Unlearning Obedience: The Ecclesiopolitical Critique of the "Sword" in the Schleitheim Articles

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Abstract

This article offers a speculative reading of the Schleitheim Articles' argument on the "sword" in its sixth article. It argues that Schleitheim's argument is more concerned with the political logic of the church than with ethical rules individual Christians are to obey. The "sword" does not refer to violence in general but specifically to a particular logic of political domination. Seemingly anticipating modern discussions, this logic functions by making a distinction between lives: the "wicked" and the "good," those that are protected and those lives given up to death. Although such authority can be legitimate, Schleitheim argues the church should strive to build communities that break with that logic, in emulation of Christ's non-sovereign character. In the church, the theopolitical image of God as one who "ordains" is to be unlearned. The relationship between the two incompatible orders of sword and church remains underdetermined, giving rise to a wide spectrum of possible interactions and interminable negotiation.

Introduction[1]

In 1527, a number of Anabaptists gathered under the leadership of Michael Sattler in the Swiss town of Schleitheim to affirm a set of principles. Their declaration, known as the Schleitheim Articles, is sometimes referred to as a "confession," but it is hardly interested in the content of belief, nor in the details of ethical behavior. For Schleitheim, the decisive questions are what

1 I am grateful to Benjamin Isaak-Krauss for his comments on an earlier version of this article; my gratitude likewise goes out to the two anonymous peer reviewers for *CGR* for their constructive comments.

we might call ecclesiopolitical: it is concerned with the practices that institute, shape, and discipline the church as a collective. Its seven articles thus regulate constitutive collective practices such as baptism and excommunication, but also the election of leaders and the gathering for communion. It is of striking formality: Prospective members must be "taught" before they can be baptized, but nothing is said of *what* they must be taught; sinners may be banned, but nothing is said about what constitutes sinful behavior. Its longest article deals with what it calls the "sword," establishing an enigmatic axiom: The sword is "ordained of God outside of the perfection of Christ."[2]

In this article, I offer a reading of Schleitheim's argument in its sixth article. I will argue that its significance is more *ecclesiopolitical* than *ethical*, by which I mean it is more concerned with the kind of political logic by which the church should be organized than with establishing rules individual Christians are to obey. This may seem counterintuitive, as Schleitheim is often related precisely to an ethic of obedience, following Christ's command to "resist not an evildoer," and thus considered exemplary for Anabaptist theological ethics centered on such obedience to God's authority.[3] Yet these words are entirely absent from Schleitheim's sixth article. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely authority and obedience that are rejected as categories for the way God relates to the church.

On closer reading, it quickly becomes clear that the "sword" Schleitheim here rejects does not refer to violence in general, but specifically to a particular logic of political domination with which the fellowship of the church is called upon to break. The "sword" is a kind of political order or legal authority that—seemingly anticipating modern discussions of sovereignty—makes a distinction between lives: the "wicked" and the "good," those that are to be protected and those lives given up to death. Although such authority can be legitimate, the church should strive to build communities that operate according to a different logic, shaping communities we might call "non-sovereign," in emulation of Christ's non-sovereign character.

2 All citations from Schleitheim are from John C. Wenger, "The Schleitheim Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 no. 4 (1945): 243–53. Article VI is found on pp. 250-51. For purposes of readability, I will not reference each individual citation from Article VI.

3 See J.R. Burkholder, "Historic Nonresistance," in *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types,* ed. J.R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Elkhart, IN: AMBS/IMS, 2024), 11-18.

Read in this way, Schleitheim seems to envision the church as a place of collaborative becoming-with where the theopolitical image of God as one who "ordains" can be unlearned. On its surface, Schleitheim insists that Christians should withdraw from sovereign structures as much as possible, but on closer reading, the text also suggests that the relationship between the non-sovereign community and its political others is more complex than might initially be assumed, marked by incompatibility more than simple withdrawal or antagonism. Thus, that Schleitheim suggests something like a "two-Kingdom" theology, as this is often referred to,[4] on one hand seems beyond discussion: It indeed distinguishes between two orders or political logics. Yet on the other hand, calling this two "Kingdoms" risks eliding the strange peculiarity of the ways the text considers these two to relate to each other, or fail to relate to each other. If two normal kingdoms might reach a détente around a shared border, the relationship between the "sword" and "non-sword" orders remains one of underdetermined incompatibility, giving rise to a wide spectrum of possible interactions and interminable negotiation.

In offering this reading, I am not suggesting that this kind of philosophical-theological critique was among the primary concerns of Sattler and his fellows in any concrete historical sense. This is a constructive, perhaps even speculative reading, entering into a conversation with the words Sattler and his fellows have left us from the perspective of an Anabaptist writing in the early 21st century. I also do not wish to suggest that Schleitheim is *the* founding document of proper Anabaptism—an idea that has rightly suffered in recent decades of Anabaptist historical inquiry. Yet perhaps Schleitheim's loosening from such an authoritative status might allow us to return to it in a different way, with a different kind of reading, more constructive and speculative. After all, its concerns—how do we build faithful community in the midst of crisis and collapse?—may be closer to our contemporary predicament than we assume.

