Women, Power, and the Bible in Early Anabaptist History

David Willgren
Academy of Leadership and Theology, Sweden

Abstract

The article argues that the way Anabaptist history and theology is commonly narrated needs to be reshaped. A fundamental question is asked: Did women have positions of power in the early Anabaptist movement? Two points are considered: 1) How is power understood? and 2) On what premises can the history of Anabaptist women be written? These two points are put in relation to portraits of three women – Margret Hottinger, Helene von Freyberg, and Elisabeth Dirks – who represent three fundamental ways in which women related to power and authority in the early years of the movement. The article concludes that the way the stories of early Anabaptist women have usually been told are often both highly tendentious and failing to assess the authority of women on the basis of an Anabaptist theology of power. At the same time, the early movement employed a flat biblical hermeneutic that lead to a failure to process the subversive use of power and authority and the theological potential of the Anabaptist critique of the sword in relation to their own families and communities.
Keywords: Anabaptism, power, leadership, biblical hermeneutics, women's history.

Introduction: Where are all the Women?

In a presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 1942, Harold S. Bender outlined some of the main features of what he called the "Anabaptist Vision."[1] Among others, two important foci were identified: the "essential nature of Christianity" and "the church." In relation to the first, Bender claimed that the Anabaptists "laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life. To them it was unthinkable for one truly to be a Christian without creating a new life on divine principles both for himself and for all men who commit themselves to the Christian way" (Bender 1944:87). This

[1] The address was eventually published in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (Bender 1944). As will become clear below, my intention is not to use Bender as though he provides the best representation of Anabaptist theology. Indeed, there are many valid points of critique to his essay (for a brief overview of research, see, e.g., Finger 2004, esp. 46–57). Instead, my use serves the purpose of illustrating a tension between an early Anabaptist view of power and its relation to women.

claim related to the second focus, where Bender proposed that Anabaptists viewed themselves as a "brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian life ideal is to be expressed," ultimately leading to a "Christianization of all human relationships" (Bender 1944:79).

These two focal points, which stressed the reshaped nature of human relations and structures of power, were highly disruptive in the historical milieu in which the Anabaptist movement grew. Their radical critique of how the surrounding society perceived the relation between clergy and laity on the one hand, and the church and the "world" on the other, had severe consequences. Persecution and death became their reality.

Bender's address also implicitly illustrates a long-neglected aspect of this subversive view of power. As can be seen in his choice of words, the vision is described as both all-embracing – he speaks of a Christian life *ideal*, and *all human relationships* – and highly gendered. Consequently, a tension can be observed, and the obvious question to be asked is what place women had in this vision. Did it include only "all men," was it primarily to be seen as belonging to a "brotherhood,"[2] or is Bender's wording to be understood as yet another example of the often-recurring failure of historians to include women in their narratives?

It is certainly not a new observation that the focus of history writing has traditionally focused on men and their achievements. But should it not be expected that a movement that so clearly reflected upon power and spoke about a Christianization of *all* human relationships would provide greater opportunities for women to partake in the life of the church? Should one not expect that this aspect of Anabaptist theology would have constituted a cogent corrective against a patriarchal society similar to how it challenged its contemporaries with regard to politics and religion?[3] After all, as Linda A. Huebert Hecht (1992a:58) writes: "[f]or women the grace of God was not imparted to them through a priest or their male guardian; their faith was based on a personal choice, made as individuals and demonstrated in visible actions." Nonetheless, much scholarly work has been devoted to those men that are considered as major contributors: Menno Simons, Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, Conrad Grebel and more. Descriptions of Anabaptist theology have, to a large extent, been based on their writings, and it is mostly men that are mentioned in relation to (and as defining) decisive events in early Anabaptist history. At

[2] Evidently, his notion is primarily to be understood as denoting an anti-hierarchical organization (cf. Yoder Nyce & Nyce 2001, 160), but this is somewhat beside the point here. It might also be argued that masculine language was used generically at this time, so that Bender would have intended to include women as well. While this might be true, it nevertheless underscores the observation that the writing of history has often been undertaken from a male perspective. I will return to this point further below.

[3] Indeed, some scholars have claimed that the radical reformation brought with it quite substantial benefits for women (see, e.g., Williams 1962, or Bainton 1971:145–58, who even suggested religious equality), but this has been rightly disputed. Important factors to consider here are, among others, diminished opportunities for women's education (previously enabled through monasteries), and iconoclastic removal of female saints (cf. Packull 1999), even if the latter could be somewhat nuanced by the fact that Anabaptist martyrs came to perform similar – albeit not identical – roles (see, e.g., the interesting discussion in Gustafsson 2017). On women's status, see also Irwin (1982), whose results are corroborated by what will be shown below regarding scholarly arguments on the periodization of history (most notably Kelly 1984:19–50).

the same time, it is recurrently noted that women were martyred to a roughly proportionate extent.[4] How could this be? Is the scholarly focus on men really warranted? Where are all the women?

In this article, I will attempt to sketch out some reasons why I think the way Anabaptist history and theology is commonly narrated needs to be reshaped.[5] This will be done by asking a fundamental question: Did women have positions of power in the early Anabaptist movement?

To be able to answer the question, two points will be vital to consider. The first relates to the very notion of power. How is power understood? I have already hinted at an answer above, but will attempt to delineate it further below. The second relates to the broader issue of writing women's history. On what premises can this be done? In what way does it relate to "history writing" in general?

These two points will then be considered in relation to portraits of three women: Margret Hottinger, Helene von Freyberg, and Elisabeth Dirks. As will be clear below, these particular women have been chosen to represent three fundamental ways in which women related to power and authority in the early years of the Anabaptist movement and, consequently, will provide a platform from which a challenge can be formulated and areas of further reflection can be seen.

Power and Authority in Anabaptist Theology

What, then, can be said about power? What is power? Here is not the place for a detailed discussion of various ways of understanding power,[6] but I will instead paint a broader picture that can serve as a backdrop for the ensuing discussion. To this end, I will proceed from the often-repeated definition by Max Weber (Weber, Gerth & Mills 1946:180):

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[4] A prominent source, the *Martyr's Mirror*, mentions 288 women out of a total of 1007 people whose sex is accounted for, that is, about 30% (Klassen 1986:549; cf. Redekop 2001b). Yet another 661 martyrs are listed without a specified sex. I will return to the *Martyr's Mirror* below, but here it could be noted that it is a source that needs to be approached with some caution, since it has a clear tendency to embellish (cf., e.g., the notes in Klassen 1986:548; Hiett Umble 1990:135, n. 2; and Kobelt-Groch 2007:222–23, who discuss this issue in relation to a larger argument concerning the reliability of an account by Hubmaier). This figure is to be compared to the degree of female martyrs in the Tirol between 1525–1527, which amounts to 40% (Huebert Hecht 1992a:61).

