


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluating a neglected tradition of (Ana)baptist Christology

Stephen R. Holmes 

St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK
Email: sh80@st-andrews.ac.uk

(Received 12 December 2022; accepted 13 January 2023)

Abstract

Oosterbaan identified a tradition of Anabaptist christology running from Ziegler in Strassborg in the 1520s to Menno Simons in the 1550s. I demonstrate that this tradition continued until at least around 1700, first amongst the Waterlander Mennonites in the Netherlands, and then amongst the English General Baptists. I sketch the development and diversity of the tradition, and then ask whether it might be considered 'orthodox', and whether reflecting on the scholarly reception of this tradition might help academic theologians to engage better with marginalised Christian communities today.

Keywords: biblicism; Matthew Caffyn; Christology; heavenly flesh; Menno Simons

No need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself.

(bell hooks)

Menno Simons, the Dutch Anabaptist who gave his name to the Mennonites, debated Christology several times with representatives of the majority Reformed church in the Netherlands around the middle of the sixteenth century. The debate began in 1544 in a wider conversation with John a Lasco, who had been appointed by Countess Anna of East Friesland to oversee the churches in her lands. Anna was confident she wished to leave the Roman fold, but unsure about where to go instead, and enlisted a Lasco to explore the religious opinions of her subjects, and to propose a way forward. This brief moment of magisterial indecisiveness gave Menno a breathing space, in which for a little while he did not have to fear – and flee from – persecution. No doubt he engaged with a Lasco in the hope of finding a lasting tolerance.

Menno and a Lasco debated a number of issues: they found themselves able to agree on original sin and sanctification; they disagreed on predictable lines on baptism and the calling of ministers; more surprisingly, perhaps, they could find no common ground on Christology. Menno quickly wrote up his views in his 'Brief and Clear Confession',

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

which is essentially a catena of scripture texts.¹ A Lasco published a refutation equally rapidly, his *Defensio*,² but it took until 1554 for Menno to respond with his *Clear and Irrefutable Confession*, usually known in English as *The Incarnation of our Lord*.³ Also in 1554 Menno had a debate with Martin Micron, an associate of a Lasco, which Micron wrote up in a text published in 1556.⁴ Menno responded with two works that year,⁵ and Micron had the last word in 1558 with his *Reckoning*.⁶

Micron and a Lasco are each exercised that Menno first does not know, and then will not accept, the Chalcedonian formula: two natures in hypostatic union. They take this as evidence of his unorthodoxy, but this seems unfair as we read the documents: Menno clearly hears that formula as teaching something akin to Nestorianism, and so he is right to reject what he thinks he is rejecting. His summary of Micron's doctrine is 'there are two sons in Christ, the one eternal and not subject to suffering; the other temporal and subject to suffering'.⁷ It is fair to say that, in his published works, Micron so stresses the standard Reformed insistence on the integrity of the two natures that it is understandable that Menno heard him claiming a doctrine of two sons.⁸

Micron apparently also insisted on the anhypostasic nature of the assumed humanity, but Menno could make no sense of what he said concerning it:

Micron ... replied that there were not two persons in Christ, but one person, for although the Word was one person from eternity, that was no person which was conceived in Mary. He also said, Although each human being is a person, and although the man Christ was a man as any other man, yet the human Christ by itself was no person ... Paul justly says, Oh, where is the disputer of this world?⁹

¹Menno Simons, 'Brief and Clear Confession', in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), pp. 419–54. Verduin's translations are not without their problems and should be compared to the Dutch originals in Menno Simons, *Opera Omnia Theologica, Of Alle de Godtgeleerde Wercken van Menno Symons* (Amsterdam: Joannes van Veen, 1681); the 'Korte Belijdenisse' is pp. 517–42 of this edition. I will however quote the Verduin/Wenger translation below (other translations of Dutch and Latin works are my own). One of the recurring problems with Verduin's work is in the lists of scripture citations with which Menno often ends paragraphs, where the list in the English translation is at variance with the list in the original. Consider, for example, a paragraph with a number of citations in both texts (*Complete Works*, p. 800; *Opera*, p. 363): the 1681 Dutch offers us 'Rom. 1.9. Joan. 3.16. Eph. 1.6. 1 Joa. 1. 3/4. Col. 1.16. Apoc. 1. 5/6/7'. The paragraph also has 'Gen. 1.27. Psal. 33.6. Syr. 17.8. Rom. 5.12. 1 Cor. 15.3' in the marginal notes. The English translation has a terminal list only, that reads 'Psalm 33:6; Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:3; John 3:16.' – a selective combination of the original terminal list and the marginal notes with no indication of the omissions, or of which reference comes from which position. Keeney has further shown that some careful differential work in Christology that Menno does by consistently using different prepositions is lost or mangled in the English translation. W. E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice 1539–1564* (Nieuwkoop: B de Graaf, 1968), pp. 217–18.

²Joannis a Lasco, *Defensio Verae* ... (Bonnae: ex officina Laurentii Mylii, 1545).

³Simons, *Complete Works*, pp. 783–834; *Opera*, pp. 351–82. Further page references to these will be indicated using page numbers only, separated by a forward slash (i.e. *Complete Works/Opera*).

⁴Marten Micron, *Een Waerachtigh Verhael* ... (no place stated: G. Ctematuis [= Gillis van der Erven], 1556).

⁵Menno Simons, 'Reply to Martin Micron' and 'Epistle to Martin Micron', pp. 838–913; 917–43/543–98; 599–618.

⁶Micron, *Een Apologie of Verantwoordinghe* ... (no place stated: G. Ctematuis [= Gillis van der Erven], 1558).

⁷Simons, 'Reply to Micron', p. 848/555.

⁸See e.g. *Een Apologie*... ff. 14–15.

⁹Simons, *Incarnation of our Lord*, p. 825/378.

For Menno, the simple scriptural truth is found in the Johannine prologue: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’¹⁰ He is not above mockery on this point: ‘[the fourth evangelist] does not say, *The Word assumed a man of our or of Mary’s flesh and dwelt in this...*’¹¹ He thinks this becoming is ineffable, and identified as such by scripture: ‘[t] ruly, it is said, Who shall tell of his birth? Isa. 53:10; Acts 8:31’.¹² He insists that this becoming is not a change – the Word remains immutable whilst becoming flesh; he does not purport to understand how this is possible, but asserts that it must be true since it is the plain reading of scripture.

The flesh that the Word becomes is an *ab novo* creation in heaven, in no way derived from the Blessed Virgin.¹³ For Menno this is important because any human flesh or nature derived from Mary would be marred by Adam’s sin, and so not acceptable as the pure sacrifice necessary for sins to be forgiven. He also relies on a curious argument, derived from Aristotelian biology, that in the normal course of human reproduction the mother contributes nothing to the foetus but nourishment and a place to grow, and so that the Blessed Virgin contributes nothing to the humanity of the incarnate one she bears. This point is repeatedly foregrounded in Menno’s engagement with Micron, a fact his most recent editor clearly finds embarrassing.¹⁴ (This argument will be relevant for us later.)