4 Ibid., 12.

An Ethic of Obedience

It has often been argued that obedience is essential to the historical Anabaptist venture in general and Schleitheim and Sattler's thought in particular. John Howard Yoder, for instance, writes that "Sattler's known writings emphasize literal obedience to Christ's words and actions,"[5] and C. Arnold Snyder frames the Schleitheim Articles as calling for "separat[ion] from the world in…careful obedience to God."[6] The sixth article in particular is described by Snyder as an application "of the general principle that true Christians must obey the commands of Scripture."[7]

More generally, both Ben Ollenburger and Stuart Murray have described the historical Anabaptist approach to Scripture as "hermeneutics of obedience."[8] Ollenburger, writing in the 1970s, argues this makes for Anabaptism's enduring relevance: Modern Christians also "must read the Bible as obedient people, followers of Christ first and foremost."[9] This suggestion that Anabaptism revolves around obedience continues to be difficult to shake, in spite of eloquent critique,[10] and the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* names Christ's "obedience" as one of His most relevant

5 John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Walden, NY: Plough, 2019), 7. Yoder, a perpetrator of sexual violence and abuser of his own position of power, emphasizes obedience as a central ethical task for Christians. This jarring fact may particularly encourage us to revise the place of obedience in our thinking. See especially the first two works cited under note 10 for more on this problematic.

6 C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 156.

7 Ibid., 163.

8 Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience: A Study of Anabaptist Hermeneutics," *Direction* 6(2) (1977), 19-31; Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 186.

9 Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience," 30.

10 See Hilary Jerome Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, "Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities," *Religion Compass* 13 (2019): 1-13; Kimberly L. Penner, "Mennonite Peace Theology and Violence against Women," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35 no. 3 (Fall 2017): 280-292; Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1982); Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1999).

characteristics,[11] describes how "the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ" through the Bible,[12] and understands sin explicitly as disobedience[13] and salvation as essentially tied to obedience.[14]

So, it would not be strange to expect Schleitheim's argument against the sword to similarly revolve around the notion that God has given rules that Christians simply are to follow out of obedience to God as sovereign lawgiver. Christians, we might say, must simply obey God's command to "resist not an evildoer" (Matthew 5:39) or that "thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13).[15] We might call this an obedient or "strong" pacifism, one whose nonviolence is backed up by the unwavering sovereign providential rule of the Almighty. The church is called to nonviolence, we might say, because it is called to fully trust in this rule instead of in human weapons and machinations.

In this light it may come as a surprise that the notion of obedience to a sovereign Lord is entirely absent from Schleitheim's sixth article, and that it nowhere cites such commandments to "resist not an evildoer" or "thou shalt not kill."[16] In making this argument, it points not to the sovereign character of God as a lawgiver, but to the *non*-sovereign character of Christ as an example for the kind of collaborative fellowship the church is called to be.

So let us take a closer look.

First Reading

Schleitheim's sixth article begins with a succinct axiom on which the gathered assembly has "agreed": The sword is "ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ [*ein Gottesordnung ausserhalb der volkomenheit Christi*]." So, we could say, God seems to have instituted the use of the sword for the world at large, but within the "perfection of Christ" (presumably referring to the church), different principles apply. This already says a good deal: Schleitheim is not simply positing a general critique, but one deeply related to the

11 General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church General Board (eds.), *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 1995), 5, 6n1.

12 Ibid., 10.

13 Ibid., 18n3.

14 Ibid., 20n3.

15 See Burkholder, "Historic Nonresistance," 11.

16 As also noted by Snyder, *Life and Thought*, 165.

kind of fellowship the church is called to be. There may be other ways than this, and God may be at work in those ways as well, Schleitheim affirms—but for the church, the "sword" must be rejected.

It is important to note that the "sword" here does not seem to refer simply to the use of violence—as if violence were *generally* legitimate outside the church—but to something more specific. The term *Gottesordnung* is already suggestive of this: the "sword" is a distinct kind of *order* or political logic. This becomes more explicit in the following sentences. We read the sword has something of a dual orientation: on the one hand "for the punishment of the wicked and for their death," while on the other hand it "guards and protects the good" (a reference to Romans 13). It is with this dual orientation that the sword is explicitly "ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates," and it is the "same" one that God ordained in the first testament Mosaic Law. If, for the people of Israel, God institutes the Law as an enforceable legal order (that is, one with violent sanctions, even if not a "state" in any modern sense of that word), Schleitheim suggests, God has ordained the legitimacy of an enforceable legal order and (now) state authority in the same way.

So, the sword seems to refer to a kind of political order or legal authority that is marked especially by the capacity for violent sanction. It is not so much the question of violence that is addressed, then, but the question of violent sanction as part of a political system of authority. On the one hand, the church must recognize such power as legitimate, at least for certain purposes. On the other hand, the church must itself be a community without such violent sanction. That is not to say it is left without means to assert disciplinary force or to call problematic members to account, merely that the means it can employ must follow a different logic: It can use "only the ban," which explicitly does not kill but is oriented to rehabilitating the sinner for the community as "the warning and the command to sin no more." Not all readers will immediately be convinced by Schleitheim's optimism around the supposed non-sovereign character of the ban, it seems to me, and I will return to some of its ambivalences later in this article.