[5] It should be mentioned here that significant advances have been made in this area in the last few decades. If early scholarly work tended to see very few women leaders, this has changed. When Claus-Peter Clasen (1972) surveyed Anabaptist leaders in the Tirol, for example, he only identified two or three "maybe leaders" (cf. Clasen 1975:144–45). This has been called into question by, most significantly, the studies of Huebert Hecht. She has convincingly shown that this number is much greater (see, not least Huebert Hecht 1992a; 1999). Together with C. Arnold Snyder, she has also provided a significant contribution to this area of study with the publication of *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers* (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996). Even so, this knowledge has not had any major impact on the way early Anabaptist history is retold, and it has not, to any greater extent, shaped the way early Anabaptist theology is construed. Given this, there is need for further reflection on these issues.

[6] For an excellent overview, which also relates the notion of power to Anabaptist theology, see Burkholder 2001 (cf. Redekop 2001a).

> We understand by "power" the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.

If (for the sake of the argument) ignoring the gendered language of this definition, it points to a fundamental understanding of power as – to borrow the words from Jean Baker Miller (quoted from Yoder Nyce & Nyce 2001:156) – "the ability to advance oneself and, simultaneously, to control, limit, and if possible destroy the power of others." In other words, it evokes the notion of imposing one's will upon another, or, even more bluntly, of power *from above*. But how does such a notion relate to the Anabaptist tradition, which is well known for placing emphasis on mutual aid and neighborly vulnerability as characteristics of true discipleship?

If turning briefly to the Schleitheim Confession, the notion of power *from above*, spoken of as the "sword," is addressed in length in article 6:

> The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked and guards and protects the good. In the law the sword is established over the wicked for punishment and for death and the secular rulers are established to wield the same. But within the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the admonition and exclusion of the one who has sinned, without the death of the flesh, simply the warning and the command to sin no more.[7]

A contrast is painted here, and it had some concrete, practical consequences, as is spelled out a bit later in the same article:

> [It] is asked concerning the sword: whether the Christian should be a magistrate if he is chosen thereto. This is answered thus: Christ was to be made king, but He fled and did not discern the ordinance of His Father. Thus we should also do as He did and follow after Him, and we shall not walk in darkness... Lastly, one can see in the following points that it does not befit a Christian to be a magistrate: the rule of the government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the Spirit. Their houses and dwelling remain in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven. Their citizenship is in this world, that of the Christians is in heaven. The weapons of their battle and warfare are carnal and only against the flesh, but the weapons of Christians are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil.

These brief formulations call for a separation from the world and, as such, affected the Anabaptist view of power. Focus lay primarily on two distinct areas, the relation to the state and church leadership (see also Redekop 2001a:15), and Anabaptist congregations

[7] Translation from http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleitheim _Confession_(source). Accessed Oct 19, 2017.

were to embody this new reality. Also notable is that their vision of power was not understood as the means to an end. It was not to be evaluated in relation to its possible effectiveness, but in relation to the Bible itself,[8] as is made clear through the many infused allusions and quotations in their theological documents. More specifically, it was rooted in an understanding of the cross as the ultimate revelation of the power of Christ. As a consequence, what others might have called success was often subverted, and things that looked like failure in the eyes of the world – like the cross (or martyrdom) – were, in fact, astounding victories.[9] Such a subversive view (and use) of power is captured quite well by Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop (2001:xi):

> As an important outgrowth of the Reformation, Anabaptists proposed that power and authority were not vested in traditional and inherited political power or in the ritually sanctioned offices of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather only in the individual will and the community of the faithful. This signally explosive confrontation with power was immediately understood by the contemporary religious and political authorities and institutions, and it helps to explain why there was such ruthless extermination of early Anabaptists through martyrdom and exile. Its significance has also been recognized among nonAnabaptist scholars, who have rightly described the Anabaptist movement as the forerunner of religious and political freedom in the West.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that early Anabaptist theology exhibited great potential for critiquing oppressive power – power from above – by a subversive use of "power from below": humility; *Gelassenheit*; care for the weak; love; and nonresistance (cf. Payne & Hershberger 2001:308). By shaping congregations around such a concept, Anabaptists were able to recurrently raise the poignant question of "by which authority do you do these things?".

This is not the whole story, however. In what follows, I will suggest that the fact that such a question was almost exclusively directed towards ecclesiastical hierarchy and political power resulted in the creation of a blind spot when it came to the existence of power structures within the small faith communities themselves (cf. Burkholder 2001:7), and that this primarily affected women.[10] So, if one would infuse traditional presentations

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[8] It should be mentioned that the Anabaptist canon was "wider" than the current Protestant one. In the concordance of the Swiss Brethren from 1540, for example, books that are often designated as "apocrypha" featured frequently (Snyder 2001).

[9] This is, of course, not unique to Anabaptists. An excellent presentation of a similar vision of the cross was recently given by, for example, N. T. Wright (2016). Nevertheless, the point is that in the historical context in which the Anabaptist movement first grew, their *application* of this fundamental piece of theology was quite radical.

[10] In this sense, it does not suffice to note, as with Kobelt-Groch (2007:220), that martyrdom confirmed "what kind of collective consciousness—what sort of 'we'—had been created through believer's baptism. In the final analysis, male and female Anabaptist martyrs did not die as worldly individuals but rather as the spiritual brothers and sisters that the faith had made of them. They were to be pious, renounce their sins, help one another, and 'call each other brother and sister'."

of Anabaptist history and theology with the stories of women, the idea that Anabaptists did not make use of (or promote) "power from above" can in fact be questioned. The theoretical foundation for such a suggestion will be further substantiated as I now turn to the issue of writing women's history.

Insights from Women's History

It is certainly not a new observation that, to a large extent, women have been excluded when history has been written down. This relates not only to the question of who have been deemed the most influential during a certain period of time, but also to which events are deemed significant, as well as to the fundamental issue of the periodization of history itself, an act performed by (mostly male) historians. To be able to address the issue of the place of women in Anabaptist history, something must be said in relation to each of these three points. How is one to come to terms with the depressing observation by Mary Astell (quoted from Kelly 1984:82–83), that one cannot learn anything about women from books "because the writers, being men, envious of the good works of women, haven't recounted their great deeds"? As with the previous section, the aim here is not to enter into a detailed discussion on this subject, but rather to sketch some important trajectories relevant for the focus of this article.

A first and necessary step would be to simply narrate the stories of early Anabaptist women (cf. Lerner 1975:5). As mentioned above, this has been done in an increasing amount of publications, not least in the important *Profiles of Anabaptist Women* (1996), but it is not enough, since it runs the risk that the main narrative will not be affected in any way other than merely complementing it, as "fun facts" appended to events already defined as important (since they relate to male activities).[11] More importantly, such a complementary approach runs an additional risk of accepting a male-dominated paradigm, so that the women placed in the spotlight are those who have been shown to perform similar roles as men ("exceptional women"), and have thus been evaluated on such principles. To account for this problem, the retelling of women's stories needs to include a rethinking of the focus of history writing.

