

## Another World<sup>1</sup>

*Scott Holland is Professor Emeritus of Theology & Culture at Bethany Theological Seminary in partnership with the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. USA.*

Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world. – James Baldwin

Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.... On a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

– Arundhati Roy

Three decades ago the band “The Roches” played Pittsburgh. Along with many in the audience, I was struck by the title song of their album, “Another World.” The three sisters from New Jersey, Maggie, Terre and Suzzy Roche, sang in harmony, “There's got to be another world somewhere, uh, uh, uh, oh baby.”

A few days later, I was humming “Another World” when the two handymen-contractors arrived to do some work on our roof and chimney to repair a leak. “There's got to be another world somewhere, uh, uh, uh, oh baby. Another world, another world, another world.”

I climbed onto the three-story high roof with the handymen to point out the problems and requested repairs. The men were ex-steelworkers who lost their jobs when the mills shut down and the wolf came to Pittsburgh's Monongahela Valley killing the industrial economic base. These guys were now self-described contractors. They might paint a house, install a hot water tank, patch a roof or point a chimney. Some might call them white, blue collar, good old boys, left-overs from better times in the culture of late capitalism. Contractors.<sup>2</sup>

The large homes of our neighborhood were once occupied by the captains of industry and their attending doctors and lawyers, those whose hands touched the finest leather and poured the finest wine. But today our neighborhood is nicely integrated with professors, small business owners, contractors, pastors and plumbers. Once a white enclave, it is now about sixty percent African American.

As the roofers and I looked out over the community from a place with a view, one of them said, “This used to be a really nice neighborhood, twenty years ago.”

I replied, “It still is.” He looked surprised.

Just then the neighbor from across the street, an African American, stepped out of his large English Tudor home and greeted me, “What's up, Scott?”

I waved, “Hey Eddie!”

The talkative contractor continued, “Uh, Umm, what I mean is that there are a lot of blacks in this neighborhood now, aren’t there?”

“Yes,” I answered. “That’s why we like it.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I thought I would be a bit playful, as well as purposeful, so I responded, “Well because of heaven, of course!”

To my surprise both contractors became quite interested. So, I told them I was a Christian and that in the Bible the story of redemption begins in a garden but ends in a city. The biblical vision of salvation is not a return to the Garden of Eden where the first man and woman walked with God in solitude. It is instead a vision of a transformed city, the New Jerusalem, where people from every nation, every tribe, every kindred and every tongue live together in peace. It is a vision of unity in diversity, of similarity in difference. It is a multicultural, interracial, interreligious place. It is not a big church, synagogue, temple, mosque or pagoda. It is a city that has redeemed the pleasures of Babel.

I continued, “This is why we pray the familiar prayer, “May your kingdom come, may your will be done, ON EARTH, even as it is in heaven.”

The contractor, with sincerity and seriousness in his eyes, exclaimed, “You know, I never thought of it like that. I’ll have to tell my priest.”

The three of us sat down on the roof and for the next half hour talked about God and other mysteries. We talked about the social and spiritual problems of classism, racism and religionism. We discussed reimagining both cities and churches.

At the end of the day when the roofers’ work was done and I was writing their paycheck, the contractor grinned and repeated our roof-top theology, “Now what was that again? The story of heaven begins in a garden but ends in a city. Wow. That does make you think, doesn’t it.”

These two contractors were only beginning to understand that the map to the New Jerusalem is more theopoetic than theo-logical and that the homes there are built by mythopoetic contractors. The New Jerusalem and its analogous Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven are imaginary homelands. These imaginary homelands are not mere fictions but dreams, visions, desires, ideals, aspirations and faith in the real possibility of another world somewhere. We live only what we imagine.

The metaphor of the Kingdom of God and its manifestation of a New Jerusalem has been used as a source of both terror and transformation in the history of Christianity. Indeed, from the violent apocalyptic visions of the Anabaptist Melchiorites and Munsterites, to the imperial Doctrine of Discovery, to the many global manifestations of colonial Christendom, the strong theologies of a

hegemonic heavenly city have descended to crush earthly diversity, dissent and democracy in the name of the Holy. Yet challenges to political and ecclesial autocracy and hopes for just and peaceful spiritual and social transformation have also artfully employed the metaphor of the New Jerusalem.