A christological tradition: Ziegler to Menno

What should we make of Menno’s Christology? The first thing to say is that it is not merely idiosyncratic. He stands in a tradition, first identified in modern scholarship by Oosterbaan, that stretches back to Clement Ziegler in Strasbourg in the first decades of the Reformation.¹⁵ Ziegler influenced Melchior Hoffman, who in turn influenced Dirk Philips and Menno Simons. Schwenckfeld claimed that he, rather than Ziegler, was the source of Hoffman’s christological views, although he thought that Hoffman misunderstood him rather badly;¹⁶ some modern scholarship has followed this, but

¹⁰Oosterbaan describes John 1:14 as Menno’s ‘central text’, commenting that it is the scripture he quotes more than any other. ‘De centrale tekst in alle geschriften van Menno is Joh. 1:14; van alle bijbelplaatsen wordt die het meest geciteerd.’ J. A. Oosterbaan, ‘Een doperse christologie’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 35 (1981), p. 41.

¹¹Simons, *Incarnation*, p. 795/360. Emphasis original in *Complete Works*; emphasis in *Opera* (using roman type for emphasis, rather than italic) is similar, but does not include some of the conjunctions; perhaps it is better rendered ‘...say, *The Word assumed a man of our or of Mary’s flesh* and then *dwelt in this...*’

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 810/369.

¹³Burkhart, in a valuable paper tracing the interpretation of Menno’s Christology to his day, argues that we should more properly speak of ‘miracle’ rather than ‘creation’; inasmuch as the becoming of the Word results in human flesh that did not exist before, it seems to me that we must speak of ‘creation’, but we would be wrong to read Menno as teaching the creation of a new human being that is then assumed, Chalcedonian-style, into union with the Word; rather, the Word *becomes* (albeit immutably) flesh, which thereby comes into being. Irvin E. Burkhardt, ‘Menno Simons on the Incarnation’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 4 (1930), pp. 133–4.

¹⁴The whole discussion is tedious and tiresome. While no one can blame Menno for the primitive state of science in his day, yet one cannot but wish that he would have had more good sense than to waddle through the mire as he does in this monotonous and repetitious discussion.’ *Complete Works*, p. 836.

¹⁵Oosterbaan, ‘Een doperse christologie’; see p. 39 for Oosterbaan’s four-point summary of Menno’s theology.

¹⁶So W. E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice 1539–1564* (Nieuwkoop: B de Graaf, 1968), p. 89.

Oosterbaan's proposal that Ziegler is the origin of the tradition seems more secure. Ziegler was active in Strasbourg before Schwenckfeld, and had a distinctive christological position that emphasised the pure spirituality of Christ.¹⁷ Ziegler has not been extensively studied, but the broad shape of his doctrine seems clear.¹⁸ He distinguishes fairly sharply between the Son of God and the Son of Man: the Son of God is eternal, the high priest after the order of Melchizedek, but in some sense also always human; the Son of Man is born of the Virgin, suffers, dies, is resurrected and will return at the eschaton. The incarnation is a connection between, but not an amalgamation of, the Son of God and the Son of Man; a similar connection is possible for all believers through the eucharist, which makes us participants in the spiritual body of the Son of God.¹⁹

To someone trained in classical christological categories, this will inevitably sound Nestorian, and indeed it has been read that way. Depperman, for example, writes that Ziegler 'distinguished between Christ's two bodies, and placed a one-sided stress on Christ's divine nature'.²⁰ This is a misreading however, in that it transfers Ziegler's language of 'two Sons' into Chalcedonian language of 'two natures', which Ziegler did not do. He was not a trained theologian, and used biblical language to develop original categories that do not map straightforwardly onto the standard terminology of technical dogmatics. There is clearly here a strong distinction between the two Sons; but by asserting that the eternal Son of God is in some sense always human even prior to the incarnation (a position explicitly derived from the references to Melchizedek in Hebrews), Ziegler avoids being simply Nestorian. This is not to say that his theology is acceptable; his narration of the personal identity of the one who suffered on the cross with the one who is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek certainly feels weaker than it needs to be for the logic of atonement to work. But his proposals must be judged using their own categories, however idiosyncratic, not forced to fit the categories with which trained theologians are comfortable; I will return to this theme.

This lack of connection between the two Sons enables Melchior Hoffman's development of a true 'heavenly flesh' Christology. As Deppermann has it, 'To Ziegler the historical and concrete humanity of the Son of God [*sic*, "Son of Man" in Ziegler's terms] as mediated by Mary was of no consequence ... only one more step in this direction was needed (i.e. to deny Christ's second body, taken from Mary) in order to arrive at Hoffman's monophysite Christology'.²¹ This seems basically secure, although the

¹⁷See Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation*, trans. Malcolm Wren (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), pp. 177–8 for a brief description of Ziegler's Christology and a suggestion of influence on Hoffman. W. I. Leendertz, *Melchior Hoffman* (Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, 1883) first suggested the influence of Ziegler; see pp. 209ff.; Oosterbaan assumes Ziegler's influence: 'Een doperse christologie', pp. 32–3.

¹⁸The primary sources are available in Manfred Krebs and Hans Georg Rott (eds), *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*, vol. 7: Elsaß I: *Stadt Straßburg 1522–1532*; and vol. 8: Elsaß II: *Stadt Straßburg 1533–1535* (Gütersloh: VRG, 1959, 1960). Peter Rodolphe's unpublished 1954 Strasbourg dissertation, 'Le Maraîcher Clément Ziegler: L'homme et son Oeuvre' remains the best study; Rodolphe published a précis of his work: 'Le Jardinier Clément Ziegler: L'homme et son Oeuvre', *Revue d'histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 34 (1954), pp. 255–80.

¹⁹Rodolphe, 'Le Jardinier', pp. 268–70.

²⁰Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, p. 176.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 178.

caution about innovative and traditional categories just offered might make us want to pause before confidently labelling Hoffman 'monophysite'.

The concern that drives Hoffman's Christology is soteriological: only a pure sacrifice can atone for human sin, which means no descendant of Adam and Eve, stained as we all are by original sin, could be the atoning sacrifice. The incarnate one could not, therefore, receive his human nature from the Virgin Mary, because if he did he would not be the necessary pure sacrifice. Hoffman's solution was, first, to insist on the heavenly flesh doctrine, and second, to posit some sort of a transformation of the divine Logos into a human being, leaning on John 1:14 ('the Word became flesh', insisting on reading 'became' literally).²² His second key text, perhaps borrowed from Ziegler, was Hebrews 7:3, speaking of Melchizedek 'without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life' (NRSV). If Jesus is to be the anti-type of Melchizedek, as the text goes on to insist, the 'becoming flesh' of the divine Logos must not happen late in time, but in the beginning, and so, for Hoffman, the heavenly flesh that passes through Mary is eternally existent.

Is this account 'monophysite'? At one level, it depends on the account of the 'becoming' spoken of in John 1:14 – but at a deeper level it does not. Hoffman simply does not use the language of 'nature(s)' in his christological formulations, and so to characterise his doctrine as insisting on a single nature (*monē physis*) is inevitably to misrepresent it. We might – we probably should – interrogate Hoffman on what he means by the Word becoming flesh – what accounts of omnipotence and local presence obtain before and after the 'becoming'? What accounts of impassibility and suffering? The best and most honest answer is probably that Hoffman does not give us enough detail about his doctrine for us to come to a view on it. He seems awake to at least some of the potential problems – he was, for example, very aware of the dangers of docetism. However, he shows little concern over other concerns, perhaps more obvious to the classically trained theologian, with his account – the problems in the language of change, for example. His response, however, would be fairly simple: scripture says 'the Word became flesh', and so that is the right language to use; any problems we find with it are simply a result of our failure to believe the plain teaching of scripture.

