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# Memories from the margins? Anniversaries, Anabaptists and rethinking Reformations

Kat Hill<sup>1</sup>**ABSTRACT**

With the recent 500-year jubilee of the Lutheran Reformation, Reformation anniversaries have become big business and the subject of much scholarly debate. This paper considers the question of anniversaries in relation to supposedly marginal religious groups in the era of the Reformation. What do they choose to commemorate? How did they fit into our accounts of religious change? And what does memory from the margins tell us? The paper argues that considering memories and anniversaries amongst these communities allows us to reassess our categories of mainstream and marginal in relation to religious change in the early modern world and beyond, and to reconsider some of our narratives about the legacies of religious change.

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## Introduction

2017 was ‘Luther year’, the 500-year anniversary of the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses and the start of the Reformation. Ten years of preparation from the Lutheran Church and German authorities culminated in celebrations all over the world. From poetry slams to movies, panorama installations to conferences, heritage tours to a wave of publications, Luther 2017 sparked intense intellectual and academic analysis about the meaning of religious change in early modern Europe.<sup>1</sup> (Marshall, 2017; Roth, 2017, pp. 11–13).

Anniversaries and moments of memory activation invite us to consider what narratives are being shaped about the past and what narratives we as historians and scholars want to tell. Remembrance inevitably sparks renewed debates about origins and outcomes, and we can learn much about a movement, nation or community at times of commemorative celebration. The first big 500-year Reformation jubilee, that of Luther’s birth, initiated a battle for ownership of his memory in a fractured Germany in the dying days of the GDR (Hoffmann, 1986; Scott, 1984). From 2014–2018, visitors might have experienced the nuanced differences of nationally inflected exhibitions commemorating the anniversary of World War One in, for example, Belgium, France, England, and Germany.<sup>2</sup> The 100-year anniversary of women’s right to vote and the suffragettes has struck chords with the contemporary #MeToo movement. The Luther anniversary was, it seemed to many, a chance to embrace a more ecumenical Luther, though there have also been concerns about the way in which commemorations renewed a hero image of the reformer (Evangelical Church in Germany, 2013; Roth, 2017).

But what if we did not focus on Luther’s story? The years 2025 and 2027 will mark the anniversary of a different part of the Reformation. These are the dates that the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) has picked to commemorate the origins of Anabaptism. 2025 recalls the moment at which Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock in Zurich ‘to ignite a brand-new Anabaptist movement which countered the movements of Luther, Zwingli and Catholicism’.<sup>3</sup> 2027 coincides with 500 years since the appearance of the Schleitheim Articles, a statement of Anabaptism’s separation from the world, and the Martyrs’ Synod, a meeting which established a principle of mission. (It earned its name because many of its principle participants died soon after). The significance of these dates is clear, but any such immediate connection is sidestepped on the front page of the MWC’s website for the anniversary which focuses on the message of what has been titled ‘Renewal 2027’. Renewal 2027 was launched in the same year as the 500-year anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and is presented as a chance for ecumenical discussion within and beyond the Mennonite church, with ten years of events designed to invigorate Anabaptist faith globally.<sup>4</sup> These events are not likely to be on most people’s radar and will not spark the same rash of publishing as Luther’s 2017. Nor are the events uncontroversial amongst Mennonites some of whom question whether these anniversaries are an appropriate or relevant celebration of Mennonite identity (Goossen, 2017b). For Mennonite communities and Mennonite scholars the question of anniversaries has stoked intense debate about the historical narratives that surround these public rituals of commemoration. (Roth, 2017, pp. 24–30; Osborne, 2017). Considering the anniversary celebrations and controversies of the lesser known part of the Reformation story, however, is also a chance for Reformation scholars to revisit some of our accounts of religious change and its legacies. What if we switched our perspective to those who were supposed to be on the edges of the story? What do the debates within the Mennonite community reveal about these memories and anniversaries more broadly? What new questions or old problems might we consider by examining remembrance from

the edges of the Reformations? Memory on the margins makes us reconsider the centre.