Helmut Isaak reminds us that “the image of the New Jerusalem runs like a winding river throughout Menno’s (Simons) thought and writings” as a root metaphor for another way of being in the world.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch was profoundly informed by Anabaptist understandings of the Kingdom of God. We often forget that as a German Baptist, Rauschenbusch and his scholar father were the first to translate some German Anabaptist texts into English, including Conrad Grebel’s letters to the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer.<sup>4</sup>

The Quaker preacher and artist Edward Hicks envisions the possibilities and realities of the Kingdom on earth even as it is in heaven in his classic work, “The Peaceable Kingdom.” This primitive painting, reflecting the imagery of poet-prophet Isaiah, portrays a lion eating straw with an ox in the presence of happy children. In the background William Penn is signing the 1687 treaty with the Delaware/Lenape Indians as a circle of new citizens watch. Hicks, guided by the Inner Light, hoped to portray the vision of peaceful coexistence on earth.

The many Anabaptist inspired representations over the centuries of the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem or the Beloved Community are not mere hopes for going to heaven but instead dreams of a New Heaven and a New Earth in this blessed broken world. A responsive reading in the new Mennonite hymnal and worship book invites prayers that the faithful might be led “to transform the fabric of this world until it resembles the shape of your (Christ’s) kingdom.” (1050). These inspiring images may indeed lead to poetic and parabolic ways of living our lives in personal, public and political worlds.

At our last Believer’s Church Conference hosted by Shaw University and Divinity School, I offered a possible vision of a contemporary Anabaptist or Believer’s Church Social Gospel informed by the dreams of our poets, prophets, preachers, artists and activists.<sup>5</sup> This spiritual as well as social gospel dreams of a city, an imaginary homeland, in which spiritual formation and social solidarity are never pried apart. This is a city in which the culture of just peace promotes human flourishing and avoids cruelty, a city that celebrates and practices both the democracy of soul and society.

Rather than review the architecture of that city today, I would like to instead ponder how we might travel there. At the Shaw conference, we looked at the mutual dream of the poet and the preacher, Langston Hughes and Martin Luther King. In this year of “Anabaptism 500,” Hans Denck is emerging as a neglected but important guide. If we read the diverse treatments of Denck’s life and thought in German, Dutch, Italian and English, we begin to see a mystic, spiritualist, Anabaptist, Pietist, Humanist, ecumenist, universalist and pacifist in one person.<sup>6</sup> Werner Packull has said, “Like the historical Jesus, Denck remains an elusive but impressive personality.”<sup>7</sup> He is an ideal citizen of the New Jerusalem.

Like the great James Baldwin, Denk understood that the interior life is a real life and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world. As a contemplative Anabaptist, he would likely have appreciated Rilke's poem, "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Meditating on the damaged headless, limbless sculpture, Rilke writes, "And yet his torso is still suffused with brilliance from inside, like a lamp...from here is no place that does not see you. You must change your life."<sup>8</sup>

When I was a student at AMBS, the Mennonite seminary, most students seemed more naturally drawn to Professor John Howard Yoder and his advocacy of Michael Sattler than to Professor Clarence Bauman and his contemplative presentation of Hans Denck. Likewise, my Mennonite and Church of the Brethren ministerial colleagues in Western Pennsylvania from Pittsburgh to Scottdale to Johnstown frequently cited the evangelical Swiss Anabaptists – Grebel, Manz and Blaurock – but never the South German spiritualist Hans Denck. It could have been otherwise for global Anabaptist theology, thought and action.

The German Mennonite writer, editor and publisher John Horsch, as a young scholar, often traveled with an important book in his bags during his early years in the United States, *Ein Apostel der Wiedertaufer* by Ludwig Keller, a study of Hans Denck.<sup>9</sup> Early in his writing life, Horsch carried on an intense and lively correspondence with Keller about their mutual hopes of translating and publishing Denck's work as well as studies of Denck for the Mennonite Church and ancillary or adjacent Anabaptist, Pietist and Free Church audiences.

Horsch began this work while working for John Funk and the Mennonite Publishing Company in Elkhart, Indiana. He published a short history of the Mennonites accenting the witness of Hans Denck, *Kuregefasste Geschichte der Mennoniten*, and one of Denck's writings, *Wahren Liebe* (*True Love*). Both were published in German, in 1891 and 1888, respectively. The Denck pamphlet on *True Love* sold very poorly.