The rest of Schleitheim's sixth article is concerned with the precise relationship between the sword order and the "non-sword" order of the church. This is peculiar: Surely the initial axiom, defining two incompatible political logics or orders, is clear enough? But the text immediately seems to admit

that its schema fails to achieve the kind of clarity perhaps desired, that many questions around the relationship and possible interaction between the two orders are still open. Further stipulations are required. Schleitheim provides three such stipulations in response to three questions, "asked by many who do not recognize [this as] the will of Christ for us."

The first question is the following: *If* Christians recognize the legitimacy of a legal order, then "may or should" they not also "employ the sword" themselves for such legitimate functions? The text responds in the negative. Christ "teaches and commands us to learn of Him," and that we should particularly follow Christ's character, which is "meek and lowly in heart" (Mt. 11:29). More specifically, it cites John 8, where Jesus is asked about a case of capital punishment of a woman apparently caught in adultery. The text argues He operates exactly according to Schleitheim's dual logic: He does not doubt the legitimacy of the Mosaic Law ("ordained of God"), but also instructs "not that one should stone her…but in mercy and forgiveness and warning, to sin no more" ("the perfection of Christ"). So Christ does not cancel or abolish the Law so much as suspend its application in this case.

Second, the text similarly asks if Christians may act as judges in cases between non-Christians, for whom such judicial proceedings are, after all, divinely instituted. The answer is again no, and again by means of Christ's example: "Christ did not wish to…pass judgment between brother and brother…but refused to do so [a reference to Luke 12]. Therefore we should do likewise."

The third question is whether a Christian may act as a magistrate (*Oberkeit*), which is a representative of state authority. The answer is again by analogy with Jesus: "They wished to make Christ king, but He fled…Thus we shall do as He did." The way of Jesus, in sum, is one that refuses sovereign power, and the church is to emulate Christ in this refusal. "He Himself forbids…the force of the sword saying, 'The worldly princes lord it over them… but not so shall it be with you.'"

The text supplements these biblical arguments by reiterating and elaborating on the more fundamental incompatibility between the logic of the sword and that of the church community, noting they are oriented in fundamentally different ways.

> The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians' are in heaven; their citizenship is in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christians' weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.

In many ways, Schleitheim seems to be saying, the sword simply operates by a different logic than that by which the church grounds its fellowship. It understands the world and its creatures differently, it has different tools, which in turn shape the way it approaches its problems. Most importantly, it is beholden to the structures of exploitation in the "world" in a way inimical to what the church is trying to do. Though these structures of exploitation are not synonymous with the sword (which, after all, has a legitimacy, while the "world" is "abomination"[17]), they do seem to have a structural affinity or belonging: Working as a magistrate seems to thicken one's entanglement ("homes and dwelling" and "citizenship") in worldly exploitation.

Schleitheim closes by summarizing its fundamental point: The church should emulate Christ's rejection of political authority and follow Him in forming a community that breaks with the sovereign logic of the sword. "[A]s is the mind of Christ toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things," the text argues. "[S]ince Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same."

So already we can say a few things: First, the "sword" that is both affirmed and rejected here refers to a certain kind of political authority or legal order, not simply to violence in general (nor indeed to government in general, at least not in the sense of a collective administration). By extension, the church is called not simply to reject violence (nor indeed public life), but to reject the political logic the sword stands for and to give shape to a com-

17 Wenger, "The Schleitheim Confession of Faith," 249-250. This estimation appears in the fourth article, which does not discuss government at all.

munity rooted in the break with that logic. Second, in doing so, it does not simply *obey* the command of a sovereign lawgiver—which would, after all, *not* break with the logic of sovereign rule—but it *emulates* the non-sovereign character of Jesus, who himself rejects authority, suspends the application of the sword, and refuses the position of lawgiver or judge. Third, the relationship between the order of the sword and the ecclesiopolitical logic of the church is not one of simple antagonism but of incompatibility, as they are fundamentally oriented in different ways. Nevertheless, fourth, the appropriate kinds of interaction between these two orders do not simply follow from their incompatibility but require supplementary negotiation and interpretation (given here in the form of three questions).

In the remainder of this article, I will enter a conversation with Schleitheim on these four points.

A Distinction between Lives

As we have seen, the "sword" here seems to refer to a particular kind of political rule or legal order, and not generally to the use of violence. This is clear both from the way it is defined—the capacity for violent sanction—and from Schleitheim's focus in its discussion and examples, which lie entirely with questions around government and political authority.[18] Ethical issues related to the use of violence more broadly, such as the legitimacy of self-defense on the road, violent revolution (we recall the very recent peasants' war), or domestic violence, are absent entirely. This is not to say that Sattler and the others at Schleitheim do not affirm pacifism in a more general ethical sense (a rejection of "the unchristian, devilish weapons of force—such as sword, armor and the like" is found at the end of Article IV). It is merely to say that here, in Schleitheim's longest article, its focus lies elsewhere, and its argument is more political than ethical.