Menno is aware that he is offending against classical orthodoxy in following this 'heavenly flesh' doctrine, and begins the section of his response to a Lasco titled 'Our Confession', with the words, '[t]he reason we do not grant the learned ones' doctrine in regard to the Lord's incarnation ... is this ...'²³ He first quickly outlines a similar soteriological concern to Hoffman's ('they rob us of Christ, the Son of God, and direct us to an earthly, sinful creature, and a man born of Adam's impure and sinful flesh'; p. 792/358). The next move is complicated to unpick: Menno conflates his biological concern with a concern over classical christological terminology: 'Christ would be but half a man, if the woman contributed as much to the fetus as does the man, as they assert. And we get two persons, one divine and the other human, called by them two natures or parts' (p. 792/358). Menno appears simply unaware of the concept of the hypostatic union here, and this concern that conciliar Christology 'divides' Christ recurs repeatedly in his exposition (e.g. pp. 800/363; 812–13/370; 823/377). It would not, therefore, be fair to say that Menno rejects Chalcedonian Christology; he does

²²Ibid., pp. 225–9.

²³Menno, *Incarnation*, p. 792/358. Further references to Simons will be in the main text (*Complete Works/Opera*) to avoid a profusion of footnotes.

not understand it enough to reject it. He rejects, effectively, Nestorianism (albeit without simultaneously rejecting Eutychianism).

Claiming that Menno just did not understand the core concepts of the theological tradition might appear harsh, but it can be substantiated by the evidence he offers of his level of understanding of patristic theology, although that evidence concerns the doctrine of the Trinity rather than Christology. That said, if we can be confident that his grasp was shaky on the one, it is likely to have been similarly weak on the other. In order to illustrate how easy it is to drift into theological error, he gives a list of various patristic trinitarian heresies, with a one-line definition of each one (p. 802/364). The definitions are essentially accurate; we might at worst complain that those he calls 'Monarchians' (including Praxeas) and those he calls 'Sabellians' are in fact guilty of the same error, but that is hardly a major historical blunder. His definitions are not, generally, technical, however: Aetius and Eunomius 'taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost were things or beings not of equal rank' (p. 802/364): this is true, but fails to notice the specificity of their teaching, that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were of different substances.

Almost immediately, however, he stumbles quite badly in narrating fourth-century doctrinal history more generally: 'certain church councils resolved that there were three hypostases in triunity, that is, three substances, and these *Homoousioi*, that is, of identical substance. Both these terms became suspect, Erasmus says' (p. 803/364). This last assertion is not entirely clear in translation, but in the original it is an explicit, and obviously erroneous, claim that both 'hypostasis' and 'homoousios' passed out of ecumenical use.²⁴ The earlier comment reflects a problem that was indeed live in the fourth century, that *substantia* was the natural Latin translation of both the two key Greek technical terms, *ousia* and *hypostasis*, rendering the central Cappadocian formula *mia ousia treis hypostases* unintelligible. Menno translates *hypostasis* as 'substance', suggesting that he is unaware of the quickly reached universal agreement to use *substantia* for *ousia*, and to find a different term (Augustine: *persona*; Rufinus of Aqueila: *subsistentia*; etc.) for *hypostasis*.

The list of heresies is, we may presume, substantially copied from one of many available sources for such lists; his confusion over very basic technical language indicates his lack of knowledge of classical dogmatics. This is not intended as a criticism, but as a useful datum for expounding his doctrine. He tries to make sense of what his critics are pressing on him, but simply lacks the categories and the technical definitions to do so. As we have already seen, Menno refers to his opponents as the 'learned ones', and when challenged about it, he protests that it is not irony or satire, but 'common politeness ... in the simplicity of my heart' (p. 787/355). This may be slightly disingenuous – one of Menno's themes is the snares of 'philosophy' in leading simple Christians away from the truth – but it is also surely an honest acknowledgement of his own lack of formal theological training.

²⁴There is an editorial footnote in *Complete Works* suggesting that 'both these terms' refers to *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, but the Dutch original specifies *hypostasis* and *homoousios*: 'namelijch *hipostases* ende *homusii*', *Opera*, p. 364. It is hard to know how both the translator and editor of *Complete Works* missed this straightforward assertion.

Positively, Menno is not very dissimilar to Hoffman, although more expansive in his response to his critics, and so offering a fuller account. Menno gives, for example, a much broader range of texts to support the basic heavenly flesh doctrine. To offer only a quick sample: 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven' (John 6:32–3, cited p. 796/360²⁵); 'What is it to ascend but that he first descended to the lowest parts of the earth?' (Eph 4:9, cited p. 797/361²⁶); 'I come forth from the Father, and am come into the world' (John 16:28, cited p. 798/361²⁷); 'the first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven' (1 Cor 15:47, cited p. 798/362). Menno is impatient with the careful distinctions his opponents offered, seeing no need for them. He believes his heavenly flesh account, as well as solving a crucial soteriological issue, is simply a plain-sense reading of scripture; those who refuse it are being led astray by human cleverness that is opposed to the simplicity of the gospel.

As with Hoffman, the key language for narrating the incarnation is 'becoming', with John 1:14 as the controlling text. The careful technical formulations of his critics are matched against this and found wanting; I have already cited his biting comment, 'He [the fourth evangelist] does not say, *The Word assumed a man of our or of Mary's flesh and dwelt in this...*' He addresses the question of 'change' directly, noting first that he has never used such language to speak of the incarnation, but then insisting that he will continue to speak with John of the Word 'becoming' flesh (p. 809/368). He offers some little explanation: 'change does not alter the basic substance of which a thing consists', with the example of Adam being made out of the dust of the earth, but remaining dust (Gen 3:19). He refuses to give any explanation beyond this, insisting that the divine Logos can become flesh without being changed, since this is what scripture teaches. We should not expect to understand, since the life of God is incomprehensible; further, scripture tells us specifically that the incarnation is incomprehensible: 'Truly, it is said, Who shall tell of his birth? Isa. 53:10; Acts 8:31' (p. 810/369).

The English translation obscures it, but Menno – and Dirk Philips with him – adopts a carefully precise formula to speak of the incarnation, which depends on the use of specific prepositions. Keeney, who I am following here, sums the point up as follows: 'Their formula was: Jesus Christ was conceived *in* ["in"] Mary *through* or *from* ["door" or "van"] the Holy Spirit, but was born *out of* ["uit"] Mary and not *from* ["van"] Mary. They also say that Jesus was born *from* [van] God *out of* [uit] Mary.'²⁸ This adds nothing to our understanding of his doctrine of the incarnation, but emphasises again the points he was concerned to protect, particularly the heavenly flesh doctrine.²⁹

²⁵The English translation restricts the citation to v. 32, but the Dutch original includes both verses.

²⁶The English translation cites v. 10, but v. 9 is cited in the Dutch. Either verse adequately makes the point.

²⁷Here, the Dutch original has 'Joan. 16.16' but the verse quoted is clearly v. 28, and so the English editorial amendment is appropriate.

