Jacob Harnasveger: 16th Century Anabaptist Reformer

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Jacob Harnasveger, the son of Nicholas, was arrested in The Hague on July 5th, 1535, and charged with aiding in the attempted escape from Amsterdam of a group of radical Anabaptists caught in the act of plotting to take over the city and establish an Anabaptist administration. He was an armorer by trade and his role in the escape attempt was to provide weapons for the self-defense of the Anabaptist group. They were hoping to make their way to a safe Anabaptist stronghold in the city of Munster, Germany. It was the second time authorities had captured him, as he had escaped his first arrest in Amsterdam the previous October when the plot was discovered and foiled. After his first escape, at the age of 55, he had been on the run from the courts.

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V published a decree in The Netherlands in 1521 prohibiting any form of religious worship that did not adhere strictly to the Roman Church's traditions and practices. Anyone violating or even suspected of violating the decree could be condemned to death on the evidence of just two witnesses. Accusers and witnesses were then awarded one third of the convicted heretic's property in gratitude for service to the state. Judges who did not faithfully render the prescribed sentence were, themselves, charged with heresy under the decree to ensure compliance. The state sanctioned brutal torture to induce admissions of guilt, and then executed the victims. Records are full of stories of neighbors selling out neighbors, driven by fear and greed.

Jacob's case went to trial on October 15th, 1535. He was lucky – while found guilty, he received the comparatively lenient sentence of banishment from Amsterdam for two years. The Prosecutor had requested a sentence of death by beheading.

Jacob is my 13th great-grandfather and possibly one of the earliest identified ancestors in all of Mennonite genealogy. The surname he took, Harnasveger, means "Armor Sweeper" in English. The adoption of one's occupation as a second name was a common practice at this time in the Netherlands, before formally registered surnames became mandatory. His story and the story of his family's survival is vitally relevant to his many Canadian Mennonite descendants. The potentially brutal punishment he faced for his actions stems from the existential threat to the Holy Roman Empire posed by the Anabaptist movement. The corresponding

reaction of a small group of Anabaptists led by Menno Simons forms the origin story of the Mennonite movement.

To understand why such harsh punishments were sanctioned against the Anabaptists, we must go back to the beginning – to the time of John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, and the roots of the Christian church.

The early Christian movement embraced baptism as an important symbol of their beliefs. This followed the practice of John the Baptist, whose religious sect practiced baptism to purify their souls, and who himself baptized Jesus. As the Christian church emerged and grew, so too did the ritual of baptism. In the early days of the Christian church baptism was a symbolic ritual in which any willing adult could participate, and this evolved from the daily ritual practiced by followers of John the Baptist to a one-time symbol of Christian acceptance. Later, adults and entire households could participate, including infants. Over time the baptismal practice continued to evolve, eventually becoming an important sacrament of the Christian church to be performed usually upon infants.

The concept of universality, or the idea of one single form of religious practice and tradition, emerged in the 2nd century around the time of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch. Thereafter all efforts by church officials were oriented to shaping this universal system and weeding out deviations. The church's goal at this time was to spread its teachings by creating a consistent set of rules and practices that could be easily brought to new communities in a repeatable manner with predictable results. Over centuries this well-organized model enabled the church to accumulate wealth along with social and political influence.

By the beginning of the 3rd Century an organizational model featuring deacons, priests and bishops had evolved and was uniformly entrenched. It was a solid hierarchical structure enabling the church to project power and influence. This complemented the monarchical role of the papacy in which control and decision-making was lodged in the highest strata of the church. The view of the priest's role evolved to be the intermediary between parishioners and God. The path to heaven for one's immortal soul was through the local priest.

Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of his empire in the 4th Century. This event established a political linkage between the Roman Church and the State that would ensure their mutual survival.

The idea of confession and absolution (or forgiveness) was still a central theme of the church's teachings. Before long confession and absolution became a sacrament of the Roman Church and by the time of Pope Basil of Caesarea in the 4th century

confession could only be made to an ordained priest and only a priest could grant absolution. With this the Roman Church took communion with God out of the hands of the masses and made Christians reliant on the church and its priests.

During the reign of Emperor Justinian I in the 6th century, religious rules became more rigid and the act of adult re-baptism was forbidden under the law and enforced by the death penalty. This law survived for a thousand years and near the end it was rigorously enforced by the Roman Church operating under the auspices of the state and reinforced by decree of Emperor Charles V.

As time moved on, the Roman Church found itself in need of capital for expansion. The church realized it could package up dispensation for sins and relief from the obligations of penance and purgatory by granting indulgences to hapless sinners - for a fee. By the 11th or 12th century the sale of indulgences was big business. Anyone with money could purchase dispensation from sins and priests were delegated the authority to sell the service and collect the money.

