

Polish Anabaptism in the 16th : a story little told

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For a country known internationally as one of the most decidedly Catholic in the world, the multi-cultural and multi-faith state of affairs in the Poland of the sixteenth century comes as a surprise. This is a story little told. Poland might easily, at that time, have followed a course similar to that of England, with a Polish via media of its own: the Polish Reformed Church was on the ascendancy during the middle decades of the century. As Diarmaid MacCulloch comments: 'Poland-Lithuania went on to exhibit one of the most richly varied and interesting of all the local religious developments in Reformation Europe.'¹

It was only during the seventeenth century that a Catholic supremacy was reconstructed as Poland's Protestant communities were systematically extirpated.² The seventeenth-century Polish radical historian, Stanislas Lubienicki, provides us with many of the source documents necessary to understand this turn of events. He told how the Reformation reached and spread through the sixteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the largest state in Europe. For Lubieniecki the arrival of radical ideas and their subsequent history was 'the culmination of the whole Reformation movement.'³ Although he concentrated on what became known as 'The Minor Church'⁴, and especially the radical faith community with which he identified, his history remains a key source for understanding all early Protestant movements within the Commonwealth, including several Anabaptist movements.

These Anabaptist roots can be respectively traced back to the Hutterites in Moravia, to the Mennonites in Royal Prussia and to Dutch and German Anabaptists moving in from Silesia. This article first outlines the political and religious context within which sixteenth-century Polish Anabaptism flourished, then tells something of its story, and finally draws out some contemporary implications.

The Golden Age

Poland's Catholic Christian history dates from the conversion of Duke Mieszko in 968.⁵ During the sixteenth century, Polish Catholicism, like many of its West European counterparts, was subjected to much critical analysis and clamour for reform. It was a time of significant social transformation. Reformation there took place during the period of the union of Poland with Lithuania, which began in 1384 when the very young Jadwiga of Anjou was married to Jagiello, Grand Duke of Lithuania. Their childless union meant that the children of Jagiello's later marriage would subsequently also rule Poland: the Jagiellonian dynasty was born, and with it the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth which lasted some 187 years.⁶ The reigns of Zygmunt I (1506-48) and his son Zygmunt II (1548-72) were critical for Polish Protestantism. To an extent both rulers encouraged reform and renaissance in the dual state. This was the age of Mikolaj Copernicus (1473-1543), the paradigm-changing astronomer; of Jan Kochanowski (1530-84), whose Polish Psalter 'did for Polish what Luther's Bible did for Germany'⁷; and of Jan Zamoyski (1542-1605), student of Roman history and pioneer of Poland's sixteenth-century democratic experiments.

During the two Zygmunts' reigns international scholarship, as well as reformation and renaissance visitors, were actively welcomed to Poland-Lithuania. Zygmunt I's second wife, Queen Bona Sforza, encouraged many Italian artisans, architects, engineers, painters, tradesmen and scholars to visit Poland. It was also an age of territorial expansion. In 1561, Livonia was incorporated into the Commonwealth and in 1569 the then Ukraine. Not surprisingly then, the two Zygmunts' reigns have been called Poland's *Złoty Wiek*, or Golden Age. Their open and constructive attitudes to reform and renaissance were mirrored in Lithuania whose ruler, Prince Radziwill, Nicholas Radvila the Black (1515-1565), actively encouraged Protestant reform. In 1563, by his command, a translation of the Bible into Polish, the Radziwill Bible, was printed in Brest for the use of all Lithuanian and Polish Evangelical Reformed churches.