²⁸Keeney, *Development*, p. 91. See also Appendix II, pp. 207–21, which gives extensive evidence of Menno's careful use (and some of Philips'), together with demonstration that Verduin's English translation of Menno is not, unfortunately, careful in preserving these distinctions, as I noted above.

²⁹Menno became increasingly insistent on his heavenly flesh doctrine (and on the right use of 'the ban', or excommunication) towards the end of his life, a move that has been interpreted as a developing legalism. See e.g. Christoph Bornhäuser, *Leben und Lehre Menno Simons* (Neukirchen-Vlyun: Neukircher Verlag, 1973), p. 60.

The continuation of the tradition: The Waterlander Mennonites and the English General Baptists

Oosterbaan ends his story with Menno, and goes on to consider how this tradition might be read as a prefiguring of some moves made by Barth.³⁰ It is not hard, however, to see the influence of this Anabaptist tradition of Christology, stressing the heavenly origin of the human nature of the incarnate one, and insisting that the mode of incarnation was ‘becoming’, continuing in some later Mennonite traditions. It is clearly present in the various published writings of Hans de Ries, arguably the greatest theologian of the Waterlander Mennonites, but unfortunately neglected by recent scholarship.³¹

A group of Polish Anabaptists adopted anti-trinitarian views in the second half of the sixteenth century,³² and sent missionaries to the Netherlands, which forced the Mennonites to look again at their Christology.³³ Hans de Ries wrote several responses,³⁴ including his 1578 Middleburg Confession;³⁵ he also collaborated with Lubbert Gerrits on the 1580 Waterlander Confession. The 1578 Confession was an apologetic work composed in prison to justify the Mennonites to the Reformed authorities; the 1580 Confession was an attempt to state the faith of the tradition without any immediate contextual trigger. In between the Confessions, de Reis wrote a brief treatise on Christology seeking to promote unity between the Emden Mennonites and the Waterlanders;³⁶ he wrote two other small manuscript treatises on Christology, which unfortunately remain unpublished.

Both Confessions clearly stand in the tradition of Menno’s Christology, asserting that the Word became flesh; both are also more careful than Menno ever was to deny various classical errors. The 1578 Confession is without doubt more

³⁰Oosterbaan, ‘Een doperse christologie’, pp. 43–7.

³¹The only serious study remains Dyck’s unpublished doctoral thesis from six decades ago: Cornelius J. Dyck, ‘Hans de Ries: Theologian and Churchman. A Study in Second Generation Dutch Anabaptism’ (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1962). Dyck published a number of articles and chapters based on his thesis, but none adds much to the material in the thesis, at least in the areas that have concerned me.

³²Lumpkin ascribes this to the influence of Faustus Socinius (William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969), pp. 42–3), perhaps understandably, given Faustus’ influence on the Church of the Minor Brethren in Poland fairly quickly afterwards (he assumed leadership in Kraków in 1580). Faustus, however, had rejected (more or less) any practice of baptism along with his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, and there is a definite moment around 1570–80 in which there is a clear anti-trinitarian but also credobaptist tradition in Poland. The best witness to their beliefs and practices is George Schomann, *Catechesis et Confessio fidei coetus per Polonium cogregati* (Kraków: Turobinus, 1574), an English translation of which is published in George H. Williams (ed. and trans.), *History of the Polish Reformation: And Nine Related Documents* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995). For the context and history see George H. Williams, ‘Radicalization of the Reformed Church in Poland 1547–1574: A Regional Variant of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65 (1991), pp. 54–68; and Robert Friedmann, ‘The Encounter of Anabaptists and Mennonites with Anti-Trinitarians’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (1948), pp. 139–62.

³³For an account of the history see Dyck, ‘Hans de Ries’, pp. 154–6.

³⁴The only recent published study is Cornelius J. Dyck, ‘Hans de Ries (d. 1638) and Socinianism’, in L. Szczucki (ed.), *Socinianism and its Role in the Culture of 16th to 18th Centuries* (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1983), pp. 85–95. Dyck, ‘Hans de Ries’, is also very useful.

³⁵For a translated text and some context, see Cornelius J. Dyck, ‘The Middleburg Confession of Hans de Ries, 1578’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (1962), pp. 147–54.

³⁶Hans de Ries, ‘Kopie van overeenkomst met ingevoegde korte belijdenis over den persoon van Christus’, in S. Blaupot ten Cate, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Groningen Overijssel en Oost-Friesland*, vol. 1 (Leeuwarden/Groningen: W. Eekhoff en J. B. Wolters, 1842), pp. 264–71.

accommodating, unsurprisingly given its provenance. It begins by insisting that 'Jesus Christ is truly God and man' and quickly turns to a careful demonstration of the former point.³⁷ Christ is 'of one will, one mind, one essence with the Father, of one substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit ... in His divine Being having neither beginning nor end...' The true humanity is next treated, beginning with the key assertion, 'became man'. This is of course unexceptional in the context of a heresy trial, being a simple citation of scripture, but its prominence indicates de Ries' ongoing commitment to an Anabaptist Christology. Further carefully chosen biblical phrases follow: 'through taking on the form of flesh, not through a change of his essence, He became of the seed of woman, of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David according to the flesh'. I suspect Menno might have bridled at 'taking on the form of flesh' as yet another attempt to evade the simple 'became' of John 1:14, but the language of 'taking on the form' has biblical precedent in Philippians 2:7, and it and the rest carefully leaves room for the heavenly flesh doctrine.

De Ries then goes far further than Menno ever did in conforming to the Chalcedonian definition: 'I have preached Christ Jesus as true God and man, having both a human and divine nature without intermixture, in one Person, the only Son of God.' Having said this, he strongly implies his commitment to heavenly flesh, whilst also insisting that he does not regard this as a soteriologically decisive doctrine (against both Menno and Hoffman): 'the Scriptures do not tie salvation to a knowledge of the origin of the flesh of Christ. Therefore we do not reject or condemn to hell those who are weak in confessing this...' We should not forget that de Ries was imprisoned when he wrote this, and so we must assume it to be the most conciliatory document that he felt able to produce in good conscience. From such a context, he essentially affirms Chalcedonian Christology, whilst insisting on the 'became' language of John 1:14, and on the heavenly origin of the flesh of Christ.

The 1580 Confession, intended for internal use, is far less interested in Chalcedonian categories. The doctrine of the Trinity is affirmed in simple and biblical language in Articles II–III, excluding the doctrines of the Polish anti-trinitarians;³⁸ the incarnation is dealt with in Article VIII. The 'eternal word, or Son' was 'in the body of the virgin Mary ... made flesh or man through the admirable power of God and the incomprehensible operation of his Holy Spirit'.³⁹ Having stated a clearly Anabaptist positive doctrine, the Article does employ some Chalcedonian negatives: 'Not indeed in such a manner that the divine Essence of the Word or any part of it was changed into visible and mortal flesh and this ceased to be Spirit...' The Anabaptist doctrine then reasserts itself: 'remaining the eternal Son of God ... he was made (what he was not before) namely flesh or man'.

The 1579 'Overeenkomst' is an interesting mediating piece. The concern to teach recognisably orthodox Christology is certainly there, and insisted upon as of first importance;⁴⁰ unsurprisingly, the language of 'becoming' (*geworden*) is also present,

³⁷Art. VI; Dyck, 'Middleburg Confession', p. 152. Further quotations in this paragraph are from the same article.