Horsch discovered to his disappointment that the North American Anabaptist affiliated denominations were more closed than open societies and that their ministers and members preferred a doctrinal theology over an undogmatic spirituality like Denck's. By the time John Horsch went to work for the Mennonite Publishing House in Scottdale, Pennsylvania in 1908, where he worked, wrote, edited and published for 33 years, something within him had shifted.<sup>10</sup>

He began to accommodate his writing to the theological and churchly expectations of the American Mennonite churches and eventually turned from Hans Denck to more biblical, doctrinal and dogmatic expressions of historical and contemporary Anabaptism. This was the era of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy in the United States and Horsch surprisingly began to encourage his Mennonite and Christian readers to favor the fundamentalists. In fact, by 1921 Horsch published an influential polemic against modernism that sold over 10,000 copies and went through several editions. His *Modern Religious Liberalism* was studied at many fundamentalist colleges and Bible schools including Moody Bible Institute.

During the many decades leading to our global celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Anabaptism, 1525-2025, Hans Denck has been exiled or eclipsed by more normative, uniform, evangelical and biblicist expressions of Swiss Anabaptism. However, in 2025 we are now seeing the welcome resurrection of Hans Denck. A longer version of this paper will include biographical and theological accounts of Denck's dialogues and debates in the several European cities he briefly inhabited as a heretical teacher on the run. He lived a full but short life, avoiding death by fire, water or sword – dying instead of the plague in Basel in 1527 at the young age of about 27 or 28.

Let us consider several central themes of Hans Denck's spiritual theology: the Inner Word and the Outer Word, Mysticism, Ecumenism, Humanism, Pacifism and Existential Discipleship.

### **The Inner Word and the Outer Word**

Central to Denck's teaching is the intersecting relationship of the inner life and the outer life, the inner Word and the outer Word. When John Horsch finally published his large signature work in 1942, *Mennonites in Europe*, he included only four rather dismissive pages about Denck. Horsch wrote critically, "Hans Denck was a mystic who believed that 'the inner word,' or the voice of God within the heart, is the highest source of divine revelation, exceeding the Scriptures in authority."<sup>11</sup> Although this assessment is correct, Denck's spiritual theology of the inner Word-outer Word dynamic is more nuanced.

Unlike the *sola scriptura* theology of Luther, Zwingli and most of the evangelical Anabaptists, Denck refused to declare that the Bible was the Word of God. In so doing, he refused to replace the authority of the pope in Rome with a mere paper pope of scripture. Denck thus taught that the Bible served as a witness to the revelation of God and could become the Word of God for the believer if illuminated by the Inner Word. Although treasuring scripture, Denck explains:

I hold the Scriptures dear above all of man's treasures, but not as high as the Word of God which is living, strong (Heb. 4:12), eternal, and free of all elements of this world, for inasmuch as it is God Himself, it is spirit and not letter, written without pen and paper so that it can never be erased. Consequently, salvation is not bound to Scripture even though Scriptures may be conducive to salvation (II Tim. 3:16). The reason is this: Scripture cannot possibly change an evil heart even though it may make it more learned. A pious heart, on the other hand, one which has a spark of divine zeal, can be improved by all things.<sup>12</sup>

For Denck, therefore, if the proclamation of the outer Word of scripture or Biblical theology by priests, popes or pastors is contrary to the inner Word of the believer, the faithful must yield to the voice of the inner Word. However, for Denck, this voice is not unaided or flat natural inspiration or reason; it is a God-prompted, Spirit-prompted internal Word, resisting the mere externalities of texts, traditions, creeds and churchly moral codes. It is *Geist* not *Schrift*.

The distinguished Quaker scholar of mysticism, Rufus Jones, saw in Denck “a Quaker” before the formation of the Society of Friends. Jones saw the influence of medieval mysticism on Denck’s spiritual formation mediated through the revolutionary Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer during their time in the city of Nuremberg. Müntzer also taught this theology of the inner Word and outer Word but Jones notes the principle was in safer hands with Denck. While Müntzer became a radical apocalyptic proponent of ushering in the New Jerusalem with the sword if necessary, Denck remained an irenic reformer in both religion and politics.