Yet to say the sword simply refers to what we today understand as the state or government would also be inaccurate. For one, the crystallization

18 This in and of itself is not controversial among commentators of Schleitheim: John Howard Yoder states that "in this entire discussion 'sword' refers to the judicial and police powers of the state," (*Legacy*, 42n74, glossing over the way the non-state legal order of the Law is also a "sword" order) and Snyder also notes that "the detailed sixth article on the sword deals explicitly only with the 'sword of government' rather than with the 'sword of war'" (*Life and Thought*, 163).

of the Western system of sovereign states with territorially defined borders is still over a century in Schleitheim's future, taking shape as it does with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. But the incipient state structures of Schleitheim's early modern context also do not seem to be what the "sword" is specifically referring to: After all, it names the Torah as the divinely ordained "sword" order par excellence, a type of enforceable legal order that is not a state or government in any modern or even premodern sense of that word. So, what is rejected with the sword is at once more and less specific than simply the state or government, and it certainly does not appear to refer to the kinds of collective administration and organization that we often consider essential for modern states.

The sword order in Schleitheim's understanding seems to be definitionally marked by a certain dual orientation or capacity: On the one hand, it has a destructive capability, which it brings to bear "against the wicked," whom it can "put to death" and "punish." But on the other hand, it also has a nurturing or protective capability: It sets itself up "for the defense and protection of the good," whom it can "protect" and "guard." So, the sword is not *merely* defined by its capacity for killing and destroying, but also paradoxically by its capacity to nurture, to create spaces for human flourishing. We could say that the essence of the sword order lies in this dual orientation, in the way it causes and governs over death *and* life. And essential to this dual orientation is a more fundamental capacity: The sword is the kind of order that makes a difference between the "wicked" and the "good" in the first place. The essence of a sword order seems to lie in the way it distinguishes between lives worthy of protection and those worthy of death—between lives that matter, and lives given up to destruction.

It is by making this distinction that the political logic of the sword enforces an order. According to Schleitheim, it is the practice of producing this distinction between lives that is held in common by the early modern political entities of Schleitheim's direct context—from free cities to feudal lordships and papal domains—as well as the Old Testament legal order (and, we might add, with the modern sovereign state). This essential operation lies at the root of the functioning of all of these. Again, I do not intend to say that philosophical critique of the logic of the sovereign order was front of mind for those gathered at Schleitheim in a historical sense. Perhaps their words

and selection of biblical references were more guided by the ambivalence of their own experiences with the state order than with theoretical analysis. And yet the text they have left us seems to be remarkably attuned to the ambiguity of what it is discussing, offering—despite its sweeping scope—already a somewhat nuanced understanding and critique of political power that goes beyond its immediate historical context.

In doing so, Schleitheim anticipates a modern understanding of what is known in political philosophy as sovereignty. An early definition of sovereignty is given by legal theorist Carl Schmitt, who argues that sovereign power is quintessentially the capacity to decide on the exception: That is, to have the final word in a way that surpasses the regulations or procedures of the legal order.[19] Paradoxically, the establishment of a political and legal order can only exist if it is grounded in such an exceptional power (for example, that the Torah receives its normative force in a similar way from being given by a Lawgiver who is Himself not a subject among others). Significantly for our purposes here, Schmitt argues that the distinction between friend and foe, that is, between those belonging to my own community and those we may have to face and kill, is the irreducible beginning point of the political.[20]

A generation later, philosopher Michel Foucault draws attention to the way the sovereign has the "power of life and death" in the sense of a dual orientation, in the sense—remarkably similar to Schleitheim's discussion—that the sovereign has "the right to take life or let live," noting that its "symbol, after all, was the sword."[21] Foucault notes a transformation as the West enters modernity, so that the expression of power comes to lie less in the instruments of sovereign violence, and more in shaping, regulating, and producing a certain kind of life. Foucault calls this biopower or biopolitics (after Greek *bios*, life). Yet while the orientation of sovereignty's dual capacity thus changes, the way it fundamentally takes shape as the capacity to produce a distinction in life or between lives did not. "One might say," Foucault writes, "that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster*

19 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).

20 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 26ff.

21 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 136.

life or *disallow* it to the point of death."[22]

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben picks up on a similar insight—that the essence of sovereign power lies exactly in this more fundamental capacity to produce a distinction between lives worth protecting and lives given up to death. For Agamben, however, this does not need to mean actively killing or executing, and he notes the oldest forms of sovereign sanction are types of banishment and exile. Echoing Schleitheim, Agamben argues the "fundamental activity of sovereign power"[23] is more fundamental than overt killing, embodied in making the distinction between life that matters and life devoid of significance. For Agamben, this is ultimately what all legal orders in the West, even ones that are not explicitly headed by a single "sovereign" ruler—from the ancient Roman kingdom to modern democracies—have in common: In their essence, they always operate by distinguishing between the lives they protect and the lives they condemn, between citizens and non-citizens, insiders and outsiders. Or, as Schleitheim puts it, between the "good" and the "wicked."