³⁸Lumpkin, *Confessions*, pp. 44–5.

³⁹Ibid., p. 48. Further quotations in this paragraph are from this article.

⁴⁰Sulc werd In dat eerste stuk openbaer en blykelyck Dwelck Den persoon cristij is betreffende waer in geloof, beleden en bekendt werdt, Dat christus Jesus warachtick godt Is en warachtigh mensche, Den enigen eerst geboren eygen sone Des alderhoogsten, warchtich godt en een Sone goodst van ewicheijt, maer een mensche Inder Laester tyt geworden, naer Der H. Scrifts. getuygenisse.' De Ries, 'Overeenkomst', p. 267 (in part: '...that Christ Jesus is true God and true man, The only firstborn own Son of the Most

although hardly insisted upon. The heavenly flesh Christology was clearly a point of difference between the two traditions (or perhaps within one or both) however, and the text essentially records an agreement to disagree.

Socinianism did become a problem within the Waterlander community, and a 57-point refutation was drawn up in 1604; another, briefer, set of Articles was drawn up in 1627 in response to the fear that an Amsterdam preacher, Nittert Obbes, had become anti-trinitarian.⁴¹ Article IV treats Christology, and asserts:

he ['the eternal Word of the Father'] who from all eternity has been the true, almighty God, existing as one and the same Being with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is and shall be in all eternity, he, we say, became man in the fulness of time, though remaining God, divine, and a spiritual Being with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as he has been from all eternity. He became what he was not, true man, like us in all things, except sin, that in his lowly state he might serve us as Savior.⁴²

Although not written by de Ries, this clearly displays his influence. The technical language of Chalcedon is absent, but there is an obvious concern for orthodoxy, coupled with a quiet maintenance of the language of 'becoming' to describe the incarnation. The possibility of change in the divine Logos is carefully excluded ('remaining God ... as he has been from all eternity'). The question of the origin of the flesh of the incarnate one is not raised at all – although nor is it particularly relevant to rebutting Socinian tendencies.

This doctrinal tradition is important right at the beginning of the story of my own, Baptist, tradition. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were leading a Separatist church in voluntary exile in Amsterdam in 1609, which congregation became collectively convinced that true Christian baptism could only be administered to those able to confess their personal commitment to Christ. They thus dissolved their church, and then Smyth baptised himself, and then the others one by one, before forming a new church, the first Baptist congregation. Shortly afterwards it seems that they encountered the local congregation of Waterlander Mennonites, who convinced them to give up their Calvinist beliefs, and who were committed to de Ries' version of the heavenly flesh Christology. Smyth began to doubt the validity of his self-baptism, and began conversations about unity with the Waterlanders.⁴³

The distinctive Christology became an issue, however, and, in combination with other tensions, led to a split in the Baptist congregation. John Smyth and the majority were not prepared to declare the Mennonite Christology orthodox, but were ready to accept that it was not a bar to unity; Thomas Helwys and his little group rejected this, and returned to London to begin the Baptist story. By 1626, the five congregations that identified with Helwys' tradition (he had died, probably in prison) were in contact

High, true God and a Son of God from eternity, but became human in the last days, according to the teaching of Holy Scripture'.

⁴¹The original can be found in Gerardus Maatschoen, *Aanhangsel, dienende tot een Vervolg of derde deel van de Geschiedenisse der Mennoniten* (Amsterdam: Kornelis de Wit, 1745), pp. 119–27; an English trans. may be found in Dyck, *Hans de Ries*, pp. 308–13.

⁴²Dyck, *Hans de Ries*, pp. 309–10.

⁴³See Stephen R. Holmes 'When did John Smyth Embrace "Arminianism" – and was the First Baptist Congregation "Particular"?', *Baptist Quarterly* 52 (2021), pp. 146–57, for some account of this history.

with the Waterlanders in Amsterdam seeking unity; the attempt failed, but not, apparently, over christological differences. We have a 1647 manuscript letter from one James Toppe, a member of the Tiverton Baptist church, to Mark Busher, an English Baptist who had remained in Amsterdam, and who had embraced some eccentric eschatological principles. Toppe mainly engages with these, but also addresses Christology in terms which suggest strongly that Busher was following in the Mennonite tradition.⁴⁴

Matthew Caffyn, a key leader of the English General Baptists throughout the second half of the seventeenth century (he was one of the three authors of the 1660 'Standard Confession' of the General Baptists, which remained significant both sides of the Atlantic well into the 1700s⁴⁵), also embraced the 'heavenly flesh' Christology I have been describing, and so was the occasion of controversy within the denomination in the last decades of the seventeenth century.⁴⁶ While Thomas Monck's 1673 text, *Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutychians*, the most adequate treatment of ecumenical doctrine produced by any General Baptist in the seventeenth century,⁴⁷ does not mention Caffyn by name, one of his disputants asserts it was written against him, and he accepts the charge.⁴⁸ Monck's 'New Eutychians' are those who assert the divine Logos was changed into human form in the incarnation. The textual evidence is less complete than for Menno, but I think there is enough to suggest that Caffyn would, like Menno, have denied the word 'changed' whilst insisting on 'became'.⁴⁹ Monck, and several later writers in the controversy that ensued, made reference (either for or against) to the strange biological argument concerning the lack of maternal input

⁴⁴The best scholarship on Toppe remains Walter H. Burgess, 'James Toppe and the Tiverton Anabaptists', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* 3 (1913), pp. 193–211; the manuscript response to Busher is held by the British Library: Sloane ms. 63 ff. 36–57.

⁴⁵Stephen R. Holmes, 'A Note Concerning the Text, Editions, and Authorship of the 1660 Standard Confession of the General Baptists', *Baptist Quarterly* 47 (2016), pp. 2–7.

⁴⁶The best current account of Caffyn's theology is Clint C. Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2020); he treats Christology on pp. 89–108. Bass's analysis of Caffyn's account of Christ's humanity locates him within the Anabaptist tradition I have been describing; there are a couple of points where I think we can be more specific than Bass, but I am in essential agreement with everything he argues there. When he turns to Christ's divinity, I think there is more to be said, but that is an argument for another time.

⁴⁷Thomas Monck. *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutychians...* (London: for the author, 1673). As far as I have been able to discover, the only seventeenth-century English writer who discussed the details of the heavenly flesh Christology in its continental forms was Spence, who commented in 1659 that 'the Melchiorists ... hold that Christ was not conceived and born of the blessed Virgin *Mary*, but only passed through her as water through a conduit; in which they agree with the old Eutychians'. Benjamin Spence, *Chrysomeon, a Golden Meane, or, A Middle Way for Christians to Walk By* (London: B.S. the author, 1659), p. 175. Given the coincidence in terminology, it is plausible to believe that Monck knew Spence's book, although there is no evidence to prove this.

⁴⁸See, for the assertion, Richard Haines, *New Lords, New Laws, or, A Discovery of a Grand Usurpation* (London: s.n., 1674), p. 6. For Caffyn's acquiescence, see Matthew Caffyn, *Envy's Bitterness Corrected with the Rod of Shame* (London: s.n., 1674), p. 31.