The Mennonite church, which is coordinating the 500-year anniversary, has its roots in Anabaptism. This reforming movement of the sixteenth century rejected infant baptism along with many of the conventional structures of society, such as swearing oaths and serving in the military (Stayer, 2002; Goertz, 1996). Anabaptism is not well integrated into Reformation histories. Histories of the radical or ‘left-wing’ of the Reformation remain understudied and marginalized from the mainstream historiographical scholarship on the Reformation, and despite a spate of histories produced in the 1970s and 80s on early modern Anabaptism, Anabaptist studies have not seen the same energy since. New waves of scholarship have started to redress this problem, recognizing the fundamentally problematic label of the ‘radical Reformation’ and a group of new researchers are spearheading moves to bring Anabaptist histories into the digital age with the open access website, Anabaptist Historians.<sup>5</sup> Scholarship in the last fifteen years has seen a handful of important monographs on Anabaptist and Mennonite histories (Driedger, 2002; Räisänen-Schröder, 2011; Monge, 2015; Hill, 2015; Goossen, 2017a). But the scholarly imbalances and the division between mainstream and radical persist, especially for the pre-modern era.

Not everyone agrees that Anabaptist studies are an endangered enclave (Dipple, 2009; p. 244). Anabaptism does have a rich historiography, and there are Mennonite presses and journals, notably the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, which are energetic and stimulating fora. However, the specialist focus of this publishing can also reiterate the boundaries separating scholarship. Research is often produced in confessional contexts, and though confessional history in itself is not inherently problematic, I would agree with academics who stress that there has been a return to confessionalised scholarship in Reformation studies. The 2017 anniversary sharpened this in many cases, despite its claims to ecumenism, and has reinforced a sense of separatism. Even sources may be divided. A special series exists for documents on the Anabaptist reform movement (with the tactical name change from the pejorative ‘Wiedertäufer’ to ‘Täufer’ in the late 1930s).<sup>6</sup> So, while students of the European Reformation may have a week on radical Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, few courses touch on much beyond this or examine the longer-term traditions that evolved from non-conformist impulses.

The distorting nature of this scholarship has broader implications. It matters that Anabaptists have been on the edges of historiography since it is partly a symptom and consequence of one of the biggest, most problematic debates in Reformation historiography: confessionalisation (Brady, 2004). Reformation scholars have for some time sought ways to write histories which go beyond the confessionalisation thesis which ties long-term narratives of religious change into accounts of state, discipline, and institutions. Confessionalization neglects alternatives to the model of institutional faith, faiths often related to national identity and larger historical narratives of the rise of nationalism, and thus it omits a fundamental and long-lasting element of confessional change (Lotz-Heumann, 2001). Moments of memory and celebration, therefore, are a chance for academics to address these questions. Anniversaries bring to the fore big debates about origins and futures, as well as the place of communities in the contemporary world, and so often implicate national and international institutions. Though there are questions about its success, a major emphasis of the Luther 2017 commemoration, for example, was to attempt to move away from national and confessionalised narratives and embrace a more ecumenical vision for Lutheranism’s future in the modern

world (LWF and PCPCU, 2017).<sup>7</sup> The run of Reformation anniversaries can stimulate conversations which re-invigorate scholarship.

### Anabaptists memories

There are over 2 million Anabaptists in the world,<sup>8</sup> and the MWC 500-year celebrations for many are a remembrance of those things that characterize the collective memory of their communities—an emphasis on the separation between church and state, a history of persecution and martyrdom, freedom of religion, liberty of conscience, and elective entry into the church. It is also seen as a chance to assess and reinvigorate Mennonite identity in the contemporary world (Roth, 2017). Clearly memory matters to Mennonites (and their close cousins the Amish and Hutterites). For numerous Mennonites, there exists a deep sense of connection to their early modern past, its martyrs and heroes.

