Diversity and Tolerance in the Age of Reformation and Confessionalism

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In the contemporary popular historical imagination the origins of modern notions of religious toleration are often associated with the sixteenth-century Reformation. Images of Martin Luther’s “Here I Stand” speech before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms are often conjured up in this context. According to this vision, Luther and other early Protestants become not only “heroes of the faith,” but also advocates of freedom of conscience and religious toleration. However, such images obscure the fact that while the early Protestants were quick to argue for tolerance for their own religious opinions and practices, they tended to have little patience with those who dissented from their new orthodoxy and orthopraxis. For example, although Catholic authorities on the continent executed more people for the crime of Anabaptism, and usually by more brutal methods, than did their Lutheran or Reformed counterparts, the Protestants were not adverse to putting people to death for their religious beliefs and practices.

An alternate vision of the birth of religious tolerance during the Reformation recognizes this willingness to employ coercion on the part of the so-called “magisterial Reformers,” but looks instead to the religious dissenters of the age, especially the Anabaptists, as the true advocates of religious toleration. On the whole there tends to be more evidence to support this vision than the preceding one. As members of a persecuted religious minority, the early Anabaptists tended to be distrustful of governments in general and governmental interference in religious matters in particular. Among the writings of the major Anabaptist groups which
survived the sixteenth century – the Swiss Brethren, Hutterites and Mennonites – there appear frequent statements extolling freedom of conscience and denouncing compulsion in religious matters.

However, in this case, too, the situation is more complicated than it initially appears. It is true that Anabaptists as magistrates never compelled others to adopt their beliefs, if for no other reason than Anabaptists never formed the same alliances with temporal rulers that their Catholic and Protestant counterparts enjoyed. (An obvious exception to this observation occurred when Anabaptists seized control of the city council of Münster in 1534 and gave “non-believers” the choice of conversion or expulsion. But many descendants of the Anabaptists regard Münster as an aberration that has nothing to do with “real Anabaptism,” and for the purpose of this discussion it can be left out of consideration.) Nonetheless, I would argue that our conceptions of religious toleration were foreign to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists as well. If we look at their relationships not only with Catholics and Protestants, but also with other dissenters, we see that an underlying intolerance of seemingly insignificant issues led to frequent divisions within the Anabaptist movements. Unwilling to employ the force of the state to compel consciences on matters of faith, the Anabaptists were not above the use of other, less brutal means. If tolerance of religious diversity is to mean something beyond an uneasy detente between sectarian communities, Anabaptists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not so easily identified as the authors of modern notions of religious liberty.

This paper examines briefly the arguments for and against tracing contemporary notions of religious toleration to either the Protestant Reformers or the Anabaptists. It then examines some of the statements on this subject of another group of sixteenth-century religious Reformers,
loosely collected under the title “Spiritualists.” Ardent opponents of the dogmatism and confessional exclusiveness of Reformation era religious denominations, they were ecumenical in ways the vast majority of their contemporaries were not. If there is a direct line from the sixteenth-century Reformation to today’s notions of freedom of religion and conscience, it runs through the Spiritualists rather than the Protestant Reformers or the Anabaptists.