Radical religious movements grow in Poland-Lithuania through what, in Latin America, has come to be known as conscientization, or consciousness-raising. Lubieniecki's *History* is fascinating for its account of the lives of some of the sixteenth-century reformers and how they went about this task. A trawl through the 300 or so pages of Williams' detailed footnotes is rewarding. There can be seen consciousness-raising at work, with many examples of radicals using their new knowledge and learning to spread reform. Francis Stancaro (1501-74), an Italian Hebraist, initiated a Christological debate that raged for decades in Poland and beyond. He taught that God is one and that Jesus Christ is 'not Mediator with respect to his divine nature, but only with respect to his human nature, lest he should be Mediator of himself.'⁸ Marcin Krowicki (1501-73), a classicist and a nobleman from Pomerania, a graduate of Krakow, one of Europe's oldest established Universities, became one of the earliest ex-priests to marry. Later he was an advocate of non-resistance, opposed to both the sword and the magistracy.

Another consciousness-raiser was Piotr Gieszka or Gonesius (i.e. Peter from Goniadz, 1530-73), a philologist and also a graduate of Krakow. At a synod in Secemin, in January 1556, he declared himself an opponent of the sword. His immersionist views on baptism were combined with a Calvinist belief in pre-destination to salvation. He features again in Stanislas Lubieniecki's account, as an opponent of some of the views of the prominent radical Fausto Paolo Sozzini (Socinus) on both Christology and the Trinity. Martin Czechowic (1532-1613) studied in Poznan and Leipzig before teaching in the Calvinist school in Vilna founded by Prince Radziwill. He moved to Kujawy in 1565 after the Prince's death and played a leading role among Polish-Lithuanian Anabaptists committed to believer's baptism and to nonresistance: 'I consider the baptism of infants as the beginning of Papist ignorance and the foundation of all errors in the Church of God?'⁹

Deeply influential too was Jacob Palaeologus (1520-85), whose *De tribus gentibus* (1572) is one of the earliest historical accounts of a plea for inter-faith dialogue with both Judaism and Islam. His arguments in favour of both just war and Christian engagement with society caused much consternation among the Anabaptist pacifists of the period. He helped to lead the radicals in Poland before his death at the stake in Rome for 'heresy'. Another pioneer was George Schomann (1530-91), who travelled, with Lord Jerome Filipowski, to visit the Moravian Anabaptists in 1569. His growing convictions about baptism led to his decision to be baptized as a believer in August 1572, when he was forty.

G.H. Williams' thorough editing of Stanislas Lubieniecki's account reveals the speeches, deeds and personalities of such radicals, whose views helped to shape the cause of Reform in sixteenth-

century Poland. Theirs was consciousness-raising of a high order. The reigns of the two Zygmunts were exceptionally tolerant years for new religious movements. The *Polish Interim* of May 1555 was a remarkable example of a laissez faire policy in religious matters. The agreements included (a) that the king was to be considered 'a common father' in matters of religion, (b) that every Polish lord was granted permission to introduce into his estate and house any scriptural mode of worship he desired, and c) that, with the king's consent, a national and ecumenical council should be called to discuss reforms for the Polish Church.

All this was agreed, despite the protests and even a threat to arms from the countries' Catholic bishops, led by Andrew Zbrzydowski of Krakow.¹⁰ Under such a tolerant reign, Poland became known as a 'state without stakes' or a 'land without bonfires'¹¹: as the unsurpassed historian of Poland, Norman Davies, observes: 'There were no campaigns of forced conversion; no religious wars; no *autos-da-fe*; no St Bartholomew's Eve, no Thomas or Oliver Cromwell.'¹² In Poland-Lithuania sponsoring noblemen, encouraged by the *Polish Interim*, were frequently appointed as church elders. Protestants met for worship or for conferences and discussion in their homes, or in modest stone meeting houses, purpose-built, on their estates or in the towns they owned or governed.