The ambivalence around this analysis, that the power of the sword can both destroy and foster life, that the protection to the "good" offered by the sovereign order always depends on its production of some others as "wicked," is central to Schleitheim's argument and seems to also give rise to its ambivalent axiom. But sovereign rule is also, less ambivalently, always "a relationship of power and domination," as theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri stress, and this is also, if less explicitly, crucial to Schleitheim's rejection of it.

> The sovereign always stands in relation to subjects, above them, with the ultimate power to make political decisions. … the concept of sovereignty that functioned in early modern Europe was also a pillar of the ideological justification of

22 Ibid., 138. Achille Mbembe has famously questioned Foucault's perspective here, arguing that modern political authority has by no means given up its capacity, nor its propensity, for taking life, for example in colonial ventures. See Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Biopolitics: A Reader,* ed. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2013), 161-192.

23 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 181.

conquest and colonization.[24]

Schleitheim spends little of its explicit argument on this aspect of domination. It does not argue from the equality of all humans and the unjustifiability that some hold power over others, for example. And yet in rejecting sovereign power of the sword, it is looking for a kind of ecclesiopolitical community that is "non-sovereign,"[25] in Hardt and Negri's words, in which no ruler "lords it over" (Matthew 20:25) their subjects, in which the force of violent and final sanction is broken. The church is to be a kind of shared life not grounded in the capacity for violence or the power of some over others. This becomes clearer in its discussion of the way Jesus's rejection of the powers of the sword stands as an example for the church.

A Non-sovereign Messiah

After establishing the kind of order the sword refers to, Schleitheim addresses three particular questions around the interaction of Christians with it. In addressing these three questions, in each case, the text illuminates its point by drawing the comparison with Jesus. Here, it refers to biblical narratives in a way it does not do elsewhere, showing Jesus refusing to exert judicial and executive power in several instances. In so doing, the text not only answers the question directly at hand, but also develops the general point it is making: That the church should reject sovereign power, not out of simple obedience to a rule, but because, in this way, it emulates Jesus's own rejection of sovereign power. This is the argument throughout this article: Christ "teaches and commands us to learn of Him"; "He who wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24); "Whom God did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:30); "Christ has suffered (not ruled) and left us an example, that ye should follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:21).

This distinction between obeying God as sovereign ruler and following Christ as one who rejects sovereign rule might seem largely academic. And perhaps for some readers, the emulation of Christ's character is not so different from just another rule to be followed. But that would miss the way this

24 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 25.
25 Ibid., passim.

emulation reorients the relationship between God and God's church. The text does not call for ethical obedience to God as a lawgiver, but for following Christ's example as *explicitly not* a lawgiver, as a figure who refuses the position demanding obedience and breaks with the structure of law. At the heart of Schleitheim's argument is not the discontinuity or categorical difference between God who commands and the church which obeys, but exactly a continuity or relationality between the two.

Thus, in framing its political theology in this way, Schleitheim is also making an argument about the nature of God. In giving shape to a non-sovereign community, the church is embodying a continuity with the non-sovereign character of God as revealed in Christ. God, the text seems to suggest, is ultimately, in God's most authentic expression (for this is, after all, what Christianity teaches Christ to be), not a sovereign Lord demanding obedience, but a non-sovereign Messiah inviting fellow creatures into fellowship. Jesus calls this fellowship the Kingdom of God, but on closer look, it is perhaps best understood as a non-kingdom[26] in which God is encountered as one who does not command but issues a collaborative call.

In a way, all of Schleitheim can be understood as a response to this call, which invites creaturely community into cooperative self-organization in ways not indebted to structures of exploitation and domination. After all, it envisions the church as a community of free persons, each of whom has responded to God's invitation "through themselves" (Article I), a freedom nevertheless essentially entangled in community as baptism is asked and given and enters one into a shared life among equals (Article I). It calls this path the "obedience of faith" (Article IV), certainly, but this "obedience" is nothing like the obedience demanded by sovereign authority; it is essentially described as an escape from the grasp of empire, of being "set free" (Article IV). Its leaders are elected (Article V), and their tasks clearly circumscribed, appearing more as facilitators or care workers than leaders. In sum, it is more a community of refuge than a kingdom in any recognizable sense of that word.

Embedded in this understanding of God's call as a non-sovereign invitation is Schleitheim's insistent awareness that the kind of community it envi-

26 See also Mark Van Steenwyk, *The Unkingdom of God: Embracing the Subversive Power of Repentance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 2013.

sions does not come guaranteed. No institutions, not even divine ordinance, can be relied upon to simply make non-sovereign community happen. It does not simply gather in obedience to a sovereign Ruler, but self-organizes in response to a collaborative call, which means it needs to be made and asserted.[27] Paradoxically, it is exactly for this reason that the church must be capable of exerting force. Schleitheim has no illusions that the church could do without such a capacity, that it could do without claiming the space for its shared life against the forces that would subdue it. It is in this light that it suggests the ban as an alternative means of sanction.