⁴⁹The evidence, such as it is, is Caffyn's impatience with the charge of asserting 'change' in *Envy's Bitterness* (cited above), and his repeated denial, and acquittal, of teaching 'change' through the 1690s. Finally, Wright records Caffyn as saying 'to say that the Eternal God could change into Flesh, Blood and Bones, and really die, is Blasphemy', but not accepting that this is a change in his longstanding beliefs; Joseph Wright, *Speculum Haereticis, or, A Looking-Glass for Heretics* (London: for the author, 1691), p. 11. By itself, these snippets would prove little; given that we have good evidence of Caffyn adopting a 'heavenly flesh' Christology, and that we know that an immutable becoming had become standard in that tradition, this evidence appears very suggestive.

to the development of a foetus that Menno had used, which seems to me good evidence of influence, rather than convergence, at this point: the argument is sufficiently idiosyncratic that it is hard to believe it was invented twice, particularly when we can trace plausible historical connections.⁵⁰

The controversy exploded in the 1690s, when it became entangled with some trinitarian disputes, and led to a schism within the denomination.⁵¹ The christological claim under dispute was that the Logos ‘was made flesh & Blood & Bones in the Virgins Womb Not by takeing flesh of the Virgin Mary But yt ye Matter (viz) the Word was turned into flesh in the Virgins Wombe’.⁵² It is this tradition of ‘heavenly flesh’ Christology which I am suggesting remained live into the 1690s and beyond. The dispute was complicated and at times angry, but it is striking that Caffyn was repeatedly, albeit never uncontroversially, acquitted of believing this formula. We cannot definitively know why (since the records we have note decisions, not debates), but, given that it is clear that Caffyn stood in the ‘heavenly flesh’ tradition, it might well be that, like Menno, he insisted on the biblical language of ‘becoming’, but denied that this entailed change, and that his defenders took him at his word, whereas his opponents thought this distinction mere sophistry.⁵³

It seems that, like Menno, Caffyn believed that in heaven, without change, the Word became flesh, and entered the world through the womb of the Blessed Virgin. Like Menno, he simply did not know what to do with ecumenical language of ‘persons’ and ‘natures’, rejecting it in favour of biblical terms that he believed were secure.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Monck supposes his opponents will insist that ‘no Child (say they) doth take any thing from his Mother but only nourishment, therefore Christ did not’, *Cure*, p. 101. Daniel Allen comments that ‘it is something pleasant to see old grave men discoursing so seriously and learnedly how far any Woman contributes towards any Child conceived in her’ Allen, *The Moderate Trinitarian...* (London: for Mary Fabian, 1699), p. 32. Christopher Cooper comments caustically in direct response to this line, ‘I know Matthew Caffin [*sic*] and his followers, because they would not have Christ to partake of the Virgin, do deny that any Child takes any thing of his Mother, but Form and Nourishment, not Flesh and Blood, which is so contrary, not only to Scripture, but to Reason and Married Persons Experience and Knowledge...’ Cooper, *The Vail Turn’d Aside...* (London: s.n., 1701), p. 70.

⁵¹Bass again gives the best narration of the 1690s debate currently available, although he gives no account of why Caffyn was repeatedly exonerated, which suggests that there must be something more to the story. Bass, *Caffynite Controversy*, pp. 44–63.

⁵²W. T. Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Church in England...*, 2 vols (London: Kingsgate Press, 1908), vol. 1, pp. 39–40. Alongside the *Minutes*, a near-contemporary text reports the same wording: Anon., *A Vindication of the Antient General Assembly...* (London: s.n., 1704), p. 5.

⁵³This is important in the context of the debate since the language of ‘becoming’, being scriptural, could not be condemned.

⁵⁴A striking piece of evidence, albeit relating to the Trinity, not to Christology, which is not noted by any study of Caffyn that I know, is his appeal to Sherlock’s *Vindication* soon after its publication. Sherlock was a non-juror, and had argued in the face of the Act of Toleration that nonconformity should remain illegal and punishable; he was therefore not an obvious source for Caffyn to cite. His *Vindication* was eccentric, and widely opposed, but was essentially an attempt to give an account of divine triunity that was responsible to Locke, did not invoke any concept of ‘nature’ and accepted the Cartesian redefinition of ‘person’. He offers, that is, an attempt at being trinitarian without the traditional terminology, which might have been very attractive to Caffyn. William Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: W. Rogers, 1690); for Caffyn’s invocation, see Wright, *Speculum Haereticis*, p. 28; for some narrative of the debates around Sherlock’s proposals, see variously: Martin Grieg, ‘Reasonableness of Christianity? Gilbert Burnet and the Trinitarian Controversy of the 1690s’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993), pp. 631–51; D. W. Dockrill, ‘The Authority of the

Caffyn died in 1714, although the dispute of which he was the epicentre had largely healed with the ending of the schism a few years earlier.⁵⁵ I am not aware of further notable representatives of this Christology beyond Caffyn.

Evaluating the tradition

So we have a doctrinal tradition that begins in Strasbourg in the 1520s, becomes standard (for some Mennonite traditions) in the Netherlands in the 1580s, lands in England in the 1620s and only disappears early in the eighteenth century; such a tradition is surely not insignificant, and the challenge for the historical theologian is how best to narrate it. In concluding I will address two themes: orthodoxy and biblicism.

Is this Christology orthodox? At the risk of invoking the most hackneyed of academic clichés, the answer will depend on our definition of ‘orthodox’. It would be possible to dismiss it as an undeveloped heresy – the denial of Chalcedonian orthodoxy is endemic (although not quite universal) in the tradition I have described, and there are basic questions of coherence (most saliently, how ‘becoming’ does not entail ‘change’) that are simply unanswered in the published sources we have. Every recent commentator I have read takes this route, branding it ‘Hoffmanite’ and monophysite; the editor of the standard English edition of Menno’s works is visibly just embarrassed by this aspect of his teaching,⁵⁶ as is his most recent biographer.⁵⁷ I want to suggest that such dismissals are, however, unfair.

‘Hoffmanite’ is historically inaccurate: there is a relatively settled form of the tradition from Menno in the 1550s to Caffyn in the 1690s that disagreed with Hoffman on key points (notably Hoffman’s teaching of eternity of the humanity of the incarnate one), and it seems clear that he was not the originator of the tradition – whether we accept the developing scholarly consensus that points to Ziegler, or Schwenckfeld’s self-asserted priority. ‘Monophysite’ is more interesting: as I have indicated above, it is formally inadequate because none of the exponents of the tradition I have been considering used ‘nature’ as a significant category; if we have to classify in such terms, they were perhaps ‘aphysite’ not ‘monophysite’ (although even ‘aphysite’ implies that *physis* is an important category, and so is misleading). As I have indicated, the charge of ‘Eutychnianism’ advanced by Spence and Monck depended on the assumption, denied explicitly by Menno and, I have argued, by Caffyn, that the ‘becoming’ of John 1:14 entailed change. To describe this tradition as monophysite is to force it into a

Fathers on the Great Trinitarian Debates of the Sixteen Nineties’, *Studia Patristica* 18 (1989), pp. 335–47, and Yudha Thianto, ‘Three Persons as Three Individual Substances: Joseph Bingham and the Trinitarian Controversy at Oxford in the 1690s’, *Fides et Historia* 40 (2008), pp. 67–86.