In her influential article "Did Women have a Renaissance?," Joan Kelly (1984:20) attempts to do just that when suggesting four categories relevant for the assessment of the power of women:

> 1) the regulation of *female sexuality* as compared with male sexuality; 2) women's *economic* and *political roles*, i.e., the kind of work they performed as compared with men, and their access to property, political power, and the education or training necessary for work, property and power; 3) the *cultural roles* of women in shaping

[11] Cf. the notion by Perrot (1992a:3): "Women's history is treated as marginal: an extra chapter to be added without changing the whole," or the observation by Kelly (1984:2), that women's history cannot and should not be seen as "another subgroup of historical thought, a history of women to place alongside the list of diplomatic history, economic history, and so forth." Evidently, such an approach would also fail to deal with the history of the larger majority of women (cf. Lerner 1975:5).

> the outlook of their society, and access to the education and/or institutions necessary for this; 4) *ideology* about women, in particular the sex-role system displayed or advocated in the symbolic products of the society, its art, literature, and philosophy. (emphases original)

Similar features are also visible in the selection of themes introduced in *The Routledge History of Women in Europe Since 1700*: family, sexuality, education, working women, faith and practice, citizenship, war and peace, and culture and leisure, so that ultimately, it is "[n]ot just about adding women; it intends to reshape the narrative" (Simonton 2006:4). In this way, it relates to the third point, that of periodization of history. Kelly (1984:2) once more:

> In historical terms, this means to look at ages or movements of great social change in terms of their liberation or repression of woman's potential, their import for the advancement of her humanity as well as "his". The moment this is done—the moment one assumes that women are a part of humanity in the fullest sense—the period or set of events with which we deal takes on a wholly different character or meaning from the normally accepted one. Indeed, what emerges is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called progressive change.

Taking these features into account, scholars have brought into broad daylight the tendentious nature of earlier history writing and shown how an exclusive focus on men and their actions – despite often presented in a guise of objectivity – is simply not an accurate (or even valid) way to do history. Power relations between men and women have been unveiled (cf. Perrot 1992b:172), and the dominating mode of assessing history from the vantage point of men has been questioned, not seldom accompanied by an urge for change in contemporary society.[12]

Consequently, the issue of the nature of power is shown to be at the forefront when discussing how history is to be written. But in what has just been said, the implicit view of power has been "power from above." Since the focus of this article is not on women's history in general, but on evaluating the power exerted by early *Anabaptist* women, all notions of having the *right* to political power, to be able to have *control over* production, work, leisure time and so on need to be cast in a different light. Otherwise, there is an immanent risk of blurring the characteristics of Anabaptist theology. Consequently, in what follows, I will not only inquire into the question of whether there were, in fact, female leaders in the early Anabaptist movement, but will also attempt to qualify such a notion in relation to the Anabaptist vision of "power from below" presented above.

[12] But one example of this is Kelly 1984:60, who speaks of "[a] feminist politics that aims at abolishing all forms of hierarchy so as to restructure personal relations as relations among peers has to reach and transform the social organization of work, property, and power."

Dealing with the Sources

First, however, I need to address the issue of how to deal with the sparse number of sources. It is a(n unfortunate) fact that most of the preserved written material from this period is written by men.[13] It is also predominantly men who are mentioned as Anabaptist leaders in contemporary documents.[14] This could be interpreted to indicate that there were no women leaders, but such a conclusion would only repeat the mistakes of previous generations. Instead, the material – whether theological pamphlets, court proceedings or martyr stories – needs to be approached with some methodological awareness. Other genres, such as songs, prayers, iconography, and so on, also need to be taken into fuller consideration, genres that are not constituted by (the otherwise dominating) propositional discourse. A way of doing this is to read history like a text, and I will suggest that one fruitful way of approaching such a text would be to learn from strategies employed in *womanist midrash*. In the introduction to a re-reading of the Hebrew Bible from such a perspective,[15] Wilda C. Gafney (2017:3) defines womanist midrash as the following:

> Specifically, womanist midrash is a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation, that attends to marginalized characters in

[13] There are, of course, a few exceptions to this. One is Anna Jansz of Rotterdam who (maybe) wrote a will (there is discussion about its authenticity, see Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:336), and has been called "our first duly recognized Anabaptist woman theologian" (Sprunger 1985:51). We also know of, for example, the confession of Helene of Freyberg (see Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:132–35), the visions of Ursula Jost (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:273–87), and that women could work as printers (see, e.g., the story of Margarethe Prüss in Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:258–72). This issue should also be related to the existence of anonymous documents. There is, for example, an often-mentioned anonymous treaty on "the Christian and the state" which has been published in facsimile in Hillerbrand 1958. The main discussion of a probable author is found in Klaassen 1987. According to Klaassen, the tract fits into the polemic between Anabaptists and Caspar Schwenckfeld. It was printed by Ulhart in Augsburg, either before the end of 1532 or in the first half of 1534, and had some overlaps in content with writings of Pilgram Marpeck. Klaassen thus concluded that Marpeck was the most likely candidate. However, as will be clear below, we know that Helene von Freyberg was an active part of the Caspar Schwenckfeld polemic, that her theological thinking had overlaps with Marpeck's, and that she was in Augsburg during this time. Although this is not enough to propose that she might have been the author (more research is needed on this issue), it at least points to a glaring blind spot. At the very least, all prominent leaders in the same region and period of time should have been considered before settling for Marpeck as the most likely author.

[14] Not least in their own creeds (so Sprunger 1985). This, however, has to be qualified. As will be clear below, Elisabeth Dirks is referred to as a "man" by those arresting her ("we have the right man"). Plenert (1975:15) has also observed that another woman, Maeyken de Korte, referred to herself in the masculine. Consequently, one should be cautious in making "sexual distinctions from the writing style," and that "when the unusual word usage is used apart from the normal 'his' and 'brethred' to refer to a general male-female audience, the task of evaluating biases becomes even more intense and difficult" (Plenert 1975:15). From this, it is entirely possible that the very use of language has contributed to the marginalization of women. It is, for example, to be noted with Sprunger (1985:48) that the Schleitheim Confession first addresses "beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord," but that the remainder of the document primarily uses masculine pronouns when speaking of specific individuals. Although Sprunger concludes that the Confession therefore "otherwise did not expound on women in fellowship," this need not be the case.

[15] The reason to speak of "womanist" midrash rather than just midrash is motivated by the fact that womanist studies pay special attention to women of marginalized groups (most often black women), a category into which Anabaptist women certainly fit.

> biblical narratives, especially women and girls, intentionally including and centering on non-Israelite peoples and enslaved persons. Womanist midrash listens to and for their voices in and through the Hebrew Bible, while acknowledging that often the text does not speak, or even intend to speak, to or for them, let alone hear them.

Evidently, such an approach increases the degree of speculation when reconstructing history. Gafney (2017:7) speaks of a "sacred imagination [that] tells the story behind the story," but as I will attempt to show as I now turn to stories of early Anabaptist women, such a way of asking questions about "power, authority, voice, agency, hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion" could provide an important foundation on which a reshaping of the dominant, male-centered narrative could take place.

