

CHAPTER 1

Cathedrals, Churches, Caves

Notes on Architecture, History, and Worship

The layers of history, the ways the past persists, are easier to see in the Old World, where the irony of ancient towers juxtaposed against tattoo parlors and multinational fast-food outlets is inescapable. The smooth and rough children of western Europe at the millennium, in their black designer dresses or their spiked hair and pierced eyebrows, do not spend nights arguing infant baptism, the uses of the sword, or the perils and advantages of a state church, as my ancestors did during the Anabaptist Reformation of 1525. If today's citizens were to meet to study the New Testament and reach conclusions about its meaning contrary to those of the state church, the worst they would suffer is ridicule. When my wife Marlyce and I crossed ancient European borders no one asked about our passports, let alone our religion; as long as our cash and credit cards held out, we were free as any bird. So we went our quiet way across Holland and France and Switzerland and Germany, sometimes simple travelers enjoying the food and the sights, sometimes pilgrims in pursuit of the strange, small traces of our past. We call ourselves Mennonites now, but our people have claimed and been given many names in the last five centuries, as they wandered over Europe and then to many parts of the world in search of places where they might work out their particular, peculiar version of the gospel.

We were in Europe for three weeks, hardly time to discover anything. If I want to write about the place, I know I should spend months—no, years—making the daily rounds, learning the native tongues, talking to everyone who would talk to me, studying and listening and just dwelling. I should read a couple hundred books and interview countless experts and just plain folks. I know. But we took twenty-five years of married life to scrape together the money and the time to get to Europe once. So during the months we planned and prepared, it sometimes seemed as though our whole lives had been preparation; we knew our thoughts and feelings would swirl around the trip for a long time. We laid our plans—to see places in Holland, France, Germany, and Switzerland where my Mennonite ancestors and, more distantly, Marlyce’s had lived; to visit key sites of Mennonite history; to sample as much as we could of the “other” Europe, the buildings and scenery and food and drink; to meet some relatives and scholars (which we did, but those stories must wait for the last chapter in this book). We arranged for our children with relatives and camps. Finally we got onto a plane in Detroit, got off another in Hamburg, piled our bags into a little gray Renault, and headed west for Holland. Three weeks later we left the Renault in Hamburg and headed home, feeling that we had been thoroughly changed.

Modern, liberal Mennonites like us—as well as our more conservative cousins, Amish and Hutterites—trace our origins to the Swiss reformers of the early sixteenth century. Distressed that Ulrich Zwingli’s reforms in Zurich had stopped short of what they believed the New Testament required of true Christians, one small band of rebellious believers gathered in 1525 in an upstairs room a few blocks from Zwingli’s grand church. Convinced that their careful reading of the New Testament provided no grounds for a state church or for infant baptism, they rebaptized each other as adults. Very quickly their zealous preaching of separation of church and state, nonviolence, and adult baptism came to be seen by both Catholics and less radical reformers as a threat to fundamental social structures. Almost immediately the reformers began to be challenged, arrested, expelled, and executed.

Despite persecution the movement spread widely, especially in what are now Germany and the Netherlands. In the nearly five centuries since, those who trace their roots back to the first

Anabaptists have spread, split, fallen away, reformed, regrouped.¹ Today roughly a million members of the largest denominations—Mennonites and Amish—are scattered around the globe, the majority of them in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For most, the time of persecution is long past, but the stories of martyrdom remain, and distrust of “the world” is still deeply engrained in the Anabaptist character.

For us, then, Europe would be a return to origins that are essentially, strongly ambiguous. Switzerland, Germany, and Holland are both the ancient homelands and the places where our people faced the stake and the thumbscrew. One of our tour books led us to quaint villages, picturesque bed-and-breakfasts, wine tours, giant cathedrals; the other, written by a Mennonite historian, covered the same territory but pointed out scenes of martyrdom and covert gathering places. With both books and at least one road map on my lap I offered Marlyce a stream of directions, information, and commentary as she drove, only occasionally confusing her to the point of open rebellion.