The need for some way to assert the community's standards and maintain a space for its form of life seems clear. What is not immediately clear, however, is why comprehensive excommunication—if this is indeed how the ban is to be understood in Schleitheim—would really be structurally different from sovereign sanctions, especially in light of Agamben's argument mentioned in the previous section that the most originary sovereign sanctions are also kinds of exile and banishment. Does not the ban function similarly by making a distinction between lives, specifically by producing some lives as exiled from the community? It seems to me these ambivalences are difficult to dispel definitively, as indeed the history of the ban's application shows.[28]

A clue might be found in this juxtaposition between ban and sword-type

27 See also Marius van Hoogstraten, "Confession by the Deed: Asserting Anabaptist Ecclesiopolitical Performativity," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 77 no. 4 (2023), 277-287.

28 I have investigated the possible relationship between Agamben's understanding of the "sovereign ban" and the Anabaptist ban as envisioned by Balthasar Hubmaier in Marius van Hoogstraten, "Anabaptist Biopolitics: Balthasar Hubmaier on Religious Noncoercion and Church Discipline," in *Free Speech in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Nina Schroeder et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, forthcoming). In brief, Hubmaier's ban on the one hand reinforces the inside-outside dichotomy, but in the same stroke (and in spite of itself) subverts it by adding a category of persons that is neither in nor out. This becomes especially clear in Hubmaier's use of various metaphors, suggesting a peculiar non-symmetry between baptism and excommunication. The ban is thus marked by a structural ambiguity which it cannot decisively suppress. A closer analysis of Schleitheim's second article, on the ban, would highlight the rather relaxed attitude the text seems to have: Disciplined church members are not described as "rotting flesh" (Hubmaier) but simply as "slipping and falling," even "inadvertently" so. It also does not heighten the emotional stakes of repentance and readmittance in the way Hubmaier does. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of such an instrument are present in Schleitheim also.

punishment—that is, in the way the text frames the ban *as* embedded in the break with the logic of sovereignty. This break is perhaps most clearly embodied in its non-final character. While a perpetrator may need to be excluded from the community, the "warning" to "sin no more" also shows that this exclusion is oriented toward their (for lack of a better word) rehabilitation. This means, in a way, that the community is never definitively made safe from the "wicked," but those "wicked" are also not definitively so; their disciplining is oriented to their return. So perhaps we can make a distinction between the *final* temporality of sovereign power and the temporality of *repetition* that marks non-sovereign practices. The sovereign's decision (Schmitt) is not up for discussion; the sword punishes for the "death" (Schleitheim) of the wicked. But non-sovereign practice is never so final. It is in this light, it seems to me, that the non-sovereign character of the ban must also be read—or, we might say, *insofar as* it embodies this non-final temporality of repetition can the ban be deemed a non-sovereign instrument.

A similar resistance to the final character of sovereignty is found in Schleitheim's argument against oath-swearing (Article VII). In this context, I have noted in the passage that follows how Schleitheim's ecclesiopolitical venture as a whole seems to embody this temporality of repetition.

> It is in the repeated practices of this community…that it envisions its alternative to the sovereign guarantees of oath swearing. Certainly, Schleitheim's vision of disciplined and somewhat sober community is not one all contemporary readers will find appealing. Yet in envisioning a collective life apart from the structures of sovereignty, it…points toward faith as a form of life, and sees its truth manifested in the relationships shaped by its repeated practice. This is a togetherness that cannot be ascertained or guaranteed, is never finally given or achieved, but must interminably be restaged and reasserted.
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> Assurance and trust, for Schleitheim, are given not in linguistic performatives or binding operations, but in repetition: in the interminable process of gathering, which is never quite decisively achieved. …"Let your words be yes, yes, no, no" (Matt 5:37). …Yes, *yes*: If you say yes, once will not be enough. Faith as practice must be affirmed and reaffirmed. This originary yes, not beholden to the oath structure, does not guarantee or seek to seize or dominate a

> relation to the world, but admits to its own incompleteness; another yes will always be required. Likewise no, *no*. If you say no, once will not be enough. Resistance must be reasserted interminably. Let your words, Jesus seems to be saying, not gather into themselves, but open up into the future, for you live in a world structurally not under their dominion.[29]

In sum—the church is a risk and a wager, requiring the voluntary cooperation of the faithful to persistently, assertively, bring it into being.