Three Aspects of Power and Authority

Prophetic Authority

In the excellent *Profiles of Anabaptist Women* (1996), Snyder and Huebert Hecht give an informative introduction to the life of Margret Hottinger.[16] Hottinger came from the lower-middle economic class. Her father was a peasant farmer in Zollikon, a village three kilometers south of Zürich, and despite the fact that the family seems to have been quite large, not much is known other than that Hottinger had several brothers and sisters, two of whom are mentioned by name in the sources. Plausibly, many in the Hottinger clan were Anabaptist sympathizers, as indicated by the court records, where at least 31 individuals with the surname are listed (although it cannot be known if they were all related). It was also in Zollikon that the first Anabaptist congregation was formed shortly after the first baptism in the home of the mother of Felix Mantz in Zürich.

According to the sources, there were both men and women among those baptized in Zollikon, and this is underscored by the fact that when authorities attempted to "collect fines from those who had been rebaptized," they were met by a crowd of "very angry and stubborn women" (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:44). However, this did not mean that women were necessarily given positions of power, according to Snyder and Huebert Hecht. Although they were certainly active in what is often labeled "informal proselytization" – that is, that they bore witness to their new-found faith and encouraged others to join the movement – the records do not mention any women among those who baptized and administered the Eucharist (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:44). How should this be evaluated?

A possible clue is found in the records of Hottinger's arrest. Having been baptized at the end of January 1525, she was arrested in November, shortly after her father and

[16] In what follows, I will depend heavily on the portrait as found in Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:43–53. Many of the pieces used to reconstruct the narrative are found in von Muralt & Schmid 1952:126, 136–37, 177, 178, 183, and Fast 1973, and will be referred to when appropriate.

uncle, and interestingly, she was not the only one arrested at that point. The records also mention Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, George Blaurock and Michael Sattler, all male Anabaptist leaders. The fact that Hottinger was included in this list should not be underestimated. If read through the lens of womanist midrash, it could be taken as an indication that she had a considerable impact on the Anabaptist movement in Zollikon. However, she was not treated as such by the authorities. They rather saw in her – a woman – a potential disseminator of Anabaptist ideas formulated by men: "It is our decision that she be spoken to, and asked whether or not she will persist in rebaptism and the teaching of Grebel, Mantz, etc." (von Muralt & Schmid 1952:136; translation from Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:47). But while some of the prominent men supposedly responsible for the formulation of this theology recanted (most notably Michael Sattler), Hottinger persisted and was imprisoned.[17]

Questioned again a year later, records show she still persisted, and was moved to a "new tower" where she had nothing more than water and bread to eat (von Muralt & Schmid 1952:178). Six months later, she recanted. She confessed "that she erred" and now held "infant baptism to be correct and rebaptism to be useless and incorrect."[18]

However, this was not the end of her Anabaptist "career". After her release, she moved to St. Gall, where her influence on Anabaptist congregations can be uncovered with more certainty, since a male opponent, Johannes Kessler, apparently saw her as important enough to devote to her a polemical piece of writing. Among others, Kessler notes that she was "von den widertouften hoch geliebt und geachtet" (Fast 1973:618), that her theological claims were believed and defended by other Anabaptists,[19] that she forgave and absolved sins, and that she sometimes spoke in ways no one could understand.[20]

From this, and taken together with the fact that she was arrested together with influential male leaders, it is quite plausible to conclude with Snyder and Huebert Hecht (1996:49) that Hottinger is best seen as a "charismatic and prophetic young woman who

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17 According to the sources, she was given the option to pay a fine and be released (von Muralt & Schmid 1952:136). For an informative discussion on women's possible freedom of choice, where some rationales behind their actions in the face of authorities are discussed, see Hiett Umble (1990). In that article, Hiett Umble argues that many chose to be arrested, despite having the possibility to avoid it (137–39), and suggests a number of factors to explain such a behavior: honesty, the opportunity to proclaim their faith in public, and their view of suffering as intrinsic to discipleship (139–40). For a discussion of the possibility that men and women were treated differently in prison, see Kobelt-Groch (2007:225–26), although it should be noted that this would vary significantly in different regions. In the Netherlands, for example, punishment seems to have been fairly equally executed (Klassen 1986:552–54).

18 The English translation is from Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:48; cf. Kobelt-Groch 2007:228. The original reads "Margrett Hottingerin bekent sich, geirret habenn, git den kindertouff für grecht und den widertouff für unnütz und ungrecht, pitt mine herren, das sy iren gnedig sigind und das best thu^{e}ynd, wöll sy inen nunhinfür ghorsam sin. Iren ist die urtel vorgeleßen, die hatt sy angenommenn. Actum uff den meytag, anno etc. 1526" (von Muralt & Schmid 1952:183).

19 He mentions specifically that she had claimed to be God ("sy were Gott"), and although this is difficult to substantiate, I would, not least in relation to what was just said about her association with other male Anabaptist leaders, side with Snyder and Huebert Hecht, who deem this claim to be "highly doubtful" (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:49).

20 The latter also seemed to be related in particular to the way she prayed (cf. Scholz Williams 2012), and might be taken as an indication of glossolalia.

exercised considerable influence among the early Swiss Anabaptists." This would have been the case up until her last mention, when she was drowned by the authorities having failed to escape St. Gall for Moravia together with her father.[21]

Having exercised her influence by means of prophetic authority, Hottinger was not unique. In fact, it has been commonly understood as a characteristic feature of early Swiss Anabaptism.[22] Leadership was not primarily authorized by men but by God, and scholars have therefore suggested that there was consequently a greater possibility for women to take part, while it at the same time entailed more derailed expressions. According to Snyder and Huebert Hecht (1996:50), the latter might have been one important factor behind the stress on structure and order in relation to the "Shepherd" of the church found in the Schleitheim Confession. Although not too much should be read into the masculine language in the section on "Shepherds,"[23] it is quite clear that this position would eventually be reserved for men only. More importantly, a process had now been set in motion where charismatic manifestations came to be fully subordinated by the authority of the Bible, leading Snyder and Huebert Hecht (1996:51) to conclude that "the diminished leadership role of women in Anabaptist congregations was thus roughly proportional to the victory of the letter over spirit in Anabaptism" (cf. Sprunger 1985:69). Huebert Hecht (1999:56) also notes that this would be quite in line with Max Weber's idea that women's influence and involvement in religious movements seldom continued beyond the early stages (cf. also Bender & Smith 1959, 972; Sprunger 1985:45):

> ... if Anabaptism was to survive at all [that is, in the early stages], official and appointed leadership had to take second place to personal initiative and spontaneous, inspired action. Here was a "window of opportunity" for women, an unplanned reversion of the patriarchal order for a short time.