Quickly we noticed how the old churches and cathedrals still dominate the skylines of Europe, even in the bigger cities. In the flat countryside of northern Germany and the Netherlands almost the only relief was cathedrals and windmills. Every village had a church in the center of town, often still the tallest building. Every town’s and city’s cathedral, according to the guidebooks and the tourist information centers, was the first thing to see.

And so we saw cathedrals. We saw the village church of Hinderloopen with its tower that leans in, then out again, keeping a precarious poise. We saw the Grote Kerk of St. Bevo in Haarlem with its red and gold Wizard of Oz organ. We saw the eighty-five-meter tower of the Westerkerk of Amsterdam, Rembrandt’s dust somewhere below its stones. In Paris we saw Notre Dame the enormous and Sainte Chappelle the sublime; in Zurich we saw the Grossmünster and the Wasserkerche, almost in each other’s shadow. We saw the single-spired cathedral of Strasbourg and its famous astronomical clock, the Romanesque St. Peter’s Church of Salzburg, and the baroque Salzburger Cathedral where Mozart was baptized in 1756. We saw the cathedrals of Colmar and Freiburg and Sarrebourg; in Triere we walked through the Black Gate the Romans built, and we tried to find the spot where Saint Simeon



Figure 1.1. St. Lamberti Church, Münster, Germany. Note the cages above the clock.

had himself bricked right into a niche in the chapel wall to spend his last seven years in claustrophobic contemplation.

On our last day in Germany we entered the massive Münster Cathedral and walked the cobbled square where Jan van Leyden,

fervent Anabaptist and unlikely military strategist, held court in the wild, weird years of 1534–35, when the men he led held the city against the forces of Bishop Franz of Waldeck. We saw the St. Lamberti Church two blocks away, where the bodies of van Leyden and two others were hung in iron cages after the city fell. We saw the cages still hanging from the high tower. We walked freely through the streets below and told no one who we were. No one asked our opinion on believers' baptism or the sword or the separation of church and state, not even the panhandler at the door of the church. I put a few pfennigs in his cup as we walked past. The booklet we bought inside told of the terrible reign of the Anabaptists, of the damaged icons, of cruel tortures. It noted that the cages still hang there, without exactly saying why. We asked each other why. We asked no one in the city.

We saw less imposing structures as well. In Friesland, in northern Holland, we found the tiny village of Witmarsum and—down a narrow lane, so that we almost missed it—a modest memorial to Menno Simons. Born in Witmarsum, Simons was a Catholic



Figure 1.2. Interior of Hidden Church, Pingjum, Netherlands. Menno Simons, born in nearby Witmarsum in 1496, was a parish priest both there and in Pingjum before becoming a leader of the Anabaptist movement.

priest in neighboring Pingjum until 1535, when his study of the Bible and the shocks of Reformation violence made him turn in his robe and become a leader of the Anabaptist reformers. Some would soon be called Mennists or Mennonites, but in Holland they still refer to themselves as *Doopsgezinde*, “baptism minded.” Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were persecuted, sometimes fiercely, and were allowed in the best of times only the most inconspicuous worship houses. In Pingjum an old “hidden church” still stands, a small red brick building with just a little sign on the front to name it. Behind the living quarters—now home to a caretaker who told us, “Only two Mennonites left in Pingjum, and I’m not one of them”—is a small, plain meeting room with thirty or forty wooden chairs and gray-painted benches around all four sides. Haarlem and Amsterdam also have their hidden churches, larger and still in use; the Singelkerk of Amsterdam shares its block with a twin-spired cathedral and is a short walk from the Dam square, where in 1535 the city *burgemeester* (mayor) and several revolutionary Anabaptists were killed in a skirmish.

The evening we arrived in Zurich by train it was already seven o’clock; we were tired and hungry, but determined to see the place where, perhaps more than any other, the Anabaptist movement began. No one knows exactly which upstairs room on the Neustadtgasse Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, and George Blaurock gathered in, with eleven others, to perform the first adult rebaptisms on January 21, 1525. We do know that Manz, the illegitimate son of a priest, lived there with his mother under the protection of his father, who was canon of the Grossmünster church just before Ulrich Zwingli.