Two Incompatible Orders

In the latter part of this fourth article, Schleitheim stresses the conceptual or intrinsic incompatibility between the political logic of the sword and ecclesial non-sovereignty. They are oriented in fundamentally different ways, we read: One is "according to the flesh," the other "according to the Spirit"; one is entangled in the structures of exploitation that make up the "world," while the other has its citizenship in "heaven." They have distinct "weapons," we read, one "carnal and against the flesh," made up of "steel and iron," the other "spiritual, against the fortification of the devil" and consisting of the "armor of God." The point, it seems to me, is not just that the church *should* not use the "weapons" or instruments of sovereign power. More significantly, what the church is oriented toward cannot be achieved with such instruments. By their very logic, they work in a different way. The sword may be able to "protect" the church—this is a question Schleitheim leaves open—but it cannot ascertain the kind of community it is called to be.[30]

A significant aspect of this incompatibility is the way these two orders are

29 Marius van Hoogstraten, "Without Sovereign Guarantee: Reading Schleitheim on the Oath with Giorgio Agamben," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 97 (2023): 382.

30 Another way to put this would be to say that the "downstream" ethical question of violence or nonviolence is in a way already decided by the "upstream" political (or ecclesiopolitical) question of the kind of logic and authority structure that shapes the collective life of the church. The question is not so much an ethical prohibition keeping Christians from working with the state but more fundamentally whether the political logic by which the church is organized already constitutes a break with the structures of exploitation and authority of the sword order, and whether it continues to found its togetherness in a logic of some holding power over others.

structured by different imaginaries. The way they are equipped with different tools and techniques ("weapons of their conflict") shapes the way they understand the world and its creatures ("against the flesh only"), causing them to envision fundamentally different kinds of political projects ("against the fortification of the devil"). This is why, perhaps, it is so important to Schleitheim that Christians limit their interaction with the sword order: If we spend too much time in the operative logic of sovereignty, we might say, we start to think and imagine like it, and risk losing sight of the kinds of ecclesiopolitical projects to which the church is called.

But the logics of sovereignty and non-sovereignty do not merely shape the political imagination. The text suggests they also shape the theological imagination. God is encountered in radically different ways under the sword and in the church. It is important to notice that Schleitheim clearly affirms that God is authentically encountered and in active relationship with creatures "outside the perfection of Christ." Public political life is clearly not part of the "wickedness which the devil planted in the world," referred to in Article IV. But even so, God appears radically different there from the non-sovereign Messiah of the church. Under the rule of sovereignty, God is encountered as one who "ordains"—that is, He [sic?] very much still seems to be a sovereign Lord.

Again, I do not wish to suggest that those gathered at Schleitheim intended to make a point about the way our theological imagination is shaped by our political structures in any historical or literal way. But the words they have left us with seem remarkably open to this conclusion. And is it not altogether plausible that life under the rule of the sword, under political authority that derives from a capacity for violence and for making a distinction between lives that matter and those that do not, would also shape the way we envision God? That living under sovereign kings and rulers, we also come to imagine God as a king or ruler, master over life and death? If we live in a world marked by obedience and authority, we will inevitably come to see God in this way as well, the text seems to suggest. Under the conditions of sovereign power, the image of God is constricted into merely a greater or stronger version of sovereignty. Inversely, the church is tasked with being a fellowship in which God is encountered differently, a space that nourishes and shapes a non-sovereign imagination of God. It is a place where we can

unlearn, we might say, the image of God as sovereign ruler. By living together collaboratively as equals, we might learn also about the way God could be said to interact collaboratively with God's creation. Paradoxically, God's will seems to be achieved most successfully where God does not "ordain," but invites. Yet part of shaping such spaces is to affirm that God is still at work outside them; that even in the constricted imagination of God in the image of worldly power, God can still be affirmed as acting.

A Relationship of Possibility

In spite of the apparent clarity of the disjunction between these two entirely different logics of sword and non-sword orders, the precise nature of their relationship seems to require supplementary negotiation and interpretation. This at least is what the text seems to suggest as it poses three questions (and we could certainly imagine countless more) to which it provides three answers. These take up a significant amount of text in this sixth article, and further contribute to establishing the appropriate kinds of interaction (or rather non-interaction) between the two incompatible orders. As previously established, Schleitheim stipulates a restrictive approach in each of these cases: Christians should not employ the sword, nor act as judges or magistrates.

It is telling that these supplementary stipulations are necessary at all. Should the appropriate interaction not simply follow from the initial axiom that the church and the state follow discrete logics? Apparently, it does not—and perhaps more than one kind of answer would have been possible to these questions, and different questions entirely might have given rise to different answers, too.[31] Apparently, the separatist or quietist approach for which Schleitheim is renowned only represents one possible set of conclusions from its basic axiom. It is not simply and obviously implied but itself needs to be made and negotiated.

This sense of possibility, or at least of uncertainty and complexity, is also

31 In any case, Schleitheim's answers are not overwhelmingly clear, either. For one, in John 8 Jesus interrupts an execution taking place between people who are not (perhaps not yet) His followers. In which realm does this take place: The realm of the Law, and thus the sword, or of the "perfection of Christ?" By extension, would the conclusion that Christians ought to interrupt executions—not merely abstain from them—not be at least as plausible?

implicit in the way Schleitheim frames the incompatibility between church and sword. The terms it uses to depict the two orders come in strange pairs, which do not simply map onto an opposition: Magistrates have their houses "in this world," while the Christians' houses are "in heaven." This is already a strange thing to write—certainly, Christians still live in material houses, not in "heaven." But the opposition between "world" and "heaven" is also odd: should it not be between the world and the *church*, or between *earth* and heaven?

