

Radicality in Mennonite Theology: Recent Contributions of Hans-Jürgen Goertz

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Hans-Jürgen Goertz, the subject of the following interview, is well known to Anabaptist and Reformation historians, although his name is less recognized in the Mennonite theological arena. Now retired from a career as a social historian and professor, with the appearance of two recent theological books he has once again devoted himself to theology, his first love. Goertz began his studies in theology alongside English and philosophy at the University of Hamburg, and then transferred to Göttingen, where he completed his Th.D. in 1964, during roughly the same years when John Howard Yoder was studying in Basel. From 1963 to 1969 Goertz worked as a pastor in the Mennonite congregation in Hamburg-Altona, after which he began an academic fellowship at the ecumenical institute of the University of Heidelberg. During this period he worked intensively on the issue of modern pneumatology and published a study on the theocentrism of the Lutheran theologian Erich Schaefer.¹ He turned to social history in 1974, when he accepted a position at the Institute for Social and Economic History at the University of Hamburg, where he later became a full professor and remained until retirement in 2002. Among other honors, he has given invited guest lectures at the most distinguished universities in both the German-speaking world and the English-speaking world (Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge among the latter).

Since 1970 Goertz has served as editor of the *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter*, the annual scholarly journal of Anabaptist history and Mennonite studies in Germany, and has been the chief editor of the online revision and expansion of the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* (www.mennlex.de). Although his professional commitments have centered on the university sphere in recent decades, his experience as a pastor and his concern for the self-awareness of the Mennonite tradition has kept him engaged in both student-

¹ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Geist und Wirklichkeit: Eine Studie zur Pneumatologie Erich Schaefers* (Göttingen: 1980).

centered and congregationally-oriented events. In this way his expertise as a Mennonite scholar, of which there are few in Europe, continues to be called upon as a resource for Mennonite self-understanding.

Goertz has published some twenty monographs, with only a few available in English, most notably his overview of Anabaptist history and *Profiles of Radical Reformers*.² He is also renowned for his theoretical studies in history.³ He was a pioneer in the field of radical Reformation studies, particularly in his emphasis on the social character of radical reform, which requires analysis beyond theological treatises. His most famous and debated contribution was the determinative concept of “anticlericalism,” which he sees as the Reformation era’s root impulse toward radical reform.⁴

In 1975 Goertz edited a volume of studies primarily from a new generation of Anabaptist scholars,⁵ setting the course for a more critical reading of Anabaptist history by encouraging academics to engage the social history of radicality in the early Reformation.⁶ In doing so, he played a major part in inciting the social-history orientation of “polygenesis” revisionism. He has also edited numerous volumes and published more than 70 scholarly articles. A full bibliography is available online.⁷

Goertz’s dissertation on inner and outer “order” (*Ordnung*) in the theology of Thomas Müntzer⁸ initiated his leading role in the field of Reformation radicalism. He has remained a leading scholar on Müntzer. His

² Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Profiles of Radical Reformers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982).

³ Among others, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte: Zur Theorie historischer Referentialität* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Verlag, 2001).

⁴ In addition to *The Anabaptists*, Goertz presents this thesis in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Antiklerikalismus und Reformation: Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1995), and in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “What a tangled and tenuous mess the clergy is!': Clerical Anticlericalism in the Reformation Period,” *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 499-519.

⁵ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Umstrittenes Täufertum 1525-1975: Neue Forschungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975).

⁶ For Goertz’s definition of radicality, see the review of *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute* in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 386-388.

⁷ www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=zum-herausgeber, accessed January 20, 2015.

⁸ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Innere und äußere Ordnung in der Theologie Thomas Müntzers*, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 2, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

recent collection of German essays, *Radikalität der Reformation* (2007),⁹ spans topics ranging from Anabaptist hermeneutics and apocalypticism to social and political revolution and religious nonconformity.

After retiring as a social historian and professor, Goertz returned to contemporary theology as the main focus of his reflection and publications. His reflections in *Bruchstücke* [Fragments]¹⁰ and his book on Yoder's theology¹¹ aim to engage a broad German Protestant readership, yet their content and the potential impact of his arguments and proposals should be of particular interest to Mennonites elsewhere. His theological writings would appeal to those with an affinity either to Gordon Kaufman, whose approach has clearly spurred Goertz's thinking, or to A. James Reimer, who also appears as a congenial dialogue partner for Goertz, especially as a critic of the theological basis for Yoderian ethics.

Most recently Goertz has published an updated edition of his biography of Thomas Müntzer, an important contribution to the current commemoration of the Reformation in Germany.¹² Radicality is a theme that unites the breadth of Goertz's theological interests and career-long contributions to Reformation studies broadly speaking. His latest work on Mennonite theology, from someone who presents a self-critical perspective as a Mennonite, encourages both Mennonites and mainstream Christian traditions to take social and theological radicality seriously.

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⁹ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Radikalität der Reformation: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 93, ed. Thomas Kaufmann and Volker Henning Drecoll (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

¹⁰ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Bruchstücke radikaler Theologie heute: Eine Rechenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). See book review in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (2015): 386-88.

¹¹ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *John Howard Yoder—Radikaler Pazifismus im Gespräch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). See book review in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 384-86.

¹² Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionär am Ende der Zeiten. Eine Biographie* (Munich: Beck, 2015).