In the 16th century the Roman Church found itself holding monopolistic control over religion in European society, being the sole gateway to the afterlife. It was insinuated in so many aspects of daily life that it was essentially a feature of the cultural bedrock. The Church was State-sanctioned and wielded political power through layers of interrelationships with the governing classes. It was economically powerful and used economic might to political ends. It also stifled cultural and scientific advancement in efforts to protect its societal preeminence.

It was the sale of indulgences that caused Martin Luther to finally revolt against the questionable practices of the Roman Church early in the 16th century.

Martin Luther was not the first critic of the Roman Church. There were earlier critics. For example, in the Netherlands Desiderius Erasmus had espoused numerous reforms in the late 15th century, criticizing the sale of indulgences and superstitious beliefs about saints and relics. However, the tipping point occurred when Luther published his formal list of concerns in 1517, the corrupt practice of selling indulgences being central. The resulting reform movement was of extended duration and geographic expanse, encompassing many smaller initiatives.

Ulrich Zwingli was a parish priest in Zurich and a former army chaplain. In 1522 he defended friends who ate a sausage during Lent in defiance of church rules. Later that year he further defied the Roman Church by getting married, thereby advancing the cause of reform rapidly. The religious tradition that emerged from his work became known as "Reformed". This term referred to any kind of Protestantism that was not Lutheranism. Zwingli's version of protestant worship

preceded Calvinism by a few years but the broad conventions and traditions of the two were essentially the same, sweeping out many of the most egregious corruptions, superstitions, and outdated practices of the Roman Church.

An early interpretation of Zwingli's thinking was that baptism must be a conscious act and therefore only adults could undertake this sacrament. This view appealed to some reformers who wished to take religious practice back to the origins of Christianity and a more direct interpretation of the Gospels, casting aside the ritual and ceremony that had overtaken the Roman Church. A "re-baptizer", or Anabaptist, movement was born, its adherents spurning infant baptism and participating in adult baptism.

The Anabaptist movement is usually considered a stream of the reform revolution but there exists a perspective that it is entirely separate from the Reformation. Certainly, Anabaptist beliefs drew inspiration and then criticism from other reformers. Anabaptists were scripturalists, meaning they preferred to be guided by biblical scripture rather than by sacramental tradition or Church law, dogma, or decree. In respect of baptism, they held two central beliefs. First, infant baptisms were not prescribed by scripture. Second, the only valid baptisms were those of adults aware of the commitment they were making. This was enough to threaten the authority of the church. Further, while prioritizing reliance on scriptural guidance they comfortably ignored secular rules that conflicted with their scriptural interpretation of the way human affairs should be conducted and with this they were able to raise the ire of the secular authorities as well. In fact, they advocated a strict separation of church and state. In the 16th century this was more than innovative thinking, this was revolutionary.

In consequence, by refuting one of the core sacraments of the Roman Church, Anabaptism struck at its foundation. It was an existential threat that had to be extinguished forcefully. Fortunately for the Church in the Holy Roman Empire, the State was aligned with the interests of the Church, and the ancient code of Justinian invoked the death penalty for re-baptism. The Anabaptist rejection of a role for the state in religious affairs galvanized secular administrators against the movement and encouraged them to apply the law more forcefully.

Emperor Charles V published his decree in the Netherlands upholding Justinian's law against re-baptism and other practices contravening church tradition. Frans Van der Hulst was appointed the first Inquisitor General of the inquisition in the Netherlands, with ratification by the pope. Heretics were sought out and brutally punished until the inquisition was suspended in 1566.

This is where the seeds of Anabaptism were sown, and where Jacob Harnasveger found himself. In the 1530s groups of radical reformers from the low countries of modern-day Netherlands, Belgium, Northern France, and the Rhine basin converged on the city of Munster in Germany. There a wave of thousands under charismatic leadership ousted the city council, took over the city and declared the establishment of a New Jerusalem on that spot in 1534. The New Jerusalem lasted only a year before it was suppressed. The ousted Catholic Bishop of Munster, who was both its political and religious leader, raised an army to recapture the city. The leaders of the revolt were executed, their corpses encaged and hung from the walls to rot. Nevertheless, the zeal for reform led to the riots in Amsterdam that implicated Jacob Harnasveger late in 1535.

Repulsed by the events in Munster, both the violent nature of the activists and the bloody official response, a priest named Menno Simons gathered a following of Anabaptists in the Netherlands with a program renouncing violence and secular coercion. If their intentions were to avoid the persecution resulting from events such as the siege of Munster or the Amsterdam riots it was misplaced. The core aspects of their progressive beliefs - adult baptism, separation of church and state, denial of the state's role in religious practice, and rejection of the intermediary role of the clergy in man's relationship to God - made the group a clear target for the inquisitionists of Charles V.