This opposition, if it is one, is rephrased in the same paragraph as being between flesh and spirit: the church has a "spiritual" orientation, while the sword a "carnal" one. That the sword is oriented to the "flesh"—so to the material and bodily conditions of life, which it fosters or destroys—seems clear enough. But the meaning of this "spiritual" orientation of the church is peculiar. "Spiritual" here certainly does not signify anything like an inward or transcendental faith: Schleitheim is entirely uninterested in inward contemplative concerns or transcendent truths. So, this is a spiritual and heavenly orientation that is, for all intents and purposes, not spiritual or heavenly at all, it is entirely negotiated in the immanent sphere of ecclesiopolitical contestation, among the "flesh." That is where Schleitheim considers the relevance of faith to take place: in concrete, embodied practices.

So, this quasi-opposition between flesh and spirit, or between world and heaven, certainly does not seem to imply that the church order might sit quietly alongside the worldly order, one responsible for the faithful's bodies, the other for their souls, existing in different spheres of life, or days of the week, one untroubled by the other. But it is *also* not a difference between two basically similar kinds of things which could coexist by taking up separate places or territories, like two states might come to a détente by drawing a territorial border between them. There is, we could say, a logical underdetermination in the way these heterogeneous orders might relate to each other.

It is because this relationship is so underdetermined, because it takes shape neither simply as an opposition nor as a complementary relation, that it requires supplementary stipulation and negotiation, and that, in turn, Schleitheim's quietism is but one of many different conceivable expressions. There is no one set of relations between the church and the sword order that is necessary or implied. Their incompatibility does not imply spatial

separation, nor quietist withdrawal, nor (for that matter) active citizenship. Each of these are just one of many possibilities. And this underdetermined incompatibility makes for a potential dynamism in this relationship, allowing it to be reinvented and renegotiated in different times and contexts—as Anabaptists have indeed done, the world over.

Conclusion

Instead of calling for nonviolence out of obedience to a sovereign lawgiver, Schleitheim's sixth article formulates a critique of political authority and a call for non-sovereignty. The "sword," which it both recognizes and rejects, seems to refer to a kind of authority or order that is rooted in its capacity for violence, and more specifically, its capacity to distinguish between lives worthy of protection and those worthy of death. In spite of its legitimacy, this kind of order is incompatible with the kind of non-sovereign political project the church is called to be in emulation of its non-sovereign Messiah.

The church is not called to be a place of obedience, but a community where we can *unlearn* obedience and unlearn our imagination of God as a sovereign master. Schleitheim's sixth article seeks to regulate the relationship between these two heterogeneous orders, but in so doing, it shows that this relationship is not simply given. Even if the church must recognize that God is in some way at work outside of the "perfection of Christ," and so must recognize the (conditional) legitimacy of states and governments, the relationship between the two is not fixed but subject to negotiation and transformation. It is this tensive, underdetermined relationship between incompatible orders—not simply different sets of laws for different domains, but truly different kinds of (ecclesio)political logic—that an overly simple understanding of church and sovereign rule as "two Kingdoms" is in danger of eliding, at least insofar as it misses that one of these kingdoms is an *non*-kingdom, and the relationship between these is far from clear.

To many readers, Schleitheim may seem to be a text with a mostly historical significance, influential perhaps at the beginning of the Anabaptist tradition, but with little direct relevance for faith and community today. It is not my purpose here to challenge this assumption—though, as a text concerned with living together in community in a time of systemic collapse and crisis, it may prove closer to our situation than perhaps initially assumed. It seems

to me, however, that insofar as Schleitheim's critique of the sword is relevant for the church today, this relevance does not lie primarily in the question of whether Anabaptist Christians are permitted to work for the state as judges or public-school teachers or social workers. Nor indeed in whether it is appropriate for them to rely on public childcare, take public transport, or indeed expect justice systems to call harmful individuals into account. Indeed, in many of these questions, Schleitheim's strange axiom may turn out to be quite sensible. It allows us to recognize the ways legitimate sovereign order and legal systems may yet play a role in God's wish for this planet and its creatures, while accompanying that affirmation with the level-headed realization that sovereignty can only imagine and work toward political projects that are in line with its own logic. This will always be in some sense heterogeneous to the kind of political imagination the church is called to.

Yet the major significance of Schleitheim's ecclesiopolitical critique is in its identification of this different path—in the call for building non-sovereign community. It asks to what extent our communities continue to participate in this distinction between lives that matter and lives that are given up to insignificance. The enduring force of its critique of sovereign power is in its contention that the church is called to work by a different logic, to become a space in which a non-sovereign fellowship can be learned and practiced. As Anabaptism approaches its fifth centennial, we may well ask whether it is succeeding at this task. Are our communities places to unlearn the imaginaries of sovereign power? Are they communities of equals that have broken with the logic of obedience—or do they continue to be rooted in the authority of some human beings over others?

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