⁵⁵Resolution came soon after the death of Joseph Wright, who had begun the argument of the 1690s with his 1691 denunciation of Caffyn, *Speculum Haereticis*, and had been the most energetic in prosecuting the charges thereafter; this perhaps suggests that peace came from a lack of any further taste for conflict rather than from agreement.

⁵⁶I have given one example in n. 14 above; see also Simons, *Complete Works*, p. 420, where Wenger describes Menno’s Christology as ‘the most difficult point to explain, let alone defend’ and terms it ‘unfortunate’ that Menno wrote about the subject.

⁵⁷Abraham Friesen, *Menno Simons: Dutch Reformer between Luther, Erasmus, and the Holy Spirit* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2015), pp. 199–209, where Friesen first tries to distance Menno from the doctrine, then suggests it is an understandable error given his ‘mistake’ in accepting an Augustinian account of original sin.

Procrustean bed where all doctrines must be made to conform to patristic categories, however ill-fitting those categories are.

What, however, of 'orthodoxy'? It seems clear that most of those within this tradition were not willing to subscribe to the Chalcedonian definition, or to any document that specified orthodoxy in its language. If that is enough to render them unorthodox (as it would be for Christian traditions that regard conciliar pronouncements as authoritative), then we have our answer. That said, I have tried to show that this nonsubscription is best explained by ignorance of the proper meanings of the technical terms, not by any disagreement with the doctrine taught. When Menno dismisses the language of Chalcedon, he makes clear that what he thinks he is rejecting is what the tradition would call Nestorianism: an unacceptable separation of the divine and human in the incarnation. Menno, that is, and the others with him, could not access Chalcedonian doctrine to have an opinion on it, because they did not understand the language in which it was couched. If this is correct, then his nonsubscription does not, I think, necessarily make them unorthodox.

We might then ask whether, even if expressed in different terms, their doctrine substantially agrees with Chalcedonian orthodoxy? De Ries' 1578 Confession might be the key example here, expressing an authentically Anabaptist Christology in terms that are as amenable as possible to the Chalcedonian tradition, as he sought to justify his faith from prison. As noted above, given John 1:14, it is hard to argue that the language of the Word 'becoming flesh' is a barrier to orthodoxy of itself, so the only possible sticking-point is the insistence on heavenly flesh. By now it should be clear that this is not a denigration of the true humanity of Christ: proponents of an Anabaptist Christology would in fact argue the opposite, that if Christ takes his humanity from Mary, it is a sinful, fallen, vitiated humanity; heavenly flesh is true humanity, such as Adam and Eve possessed before the fall.

I believe it is an error to separate Jesus' human nature from the Blessed Virgin, and also that it is unnecessary;⁵⁸ it does not seem to me to be an error of major significance, however. It does not compromise any of the dogmatically crucial points of Christology (it probably makes it harder to argue that Mary is properly called *Theotokos* as the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon require, but I am not now considering the position that orthodoxy requires explicit assent to every conciliar definition). I suspect it creates a certain pressure towards limiting or denigrating the place of Israel in salvation history, which is not a good thing, but unhappy pressures can be resisted, particularly if clearly identified, and there is no historical evidence that the Mennonite/Baptist traditions were more guilty of anti-Semitism than others around them.

Those who I have placed in the tradition of Anabaptist Christology would be impatient (or worse) with my discussion so far, however; for them the only measure of orthodoxy was fidelity to the Bible. As Menno did at length, they would point to the fact that they were offering plain-sense readings of texts that their allegedly orthodox opponents had to gloss and qualify and evade, and so they would proclaim the superiority of their christological formulations. There are of course various possible responses to this, including noting that they invoke a very limited range of texts, and suggesting

⁵⁸Quickly, the error made – the same as that made by the late twentieth-century theologies that argued that the human nature of Jesus had to be fallen and sinful for him to be able to redeem fallen and sinful humanity – is to assume that the qualifier 'fallen' changes the ontological status of human nature; there is no good reason to think this and, assuming we follow the traditional line of narrating evil simply as privation, at least one very good reason not to.

that texts they do not invoke might challenge their account forcefully. Further, good historical work might demonstrate the ways in which the fourth- and fifth-century debates were basically exegetical, and further show that the extra-biblical distinctions were invented to aid exegesis, to make it possible to read wider and wider circles of texts without discovering apparent contradiction.

Taking them at their own estimation, however, leads to an interesting thought: what if their christological formulations might be developed to a point where they could be judged as successful a set of conceptualities for Christology as the Chalcedonian categories were? Is there space for an account of a different-but-equal orthodoxy? Now, it seems clear to me that, at least in the examples I have studied, they were very far from this goal; the range of texts read and invoked was very limited, and there are questions of conceptual coherence (perhaps most significantly around the becoming/change distinction, which seems necessarily fairly central, as it is the operative account of how the incarnation actually happens⁵⁹). Their failure to reach it does not make the goal either unobtainable or uninteresting however. Some of the most celebrated and significant advances in ecumenical understanding in recent decades have come about as a result of work like this, recognising that terms used differently might achieve equivalent meaning – the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, for example, or the achievements of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, which has pronounced that there is theological agreement between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox on christological questions, despite continuing disagreement on the canonical status of the Council of Chalcedon.⁶⁰ Might there be, one day, a non-Chalcedonian but orthodox Anabaptist Christology?

My second theme for this conclusion is biblicism. I have argued that the writers I have been discussing did not understand ecumenical orthodoxy, and so were not in a position to reject it. Instead, with effectively a blank page, they attempted to invent a Christology adequate to the scriptures. It is striking how often they relegate fourth-century debates: Menno on one page considers the ‘anyone begotten must have a beginning’ argument, the image of the sun, its brightness and its heat, and the ‘God cannot be without God’s wisdom’ argument, all very familiar to students of the debates post-Nicaea.⁶¹

One response to this would be to insist that ignorance is necessarily culpable; there are various Christian groups – we might use the term ‘biblicist’, acknowledging that it has been used in other ways by others – who neglect the tradition and pursue their own, generally fumbling, modes of explanation based on their own idiosyncratic readings of the scriptures. I suggest that we need to make distinctions amongst these biblicist movements, distinctions which are illustrated by the early modern tradition I have been describing, but are still relevant today. With very brief exceptions, the people and

⁵⁹It may seem hard to imagine an account of becoming that does not involve change. Classical Christology, however, insists that we confess that the second person of the Trinity can assume a human nature into personal subsistence with himself whilst remaining immutable, which is hardly less challenging conceptually.

⁶⁰There is extensive discussion in Christine Chaillot (ed.), *The Dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches* (Volos: Volos Academy Publications, 2016); for a helpful overview, see Ciprian Toroczka, ‘Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches in Dialogue: Reception, Disagreement and Convergence’, *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 8 (2016), pp. 253–6.

