offices. They condemn also those that place the perfection of the Gospel, not in the fear of God and in faith, but in forsaking civil offices, inasmuch as the Gospel teacheth an everlasting righteousness of the heart.’ (‘Augsburg Confession (1530)—GAMEO’ n.d.). Some of the issues have changed in the present Lutheran and Reformed churches, some were also overstated in the Schleithem Confession.

developed after Schleithem. He also was an eyewitness of the devastating Anabaptist experiments, like in Münster and Erfurt, and his perspective on the relationship between church and state followed closely the Schleithem Swiss Anabaptist understanding (Geraerts 2012:10).

Balthasar Hubmaier was early on involved in the Reformation in Zurich. After he separated from Zwingli,⁵ he moved further eastwards to Nickelsburg, today's Mikulov in the Czech Republic, a city close to the Austrian border.(McClendon 1991:28) Schleithem took place after he left Switzerland. For a short time, he felt safe from governmental threats, as it was busy with the Ottoman troops closing down on Vienna (Stayer 2002:82). In Nickelsburg, he baptized several thousand people, including the Lord of Lichtenstein. This may partially explain his very different view of the state (Funk 2006:43). When the Ottoman threat to the Austrian empire subsided, the government forced the Lord of Lichtenstein to denounce his faith, captured Hubmaier and his wife Elisabeth, took them for trial to Vienna and, after one year of imprisonment, burned him at the stake while drowning her in the Danube. Balthasar Hubmaier had tried to bring change to the city of Mikulov, which was then the capital of Bohemia, and this way to affect the political and general society. Even today there is evidence of the historical presence of Anabaptists in the city and its Schloss. It seems that as Hubmaier was disconnected from the Swiss Anabaptists, he missed the continuing conversation and the further sharpening of ideas. Therefore, it may be true when McClendon, calling him a 'catholic Baptist', identifies his theology as still strongly rooted in the Catholic Church and theology. This included his understanding of the relations

⁵ In Zurich Hubmaier was tortured and then banned by Zwingli, so he continued his way to the East (McClendon 1991:28).

of church and state, with their two swords, and the continuation of the idea of Christendom (McClendon 1991:32).

Hubmaier is known as the first one who spoke out on religious tolerance. The powerful Ottoman Empire stood during his lifetime close to Vienna and, more than today in Europe, there was great fear that Muslims would overrun Europe and conquer it, as they had done before in the Middle East by occupying the territory of the Church of the East. Hubmaier in his writings sounds almost like a modern missiologist when calling for witnessing to the Turks, as he comments in his *Concerning Heretics and those Who Burn Them*, written during the time of his imprisonment in Vienna: ‘A Turk or a heretic is not convinced by our act, either with the sword or with fire, but only with patience and prayer’ (Janz 2008:202). This may today be read in different ways, as his statements on religious freedom and tolerance also may be interpreted differently (Bart 2016). The call to show patience and to pray seems to be a way of encouraging witness in dialogue, keeping the door open for discussion and respect, even for those who may decide not to follow Anabaptist or other Christian convictions.

Menno Simons became an Anabaptist leader after Schleithem and also after the Münster events. He was involved with the children of the radical Reformation in the north of Europe, in today's Northern Germany, Netherlands and Belgium, and was close to the ideas of Erasmus, who originated from the region (see specifically ch. 10 in Friesen 2015). The scattered Anabaptists were under heavy persecution, and Menno Simons tried to gather them in small church groups (Geraerts 2012:45–46). Often these small communities would meet as a church on a boat in the many canals and rivers of the region. It was a place where they prayed together and read the Bible without being

detected and threatened by their persecutors (Krahn & Dyck 2017). The picture of a boat, not the classical Catholic or Protestant ship, called church, helps to illustrate the vulnerable small groups as well as Menno Simons' role in saving many persecuted Anabaptists from certain drowning (Loewen 1999).