The 1550s proved, however, the zenith of the Polish monarchy's openness to reform: Polish Protestantism split just when it might have followed the Church of England's route to a *via media* in reform. Within a decade the Polish reform movements splintered into mainstream, orthodox reformers (the Major Church) and more experimental, freethinking, radical faith communities (the Minor Church), which also came to be known as 'the Polish Brethren'.¹³ The Polish monarchy had never finally broken with Catholicism, which retained deep popularity among thousands of ordinary people in the Commonwealth. As a result, in the ensuing decades, Poland-Lithuania became '...one of very few successes for Catholic recovery in northern Europe.'¹⁴ Over the course of the 1560s, the Catholic Counter-Reformation took increasing hold of the Commonwealth. A meeting of the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) in Parczew in 1564 solemnly received the many anti-Protestant decrees of the Council of Trent, and in that year the Society of Jesus established its first base in Poland-Lithuania.¹⁵

The policy of religious toleration, however, survived the Zygmunts and even the accession to the Commonwealth throne, by marriage, of the deeply Catholic Henri, Duke of Anjou. The 1573 *Warsaw Confederation*¹⁶, which followed the end of Zygmunt II's reign, consolidated these gains for religious freedom:

Since there is in our Commonwealth (Respublica) no little disagreement on the subject of religion, in order to prevent any such hurtful strife from beginning among our people on this account as we plainly see in other realms, we mutually promise for ourselves and our successors forever ... that we who differ with regard to religion (*dissidentes de religione*) will keep the peace with one another, and will not for a different faith or a change of churches shed blood nor punish one another by confiscation of property, infamy, imprisonment or banishment, and will not in any way assist any magistrate or officer in such an act.'¹⁷

The *Confederation* enshrined religious toleration in law and, for several decades, offered reformers significant protection against Catholic counter-reformation strategies in general, and Jesuit influence in particular.¹⁸ It met in the autumn of 1572 as news of the brutal murders of Huguenots in France was reaching Eastern Europe.¹⁹ The Confederation saw agreement reached among Protestants, including the Czech Brethren, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists and early Unitarian nobles that constitutional religious liberty should obtain for all *dissidentes de religione*.

For radical and reforming Christians, this 'Golden Age' meant in practice that a wide variety of capable religious leaders and teachers arrived in the Commonwealth, and Protestant teachings were spread across the Commonwealth by both foreign and indigenous preachers and teachers. Lutheran Reformation teachings first reached Poland during the reign of Zygmunt I. He suppressed them for a time, though not with great conviction, for Lutheranism had found a ready acceptance among the German burghers in cities such as Gdansk, Torun and Elblag.²⁰ Among those whose criticisms and leadership had helped to prepare the way for the Polish-Lithuanian Reformation were, in the fifteenth century, the Polish Archbishop Mikolaj Traba (1358-1422) and, in the early sixteenth, Jan Laski (1456-1531). Both had lobbied effectively for an increased Polish independence of Rome. Laski's nephew and namesake was to become one of the leading Calvinist reformers. As in much of Western Europe, clamour for reform grew: 'By the time the Reformation appeared in the 1520s the pitch had been well prepared.'²¹

Williams suggests that several Protestant tributaries flowed into Poland during the two Zygmunt's reigns: Lutheranism, Italian and Erasmian humanism, the beliefs of the Czech Brethren, Genevan Calvinism and Anabaptism from both Silesia and Moravia.²² The Reformation was also well received in Lithuania, where the prejudice of the Roman Catholic hierarchy had helped to foment national resentment. Lithuanians were largely kept out of important or wealthy office in the Church in favour of Polish speakers among the Polonized Lithuanian nobility, giving other Lithuanians '...an incentive to favour the Reformation if they did not want to choose the cultural option of identifying with the Polish elite.'²³ Not for the first time, national resentments served the cause of reform. Under Zygmunt II, a number of Protestant leaders found refuge in Poland-Lithuania. Among them were George Biandrata, Francis Stancaro, Laelius Socinus, Bernardine Ochino and a former Bishop, Peter Paul Vergerio.