While Müntzer in the spirit of the Peasants’ War was eager to see the kingdoms of this world fall to the severe justice and punishing judgement of the Kingdom of God, Denck patiently reminded all, “The kingdom of God is in you and he who searches for it outside of himself will never find it, for apart from God no one can either seek or find God, for he who seeks God, already in truth has Him.”<sup>13</sup> For Denck, the divine blueprints for the new city are likewise first found within and the principle of the inner Word and outer Word must be attended to in politics as well as within religion.

The recognition of the divine presence universally dwelling within the human rather than only occupying some wholly other space high in the sky has been an important teaching in the history of spirituality. The presence of the soul-spark (Meister Eckhart), the soul-ground or *Seelengrund* (Johannes Tauler), the spark of divine zeal or inner Word (Hans Denck) and the Inner Light (Elias Hicks and Quakerism) has been both a welcomed and contested theology within Christendom, where a logocentrism (word-entered) theo-logy is often more championed than a theopoetics which imagines the omnipresence of the Holy as *Ruach and Pneuma* – Spirit, Breath and Wind.

Rufus Jones concluded that the ecclesial world and its many reformations were not ready to receive the depth, nuance and complexity of Denck’s theology. He concluded his study of “Hans Denck and the Inward Word” lamenting, “Such were the ideas which this young radical reformer, dreamer perhaps, tried to teach his age. The time was not ripe for him, and there was no environment ready for his message. He spoke to minds busy with theological systems and to men whose battles were over the meaning of inherited medieval dogma. He thought and spoke as a child of another world, and he talked in a language he had learned from his heart and not from books or from schools.”<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen, Denck’s theology of the inner Word echoes the teachings of the mystics more than the metaphysics of the scholastic systematic theologians and his spiritualist approach to the scriptures is contrary to the biblicism of most other Protestant reformers, including the evangelical Anabaptists. What was the style and substance of Denck’s mysticism?

## **Mysticism**

Modern scholarship reminds us that even as Anabaptism was not a monolithic movement neither was mysticism. Although H.S. Bender’s 1943 modern classic, *The Anabaptist Vision*, presents a

rather unified account of normative or evangelical Anabaptism, since the late 1970s research has revealed that the various 16<sup>th</sup> century movements of Anabaptism, plural, were marked by polygenesis and polyphony.<sup>15</sup> The medieval mysticism that influenced some Anabaptists, including Hans Denck, was likewise diverse in its geographical and theological origins and expressions.<sup>16</sup>

Hans Denck is now placed in the category of the “Anabaptist mystics and spiritualists” or within the company of the South German and Austrian Anabaptist mystics. The theology and spirituality of these Anabaptist mystics differs in style and substance from the logocentric or scripture-centered Swiss Anabaptists. There is more attention by the mystics to the dynamic of the inner Word and the outer Word and likewise to the presence of Divinity within.<sup>17</sup>

Specialists in mysticism note differences between the Latin and the German mystics. Latin mystics such as Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux and Terese of Avila stress a desired union with the Divine as the alienated human ascends to God, often in visionary distress or ecstasy, and God descends to the distanced human. However, for the German mystics, there is a greater emphasis on holy immanence in the human soul. God is not seen as far away. Thus, the seeking human need only turn inward to the soul and its common ground of being for communion and union with the Divine.<sup>18</sup>

Meister Eckhart, the 14<sup>th</sup> century German mystic, led the way as a teacher and preacher of divine immanence which impacted and inspired many, especially those in his Dominican Order such as Johannes Tauler and the anonymous author of the *Theologia Deutsch*. Turning inward for unmediated contact with the numinous subverted the externalities of church, creeds, priests and sacraments demanding for the believer a more existential intersection of the external with the internal, or the a more integrated expression of inner Word and outer Word.

Hans Denck was influenced by the mystical spirituality of Eckhart, most likely via the circulating sermons of Tauler, reading the *German Theology* and through his contact with Thomas Müntzer.<sup>19</sup> We truly see in Denck a theological thinker who is neither merely Catholic or Protestant, nor even simply Anabaptist, but one spiritually awakened and pointing to another way to another world.<sup>20</sup>

## **Ecumenism**

It is important to remember that Denck never intended to begin a new denomination or to become an Anabaptist or a Mennonite. His passion was instead for the renewal and reform of the church. Looking at his early work, writing and witness in Nuremberg largely within the Lutheran orbit of reform, Denck as a reformer pushed for renewal beyond the theological lines his more orthodox colleagues and conversation partners were willing to cross and he was thus exiled from the city because of his searching heterodox proposals.