Although these observations are to the point, they do not quite suffice as explanations of why the closing of such a window of opportunity would also occur in a movement which recurrently critiqued "power from above". In fact, they indicate that something even more fundamental is at play, as the very notion of a victory of the "letter" presupposes a certain kind of hermeneutics. However, more material is needed before drawing any conclusion,

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21 She is even quoted in one retelling of this event: "Och ain frowenbild ertrenckt, welches och uss gnaden nachmals zum widerr(ou)f uss demm wasser gezogen, aber kaines wegs wellen widerroufen; sol gesagt haben: Was zihend ir mich; das flaisch ist schier uberwunden gsin. Uff das ist die urtail mit ir volstreckt" (Fast 1973:587. The quote proper translates as: "Why do you pull on me? The flesh is practically overcome. With this, your sentence against it is executed"). The event is also retold by her brother (see Fast 1973:578–80). Her condemnation should not come as a surprise. Indeed, it was quite common that "people who rejoined the movement after having recanted were classified as *relapsi* and often became martyrs unless they were able to escape" (Huebert Hecht 1992a:62).

22 See, for example, the early Emil Egli: "In their movement, impressive mystical ways, dictatorial certainty of presence came together in their circle, supplied by a consciousness of their prophetic calling, secret revelations, and history" (translated by Scholz Williams 2012; cf. Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:50).

23 See n. 15 above, although the explicit reference to 1 Tim 3:7 would imply that it was reserved for men only. See also the exchange between Lijsken Dircks and her husband below.

and I will therefore return to the issue below.

The development sketched above was not unique for Swiss Anabaptists. Similar tendencies can be observed in the aftermath of Münster, and the contrasting approaches to the issue of prophetic authority of Melchior Hoffman and Menno Simons could perhaps underscore this further.

It is well known that Melchior Hoffman had given significant influence to prophetic leadership, likely motivated by his apocalyptic focus where prophecies of the outpouring of the spirit upon all flesh were believed to be fulfilled, and that in his network of prophets, almost half were women (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:248).[24] Consequently, women were given the opportunity to influence the Anabaptist movement, and this is seen clearly when one of the prophets, Barbara Rebstock, was successful in limiting the influence of David Joris in Strasbourg (the story is retold in Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:280–82).

Seeing this focus as significant in the events that led up to Münster, Menno Simons came to sharply critique such a use of power. Instead of prophetic authority, Menno stressed "Christ and the letter of scripture, to be interpreted by duly called preachers and teachers," so that the question of women empowerment was no longer primarily related to a calling by the Holy Ghost, but to the judgement of "*men* whom the Holy Ghost has ordained bishops and overseers in His church" (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:253, *italics mine*). By pointing to a plain, literal reading of the Bible, and not least the letters of Paul, Menno found support for his views. Consequently, the notion of hermeneutics re-emerges as significant.

A similar observation can be made in relation to Peter Riedemann. Writing in 1540, he stated that men, "as those 'in whom something of God's glory is seen' were to have compassion on the 'weaker vessel' even as men 'went before' and exercised spiritual and physical leadership and authority; women, for their part, were to be humble, submissive, and obedient" (quoted from Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:77; cf. Sprunger 1985:48–49; Hiett Umble 1990:33; Huebert Hecht 1999:61). The very fact that he had to make this statement probably indicates that the reality did not please him. From a womanist midrashic perspective, this would further underscore, then, that the sources should not be read as reflecting what "women did, felt, or experienced, but what men in the past thought women should do" (Lerner 1975:7, speaking of women's history in general). Nonetheless, Packull is probably right in concluding that "gender equality was hardly a Hutterite agenda. Wives were to be obedient to their husbands 'as unto their lords'" (Packull 1999:84), and the fact that Riedemann uses the Bible (1 Pet 3:7, as did Menno) is well in line with the observations above. It seems as if in those instances where the issue of power (leadership) within the congregations was addressed directly, the biblical hermeneutics developed by the early Anabaptists generated corresponding interpretations: women were equals in faith, but not in power (cf. Harrison 1992:54).[25]

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[24] One of the more well-known would be Ursula Jost, since some of her visions were published (see, e.g., Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:273–87; cf. Barrett 1992b).

[25] See also Sprunger 1985, 52: "In congregation, the fellowship and commitment of believers

Networking Under the Radar

Close to the center of the Anabaptist movement in the Tirol stands Helene von Freyberg.[26] Her association with the Anabaptist movement was not immediately recognized by the authorities; after all, her husband was a Lutheran. However, as more pieces appeared to the puzzle, they were eventually able to identify her castle in Münichau as an important hub. In 1528, there had been reports of men teaching "rebaptism" in the area, and by opening her castle for gatherings, providing food and shelter, von Freyberg seems to have played an important part in these events. Many (male) leaders are said to have passed through her doors, and Huebert Hecht even proposes that Pilgram Marpeck might have been one of them (Huebert Hecht 1992b:316). That this is not an unreasonable suggestion is demonstrated both by the fact that their fathers had been in business together and that later witnesses also indicate continuing exchanges between the two.

Despite the fact that von Freyberg visited Anabaptists in prison and possibly passed on letters to inmates from (male) leaders, and despite long-term suspicion by the authorities that she was an Anabaptist, it took a considerable length of time before any action was taken against her (cf. Huebert Hecht 1992b:317–18). Along with the Lutheran faith of her husband, noted above, the delay might have had something to do with the fact that she was a noble woman, but also that the main focus of the authorities was on men. As a result, they did not perceive von Freyberg as a threat, but when she was identified as an Anabaptist by two other Anabaptists, specific charges were issued, and von Freyberg had to flee.

She came to Konstanz in 1530, where her influence continued to be significant. As with Hottinger, information is to be gained through her opponents. Huebert Hecht recounts how a Lutheran named Ambrosius Blaurer saw a connection between von Freyberg and Marpeck ("the person whom she revers so much") and also claimed that she often caused problems "in her house" (Huebert Hecht 1992a:319). Her influence eventually led the authorities to confiscate her property and force her into exile once again, a decision to which Blaurer reacted with relief, since the "contagion of Anabaptist evil" (Huebert Hecht 1992a:319) had now been averted.

But her story did not end there. A year later, records show that her case was discussed in Innsbruck, where she was urged to recant. Interestingly, the authorities wanted her to do it in public, since they saw her as "the primary cause [fürnembsten ursacherin] of so many people joining this movement" (Huebert Hecht 1992a:322). If she promised to distance herself from Anabaptists and submit to the sacraments of the established church, she would be given her property back, and would be able to reunite with her husband. History does not tell if she did in fact recant (so Huebert Hecht 1992a:322–23, the only source is from the nineteenth century, mentioning not a public but a private recantation to a government officer), only that she eventually ended up in Augsburg, where she continued on the same path.

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brought all members warmly together," and Sommers Rich 2002, 25, who speaks of a "soteriological equality" in the writings of Menno Simons.

[26] This overview depends on Huebert Hecht 1992b and Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996, 124–39.