Anabaptism was in the 1530s a movement heavily tarnished by the atrocities committed in its name in the German city of Münster where a group of Anabaptist terrorists had held power for a time before being brutally suppressed. On 27 September 1535, Zygmunt I ordered the expulsion of '...the godless and criminal sect of Anabaptists'²⁴ from Poland-Lithuania, but this policy was never fully implemented. Anabaptism survived and established firmer roots in the 1540s when Dutch Anabaptists, many of them supporters of Menno Simons, were welcomed because they had the skills – as experts on dykes and marshes – to cultivate the region (now Pomerania) from Gdansk to Torun and over to the German border.²⁵ From Silesia came Anabaptists led by Caspar Schwenckfeld and Menno Simons, among others, while from Moravia the Hutterites also sent missionaries and envoys.

Thus an indigenous Polish Anabaptist movement emerged, albeit later than elsewhere in Europe: 'Delay by a quarter of a century in the appearance of Anabaptist characteristics in Polish garb is one with the fact that the Reformation as a whole came somewhat later to this Slavic region'.²⁶

These sixteenth-century Protestant inroads into the two nations' Catholic strongholds were, arguably, one of the most unexpected developments of the Reformation. A factor in their success was their use of conferences and assemblies to spread their teachings, including believer's baptism, clearer Trinitarian statements of faith, and pacifism.

Conferences and Assemblies

The need to look afresh at Christology, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the sacraments for a new century and a new context are recurring features of church life. Gathering together in conferences and assemblies to seek the mind of Christ and discern how best to respond to current experiences and discoveries helps to spread new insights. The history of the Polish Reformation is full of such meetings. A Reformed Synod was held in Pinczów in 1550, just three years after the first officially recorded Protestant congregation (*zbor*) was formed. Another held in May and June 1555 at Piotrków defined *The Polish Interim*, which adapted the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, with its principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* ['Whose the region is, his the religion is'], to the Commonwealth. This principle, dressed in Polish garb after the Piotrków synod, now helped Protestantism, including Anabaptism, to spread in Poland with the support of the nobility. A further Reformed synod was held at Pinczów in the spring of 1555. One outcome was a declaration of intercommunion with the Czech Brethren.

At these Protestant synods three Anabaptist convictions featured frequently: believer's baptism, Trinitarian doctrine, and staff or sword.

a) *Believer's Baptism*. There were long discussions on Anabaptist convictions in the conferences and assemblies of the Major Church, the mainstream Evangelical Church from which the Minor Church radicals broke away in the 1550s. Piotr Gonesius first spoke publicly about his anti-trinitarian convictions, believer's baptism and pacifism at a Calvinist synod of 1556 in Secemin.²⁷ He was supported by Marcin Czechowic in Lithuania and George Schomann in Poland who was later baptized as a believer.²⁸ In a treatise, *O ponurzanu Chrystyjanskim (On Christian Immersion)*, Gonesius argued that people misunderstood even the term Christian: 'The Roman Catholic designation of "Christian" (Chrześcijanin) is derived directly from christening (chrzest), yet it is faith that makes one a true Christian (Chrystyjjan). The description is taken from the name of Jesus Christ (Chrystus). If there is an error made in such a simple matter, how much greater must the error have been in the greater mysteries of Christian theology! One becomes a Christian from being submerged or immersed with Christ, not from having had a little water sprinkled on the head in infancy.'²⁹

Martin Czechowic, in January 1565, prepared a document for the Lithuanian Prince Radziwill in which he portrayed a debate between a Minor Church Anabaptist Pastor, a Major Church Evangelical Pastor and a Roman Catholic priest. The Anabaptist Pastor is clearly his alter ego. In this work we find the first known declaration in Polish of a desire for believer's baptism:

And now God deigned by his grace to give me the knowledge of myself. I want to be baptized now because I feel the need to do so, and I realize in accordance with the word of God that the said baptism of [me as a] child was not a true Christian sacrament, but something strange, like magic, and contrary to God and his word, because I was without

that faith which is necessary for a true baptism. And at that time, being a child, I knew nothing about that faith, nor did I know anything about God and Jesus Christ.³⁰