But whilst the 2025/2027 centenary will be a celebration coordinated by the MWC, the reality is of course that cultures of memory amongst Anabaptist descendants go far beyond the official celebration and central structures. The attitudes which form the global backdrop to the planned commemorations are rooted not in national churches and state institutions, but family, communal and personal memories which have preserved the sense of the past and collective remembrance. Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites all migrated great distances from the sixteenth century onwards. This was not always the result of persecution and exile, as a traditional Anabaptist narrative might suggest, but Anabaptists undeniably traveled far. Communities moved from northern and central Europe to Russia and Ukraine, migrated to the Americas, or undertook confessional work in India, south east Asia, and Africa. As people move, memories travel with them. Indeed, for Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites, memory was a critical tool for bridging the gap between communities dispersed across wide areas and separated from society in a variety of ways. Memory is central to diasporic identity (Agnew, 2005; Baronian, et al., 2007, pp. 11–12). Anabaptist memories existed in the records kept by their own churches, family possessions or personal recollections which bound the community together. Mennonites in contemporary Manitoba or Kansas, for example, have objects, documents and shared narratives which trace cross-generational diasporic histories in Europe, Russia and beyond.

We can only follow these histories and memories if we look beyond conventional institutional and geographical boundaries, since the very core of Mennonite, Hutterite and Amish identity is in the communities of dispersion which stretched across regions. Memory in these diasporic communities could not tell the same story as institutional churches. Lutheran memories had an inclusive message in 2017 which looked to a global Lutheran culture but also reasserted the dominance of Wittenberg. Calvinist memories are focused on Geneva. Anabaptist memories have been of a more disparate nature, though the MWC's focus on 2025 and the Swiss origins of the movement has caused controversy by centring Anabaptist histories on one location determined by a central committee.

But why does it matter to think about this type of memory? Is it not just one more anniversary, one more strand of the legacy of the Reformation era? First, it reveals issues concerning contemporary Mennonite identity in relation to an early modern past and a diasporic identity. Debates arose whether the date for a Mennonite anniversary should be 2025 or 2027,<sup>9</sup> or indeed whether 2017 should have been the date for celebration. The result is ten years of renewal announced in 2017, culminating in 2027 but with a celebration of 2025 in Switzerland along the way. Deeper unease amongst some members of the community has focused on the way in which any anniversary of this kind

reinforces a monogenetic heritage which excludes the global church and diversity, and even alludes to a form of European ethnic purity (Goossen, 2017b). The monogenesis versus polygenesis debate about Anabaptist origins is long-standing but seems not to have died (Stayer et al., 1975). An official celebration which gives one line of interpretation and reinforces one normative view of Anabaptist and Mennonite heritage, rather than recognize all the alternatives and global perspectives, is problematic. It is possibly in dialogue with these concerns that Africa is a suggested location for the 18<sup>th</sup> Mennonite World Conference Assembly (Roth, 2017, p. 32).

Some counterpoint views to the 2025 and 2027 dates also argue that the Anabaptist church did not originate in the sixteenth century since it was a continuation and successor to the Apostolic church of Christ (Roth, 2017, pp. 22–23; Goossen, 2017b). This was the line taken by the two most famous Anabaptist historical works, the seventeenth-century *Martyrs Mirror* and the Hutterite *Great Chronicle*. Such a view, however, can be equally problematic and elide the constant and shifting creative power of memory formation and the way in which recollections have been reinvented across the centuries. There are, too, always political questions at stake in commemorations (Goossen, 2017b). Mennonites, not the Amish or Hutterite, are driving the 500-year anniversary, but it is presented as celebration for all Anabaptists. What does it tell us that this celebration matters most for the better integrated and politically active part of the Anabaptist legacy, and that this is intertwined with institutional and confessional narratives? Anniversaries after all always serve some purpose, and 2025 also coincides with the 100-year anniversary of the foundation of the Mennonite Central Committee, so some would argue that this has more to do with institutional and political positioning than organic commemoration (Goossen, 2017b). We should remember that the official celebrations are only one part of memory; we have to look beyond to broader memory cultures, to individuals and local communities. Memory is the aggregation of these narratives, as much as central celebrations. The intense debate amongst different Anabaptist traditions is a stark reminder of the power and importance of diasporic memory, but also the need to recover alternatives to centralized commemorations.