⁶¹Simons, pp. 860–1/p. 562; for the fourth-century debates, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

movements I have referenced in this paper lived constantly under persecution. Menno somehow managed to avoid prison, but there was a standing price on his head, and at least two people were executed, for the ‘crime’ of putting him and his family up for a night. One of de Ries’ most interesting accounts of Christology was written in prison, attempting to make his faith comprehensible and conformable to Reformed judges; his own expectations of a fair trial can be gauged by the fact that he and his wife chose to escape covertly, rather than face the court. Thomas Monck was amongst several non-conformists sentenced to death for heresy when an over-zealous local official discovered an old statute had not been repealed; they were only saved because King Charles II was deeply in debt to a Baptist merchant, who could thus command an urgent audience.⁶²

Caffyn was jailed repeatedly through his life; less seriously, but perhaps more pertinently, he was sent down from Oxford in the second year of his studies because he had become open about his Baptist convictions. (An early biographer suggests that the Oxford divines demanded his removal because, try as they might, they could not refute his arguments;⁶³ I suspect that the reality was less romantic and more sordid, as persecution generally is.) This is, I suggest, the key datum for judging his ignorance, and that of this entire tradition: he was actively and unjustly prevented from learning, and so he cannot be held culpable for his ignorance. Censuring religious minorities as if they were responsible for the inevitable results of the persecution inflicted on them has been a common enough move through history, but it is not one that can ever be regarded as fair or reasonable. Further, a group being persecuted by a state church has rather less reason to take appeals to the tradition seriously: a German Anabaptist, say, being told that the Catholics, Reformed and Lutherans all agreed on Chalcedonian Christology has good reason to find this uninteresting, given that all three traditions also all agreed that Anabaptists should be hunted down and killed.

Their biblicism, then, was forced upon them; denied the opportunity to learn the traditional theological moves, and inevitably alienated from the broader Christian tradition by persecution, they developed their own, idiosyncratic, concepts and arguments, inevitably drawing from the language of scripture. Although the recent development of the discipline of ‘subaltern studies’ through Guha to Spivak has been focused on post-colonial analysis, Gramsci’s original use of the word ‘subaltern’ included European religious minorities in a fairly central place, and so I will risk using the word here.⁶⁴ The term ‘subaltern’ does, after all, seem the only one we currently have to name the ‘other others’, and in religious terms that seems an important category. The Anglican persecutions of the seventeenth century were harsh on all nonconformists, but most could look elsewhere for hope: England nearly did become Catholic again; Presbyterians could look – or move – to Scotland; Independents founded the colonies in New England; even the Society of Friends tried, in Pennsylvania. The Anabaptists and Baptists I have been considering had no earthly city, however, and were rendered aliens and strangers on the earth, finding at best occasional temporary refuges of grudging

⁶²For Menno, see Friesen, *Menno Simons*, pp. 265–80; I have referenced de Ries’s prison confession above; for Monck, see Arnold H. J. Baines, ‘The Signatories of the Orthodox Confession of 1679’, *Baptist Quarterly* 17 (1957), pp. 36–42; and Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols (London: for the author, 1738–40), vol. 2, p. 281.

⁶³Crosby, *History*, vol. 4, p. 329.

⁶⁴See e.g. Marcus E. Green, ‘Rethinking the Subaltern and the Question of Censorship in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*’, *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (2011), pp. 387–404; or Fabio Frosini, ‘Subalterns, Religion, and the Philosophy of Praxis in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*’, *Rethinking Marxism* 28 (2016), pp. 523–39.

tolerance – Poland in the sixteenth century; the Netherlands in the seventeenth; England, briefly, under the Commonwealth – where they were more or less permitted to live on the edges of society, provided they kept out of sight. (The Mennonites became known as ‘the quiet in the land’ in the Netherlands, and later in North America.)

This leads to a second reflection: Spivak’s classic essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, constructs the subaltern in legal terms: local subordinate elites conspire with ruling elites to create the reality of multiple exclusion (this is true both of her initial construction of the category, and in her later analysis of subaltern gender in considering *sati*).⁶⁵ This is Guha’s buffer group, Derrida’s *autre*. As I have already indicated, these multiplied levels of legal exclusion were exactly the situation the people I have been considering found themselves in, and so borrowing the terms does seem appropriate.

Lastly, however, Spivak’s essay goes to the heart of my interest in biblicist groups, in history and in the contemporary world: can they speak? Does their failure to engage with the tradition, and their idiosyncratic and sketchy theology, render them unworthy participants in, or even objects of, academic theological study? Here, I want to make a key distinction: some biblicist groups choose their separation: the modern Christian fundamentalist movement leverages its extensive privilege and power to create spaces (parallel denominations, educational institutions, media, etc.) where it can be free from the challenge of negotiating contemporary theology. Those who take this route are not, of course, subaltern; they do not struggle to speak, but I see little reason why we should trouble ourselves to listen; their alienation is their own choice, and enacted by their own agency. The Mennonites and Baptists I have considered above, however, were recognisably subaltern, and they have not been allowed to speak. Dismissed as Hoffmanite or monophysite, their own attempts at theological construction have been silenced by generations of scholars; I have indicated that, when forced to notice the peculiarities, even Menno’s modern editor, and his most recent biographer, each responded with evident embarrassment and with apology.

Can these subalterns speak? I began this essay with a superscription taken from bell hooks; the fuller passage runs:

No need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.⁶⁶

This feels like a good description of the way historical and theological scholarship has treated Menno, Caffyn and the rest, supposing that their thought is best understood through our categories, and that their independent constructions are therefore of less value in explicating their thoughts. The silencing of obscure and tiny baptistic groups in the early modern period may not be a scholarly catastrophe, but there are similar groups today – I think of my own engagement at various points with leaders of

⁶⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66–111.

⁶⁶bell hooks, ‘Marginality as a Site of Resistance’, in R. Ferguson et al. (eds), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), p. 343.

underground congregations in countries where Christianity, or some tradition thereof, is still illegal, or with newly founded worshipping communities of immigrant believers in London and elsewhere. I can only offer brief anecdote here, but I remember some years ago having the chance to speak at length to a group of forty to fifty underground church leaders (through an interpreter, herself engaged in illegal mission work) overseas; the first question I was asked concerned the distinction between 'rhema' and 'logos' in the New Testament; I am confident that this has never come up in all my years in the academy, but through ecclesial involvement I was aware that this distinction has been used in Pentecostal/charismatic circles as a way of negotiating the different levels of authority to be given to scripture and contemporary prophecy, and so was able to engage with the questioner in what I hope was a useful conversation about (what with my students I would call) the sources for theology. Again, working in the UK with the Evangelical Alliance, I was several times asked to look at a confessional statement of some newly formed church to determine whether it was adequate or not (this in the context of membership applications); the language would often be extensively biblical, with little or no evidence of awareness of the categories of the eumenical formulae.

I am working on these Mennonites and Baptists in the hope and expectation that learning to hear their voice will provide models, perhaps even methodologies, for learning to hear the silenced voices of contemporary biblicist subalterns. How, in our properly critical scholarship, do we at least try to avoid becoming the coloniser hooks imagines, renarrating their stories in our terms? I propose that, as a very preliminary first step, we must at least recognise that in many cases, including the one I have described, we have failed badly in that task so far, and that reflection on those failures, and how they might have been avoided, is a pressing task.⁶⁷

⁶⁷I was honoured to be invited to give a public lecture at the fifteenth-anniversary celebrations of the Westminster Theological Centre in 2021 and tried out some of this material there; it also had a briefer airing in a short paper at the Society for the Study of Theology in 2022. I am grateful for interaction in both contexts. One of the pastors of my church, the Revd Dr Paulus de Jong, helped me with some issues with translating from Dutch; any errors of course remain entirely my responsibility, but I am very grateful for his aid.