A block from the spot on the River Limmat where Manz was put to death by drowning on January 5, 1527—the first Anabaptist martyr—we got a sandwich and a salad at an overpriced, pretentious yuppie café. Today the Neustadtgasse and the streets around it are lined with restaurants, bars, sex shops, and tattoo parlors, and on pleasant summer evenings the area teems with young people. It’s lively, polyglot, only a little tacky. One end of the Wasserkirche was given over to an exhibition of conceptual art. At the other, the famous Zwingli statue—he holds a Bible in one hand, a sword in the other—was boxed in completely with sheets of white plywood. A clatch of scruffy youths huddled on the steps, beating guitars



Figure 1.3. River Limmat Zurich, Switzerland near where Felix Manz was drowned in 1527. The current Rathaus (city hall) is on the right.

and hanging out, while six police officers stood by, watching and muttering gravely to each other. Not sure what we were missing, exhausted from a long day's touring, we caught the train back to our hotel.

The next morning we left Zurich and drove north and east, through a series of smaller and smaller towns and villages. Hinwil, Ringwil, Bäretswil, Wappenswil—then a tiny sign marked “Täuferhöhle” (Cave of the Anabaptists). We parked and followed a steep path up through a horse pasture, across two tiny streams. At last we found a set of logs laid in to form rough steps. Above them, with a spray of water coming down across its entrance, was the cave where Anabaptists of the villages around met to sing and pray during the years when they were forbidden to gather or to marry or to spread their peculiar version of the Gospel, when they were thrown in jail, sold as galley slaves, drowned in rivers, burned in public squares. In 1641, a little over a century after Manz, Grebel, and Blaurock first met, the last of these Anabaptists fled for the Palatinate and Holland. The low-ceilinged cave remains—it might fit a hundred crowded tight. Its muddy floor had been strewn with straw, and char and ashes from a recent campfire lay in a corner.

The day was wet. We sat for a bit on the bench at the entrance and looked out through the veil of water. There was a



Figure 1.4. Täuferhöhle (Cave of the Anabaptists) near Wappenswil, Switzerland.

clear view down into the valley, but I found myself thinking that if pursuers came, there would be nowhere higher or more remote to go. This little green valley, this cave with its rough bench and muddy straw, seemed far off in space and time from bustly, up-to-the-moment Zurich—but we were less than two hours away. Four hundred years ago the journey would have been longer, but not long enough to keep anyone safe from determined authorities. You have to be in the world—where else? The path to your secret retreat has to run through somebody's pasture, cross someone's creek. The geography of Europe, and increasingly of the whole crowded world, allows for only so much distance between the great cathedrals and the most obscure caves.



Cathedrals and churches and caves. Places of power taken or claimed, places of gathering. Some people make a great cathedral in which to worship, while others find a hidden church, and others a cave. The impulse toward worship persists, as does the urge to contend about what sort is proper and fitting.

I didn't think to touch the water that sprays down over the Täuferhöhle, and I wish I had—although by now, if the science tidbit I once heard is true, there's a molecule of both Felix Manz and Ulrich Zwingli in every glass of water we drink.

A variety of expressions of Anabaptism developed during the sixteenth century, some determinedly nonviolent and others not.² Thomas Müntzer was in a sense a forerunner, but his version of mystical, populist, apocalyptic anticlericalism provoked intense resistance from both the Catholic church and Luther and his followers, culminating in the Peasants' War of 1524–26, a widespread and bloody conflict that left as many as one hundred thousand dead. Not long after came the rise of the revolutionary Münsterite Anabaptists in Holland. Under the leadership of Bernhard Rothman and, later, Jan Matthijs, the city of Münster came into the hands of a group of fervent Anabaptists. Traveling evangelists throughout Holland and northern Germany proclaimed that the city was to be the New Jerusalem, and that with the return of Christ imminent all means were permitted to the faithful. Thousands of Anabaptists fled from their persecutors in Amsterdam, Haarlem, and other Dutch cities; many were captured and sent home, imprisoned, or killed, but many succeeded in reaching Münster.