Yet as Denck moved in the various radical as well as established churchly reform circles of early 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, he preached, taught and wrote against sectarianism or what today we might call denominational identity-politics in favor of a more universal, spiritual and mystical church.

Even as an Anabaptist, Denck remained not only a mystical Anabaptist but an ecumenical Anabaptist as well. For example, although favoring adult baptism, and rebaptized himself by Hubmaier, he eventually recognized the possible spiritual and ecclesial value of infant baptism for those whose inner Word affirmed it because baptism and communion were indeed externalities of the outer Word, exterior symbols of interior realities. In fact, two of Denck's most prominent students, Johann Bunderlin and Christian Entfelder, in "Quaker-like-fashion," moved away from making any sacraments or symbolic ceremonies a requirement for faith and practice.<sup>21</sup>

Denck arrived in Basel weary of his numerous exiles and ill in September of 1527. His final writing in Basel, where he soon died of the plague, reflects his ecumenical and nondogmatic spirit. Most often called by his critics his "Recantation" to make peace with Basel reformers such as Oecolampadius, this document might better be called a "Reconsideration," an irenic "Recapitulation" or a "Continuing Reflection" on his evolving theology and spiritual understandings.

Unlike most theological or doctrinal writings of the era, this pamphlet avoids the pointed either/or arguments of Christian apologetics and seeks to invite an inclusive and expansive confessional spirit. After all, church doctrine, like the sacraments or ordinances, for mystics and spiritualists like Denck, are external symbols of a more substantial internal spirit. Further, Denck understood that orthodoxy in its original expressions translated not as correct doctrine but as right worship. In addition, Denck wrote in *Concerning True Love* that all religious externals, whether doctrines, ceremonies or practices, must ultimately be subject to the standard of love, which itself fulfills the law.

Also underwriting Denck's ecumenism is his philosophical understanding of paradox which he shared with Schwenckfeld and other mystics: "Two opposites must both be true. But one is contained in the other, as the lesser is the greater, time in eternity, finitude in infinity. One who leaves antitheses without reconciling them lacks the ground of truth."<sup>22</sup> Long before Hegel's mystical and philosophical ponderings on the dialectics of *Geist* in history, Denck was contemplating the spiritual movements of thesis, antithesis and synthesis with time and eternity and finitude and infinity in view.

Far from being a recantation, Denck's final writing is a work of reconciliation written by a reformer who desired neither Anabaptist heroic martyrdom nor holy ecclesial authority but instead unity in Christ and peace with God, self, creation and others.

## **Humanism**

The Christian Humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam had both direct and indirect influences on the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Current research is exploring its influence on various Anabaptist and Radical Reformation movements.<sup>23</sup> Erasmus contributed much to dialogues and debates about the freedom versus the bondage of the human will, peace instead of warfare, human welfare and flourishing, biblical translation and interpretation, the meaning of the Great Commission and many other theological issues of the day in a spirit of peaceful concord and pastoral tolerance.

Erasmus also promoted serious scholarship and education. He modeled the close and critical reading of scriptural, classical and contemporary texts by challenging received dogmas and inviting new interpretations. It is especially here that we see the cultural and intellectual influences of Christian Humanism on Hans Denck. Well educated, Denck made his living teaching and tutoring Latin and Greek. Although Denck's own novel theology emphasized Spirit over Word, or at least a Spirit led hermeneutics, he was an accomplished linguist and a serious student of texts. Indeed, one book length treatment of Hans Denck calls him a "Humanist and Heretic."<sup>24</sup> Humanism in this context refers not only to concrete concern for the human more than speculative interest in the heavens but also the practice of educational, intellectual and spiritual honesty in encountering the conflicts of interpretation religions present.

It was in the city of Worms, Germany where Denck and his Anabaptist colleague Ludwig Hatzer learned Hebrew from the city's Jewish rabbis and completed the first translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Prophets into German. *All the Prophets Translated from Hebrew into German*, often referred to today as simply, *The Worms Prophets*, is a solid translation faithful to the Hebrew text. What is notable about this work is that it avoids Christological glosses or renderings in the translation, so much so that Luther once complained that the translation was too Jewish. Denck was thus both an inspired mystic and an honest scholar.