In 1535, she was arrested, once again suspected of having opened up her home to Anabaptist leaders. Although she did not deny this, she stressed that only a *few men* had come and gone. Furthermore, they had only preached the word of God (Huebert Hecht 1992a:324).[27] In other words, she seems to have tried to portray the gatherings as insignificant, playing on the tendency of the authorities to overlook the impact of women.[28] But the authorities did not believe von Freyberg, who was exiled the next day, just as other (male) leaders had been before her.

Helene von Freyberg shows up again in historical records in 1539, when her sons, after the death of her husband, requested that she might once again be allowed to live in Augsburg. The request was granted, she returned, and probably stayed there until her death in 1545 (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:132). During this time, she functioned as a teacher. Among her students was a man named Hans Jacob Schneider (her tailor), who eventually became a leader in Augsburg. She also participated in theological debates, and mediated in a theological exchange between Marpeck and Caspar Schwenckfeld. Interestingly, a piece of her own writing is also preserved. It is a confession of some sin, and scholars have noted significant overlaps with the theology of Marpeck (see, in particular, Huebert Hecht 1992a:327–36). This would further underscore that the two had regular contact,[29] and is commonly interpreted as a sign that von Freyberg was influenced by Marpeck. But that such an influence would only flow in one direction, or that Marpeck should be considered as more important for the theological development because he was a man who put his theology in writing in more well-known genres seems quite unwarranted.

In sum, it has become quite clear that von Freyberg must have had a considerable impact on the Anabaptist movement, and her activities were instrumental in bringing people to join the cause. She certainly profited from her social status as a noble woman, as well as the fact that she was literate, but as can be observed in this brief overview of her story, she executed her authority in ways that differed from male leaders. To a large extent, her influence was elusive to the authorities, at times even deemed insignificant, but her legacy indicates that she might well have been active, not only in "informal proselytization," but also in the development of an Anabaptist theology regularly associated with Marpeck.

Through Helene von Freyberg, significant steps are taken towards what was described above as "power from below" and the kind of subversive effect this had on the

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27 She also did not give up any names of Anabaptists except the ones she knew were already imprisoned. This kind of solidarity was quite common (cf., e.g., Kilheffer Hess 2010:48–49, who mentions Anna Hendriks, who only gave names of Anabaptists who had either already been executed or were beyond the geographical reach of the authorities).

28 Cf. Anna Mantz (Zürich), who, when accused by the authorities of housing Anabaptist leaders, said that only a few *women* had been in her house. Apparently, this was not interesting enough for the authorities to follow up on (so Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:48).

29 Consider also the possibility that von Freyberg wrote many letters to Anabaptist leaders, of which Marpeck was one, see Huebert Hecht 1992a:229, n. 71.

relations between church and state. The authorities' preconceived ideas of power, influence and traditional roles of women created a blind spot, a space where women leaders could move with some unexpected freedom. But this blind spot is not only found in the ways in which contemporary men related to women's power; it is also to be found in the very act of writing the history of the early Anabaptists. As demonstrated, in contemporary sources, there are ample examples of women serving as teachers and leaders, often alongside men (Huebert Hecht 1999:63, 66). But since their stories were not retold, only statistics remain, mere lists of "principal baptizers and seducers";[30] a faded memory of a part of the early Anabaptist movement that was deemed insignificant by (male) historians.

The Two-Edged Sword

Turning to what is now the Netherlands, we find a woman – Elisabeth Dirks – whose story is retold in *Martyr's Mirror* (van Braght 1886:481–82, 546–47; cf. Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:359–64, who include some additional details of the story).[31] According to the *Martyr's Mirror*, Dirks was of noble birth and had been put in a convent near Leer in East Friesland by her parents. There she learned how to read and write (in both Dutch and Latin), and eventually, she got hold of a New Testament in Latin. After having immersed herself in it, she became convinced that her lifestyle in the convent needed to change, which ultimately led to a decision to leave the convent. She escaped by dressing up as a milkmaid, and came to Leer, where she was welcomed into an Anabaptist home. History does not reveal whether this encounter was a coincidence or not, but here, she became familiar with Anabaptist beliefs.

Eventually, probably out of fear of discovery, she was brought to Leeuwarden, where she stayed with a woman named Hadewijk.[32] Both were soon arrested, however, and the famous account of Dirks' encounter with the authorities shed some important light on the puzzling tension between Anabaptist theology of power and the closing of the window of opportunity for women noted above. When those who arrested her found the Latin New Testament, they knew they had the right person: "We have, we have the right man [de reche Man]! We now have the teacher [Leeraresse]. Where is your husband, the teacher Menno Simons?" Three things are worth noting here.

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30 For statistics regarding female leaders in the Tirol, see Huebert Hecht (1992a:64), where, among others, a woman is mentioned who allegedly baptized 800 people!

31 She is often mentioned as the first known Anabaptist "deaconess," although the office was not officially recognized until the Dordrecht Conference in 1632 (cf. Sprunger 1985:51). The sources are not clear, however. Snyder & Huebert Hecht (1996:254), for example, do qualify the statement as only "possibly", and the claim seems to go back to an article in *Mennonitische Blätter* written by de Hoop-Scheffer in 1886.

32 The story of Hadewijk is a fascinating read (see van Braght 1886:481–82, 547). A blogger captures it well: "On P. 546 of the Martyrs Mirror, I found a three-column yarn that has just about everything – an unhappy nun, two fugitives, three daring escapes, a drunken drummer, a retarded would-be rapist, divine intervention and two flavors of execution" (https://bloodytheater.wordpress.com/tag/hadewijk/, accessed 2016-06-23)."

The first is that she is referred to as "de reche Man," which underscores the necessity of approaching the gendered language of the sources with some suspicion. Second, she is called "Leeraresse." If Sprunger (1985:53–54) is correct in that the term normally denoted a person who spoke or taught in public, this designation constitutes an explicit confirmation of her significant role among the Anabaptists in Leeuwarden. Third, she is mistaken for the wife of Menno Simons. This could be interpreted in various ways, but if continuing to approach the material through the lens of womanist midrash, and taking into account the designation "Leeraresse," as well as the theologically insightful responses during her trial and the fact that she is known to have interacted with Menno, the most likely interpretation would be that the authorities had seen Dirks and Menno together on enough occasions to assume they were married. How else could they understand her authority? If correct, it constitutes yet another example of the "blind spot" mentioned above.

During the interrogation, which included torture, Dirks displayed detailed knowledge of several central tenets of Anabaptist theology and its critique of established churches: baptism, the swearing of oaths, the house of God, the mass, the sacraments, the Eucharist, salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and clergy, to name a few. Her answers were, furthermore, replete with allusions to – and quotations from – the Bible, revealing her familiarity with it, and she also sometimes answered by means of clever counter-questions. Ultimately, she was proven steadfast and relentless in her confession (a steadfastness that was often understood as "manly"),[33] caring more about the risk of being put to shame by having her body exposed than the fact that screws were applied to her shins.[34] So, on the 27th of May, 1549, she was drowned in a sack.