The city was soon put under siege, and Matthijs was captured and killed when he went outside the walls alone, hoping to disperse the encamped army through the sheer power of faith. The still more radical Jan van Leyden came into power. He proclaimed himself the new King David, instituted polygamy—partly because many of the men had been killed—took sixteen wives himself, and held court from a throne on the central *Domplatz*. An untrained but effective tactician, van Leyden held off Bishop Waldeck's army for over a year, but the blockade made conditions in the city more and more desperate, and a disgruntled believer eventually revealed a secret entrance to the bishop's forces. In June 1535 the last several hundred defenders of the city, hungry, sick, and dispirited, were overwhelmed and slaughtered. Van Leyden and two other leaders were kept alive, displayed and tortured publicly for several months before finally being put to death in early 1536 and then placed in those cages hung from the tower of the St. Lamberti church, just above the massive clock.³

Never again has a significant group of Anabaptists sought to gain or hold power through military force. But the Münster incident reverberated for decades, even centuries. It blackened the image of Anabaptism even as it strengthened the resolve of the nonviolent wing of the movement. The Münster movement was at its height in 1535 when the village priest of Witmarsum, Menno Simons, was studying his Bible and beginning to question the Catholic dogma on transubstantiation. A few miles away, a group of Münsterites briefly captured the Oldeklooster monastery, and Menno's brother Pieter Simons died in the battle when provincial forces retook the monastery. This minor event had lasting consequences for Anabaptists; soon after, Menno wrote an influential booklet against the Münsterites, arguing that true Christians must renounce violence whatever the cost. Among his most famous words are these: "Since we are to be conformed to the image of Christ, how can we then fight our enemies with the sword? . . . Spears and swords of iron we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value."⁴

The religious and civil authorities of the day rarely shared Menno's rejection of the sword. About four thousand Anabaptists were sent to their deaths, mainly in Switzerland, Holland, Germany, eastern France, and Austria. Thousands more recanted, hid themselves, or managed to negotiate some degree of tolerance from the local authorities, often accompanied by harsh restrictions. The fates of those killed, along with stories of other Christian martyrs, are recorded in the most famous Anabaptist text, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year A. D. 1660*. Commonly known as the *Martyrs Mirror*, the book was published in 1660 in Dutch by Thielman J. von Bracht and continues to be translated, reissued, and read by contemporary Amish and Mennonites.

The *Martyrs Mirror* is an odd text to find at the heart of a sect. Its heroes, almost without exception, are respectful of the authorities but insist that nonconformity and nonresistance are the true way of Jesus, and that their tormentors—earnest Christians though they may be—are deeply mistaken. Their arguments, testimonies, sufferings, and deaths are given in extensive and often

gruesome detail. The combination of zeal and humility, along with the intensity of human drama, create a haunting, disturbing, elusive effect that contemporary Mennonites still struggle to explain or come to terms with. One of the best-known stories concerns Dirk Willems, who was imprisoned in Asperen, Holland, in 1569. In midwinter he escaped in the classic manner—knotting rags to make a rope, descending from a window, and fleeing across an ice-covered pond. When a pursuer, not thinned by prison rations, fell through the ice, Willems turned back to rescue his enemy. He was recaptured and returned to his cell; when he refused to recant his beliefs, despite his good deed he was burned at the stake. Anabaptists have been trying to puzzle out the practical implications of *that* example ever since.

In my own childhood I learned martyr stories in my turn, though I also turned to science fiction, sports, and TV shows for less austere edification and entertainment. Many years later I tried to capture one of those early moments in a poem, which offers its own take on the Dirk Willems story:

Ancient Themes: The Martyrs & the Child

this is really pretty cool isnt it
 leaving it all out but the letters wow
 it'll confuse my mom & piss off my teachers
 so bad i always wanted to be bad or at least
 i thought i was bad anyway i cant forget
 those sunday school teachers
 bernice for example my moms 1st cousin
 there we all were in the church basement
 i was 10 years old maybe & shes asking
 if we are ready to die like the martyrs
 get our tongues screwed & fingers splintered
 get burned up like firewood to heat
 the hearts of those left behind well
 thats some question when youre 10
 in the middle of america in 1962
 already scared of dying aglow
 with radiation never mind with zeal
 for the lord so there i sat gulping