The Radical Reformers, whom Menno Simons represents, have been, similar to the Hutterites, formed by the convictions of the Schleitheim Confession.⁶ Menno's focus in his writings and practice as well as his ecclesiology are, therefore, much more strongly oriented toward the small local communities who are separated from the ill-will of the persecuting surrounding world. The world and its princes represent in Menno's view the old world order and the old kingdom, while the church stands for the new Kingdom led by the Prince of peace (Colwell 1987:131). Each of the church communities was in itself an autonomous church, connected to others through the fellowship and exchange of the elders and pastors. Engaging and seeking cooperation with society was practically and theologically difficult in this particular time. But Anabaptists continued to speak out for religious freedom (Johnson 1994:19). Soon the group was called Mennonites, and this large group of radical Reformers in Northern Europe continued the Schleitheim narrative, focusing on peace witness and rejecting any involvement within politics and, especially, the wars of the powerful (Colwell 1987:137). They were known as 'die Stillen im Lande' (Huxman 2014:240), partially losing their enthusiasm for preaching the Gospel to those outside their communities and witnessing primarily by their deeds. The Dordrecht Confession (1632/1725), still echoing

⁶ That the Schleitheim Confession was written earlier and in the southern, rather than in the northern part of Europe, was not important. In Menno's time, it was considered a unifying document (Loewen 1983:270).

Schleitheim, reflects the time after Menno and how his followers understood their relation to the state (Loewen 1983:269).

4. Anabaptists on the Move

The story of the radical Reformation is impressive, in the sense that, in spite of heavy persecution right from its beginnings, the Anabaptists did not disappear. Some of them remained in the region for the entire 500 years, such as Täufer in Switzerland (Hofer 2000) or Mennonites in Southern Germany or the Doopsgezinde in the Netherlands (Geraerts 2012:45). In some areas of Switzerland Anabaptists were allowed to settle and practise their faith in places rather difficult and undesirable for others; but in this way they could at least remain in their homeland. The option in Switzerland was to settle 1500 metres above sea level, in the mountains. Holland, for some time, had offered freedom to Anabaptists with the restriction that they couldn't own land and only work as farmhands. Southern Germany offered this possibility as well, and so they served with their gifts as farmers, and were able to have space for their gatherings for prayer and Bible reading.

The three major movements of Anabaptists that are known internationally, such as Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish, have most of the time been on the move to places of religious freedom. Instead of fighting back when they faced persecution because of their faith, they preferred to leave everything behind and find new places to live that would be more sympathetic and allow them to express their faith in the way they understood it. In their journeys to the West or East, for many Anabaptists the new lands, such as North America (Smucker 2010), Australia, later also Mexico and Latin America, have become their new homes, places that have also attracted others persecuted for religious convictions since the Reformation and until now. Most of the Amish

moved to North America in the mid-eighteenth century. Sometime later also the Hutterites, after their refugee journey through the lands of present Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania⁷ up to Western Ukraine, left Europe and settled in North America and Australia. Even though many Mennonites also chose to leave Europe, some stayed in their original regions or moved to places as far as Eastern Europe, Siberia and Central Asia (Belk 2000).

When first persecuted in Northern Europe many Mennonites moved from Holland to Eastern Prussia, today's Poland, as they were offered freedom of religion and promised an exemption for their sons from general conscription. Even though no Mennonites live in Poland today, the landscape still testifies to their past presence (Suchodolski 1986:72 and Stolberg 2015:37). They took along skills gained in Holland, and developed similar canal and farming systems in Eastern Prussia. When the Prussian king changed his mind and insisted on Mennonite young men joining his army, they looked for alternatives (Bahlcke 2008:71–94 and Urry 2006:34–38). Some remained, even up to the time of World War 2, others took a chance to emigrate to North America. Quite a large group responded in 1789 to the invitation of Katharina the Great from Russia and settled in today's southeast Ukraine on lands that the Russian Empire had just won after a victory over the Ottoman Empire. These were offered to the Mennonites together with the freedom to practise their faith. Again, it was their impressive abilities in farming that caused the Tsaritsa of Russia to invite them, and the land made them very wealthy (Kroeker 2005).

⁷ The listed names describe present states, which partly had different names at the times of the Anabaptists. See about Moravia (Williams 1995:1063–1078). See also on Hutterites, H. Roth [2008], and Hutterites in Transsylvania (Bahlcke 2008:335–344).