The testimony of Dirks is both fascinating and horrible, and it sheds light on the fact that women could be very well versed in the Bible. This could be further exemplified by her namesake, Lijsken Dircks.[35] In an exchange of letters between Dircks and her husband, Jeromes Segers, Dircks mentions that two priests had interrogated her, and after responding to their inquiries with Bible-filled replies, the priests had asked "why do you trouble yourself with the Scriptures; attend to your sewing. It seems that you would follow the apostles; where are the signs which you do?"[36] The patriarchal predisposition is revealed. Reading the Bible was not women's business. Curiously, this rebuke seems to have troubled Dircks. Apparently, it struck a chord. Was she in the wrong? In contrast to

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33 Another example of this is found in the *Martyr's Mirror*, where two executed sisters – Anna and Ursula Maler – were deemed "manful and valiant in God [mannelijckheyt ende dapperheydt in Godt, van Braght 1631:35]" (van Braght 1886:437 cf. also, e.g., 205, 355, 446, 449, 699, 759, 842, 874, where martyrs, both male and female, are described as, or encouraged to be "mannelijck"). On yet another occasion, it is stated that the "army of God" (i.e. the martyrs), were not only men, "who are sometimes judged to be the strongest," but also women "for God's power is made strong in weakness" (van Braght 1886:1120; cf. Barrett 1992a:91–92).

34 The latter was not unusual (cf. Plenert 1975:15–16; Klassen 1986:552–54), and the executioner often granted the women's request for decency.

35 I have chosen to spell the two names differently to distinguish them from one another.

36 The exchange is retold in van Braght 1886:481–82, 511–22. It is also introduced and analyzed in Barrett 1992a:89–91. The quotation is from the latter.

Hottinger, Dircks' knowledge of the Bible was not related to charismatic expressions or prophetic authority. But she is comforted by her husband:

> And though they may tell you to attend to your sewing, this does not prevent us; for Christ has called us all, and commanded us to search the Scriptures, since they testify of Him; and Christ also said that Magdalene had chosen the better part, because she searched the Scriptures. Matt. 11:28; John 5:39; Luke 10:42. Moreover, my most beloved, though they ask you where your signs and tongues are, this must not hinder you; for the believers whom Peter and John baptized did not speak with tongues, but it was enough for them, that they believed in Christ. Acts 2:38. And also Stephen, who was full of the Holy Ghost, did not speak with tongues; nor did any of the bishops or teachers who were with Paul, perform signs, and speak with tongues; yet they taught the Word of God blamelessly (van Braght 1886:516).

As can be seen here, Segers encourages his wife to be faithful to her calling. He stressed that all believers have been given the ability to read the Bible, and the fact that he compares his wife with the apostles of the early church could be taken as an indication that he believed women could teach.

That it was not unusual for women to quote the Bible in this way is underscored by Ulrich Zwingli, who despaired over the situation, saying that "matters have reached such a state that even the laymen and women know more of the Scriptures than some priests and clergymen" (Sommers Rich 2002:19; cf. Plenert 1975:17; Kilheffer Hess 2010:38). A probable important factor behind this knowledge was the recurring studies of the Bible which went on in the homes, which women would frequently participate in (as seen above). Here, passages were memorized, and thematic concordances assisted in this process.[37] In these concordances, Bible verses were arranged according to certain themes, such as discipleship, baptism, persecution, love, hope, community, and so on, and the fact that court records reveal some considerable overlap between testimonies by means of shared phrases and formulations probably bears witness to this communal and relational foundation of Anabaptist hermeneutics (cf. Kilheffer Hess 2010:43).

However, the continued conversation between Dircks and Segers reveals the tension between women, power, and interpretation of the Bible once again. Despite the fact that the letters are replete with indications that Dircks was well versed in the Bible, and that she shared that knowledge with accusers and cellmates alike, when asked whether she "meant to say that he who taught [her] these things, was sent of God," she said:

> "Yes, I assuredly know that he is sent of God." They then asked me, whether I knew how a teacher ought to be. I answered: "A teacher must be the husband of one wife,

[37] A well-preserved concordance is the one compiled by the Swiss Brethren in 1540 (Snyder 2001). An early congregational order also commends that the Book of Psalms should be "read daily at home" (Yoder 1973:44).

> blameless, having his children in subjection, no drunkard, winebibber or whoremonger." 1 Tim. 3:2. (van Braght 1886:517)

The very same hermeneutic that allowed Dircks to study the Bible created an impenetrable divide between men and women when it came to church leadership. It had become a two-edged sword. The trials had given women the platform of a preacher, but in church, that platform was reserved for men.

Anabaptist Hermeneutics and Family Structures

The portraits of early Anabaptist women have provided complex and sometimes contradictory stories. On the one hand, it would be quite reasonable to conclude with Huebert Hecht (1992a:60) that there were a considerable number of women leaders in the early years, more than previous research had granted. In fact, she has shown that at least 46% of the total number of Anabaptists in the Tirol between 1525 and 1529 were women, and that they "were active enough in the movement to be persecuted and to have their names appear in the legal records." At the same time, my womanist midrashic reading of the sources has also indicated the validity of the conclusion drawn by Yoder Nyce and Nyce (2001:158), that, "since women's accounts of ministry survived androcentric history writing, we can be sure that even more were significant leaders."

On the other hand, it was noted that the window of opportunity closed quite quickly. Here, I noted that Weber's hypothesis on the development and institutionalization of religious movements had been suggested as a possible explanation. However, such an explanation is not specific enough, since it is not clear why an institutionalization of a movement that had a theological critique of the sword near its center should fail to apply that critique to their own power structures. Put briefly, it is not clear why an institutionalization of "power from below" would be a problem *in se*. The solution seems to lie elsewhere, and the analysis above has indicated that a fundamental part would have been played by Anabaptist biblical hermeneutics, especially if seen in light of a seemingly uncritical overtaking of contemporary societal family structures. To unpack this relation a bit further, I will expand on each of these points below.

Anabaptists and Patriarchy

Focusing first on the way Anabaptists related to contemporary societal family structures, I would agree with Calvin Redekop (2001b:188) that "one source for the motivation for power is role behavior, motivated by the expectations of roles we perform in society and institutions." Applied to a patriarchal society, women are brought up "in a male-defined value system and conduct their lives accordingly" (Lerner 1975:5), and this would relate to all aspects of life, not least marriage. As the stories above have shown, the patriarchal expectations of authorities enabled women some unexpected freedom to move under the

radar. They were not as interesting as their male counterparts, and so, many of the early female Anabaptist leaders could exercise their leadership in a way that men could not. This should not, however, be interpreted as a deliberate critique of patriarchy from an Anabaptist point of view. Much speak rather of the opposite. Although it has been shown that women preached, taught, housed both congregations and leaders, bore witness to their faith, were persecuted and martyred, and ultimately contributed immensely to the growth and survival of Anabaptism, it is equally clear that they uncritically overtook the structures of power of contemporary society when it came to the relation between men and women. This was an aspect of power that they overlooked, partly because it was hidden under the cover of tradition and family hierarchy, but also due to their biblical hermeneutics.