& stalling with only those flimsy
 beige curtains between our class
 & the others with only a floor & a ceiling
 & several miles of sky between me
 & god leaning down to listen
 & then my cousin connie who later went
 wild & beautiful said she would do it
 she would die for jesus yes she would
 & bernice seemed pleased & forgot to ask
 the rest of us & so i blundered on
 into the rest of my life sweating out
 the nuke tests & the bullies & the wondrous
 heedless girls treading the tender grass
 of my stupid young heart & i was surely
 not so much worse for being forced
 into uneasy contemplation of the fiery
 heroes of old of the godless commies
 & whether indeed i was ready to go up
 in pain & splendor for jesus for believers
 baptism for dirk willems turning back
 half crazed with love for his pursuer
 half full of pious shit surely clear
 full of some weird lust to leave
 this world & head out on the ice not
 the canal not the lake no the true crazy
 buckling thin ocean of ice jesus laid down
 behind on his way out of town follow me
 follow me well are you coming or not⁵
 —for di

If the martyr-heroes are hardly conventional, consider that the villains include, at least by extension, most of the rest of the world—especially those Christian authorities, Catholic and Protestant, who sent their victims to the stake or the river. If you grew up with such tales shaping your view of the world and of human society, as I did, you might also find it hard to be easy in the world even when your own persecutions were limited to an occasional trivial remark. You might find it difficult to be entirely comfortable with the Catholics or Lutherans or agnostics who outnumber

bered you everywhere, even while you worked and played and studied with them. You might find yourself wondering who was really on your side, even as you were going about most of your days with very little to distinguish you from every other ordinary American. You might always carry a faint sense of reserve, a suspicion of “the world,” a thread of conviction that you were somehow not *supposed* to belong.



Europe brought back some of these thoughts, while it also jarred some of my stereotypes. In particular, I found myself constantly brooding over the age-old Anabaptist contention about “the world.” Since the very beginning, the Mennonites and Amish who emerged from the early Anabaptists have talked about separation from the evils and dangers of the world, about being “in the world but not of it,” about living as “the quiet in the land.” The sense of a radical dualism between a small remnant of true Christians and everything else goes all the way back to the fourth article of the Schleithem Confession, a formative document adapted by a conference of Swiss Brethren in 1527:

Everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from. By this is meant all Catholic and Protestant works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the oaths sworn in unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God, in accordance with all the unrighteousness which is in the world.⁶

These sharp divisions indicate not only the zeal of the reformers and the frustrations of their largely unsuccessful struggle to remake their society, but also their effort to rethink in truly radical ways what it might mean to follow Jesus. Yet to preach radical separation has always been easier than to practice it, and from the very first the complications demanded attention. Mennonite scholar Gerald Biesecker-Mast has recently argued that even the Schleithem Confession, despite its radical dualisms, also recognizes that “separation was no simple matter, that it included ambiguity and

instability.⁷⁷ Even the most fiery of the reformers struggled to imagine how they might maintain absolute separation or purity in the real world. While the Schleithem text held that true Christians must follow the example of Christ and refuse to participate in violence of any kind, it also allows that “[t]he sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ,” and that the violence of the state “guards and protects the good.”⁷⁸ Does this mean that those who serve the state can also be Christians, but of some different, perhaps lesser sort? If so, then on what grounds can absolute nonviolence be maintained within the church?

Time brought more ambiguities and difficult decisions. Under the pressures of persecution, many Anabaptists found their way to areas where they were tolerated—sometimes grudgingly—for their farming skills. Many moved north along the Rhine from Switzerland to the fertile farmlands of Alsace, Lorraine, and the Palatinate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some local authorities, especially eager to rebuild after the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), welcomed them for their expertise and general tractability. As tenants and neighbors, the Anabaptists inevitably interacted with landlords and others around them. Furthermore, their beliefs allowed, even required, that when their core teachings were not threatened they should cooperate with authorities. But by the end of the century, these relatively prosperous and secure farmers began to think their church discipline had grown lax and weak.