Scholarship should consider how memory cultures themselves are created and recreated, why and when, and in what contexts. Centenaries and anniversaries of origins, celebrated centrally, are a relatively modern phenomenon. 1925 marked the first major Mennonite anniversary when the new Mennonite World Conference convened in Basel and there do not seem to have been parallel events in 1825 or before. Earlier celebrations and associated controversies existed. In 1861 various Mennonite communities celebrated the death of Menno Simons and a call was issued in 1859 by August Heinrich Neufeld, pastor of the Ibersheim Mennonite congregation in Rhine-Hesse, for 'every Mennonite congregation in the Old World and the New' to plan for the date. The proposed celebrations sparked considerable controversy which revealed the fault lines in nineteenth-century Mennonite society (Roth, 2017; Urry, 2007). Thus, historians should be sensitive to the way in which memories are chosen, contested, and narrated, how they vary and shift, and how they exist at different levels. For specific communities, individuals, and families, it might be personal or local commemorations which held the most weight, and memory cultures had local inflections. Mennonites in Chortitza (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine) erected monuments in the late nineteenth century to figures of their past, to Johann Bartsch and Jakob Höppner, the men who had negotiated the details of the settlement for Mennonite migration from Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century (Urry, 2007). Research needs to understand the way in which memory has been

constructed at local, regional and familial levels, as well as focusing on global and international commemorations.

Second, I would argue that by interrogating Anabaptist memories as this anniversary approaches, we can uncover novel trajectories for the long-lasting legacies of the Reformation throughout the world and in so doing address some of the fundamental debates of the Reformation era. It opens up new perspectives on both our histories of non-conformist groups in the early modern world, and the implications for how religious change has shaped global culture. The debates over anniversaries have sharpened questions of the interaction between the Reformation legacies of Anabaptism and Lutheranism (and other traditions) and brought to the fore the continued global power of these Anabaptists networks of memory. Such trends undermine the sense of marginality and separateness that has shaped Anabaptist historiography, but also call into question broader religious narratives which still seem to rest on notions of confessionalisation. The nature of the relationship between these different religious communities and the 500-year celebrations matters, and any student of the Reformation needs to understand those labeled both marginal and mainstream.

It is only from the margin though that we can rewrite the centre. Until we question the narratives of the marginal, we will be forever locked into the modes of persecuted and persecutor. Anniversaries do not always help in this reassessment since they have in some ways reasserted confessional narratives and normative divisions. In 2010, as preparations for 2017 were getting under way, the Lutheran World Fellowship offered an official apology to Anabaptists for past persecutions. The divided memory cultures sought rapprochement but also in many ways reiterated division (Roth, 2017, 5–7). Such an event reinforces normative Mennonite self-definitions of the confession as a persecuted minority without asking how this cultural narrative evolved, or what happened when communities or individuals chose not to follow this path. Looking from the edges, we can see that Anabaptists were not always a persecuted minority, they were not marginal to histories, and they did not always search for the peaceful, quiet way (Urry, 2006).

And looking from the centre, we have neglected the importance of supposedly marginal groups in our long histories of the Reformation. Anabaptist descendants are a visible presence across much of America. Nearly every north American, it seems, has a Mennonite, Hutterite or Amish story. They have seen the buggies, been to the farms, or visited the churches. Yet these communities still seem a curiosity. Amish communities in Pennsylvania, for example, are a tourist attraction more than a subject of scholarly discussion. Amish, Hutterites and more conservative Mennonites of the Old Order tradition do not necessarily sit easily in our narratives of historical development and modernity. For those from outside the tradition, they seem an outdated relic of an older time, but their existence problematizes our notions of Reformation legacies.