Jacob Harnasveger returned to Amsterdam in 1537, but he still was not in the clear. He was brought before the courts again, this time for having remarked that the papist regime did not have much longer before it would die out. Witnesses confirmed the story but, in the end, it appears the case did not go further, a lucky thing, as Jacob's family are the ancestors of generations of Mennonites – and rebels.

Jacob predeceased his wife Dieuwertje, the daughter of Jan. She was buried in February 1563 in the graveyard on Koestraat belonging to the Catholic Church of Saint Nicholas, later renamed the Oude Kerk, in Amsterdam. The church was originally a wooden chapel built around 1213. Later it was replaced by a stone church and in 1306 it was consecrated by the bishop of Utrecht. Saint Nicholas was its patron saint. Over the years numerous revisions and additions were made to the structure to complete the building that stands there today. Following the Amsterdam Revolution of 1578, when the Catholic civic government was replaced by a Protestant administration, it became a Calvinist Church and renamed the Oude Kerk. Today it is a museum during the week and, on Sundays, a Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church.

Dieuwertje was buried in a Catholic cemetery even through it seems clear her husband was a Reformer. Her son Nicholas, who pursued the family trade as an armorer, and his wife Weijn Peters, buried an infant son in 1554 at Saint Nicholas. However, Nicholas was baptized a Mennonite in 1562 at Sint Olafscapel in Amsterdam. This church was built in the mid-15th century and dedicated to Saint Olof, the patron saint of navigators.

Weijn died quite young and Nicholas remarried in 1571. With his second wife, Nicholas had two sons who lived to adulthood, Frans and Jan. Jan, whose wife was Metjen van Zevenbergen, daughter of Heijndrick, was also an armorer. When Jan died in 1611 at the age of 35 his creditors ordered an inventory of the contents of his house on Van Breestraat in Amsterdam. It appears his estate was insolvent. The inventory lists 44 items including maps, drawings, paintings, alabaster carvings, and a stuffed deer's head. Today Jan's street still exists but his house is gone.

Frans took up the challenge of religious activism like his grandfather. By the early 17th century, the reform movement had not only solidified its base in the Netherlands, but Catholicism had been pushed aside. In its place was Calvinism, virtually the state religion. Naturally, within the Calvinist faith there were competing strains of thinking. One of the central themes of Calvinism was that people were predestined to their fate. Essentially every individual was pre-programmed by God to a fiery or euphoric after-life. Those that opposed this element of Calvinism were the Remonstrants, and Frans took his place among them, signing a petition in 1628 questioning the tenet of pre-destination on the basis that it was not biblically rooted and ran contrary to the God-given will of people to conduct themselves in a godly way to achieve the ends they desired.

Nicholas and Weijn also had a daughter, Deborah, born in 1560. At the age of 20 Deborah married Gysbert De Veer, probably the scion of a wealthy merchant family. Gysbert was born in 1556 in Schiedam, a town not far from Rotterdam. The family name may refer to the town of Veere, located in the region of Walcheren, at the mouth of the Scheldt River. The word "veere" means ferry and the town was named for the ferry established there in the late 13th century when the region was an island. Veere became an important trading port for commerce with Scotland.

There is compelling evidence that Gysbert's father was a man named Jan born in Veere in 1521. Town records, name associations and DNA analysis all support such a conclusion, but realistically this must be considered hypothetical.

Gysbert operated a thriving grain trading business on the northern trading route between the Netherlands and coastal cities on the Baltic Sea and maintained

business offices in Amsterdam and Danzig. The family settled in Danzig sometime between 1583 and 1588 and Gysbert was among the first to join the Danzig Mennonite Church. Nevertheless, he retained roots in Amsterdam and returned in 1601 with sufficient wealth to be made a citizen there. Possession of citizenship was useful to take best advantage of the commercial rights and protections guaranteed to those with this status. They returned to Danzig in 1612 and remained there. Their elder son Nicholas was a prominent merchant in Amsterdam in later years, running the Dutch end of the business while his father was in Danzig.

Nearly two centuries later one descendant of Gysbert and Deborah, Benjamin De Veer, made the long trek with his family to southern Russia as an early settler of Chortitza. 228 families joined that first wave of migration in 1788-89. Many people of Mennonite descent in Canada today are descendants of Benjamin. The courage needed to uproot a family and resettle in an unknown foreign wilderness reflects the ancestral courage needed to defend principles and beliefs before hostile religious and secular authorities.

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8