There is almost something ironic in this. It is well known that in some parts of the early Anabaptist movement, church came before marriage.[38] If necessary, spouses had to live apart, that is, if only one of them had become an Anabaptist, since one was to obey God first. Evidently, this was highly controversial, but is hinted in the story of von Freyberg above, since she left her family, and another example would be the imprisoned John Claess, who writes to his wife that he no longer loves her "after the flesh" but "after the soul" (van Braght 1886:468).[39] The irony is that this did not lead to a situation where men and women had the same opportunities. Implicit hierarchy was still present in the congregations, as is seen clearly in the simple observation that men always had a privilege that women did not: the power to restrain women's use of power.[40] Nevertheless, it has also become clear that when such a power was used, it was not necessarily met with opposition. This leads to the notion of biblical hermeneutics.

Anabaptists and Flat Hermeneutics

As was seen in the introduction, Anabaptists used the Bible consciously and with great care to formulate poignant points of critique of what they called the "sword". Rather than physical power, the only sword to be used was that of the "Word," or the "power of the Spirit," and the use made of the Bible in concordances, at trials, disputations, and so on reveals what could be labeled as a "flat" hermeneutic. The Bible was seen to be clear, sufficient, and self-explanatory. Marpeck is a good example of this when, speaking on baptism, he states that "[w]e think that, if you take the simple text of the Scriptures and view it directly by faith and leave all subtle, complex speculations behind, then this question can be quite easily solved" (Klassen & Klaassen 1978:173). This hermeneutic is also seen in the often-recurring response of Anabaptists on trial, like that given by Dirks: "...

[38] See Marr (1987) for a discussion on how Dirk Philips and Menno Simons dealt with the issue. Cf. also Sprunger (1985:57–63); Klassen (1986:554–64); Hiett Umble (1990); and Snyder & Huebert Hecht (1996:4).

[39] Evidently, it was more common for a man to leave his wife and children behind than the other way around.

[40] Lerner (1975:9) puts it well: "The status of persons is determined not in one area of their functioning, such as within the family, but in several. The decisive historical fact about women is that the areas of their functioning, not only their status within those areas, have been determined by men."

prove to me that I have transgressed in any article against my Lord and my God ...!" (van Braght 1886:482). It is also in play in the response of Hottinger's father to an argument regarding the Eucharist: "We don't want philosophical proofs; you should demonstrate with the Gospel; for Christ took the bread, gave it to his disciples and said: take this, this is my body; after which he took the cup and said: take this, this is my blood" (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:45).

But the sword that so sharply critiqued power "from above" turned out to be two-edged. The flat hermeneutic created a blind spot with regard to the use of power within the Anabaptists' own families and communities. While instrumental in the development of a theology for the arena of politics and ecclesiastical hierarchy, their use of the Bible prevented a similar critique from being applied to the relation between man and woman, simply because a flat reading of certain Pauline letters turned out to uphold traditional power structures (cf. a similar conclusion in Redekop 2001b:189–92). So, if one would have asked the fundamental Anabaptist question – "By whose authority are you doing this?" – in relation to male authority, it might be presumed that an Anabaptist woman would have answered something like the answer given by Dircks: "a teacher is a *man* who...". Therefore, patriarchal structures – which are best understood as being upheld by "power from above" – were solicited in the very core of early arguments against women "Shepherds".

Ultimately, Dircks' answer reveals a failure to theologically process the subversive use of power and authority that the women surveyed here are all examples of, and the theological potential (and, in many cases, historical reality) of the Anabaptist critique of the sword was thwarted. Their hermeneutics did not suffice, and so, they failed to Christianize *all* human relationships.

Conclusion: Women and Power from Below

Returning lastly to the question raised at the outset of this article – the question of whether women had positions of power in the early Anabaptist movement – it becomes quite clear that the way the stories of early Anabaptist women have usually been retold are often highly tendentious and fail to assess the authority of women on the basis of Anabaptist theology of power. Put differently, these retellings have had an unjustifiable focus on men and their activities, and when women's authority has been evaluated, it has been done from the perspective of "power from above". This goes even for Huebert Hecht (1992a:65), who makes a distinction between "simply believers" (members) and "leaders," thus running the risk of reading contemporary congregational structures back in time.[41] This underscores the need to rethink the categories, to move further on beyond

[41] Although she does, together with Snyder, hint at a similar conclusion when they say that "Anabaptist women were no less involved in the preservation and communication of Anabaptist ideas than were the men; that they exercised their freedom of religious choice no less than did the men; that being

supplying the story of the early Anabaptism with an extra chapter on women, and towards a reshaping of the entire narrative. In this article, I have hinted at some ways this could be done. By infusing Anabaptist history with women – who have their rightful place therein – male authority is destabilized and their activities are decentralized so that what emerges is, in some respects, a critique of the way males such as Menno Simons executed their leadership. While Simons can be judged as successful in "putting a lid" on severe conflicts, his way of executing his leadership by silencing ("power from above") the voice of women could be conceived as a failure to embody the Anabaptist ideal of steadfast, Christ-like behavior ("power from below"). In this sense, it suddenly becomes clear that those who actually embodied this vision were, to a greater extent, women. By selflessly serving their brothers and sisters, without aspiring to any position of "power from above," they set an example that their male counterparts failed to acknowledge, even to this day.[42]

Consequently, if I have argued my case convincingly, it follows that it should no longer be possible to speak of the legacy of Michael Sattler without mentioning Helene von Freyberg, to speak of the theology of Menno Simons without taking Elisabet Dirks into account, or to narrate early Anabaptist history without emphasizing the subversive power embodied by the many female leaders.

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more 'invisible' than were the men, they many times provided the essential leadership, strength and continuity that enabled the underground movement to survive" (Snyder & Huebert Hecht 1996:8).

[42] This conclusion needs to be somewhat qualified, since it runs the risk of consolidating unjust structures (cf. the recent #metoo-campaign). Such was the case with, for example, the early "Christian feminism" represented by, for example, Mathilde Bourdon, Julia Bécour and Joséphine de Gaulle who emphasized that women had the power and duty to do good through their suffering and sacrifices, but failed to critique male domination. As noted by Kasdorf (1997:186–87), "[t]raditional injunctions to be humble have at times served to silence the voices of some while protecting the authority of others in the Mennonite community." Nevertheless, Kasdorf continues: "I claim the best kind of humility our tradition can teach ... This kind of humility is characterized by a commitment to listening to the other and serving the other." This tension permeates the entire issue, and is far too complex to deal with in a brief footnote, but part of an answer would be to stress that processes of reconciliation need to take place, and that in such processes, men and women would have different parts to play. For an insightful discussion of these issues from the perspective of forgiveness, see Koontz (1994).

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david.willgren@altutbildning.se

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