He described Anabaptist faith communities in positive terms:

They are sincere and govern themselves only by the word of God, and do not devise anything above it; they live so as not to offend anyone; they do not reason about high things; they do not like subtle puzzles; they care little or not at all about this world; they obtain food with their own hands and in the sweat of their brow [2 Thess. 3:7-13]; they do not like secular pleasures; they strictly observe the word of God; they dislike pride and debauchery. They follow what Christ ever ordered his disciples to do, and pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).... They live peacefully with all, do not avenge their wrongs, and set store by God. Nor do they want to owe anything to anyone except for due charity.³¹

The Synod of Wegrów in December 1565 was preoccupied with reaching a working compromise among all Protestants on baptism:

Thereupon was this conclusion reached; that those who held that little ones should be baptized, held their opinion tenaciously; but others, who hesitated at this point, and if not yet agreeing, were nevertheless unwilling to oppose it obstinately but promised rather that they wished to learn what is true and right. Therefore, since [in] the one true Church of God one cannot lord it over another in faith nor coerce anyone, each party held to its own opinion, as indeed the will of God then moved each.³²

b) *Trinitarian Doctrine*. In 1562 two synods were held in Pinczów, the culmination of several years of debate among Protestants in the Commonwealth on the doctrine of the Trinity. Some wanted a more scriptural definition of the Trinity, and preferred the simplicity of the Apostles' Creed to the complexities of the Nicene. The ensuing debates over decades were to lead some in a Unitarian direction while others maintained Trinitarian orthodoxy. At the first synod, a split had been narrowly avoided when those present '...voted that the ministers should abstain from philosophical terms such as "Trinity", "essence", "generation", "the manner of proceeding" which are all foreign to the word of God; but that each should confine himself to the terms of the prophets, apostles and the Apostle's Creed.'³³ The second Pinczów synod, however, ended in schism when the majority rejected the views of the minority radicals, who left to form their own sects, united by their rejection of the dogma of the Trinity and by an absolute claim to free thought. Many moved to Raków where, under the protection of a noble, Michal Sienicki, they created a commune, abolished class distinctions and advocated a powerful blend of separatism, common property, shared labour and pacifism. They became known as the Racovians or, more frequently, 'the Polish Brethren'.³⁴

It is important to reflect on these events, not least because the epithet 'antitrinitarian' has come to be applied to almost the entire Polish Anabaptist movement as a result of these developments. Kot offers a more helpful guide than such a provocative label provides. He explains why some questioned the traditional Trinitarian creeds: 'By not forcing belief in anything beyond the minimum contained in Holy Scripture and the Apostles' Creed, generally acknowledged for centuries, the Church removes the possibility of the propagation of heresy.'³⁵ The term 'antitrinitarian' has come, unhelpfully, to embrace both those who rejected the concept of Trinity as

traditionally understood and moved in a Unitarian direction and also those other Anabaptists who simply wanted a return to more scriptural language and the simplicity of the Apostle's Creed. During the Golden Age, if not after it, Polish Anabaptism was far from 'antitrinitarian'. For some, at least, the chief concern was to recapture a biblical understanding of the doctrine, not to reject it.