Less than 150 years later, the freedoms changed due to the outbreak of the First World War and the threats of the Russian socialist movement (Friesen 2006). Many Mennonites again chose the road to North America and several waves of emigration followed, before, during and after the First World War as well as during the Second World War. It seems like a story of running away from danger and from confrontation about their faith, as the Mennonite understanding was that Christians should not take up arms to fight for their rights (Penner 2006:195-210).⁸ Evangelicals in the Soviet Union were formed partially by this pacifistic view, which was enforced even more by the persecution by the Soviet government. Especially the non-registered Baptists and Pentecostals would refuse to take an oath, refuse to serve in the army and rather go to prison, or serve in army sections where arms were not necessarily needed, such as construction or medical battalions (Sawatsky 1981). Together with other Christian denominations the Mennonites went through Soviet persecution, and were also well integrated with various evangelical groups, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, in one Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptist of the Soviet Union (Prokhorov 2014:158). Many of them took the opportunity, agreed upon between the Soviet and German governments, for family reunion and moved to Western Germany starting in the mid-1970s and continuing till the 1990s.

⁸ There are discussions about the practices of Mennonites when, during the time of the 1917 revolution, they partially aligned themselves with the White army against the Bolshevik Red army, and also when they developed self-defence structures (*Selbstschutz*) in order to protect first their wealth and then their families' lives.

5. Neo-Anabaptist Materials and Anabaptist-Evangelical Relations

In terms of its population, the main weight of Anabaptist and Mennonite groups has in the 80s moved to the majority world, and so Anabaptist theology is also shifting due to this emphasis. In the West, Anabaptist groups can be identified primarily in the USA, Canada and in the German-speaking European countries. This is also where since the Second World War and up until the 90s most Anabaptist theology has been defined. One of the well-known Anabaptist historians and theologians of that period is John Howard Yoder who has influenced and engaged others to think in ways of the radical Reformation. Many scholars, such as James W. McClendon (McClendon 2016), William R Estep (Tillman 1994), Glen Harold Stassen (Gushee & Stassen 2003), Arnold C Snyder (Snyder 1991) and many others who are identified with various evangelical traditions, studied and developed Anabaptist/radical reformation theology.⁹ As an example of an Anabaptist theologian of the second half of the 20th century, John Howard Yoder's ideas will be summarised, as he was probably the most outspoken and controversial representative of the Third way of theology.

John Howard Yoder was, especially in the 70s and 80s, one of the formative Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians who have challenged and provoked Anabaptists as well as theologians outside the Mennonite background to engage with radical Reformation theology and to rethink for the 20th century their ecclesiology (Janzen 2011), christology (Yoder 2002) and hermeneutics (Hershberger 2015), dialogue and mission

⁹ Sometimes it has also been called 'the left wing of Reformation' or 'the Third way'.

(Yoder, Koontz, Alexis-Baker, Fassett & Hagenberg 2014) and many other issues. One of the key topics that he propounded was the Christian peace witness that is characteristic of the Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and praxis (Hershberger 2015:549). But his approach was often different to the classic Mennonite way of witnessing by deeds, denying the sword and not engaging with society and powers. He has challenged Anabaptists to engage society and stand up against abuses of power and militarism through peace actions and demonstrations. On the other side, the Christian witness through social action and relief for the poor and needy has been demonstrated through organisations such as the Mennonite Central Committee who became widely involved in helping marginalised, abused and poor (Yoder 1971).

Schuurman rightfully comments that ‘today nearly all Roman Catholic and Protestant groups agree with the Anabaptists in their opposition to state-coerced Christianity. Aside from some of the most extreme right-wing fundamentalist groups and theologians, nearly everyone rejects compulsory Christendom’ (Schuurman 2007:261). Anabaptist and Mennonite church tradition and identity has historically majored in these issues defining in this way parts of their relationship between church and state. Yoder acknowledges this development, but also calls for a different understanding of church and society while reflecting on the present stage of the church in the world as being a diaspora community, similar to the Jewish diaspora of the time of early Christianity (Yoder 1973:279–309). This still includes a clear differentiation from society and state, that today in the West is democratic, which allows a variety of participation in it while, at the same time, affirming that the church continues to remain an alternative society (Yoder 2003:27–28). This very different thinking will surface clearly again in the final part of the discussion.

6. Struggle for Anabaptist Understandings in the 21st Century

Former Soviet Evangelicals have been strongly affected by a number of Anabaptist-Mennonite views, because of their close proximity and similar influences during revivals and impressive evangelical growth during the 19th century in present Ukraine. Even today, the largest evangelical groups of the former Soviet Union are found in Ukraine. Many Russian Germans—returning to Germany after their ancestors some hundred years ago took the journey to the East leaving their homeland behind in order to find a place of freedom and peace - have left their Mennonite understanding of a Christian community in Ukraine (Löwen 2014:20–22). As the two world wars scattered Mennonites all over the former Soviet Union, only a few of them return to Germany from Ukraine.