Meanwhile, the Anabaptists who stayed in Switzerland lived mainly in hiding or under severe restrictions. Often they were not permitted to build churches or to proselytize, and children were considered illegitimate if the parents had not married in the state church. In the western Jura region, the Anabaptists (who were known as *Täufer* or Swiss Brethren) were restricted to the highest mountain valleys, where the soil was poor and growing conditions difficult. Often they survived only with the aid of fellow villagers who ignored or defied authorities to help the *Täufer* get along. People who remained members of the state church but were sympathetic to Anabaptism became known to the Swiss Brethren as *Halbtäufer* or “Truehearted” ones, and they posed a particular challenge to the rigid dualism of Schleithem. Might such people also be true Christians? Could they even be saved? They seemed

to show all the fruits of the spirit—but if they could be saved outside of the strict traditional discipline, why need anyone keep to that discipline?

Many Swiss Brethren, as they lived alongside their “True-hearted” neighbors, found it harder and harder to place such friends on the other side of the harsh Schleithem divide between the True Church and the Realm of the Abominations. Anabaptists living in Alsace, under less pressure from authorities and with looser connections to their neighbors, came to believe that the Swiss were backsliding from the true doctrines. The crisis began in the early 1690s when a group of Alsatian ministers led by Jacob Ammann came to meet with the Swiss. Ammann and his followers were dissatisfied with the Swiss position on the Truehearted, and on other matters as well. In particular, they believed in shunning those who had broken church discipline and remained unrepentant. The practice of shunning, also known as the “ban,” included not eating with those shunned, as well as not allowing them to take communion. The ban had been present in Anabaptist doctrine and practice from the start, but in Switzerland it had not been strictly enforced, and at most had meant only removal from communion.

In his call for strict application of the ban Jacob Ammann followed the lead of the Dutch Menno Simons, whose 1575 *Foundation Book* included an appendix in favor of more rigorous shunning. Under Simons’ rules, a shunned man was not to eat at the same table with his family or any other church member. At the 1693 meeting, displeased with the answers of the Swiss brethren to his questions about church discipline, Ammann announced that he had banned and shunned “most of the Palatinate ministers along with a large group of other people whom he had apparently not met.”⁹ It was not clear that he had the power to do so; he had considerable support but no official authority over those he had banned. The reaction was intense. Hans Reist, the leading Swiss pastor, refused even to meet with Ammann and the others, insisting that they had no authority over him. In return, Ammann charged Reist with “spiritual arrogance” and objected that he “continues to comfort the Truehearted people who still stand outside the faith and the Christian discipline and who are not united with us in baptism and communion. . . . Because of all this, Hans Reist was excommunicated from the Christian church and godly

fellowship as an apostate, heretic, and rabble-rouser because he strays [sic] from the true path and the heavenly hosts. . . .”¹⁰

Real issues were at stake, but clearly personalities also mattered. In the early stages of the contention each side accused the other of arrogance. Ammann and his followers asked, is it not arrogant to soften the discipline of the church merely for convenience? Menno Simons and Jacob Ammann would have agreed that the ban and shunning of unrepentant sinners are not instruments of harsh human control, but rather are necessary disciplines undertaken out of love for the sinner and earnest desire for repentance and renewal. What can be worse than to refuse to recognize the plain word of God? Ammann points to the verses and asks how they can possibly be misunderstood.

On the opposing side, one leader called Ammann “a ranter,” while another demanded that he “leave those in peace who share with us the same understanding” and “consider how you can remove the large beam from your eyes” rather than looking for the splinter in the other’s.¹¹ A group of five wrote of the Ammann faction, “[T]hey have tied themselves together with a strict and merciless bond against all Christian virtues and qualities and, sadly—let it be lamented to our own dear God in heaven—they have also fulfilled in our own day what the holy apostle Paul denounced and prophesied, namely, that after his departure fierce wolves will come who will not spare the flock.”¹²