It becomes difficult to argue, for example, that the unintended effect of the Reformation was secularization (Gregory, 2012). In a series of six essays, Gregory proposed that the Protestant Reformation questioned authority in ways which led to a multiplicity of competing claims to truth and this resulted ultimately in the privatization of faith, the power of the state over church, and secularization. But there are problems with this account. If we are to write narratives which escape the pitfalls of a return to confessionalisation but also appreciate Reformation legacies on their own terms we have to be able to understand the dynamics of the communities of Pennsylvanian Amish or Old Order Mennonites in Belize. And we also have to be able to contain accounts of Mennonites who are integrated into modern Canada, Hutterites who reject televisions and much modern media but embrace the

best farming technologies, or Amish communities who live separate lives but actively engage in a form of tourism which plays on their traditionalism. Such solutions do not represent secularization necessarily but alternative models for recreating faith and adapting. For Gregory, division has shattered a more universal sense of faith but for Mennonites, for example, the broken body of the church can also be a symbol of the quest for faithfulness and of following the right path which diverts from the mainstream (Roth, 2017, p. 28). Splintering may have led to diversity, but it can also provide energy. Furthermore, a sense of secularizing decline can also be seen as a particularly western-centric narrative, and Reformation legacies must be able to appreciate the explosion of Christianity in the global south.

Mennonite memory brings into sharper focus other issues about Reformation memory and the need to look beyond the official celebrations. Focusing on Luther 2017 in a way which reinforces the norms of the mainstream and the marginal absents a major and important part of the Reformation legacies in European, Eurasian and north American history, and beyond into Africa, Japan, India, and Korea. Deeply rooted identity and multifaceted memories have shaped Anabaptist communities and cultures across the world: from Prussia militarism to Tsarist expansion, from the American west to the world wars, from south American colonies of Mennonites to the power of contemporary Protestant churches in the global South, even to questions of how Mennonites should respond to Trump. Understanding the geographical spread of Anabaptist groups and the way in which their communities evolved across the diaspora opens up other archives, resources and memory cultures. New archives, new sources and new regions all offer promising concrete areas for research on Reformation legacies.

First, scholarship can look to understudied or neglected archives and records which provide alternative histories to accounts of confessional change. Whilst Mennonite archives in north America, for example, are an important resource for scholars of Mennonite history and communities themselves, they remain little studied by Reformation historians more generally. Yet, there is a wealth of material in the church and family fonds which continues to come into these repositories. There are surprising finds in archives across Europe and beyond, such as the histories of Mennonite communities in regional Polish archives or the church books of Mennonites, Quakers and other groups that have made their way into German state archives. A comprehensive understanding of the complex archival traces would allow a much richer account of the long legacies of the Reformation.

Second, we must think about the diverse way in which memory was enacted and histories recorded. This might be by paying closer attention to the way in archives themselves and their construction shape memory. The contents, materials and organization of archives reflect power relations (Stoler, 2009) and scholars have started to write the social history of archives (Ketelaar, 2004). Unpicking these archival histories, such as the reasons why Mennonites have come to create their own archives, will in turn shed light on the history of confessional memory and memory making. Furthermore, focusing on the transmission and function of memory could lead us to think about the very different memory cultures amongst all those included amongst Anabaptists. The memory practices of Mennonites who have created extensive records differ from the Old Order Amish who eschew formal archiving but rely on family and oral histories. The implications of different practices of recalling pasts and the power relations between different memory cultures is essential to the construction of more dynamic narratives of religious cultures.

Third, we might think about the way in which memory and confessional legacies were enacted across different media.

Discussions of Reformation anniversaries have tended to focus on written narratives, documents and recorded history. But memory and connections to the past exist in other ways. How did objects function as embodiments of tangible connections with a past? How did the landscape and environment tell stories of connection? Mennonites draw on memories of the great Chortitza oak which grew in Ukraine where Mennonites settled in the late eighteenth century but whose acorns have traveled across the Atlantic. Considering material and environmental sources, as well as written documents will help us understand legacies in diachronic and global perspective or the ways in which communities negotiate their interaction with the contemporary world.

