

History and Social Science Reviews

C. Arnold Snyder, *Faith and Toleration: A Reformation Debate Revisited*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2018. Pp. 106. Softcover, \$16.95.

C. Arnold Snyder's book, *Faith and Toleration: A Reformation Debate Revisited*, presents in published form the J.J. Thiessen Lectures and the John and Margaret Friesen Lectures delivered at Canadian Mennonite University on October 30-31, 2017, dates coinciding with the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. In the introduction to the published lectures, along with a brief consideration of the concept of 'toleration,' Snyder states that his purpose for these lectures is to ponder the subject of religious toleration and freedom from a Christian perspective, and to do so by considering what we might learn today from what happened five hundred years ago.

In the first lecture, "Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, Toleration Doubtful," Snyder explores the movement by which Martin Luther's theology of salvation by faith through grace became "a theology that supported institutionalized intolerance carried out by a territorial state" (23). Snyder introduces an Anabaptist critique of that movement by drawing on Pilgram Marpeck's essay "Exposé of the Babylonian Whore," thus providing an opportunity to consider the analogous issues of today. That is, Snyder promotes the recovery of toleration as a Christian virtue for today by asking us to consider an Anabaptist corrective to other sixteenth-century religious paths which led to fierce, violent intolerance.

Snyder's second lecture, titled "'Compel Them to Come in': A Theology of Intolerance Examined," examines the issue of the use of coercion in matters of faith. His discussions of Urbanus Rhegius's defence of religious persecution, the execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva on the charge of heresy, and the Anabaptist response which refused to embrace violent coercion provide the opportunity to show that all of this dissension was really a "disagreement over how to read and interpret Scripture and how to put that interpretation into practice" (64). Snyder thus shows that the early Anabaptists were not entirely unique in their time; they did not display, as Harold Bender would have it, a "toleration of divergence in religious matters" (69). Rather, they too were certain that views contrary to theirs had to be false; they were not the founders of modern, liberal, democratic ideals.

In the third lecture, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Anabaptism, Church, and State in Sixteenth-Century Switzerland,” the author switches his emphasis slightly. While still describing ecclesiastical structure, government legislation, and administrative organization, he shows that at the grassroots level, Anabaptist resistance to persecution took the form not of deploying sophisticated theological argument but of living upright, moral, and decent lives (85). Being good neighbours thus meant that “Anabaptists were able to hide in plain sight in the villages and rural areas because they were tolerated and accepted by their neighbors and often actively protected from the authorities” (85). Snyder’s work here nicely displays a kind of matter-of-fact toleration among ordinary people, a scenario which highlights the importance of an incremental, grassroots resistance to formal legislation and a dominant ethos of intolerance.

Faith and Toleration presents yet another example of Snyder’s important and excellent historical work and interpretive acumen. Indeed, we are deeply indebted to Snyder for his work across his influential career of teaching, publishing, editing, and translating. Much of that kind of work is distilled into these accessible, compelling lectures. The close reading of historical documents in their historical, theological, social, and political context is exemplary. For example, Snyder draws heavily on an important collection of documents he recently edited, titled *Later Writings of the Swiss Anabaptists 1529-1592* (2017). That volume makes available a wide range of writings previously unavailable in English. This present series of lectures works with that material in ways that do just what Snyder hopes they will. He writes of his hope that “these historical explorations and contemporary observations will provide an occasion for reflection and debate” (19).

Overall, Snyder’s lectures, along with his introductory comments, provide an important contribution to our understanding of early Anabaptism. They also begin to show that we have much to learn about our own lives in our contemporary context, and especially in our lives of faith and discipleship. This latter impulse is difficult to navigate. To leap across five hundred years “clutching any valid conclusions for Christians today” (40) is fraught with danger, as Snyder acknowledges. He is right then to display humility, to resist an Anabaptist version of triumphalism, and also finally to assert that if there is any such thing as a baseline for Christians today, it is “the words and the life of Christ and what he taught us about the meaning of love” (44).

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