But for many Mennonites, Ukraine has been a formative location for their faith, and to leave behind a region, that for about 150 years was their home, without witness seemed not to be possible. The southeast of present Ukraine is again experiencing a growth of Mennonite churches. Many Mennonites from Canada and Germany continue to return to Ukraine, especially in the midst of the war in eastern Ukraine, in order to plant churches and to establish a peace witness to people who now live in houses and villages which they had once built, but had had to leave, and in which they had not been allowed to resettle by the Soviets ('Ukraine MB Mission' 2017). Their role in this area of turmoil and suffering, similar to what they had experienced in the past, is to offer clothes and shelter as well as to mourn and weep with the suffering population, without positioning themselves on any side of the war. The warzone has become a place that demonstrates that there is no justice in

war, as the powerful give out commands, and soldiers and, even more, the population suffer. The role of the Mennonite-Anabaptist faith here is to respond to the needs and to remain faithful to the teaching they have acquired and maintained over a period of 500 years since the Reformation (Bell 2017).

Historical churches on both sides of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine still operate with some ‘just war’ concepts and an understanding of a Christendom model that has been formed by the Orthodox context (Elliott 2014). In the midst of this, the Evangelical communities, claiming their history, some of which is connected to the Reformation and Radical Reformation, try to make sense of the war tragedies in Ukraine (Lunkin). Especially, Ukraine is rightfully proud that they celebrate the 500 years of Reformation as a whole nation. But then, which theology is right and pragmatically more useful in the situation of a conflict which is understood by Ukrainians to be an aggression by their Russian neighbour? Many Ukrainian evangelicals share this perspective on the war. Other neighbours, like Russians, Belorussians, Central Asians and other Evangelicals, seem to be reading the situation differently (Westrate 2016). How is the church to be connected to society and state, and how should the church respond to war and injustice? Which side of the Reformation offers the best model to engage and to influence the society and state of Ukraine, which is a democracy?

Some prominent Evangelicals were very active at Maidan and other places, and have clearly expressed their Christian convictions and their solidarity with the people (Cherenkov 2017). On the positive, much has been achieved by the evangelicals in Ukraine as they have gained a respected position as a Christian church in the Ukrainian society, and are increasingly visible in public. Can there be then a clear position in

the relationship of church and state in favour of one or the other Christian positions after the Reformation? As always, history will tell (Searle and Cherenkov 2014:100–135). It is much easier to draw lines and positions when analysing past history and looking at generations that have passed. But theology needs to reflect and respond to a messy present, not just the past, in order to prove its authenticity and relevance. For Ukraine, an evaluation of right and wrong of present theology and practice will probably happen only in the future. Recognising this, it helps to be more understanding, compassionate and forgiving on all sides when reading the 500 years since the beginning and unfolding of the Reformation (Cherenkov 2017).

7. Conclusion: The Radical Reformation—How to be Relevant in the 21st Century?

Through trial and error, the early Anabaptist movement has established values and beliefs that are still important and formative for today's Christian churches and for society. Realising the difficulties and dangers as well as experiencing in their own life the precarious hazards of a unity of state and church, they separated the two in their theology (Johnson 1994:18). Today, especially in the post-Christendom West, it seems quite natural. But whenever society faces difficulties, like, for example, the danger that it may be transformed or challenged by Islam, it still often returns to the Christendom model of thinking, and calls the state to action on behalf of the Christian church, or at least on behalf of the western post-Christian society culturally formed by Christian values (Schuurman 2007:261).

With Yoder, the Anabaptists have identified the church's role as a prophetic voice that speaks into and challenges different earthly powers.

At the same time, the church as a community of disciples does not have all truths in itself, but is learning while walking with Christ, similar to the disciples who walked the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The church does not have all answers, but they have Jesus in order to learn in his community and from him (Yoder 1984). This way, the slogan of the Reformation: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* points to a way (Hershberger 2015:550) how learned truths need to be applied, depending on the context and new knowledge. This calls for humility, openness to correction and for a continuing learning and applying of the learnt in the hermeneutical interrelation between church, society and Scripture with a mind of a disciple. 500 years of Reformation, therefore, mean not only a look back to the achievements, but offer a call to follow the often bumpy road of living up to the example of Christ and correcting one's views according to the scriptural witness and the model of Christ for his followers.

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