Finally, scholarship can think about memory, community and identity in areas which have not been part of more conventional narratives of Reformation legacies. This means uncovering new trajectories for communities who are not part of the traditional accounts of survival, such as Mennonite who migrated down to the Black Sea from Russia and Ukraine rather than crossing the Atlantic. More broadly, it means focusing on global histories of Mennonites and Protestantism in general, particularly in the global south, exploring questions of community, race and place in a post-colonial era.

These new avenues for research will help reveal religious communities which existed beyond institutional and national structures and the problematic way in which big anniversaries reinforce grand narratives. Paying more attention to the local and the individual has the effect conversely of broadening memories across seas and generations. The contentious 2025/2027 celebration not only provokes questions about Anabaptist history but demands we find more nuanced ways of thinking about memory, the ways it is embedded in language, landscape, and people, and the traces it leaves.

## Conclusions

I would like to finish with one example of this power of memory at the level of the individual and the family which also touches on the way in which it expands our global and cross-period histories of religious change. In the Mennonite archives in Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas there are boxes which contain family papers donated to the archive for safe-keeping. Papers inside have not been categorized into type and are often an eclectic mix of items preserved and curated by the family over generations. Opening these folders, I was given a snapshot into the way in which histories, church, and communities are built on individual and family memories but also the importance of placing these in the context of globally connected communities. These collections are not the usual stuff of institutional or national memory. However, precisely because they are personal and have been kept by groups and families on the move, they embody the connected communities of dispersion which are at the core of Mennonite identity. One folder has a tiny notebook, meticulously translating and transcribing the daily record kept by their forebears who traveled from Russia, Russian passports, a handwritten book of early nineteenth century remedies for colic and much spider bites. The Jacob F. and Marie Banman fond contains beautiful eighteenth century fraktur examples, modern hand-written genealogies and family record and copy books. Like their owners, these objects had migrated across land and sea, and the juxtaposition of documents which record lives lived across centuries and borders encapsulates the connections, memories and emotions that sustained Mennonite communities. These collections of memories go far beyond the 500-year anniversary and remind us of the power of the local and the glocal (the term coined to express the interplay between the global and the local)

in communities bound together by remembrance (Freist, 2013, p. 208).

Whether or not Mennonites celebrate the 500-year centenary in 2025 or 2027, their debates reveal the global and diachronic power of Anabaptist memories, and these memoryscapes offer not only ways of thinking about Mennonite identity but broader memory cultures of early modernity and Reformation history. Memories of the Reformations and their global legacies must be understood in cross-confessional contexts. Scholarship can use these comparative histories of memories and legacies as a way out of the debates of marginal versus mainstream and confessionalisation to consider questions of global Protestantisms, long term legacies, and concepts of diaspora and exile. Anniversaries always offer us a chance to rethink histories. In analyzing the various Reformation anniversaries, it is not a question of 'memory wars'—whose anniversary we should be celebrating, whose Reformation was better, or which had more positive or long-lasting effects. Rather scholars can take the opportunity of these discussions over commemorations to diversify our concepts of the Reformation and its legacies.

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## Notes

- 1 For information on the variety of celebrations see the official Luther 2017 website. <https://www.luther2017.de/en/2017/reformation-anniversary/>.
- 2 German plans to spend relatively little on centenary events compared to the UK and France were criticized. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/germany-plans-first-world-war-centenary>. An example of a more subtle and low-key exhibition was that at the Neues Museum Weimar, 'Krieg der Geister: Weimar als Symbolort deutscher Kultur vor und nach 1914'.
- 3 <http://mennoworld.org/2018/06/19/the-world-together/anabaptisms-500th-anniversary-is-2025-not-2027/>. See also <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/how-to-celebrate-500-years/>.
- 4 <https://mwc-cmm.org/renewal2027>.
- 5 <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/>.
- 6 This is the series *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer*.
- 7 See for example the joint statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/31/171031a.html>. A booklet was produced to recognize this by the LWF and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (2013).
- 8 The latest triennial census conducted by the MWC counted 2,131,000 members as of November 2018. This includes various groups such as the Mennonites, the Amish, and Hutterites.
- 9 This was the first known Anabaptist confession written by Michael Sattler.

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### Additional information

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