Eventually both groups came to regret the harsh words; by 1700 Ammann and a group of other ministers took the extreme if not bizarre step of excommunicating *themselves* “for the sake of [their] errors” and in hopes that the gesture would ease the tensions.¹³ The deed was done, however, and the separation begun. The followers of Amman, who soon became known as Amish, have remained quite distinct from the Mennonites for the last three centuries. Yet the divisions were only beginning; today both Amish and Mennonites contain many subgroups, and movement from one to another has continued. More than half of today’s American Mennonites have some Amish ancestors, and in areas such as my Illinois home ground the older Mennonite congregations nearly all began as Amish settlements. A majority of current North American Mennonites are at least externally assimilated into the general culture,

but the Amish have maintained the traditional dress and limited use of technology and education that continue to make them the object of bemused attention, steadily increasing tourism, and occasional flurries of largely unwelcome media scrutiny.

Volumes would be needed to detail the welter of splits, schisms, and regroupings that Amish and Mennonites have endured, over issues ranging from proper dress—are buttons too worldly?—to the appropriate tires and colors for buggies, to revivalism, Sunday school, and feminism. Those outside these tiny circles might wonder at leaders of any faction within such a small group claiming the confident, even complete knowledge of the True Way that keeps recurring among those calling the sinful to repentance. How can any group so small claim to have gathered up all goodness within themselves? If the great God truly intended that all but some select handful of his children should be given over to the powers of darkness, surely the ways of God are wondrous indeed. Some Anabaptists are more insistent upon this point than others, but most share the traditional Christian claim to exclusive truth. In cynical moments I amuse myself by inventing mock titles for those three-century-old letters of the Amish disputation—things like “That the Truehearted Shall Despite Their Good Works Be Condemned to the Flames with the Rest of the Godless World.”

And so, like many of my people, I find myself conflicted about my tradition—drawn to the hidden churches and the quiet circles that meet outside the great halls of the majority, loving the old stories of sacrifice and fidelity, yet baffled and depressed by the hard, stubborn will to power that seems so often to triumph over love and generosity among us. Three hundred years later the particulars have changed, but Mennonites are still hurling accusations of apostasy and arrogance at each other. The two largest Mennonite groups, having agreed nearly a decade ago to merge, have seen the process thrown into disarray by a bitter debate over whether practicing homosexuals can be admitted as members. Congregations and church leaders with liberal views have been disciplined, while groups of conservative churches have threatened to leave if discipline is not enforced even more strictly. Meanwhile, the Amish continue to grow in numbers and to keep most of their many

young people in the fold, although they also have struggled to contend with modern society and with the impact of tourism, cell phones, and cocaine on their communities.

Underlying nearly every one of these issues, I think, is the problem of “the world,” and of the relationship between that world and a body of believers which is expected to be somehow both *in* and not *of* it. Where do I belong, if at all, in such a tradition? It is mine by blood—one direct ancestor, Hans Guth, sided with Jacob Ammann in 1693, while his brother Jacob Guth wrote some of the most temperate letters on the other side. Through three grandparents I can trace my family lines far back, through Mennonite to Amish, from Illinois and Ohio to Alsace or the Palatinate or Hesse, and from there to Switzerland. For the past three generations my ancestors have been marrying across the lines of the two main Mennonite groups mentioned above, and I have spent nearly all of my adult life first attending and then working for Mennonite colleges.

In the postmodern world such a pedigree by itself is neither necessary nor sufficient to keep me, even uneasily, within the faith of my fathers and mothers. No tenet of Anabaptism is more basic than its voluntarism—even the most uncompromising church leaders have always maintained that this church was only for those who earnestly desired to join it. Many do leave the Mennonite church—some for more liberal churches or for the broad buzzing world that is America today, where religion can easily become just another lifestyle choice, and some for more charismatic or evangelical churches. During most of my twenties I would have said, if anyone asked, that I was an ethnic Mennonite but not much of a believer. Yet in my late forties I find myself still in the midst of the church, for reasons I have difficulty explaining to myself, let alone to anyone else.