c) *Staff or Sword*. Kot's work also helps us to grasp the extent of pacifism's grip on sixteenth-century Polish Anabaptism. Advocacy of non-violence, including a refusal to bear arms, belongs to a tradition going back to the Schleithem Confession, one of the earliest Anabaptist statements of faith. It seems likely that the Polish Anabaptists acquired pacifist ideas from the Hutterites in Moravia, whom Gonesius was known to have visited in 1555. On his return he refused any longer to wear a sword; instead he carried a staff and became known as the first of the Polish *Stäbler*, nobles who carried a wooden staff instead of the steel swords worn by *Schwertler* ('sword men').³⁶ This stance was not welcome when many political and religious authorities were facing increasing pressures from Muscovy in the 1560s. In the 1570s, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was on a war footing, with the power vacuum after the death of Zygmunt II. Reform itself was in danger of being wiped out too. Polish Anabaptist pacifism was no theoretical stance: the noble who adopted it might face ruin for failing to support the Commonwealth against its enemies. Penalties, including confiscation both of goods and title, would ensue. As often in the history of pacifism, accusations of cowardice, treason and heresy³⁷ were never far away. Several leading nobles, supportive of reform, attempted to persuade the radicals to fight by using the widely respected voice of Jacobus Palaeologus. In his 1572 *De bello sententiam*, he dubbed the non-violent reformers 'traitors', 'deserters' and 'cowards'. The Racovians responded: Grzegorz Pawel wrote a defence of Anabaptist pacifism. Extracts from his *Reply* (1572) capture the strength of Polish Anabaptist pacifism at this time:

Christ conquered his enemies by suffering and dying, not by taking revenge, and he taught us to conquer our enemies in the same way, thus heaping coals of fire upon their heads. We should bless them and do good to them, and not cut them to pieces with carnal weapons. Therefore, when this new Christ instructs us differently from the true Christ and his apostles, that we may now conquer our enemies by the sword, then alas – though under a new name – here is the old antichrist, who has long been teaching these same doctrines to like-minded disciples throughout the world....³⁸

Martin Czechowic produced a wide-ranging apologia for non-resistance in his *Catechism* (1575):

Pupil: Whom have the faithful Christians to kill and against whom have they to wage war?
Teacher: let it be understood that Christian warfare has nothing whatsoever in common with the military armaments of this world, which the godless employ against each other for the purpose of mutual destruction. It possesses its own armaments described in the New Testament, which is the word of God. With these weapons, Christians wage war and wield destruction while at the same time depriving no one of earthly existence. Christian warfare merely directs a warning to those being fought against of retribution to come in the life eternal.³⁹

Pacifism was not universal among these religious radicals. Marcin Krowicki, a leading Minister of the church in Piaski near Lublin, wrote shortly before his death in 1573 to one Stanislaw

Budzyński, and encouraged him in his challenging of the non-resistants of Raków. A Christian can, Krowicki argues, with good conscience hold office and punish criminals. Kings and nobles, as well as soldiers, feature often in the pages of Scripture and therefore their contemporary heirs cannot now be so easily dismissed. Krowicki also reminds Anabaptists to be grateful to God for rulers who defend them:

...we would have been squashed like lice were it not that God has shown his great grace by means of such persons (kings, lords, princes and other dignitaries). So are we to consign to perdition all those who hold office, which God himself has instituted? For God gave the sword into the hands of rulers so that he could defend the good and punish the wicked. Indeed is it not the ruler who commands but God through him...⁴⁰

This controversy continued throughout the 1570s. The dominant leader of the Racovians, Faustus Sozzini (Socinus), summarized their replies in a 370-page *Responsio* (1581).⁴¹

The doyen of Radical Reformation studies, George Hunston Williams summarizes the implications of this pacifist debate:

The controversy in Poland Lithuania over the sword was at once social, political and theological. The social issue was whether the evangelical converts among the *szlachta* should renounce the use of the sword over their serfs and become their brothers in Christ. The political issue was whether those same lords should also renounce the use of the sword in the defences of the royal republic. And the theological issue ...was whether the practice of believer's baptism, as practiced among the Polish brethren, demanded social, ethical and political radicalism....⁴²

A New Furrow?