Anabaptists have been coming to the New World for centuries; some were among the first white settlers of Pennsylvania and Virginia. My own people stayed longer in Europe, most coming in the mid-nineteenth century—a heritage still regarded as suspect by some of the descendants of the first settlers. Nonetheless, Europe has been only a hazy montage of mountains, martyrs, and hymns to me and to most other American Mennonites, one

filled with strong but murky emotional overtones. The myths and stories are powerful, but inevitably they are incomplete.

Throughout my life I have felt drawn, irregularly but repeatedly, to learn the stories of the martyrs, of the prisons and thumb-screws and fires, the Amish Division and Münster and all the rest. But nothing I had learned quite prepared me for the austere clarity of the hidden churches, or the damp earth and rock of the Täuferhöhle, or the beautiful and still flourishing estates in the Palatinate from which my Stalter ancestors left for America. When I saw Monbijou and Kirschbacherhof, resplendent in the sunshine, I wondered why anyone would have left such places. When I looked south from the village of Gunten over gorgeous Lake Thun and the Alps rising into the afternoon haze on the other side, I tried to imagine how that distant von Gunten from whom my name comes had felt as he turned his back on the village and headed north.

Likewise, nothing I had learned prepared me at all to step from a narrow staircase into the upper chapel of Sainte Chapelle, with Vivaldi reverberating off the stones and glass and with the sudden blaze of what seemed to be a whole sky lined with brilliant, multicolored, vibrant light, as though the stars had suddenly gone Technicolor. *So this is the world*, I found myself thinking as I groped my way to a chair: this place of grandeur and delight, where men had labored with enormous craft and care to put into shape and light the stories of the whole, holy, fallen world, all the way from creation to apocalypse. This is the world, where such resources and knowledge can be gathered and directed into something that will echo for centuries without diminishing, that is still as tangible and spectacular as on the day the last scaffold was removed.

And here I was, come not even to worship but only to look, driven less by piety than by my hunger for beauty—a hunger that knew well the difference between a small, functional back room painted gray and this spectacularly transformed space, one as dense with beauty and meaning as any human creation I had ever encountered. My people fled as far and as fast as they could from the grandeur of the great cathedrals, convinced that their beauty was inseparable from their corruption. Now I moved among them and marveled.



The Grote of St. Bevo Kerk is still the center of Haarlem, still the biggest and grandest building, impossible to ignore from anywhere on the cobbled square that surrounds it. No doubt it is no longer the spiritual center of the city; the public entrance is around one side, not entirely obvious, and the tourists pay much more attention to it than the locals. Yet the interior is well maintained, the stained glass impressive, the whole space monumentally vast to me in its conspicuous grandiosity. I spent the Sunday mornings (and many Sunday and Wednesday evenings) of my youth in the Waldo Mennonite Church, a plain white building four miles from town, where painting a restrained row of four-inch crosses waist-high along the inner walls was regarded as a risky innovation. The congregation, begun in the mid-nineteenth century by Amish immigrants from Alsace, was known as the Gridley Prairie Amish congregation until early in the 1900s; along with other relatively liberal Amish who settled nearby on the Illinois prairie, those at Waldo gradually gave up Amish restrictions on dress and technology and came to call themselves Amish-Mennonites and then just Mennonites. I remember discussions and votes in my childhood on further accommodations, including the installation of an electric organ with speakers hidden in the ceiling, so that the reedy tones seemed truly to descend from on high.

Tuesday evenings the Grote Kerk features a free concert on the massive, gilt-encrusted organ that fills one whole end, as gaudy and grand an instrument as any in Europe. Mozart is supposed to have played it, and it still sounds imposing, though the concert selections were a bit modern and atonal for our tastes. Afterward I read the notes outside: the church was begun in 1390, the main section completed in 1475. No ending date is listed, and later I read that there are no “finished” Gothic cathedrals: “Completion can take place only in the imagination of the observer.”¹⁴

We stayed the night in a small third-floor room overlooking the square and the Grote Kerk. I wanted to photograph it from there, but only a fraction of the tower would fit in the frame, so I settled for a few shots of the square and its rows of cafés and shops. Pausing outside one bar that evening, we were advised by a distraught young woman not to go inside. “Bad things happen in