Memories of Münster, an often unpopular anti-Catholicism, a pioneering commitment to pacifism, new baptismal practice and a rejection of traditional Trinitarian formulations by some on the extremes were not the most helpful set of conditions for the Anabaptist movement to blossom within sixteenth-century Poland -and yet it did. Poland-Lithuania, at the time of the election of its new ruler, Henry Valois, in 1573 was a model of peaceful co-operation and tolerance, with Catholics and Orthodox, Armenians and Jews, Muslims and assorted Protestants, all living generally at peace within its extensive borders:

The eastern lands of the Kingdom were largely inhabited by Orthodox, whilst at the Reformation, Lutherans, Calvinists and other Protestant sects founded important congregations. In Lwow and Wilno, Armenian and Tartar minorities established their own churches and mosques. In the united republic between 1569 and the First Partition in 1772, the Roman Catholics formed the largest single religious group, but accounted for barely half of the total population.⁴³

For a time in the sixteenth century, Poland-Lithuania was a country of genuine religious choice. These historical facts have contemporary resonances. The strength and spirituality of the Orthodox

tradition, in parts of Eastern Poland, continued that tradition of religious choice long after the initial vigour of the Counter-Reformation had faded. The Lutheran Church has likewise long remained significant in the religious life of Poland. In the twentieth century Baptist and Pentecostal growth, alongside that of other evangelical traditions, have also begun to change the religious face of Poland. A measure of choice and religious diversity has returned, restoring a tradition of tolerance several centuries old. In the Poland of the twenty-first century many of the religious choices first offered in the sixteenth century have returned. A clear majority of Poles continue to find satisfaction in the country's thousand-year-old tradition of Catholicism, but not all.

There are other contemporary implications here for church historians. Anabaptist scholarship needs to plough some new furrows, not least in this vast portion of Europe. For scholars have sometimes ignored Polish Anabaptism altogether, because of the 'antitrinitarianism' adopted by some adherents later in the sixteenth century. This does not do justice to the range of views expressed by Anabaptists in the various synods, including Pinczów. A desire for a return to the simplicity of the Apostle's Creed cannot be equated with a kind of collective Unitarianism. The debate as to whether the Anabaptists were 'neither Catholic nor Protestant' is another where an examination of Polish Anabaptism proves instructive. For, as Walter Klaasen reminds us, Catholicism '...is the soil out of which we grew and we have brought with us more from that soil than we can remember...' ⁴⁴ In Poland, of course, these words carry more weight than in most other places on earth. The attempts to grow Anabaptist communities in sixteenth-century Poland reveal a church ambivalent towards both traditional Catholic Church life and order and that of mainstream Reformed Protestantism. However strong the Catholicism, and however attractive the new Protestantism, many Christians in the then Commonwealth clearly chose to reject both religious traditions and created new ones of their own. A third way, in all its variety, was their preferred option. Contemporary Polish evangelicalism largely follows in that path.

Polish Anabaptism formed a significant part of the wider movement of evangelical Anabaptism in sixteenth-century Europe. Its heritage is a fascinating, rich and complex one. It is time for its reinstatement.

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¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation – Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004) (hereafter REHD), 192.

² For an account of these events see Stanislas Kot, *Socinianism in Poland: the social and political ideas of the Polish Antitrinitarians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957 tr. Earl Morris Wilbur from 1932 original). This is an account of a century of Polish Protestant radicalism (hereafter Kot).

³ Stanislas Lubieniecki, *History of the Polish Reformation and nine related documents* (translated and interpreted by George Hunston Williams, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) Preface x. Hereafter SL. Lubieniecki came from a family long associated with what became known as the Polish Brethren. Like many of them, he was a Unitarian who practised believer's baptism. He saw the history he was describing as 'a bridge from the wrangling of the reformation, its intolerances, mutual excommunications, and even inquisitions, across the abyss of confessional wars of the sixteenth century into the Age of Enlightenment with international Socinianism perceived as the forerunner of Deism.' (Introduction 62).

⁴ This was the name given to radical Christians, often practising adult baptism and pacifism, who broke away from mainstream Protestantism. From them, under the influence of Socinus, the Polish Brethren emerged as a group committed to Christian rationalism.

⁵ See Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: a short history of Poland* (Oxford: University Press 1984) (hereafter NDHE) for an introduction to these events. Chapter Five 'The Legacy of an Ancient Culture' 279-354.

⁶ Its story is told in Norman Davies, *God's Playground: a history of Poland Volume I: The Origins to 1795* (New York: Columbia University Press 1982) (hereafter NDGPI) Chapter Five: 'Jogaila: the Lithuanian Union (1386-1572)'.

⁷ NDHE 295.

⁸ SL 175.

⁹ Quoted by George Hunston Williams in *The Radical Reformation* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2000) (hereafter RR) 1060.

¹⁰ For a fuller account see RR 1004-6. Hunston Williams points out that in 1989 Solidarity in Poland referred back to this historic agreement in its own demands for tolerance in the then Poland. See note 18 page 1310.

¹¹ The phrase is attributed to the modern Polish historian Janusz Tazbir. REHD 358.

¹² NDGPI 200.

¹³ 'In time the name Polish Brethren came to mean all those, regardless of descent or nationality, who accepted the doctrinal and social position of the Minor Church in Poland, Lithuania and Prussia' (Kot 49).

¹⁴ REHD 341.

¹⁵ See MacCulloch for a fuller analysis of the significance of these events. REHD 340-4.

¹⁶ Also known as *The Pax Dissidentium*.

¹⁷ Quoted by George Hunston Williams in RR 1139.

¹⁸ The Society arrived in Poland in 1564.

¹⁹ The French wars of religion were sparked by a time of uncertainty about the succession after two sudden royal deaths in 1559. A Catholic faction, the Guises, and a Protestant one, the Bourbon Huguenots, had been vying for power. Their violence was fanned by the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici. The St Bartholomew's Eve massacre '...was but the largest of the series.' Norman Davies, *Europe: a history* (Oxford: University Press, 1996) 506.

²⁰ Danzig, Thorn and Elbing.

²¹ NDGPI 126.

²² RR 617-9.

²³ REHD 191.

²⁴ See Kot, 11.

²⁵ RR 612.

²⁶ RR 618.

²⁷ Kot xi-xii.

²⁸ In August 1572 aged 40. RR 1098.

²⁹ See RR 1055 for a fuller treatment of his arguments.

³⁰ Martin Czechowic, *Trzech dni rozmowa* ('Three Days' Colloquy') (1565).

³¹ For a fuller analysis of this pioneering work see RR 1058-1060.

³² Quoted in SL 231.

³³ SL 187.

³⁴ By the early seventeenth century the Racovian Academy boasted over 1000 students and the Racovian Catechism had been translated into most European languages. Some of their radical theologians, especially Fausto Sozzini, were to prove highly influential in seventeenth-century European religious life and thought.

³⁵ Kot 192-3.

³⁶ SL 170-4.

³⁷ See Kot 119 for examples of these charges.

³⁸ *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (hereafter MQR) 65:431-2.

³⁹ MQR 67:461-2.

⁴⁰ MQR 72: 444.

⁴¹ Articles in the MQR during the 1990s capture this debate well: Peter Brock, 'Gregorius Paulus against the Sword: A Polish Anabaptist on Nonresistance' MQR 65 (July 1991): 427-436; Peter Brock (tr. & ed.) 'Marcin Czechowic on the Via Crucis, self-defense, and government (1575)' MQR 67:451-468, Oct 1993; Peter Brock, 'Faustus Socinus against war: from the first chapter of the third part of his reply to Jacobus Palaeologus (1581)' MQR 70:419-430, Oct 1996; Peter Brock. (tr. & ed.) 'A Polish antitrinitarian against nonresistance: Krowicki's letter of 1573' MQR 72:441-448 July 1998.

⁴² RR 1136.

⁴³ NDGPI 166.

⁴⁴ See Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Ontario: Conrad Press, 1973).