### **Pacifism**

In Denck's pacifism the longing for "another world" comes into sharp focus. Like all Anabaptists, Denck prayed that God's kingdom would come and that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Yet he resisted the eschatological and apocalyptic zeal of Anabaptist radicals like Jan of Leiden and Thomas Müntzer. They concluded that the Kingdom could be ushered in with the sword. Although today we think of the denominational heirs of Anabaptism as "the Historic Peace Churches," there was alarming revolutionary violence in early Anabaptism.<sup>25</sup>

This political and religious violence was inspired and informed not only by the understandable demands for justice heralded by The Peasants' War but also by the apocalypticism present in early Christianity itself.<sup>26</sup> Radical reformers seeking to recover the faith and practice early church for their day found in the earliest texts and traditions an eschatological and apocalyptic religion. Even Jesus himself seemed to believe the end of the age was at hand. Therefore, turning

to the sword by some radicals seemed to follow an apocalyptic logic of the soul as well as a literal eschatological reading of the early texts.

In fact, even Peter Simons, the brother of Menno Simons, was killed when he participated in a violent uprising to take over a Catholic monastery for the radical Anabaptist cause. Hans Denck instead practiced pacifism, hoping for social and political change, but also recognizing, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” One could suggest that Denck the scholar recovered the correct biblical theology of the Kingdom of God. However, it is perhaps more accurate to conclude that Denck the mystic instead performed a spiritualist, theopoetic or mythopoetic interpretation of the many biblical texts of terror as well as transformation.

### **Existential Discipleship**

Denck is best known in many circles for his proclamation, “*No one can know Christ unless they follow him in life, and no one can follow him unless they know him.*”<sup>27</sup> Although this confession may seem paradoxical, if it is placed within Denck’s theology of the inner Word and the outer Word in face of Mystery, the existential, incarnational message of the union of faith and following becomes clear.

Denck carried the mystical concept and practice of *Gelassenheit* found in Eckhart and the German spiritualists into Anabaptist and Radical Reformation conversations. This word is most often translated as yielding or surrendering oneself to God. For some in the Anabaptist faith family, this implies *obedience* to Christ by exercising a muscular will of radical discipleship, *Nachfolge Christi*, following after Christ in a mimetic way. There is indeed a variety of understandings of *Gelassenheit* in the history of spirituality. One word-picture that chimes best with Denck’s theology is that of a lover yielding to the beloved. Rather than mere obedience to rule-based expectations, a love-relational yielding to the beloved is closer to Denck’s call to an integrated, embodied and relational faith and following in all of life.

### **Conclusion: The Resurrection of Hans Denck in the Believer’s Church**

In a blessed but broken world of many tragic externalities and terrors of history, those committed to a New Jerusalem, to another world somewhere, can faint in spiritual, psychological and political exhaustion without a robust inner life. However, happily, we are witnessing the resurrection of Hans Denck in Anabaptist and Believer’s Church communities and finding forgotten blueprints and maps to a city of just peace, diversity, equity and inclusion. For Denck, there must be a continuity between soul and society. If one hopes for a public peace one must also cultivate a personal peace. Advocacy for political democracy must begin by democratizing the soul.

For many years those of us in Anabaptist, Historic Peace Church and Believer’s Church communities found ecumenical and interfaith common ground in our mutual global quests of seeking cultures of peace. Rather than search for common churchly doctrines, we agreed on the

common interfaith, human and humane longing for seeking and building peace among diverse peoples.

In recent years, those ecumenical, interfaith and even extra-faith partnerships now include conversations and consultations on our common spiritualities. While still keeping social solidarity around just peace prominent, we are linking this to our mutual explorations and experiences of spiritual formation. We are finding new common ground and life energy around comparative spiritualities as we consider together the inner Word and the outer Word in face of life's mystery, wonder and awe.

The influential Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, writing in 1971, suggested that “the devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic – someone who has experienced something – or will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>28</sup> This appeal to mysticism or mystery is not about communicating with ghosts, spooks or specters but it is about opening oneself to higher, wider and deeper states of spiritual consciousness. The celebrated nature writer, Robert McFarlane, reminds us of this when he concludes, “The move into mystery is not an abandonment of perception into a cloud of unknowing. It’s a move into a different form of knowing.”<sup>29</sup>

Jimmy Baldwin was a Pentecostal preacher as a teenager. The racism and homophobia of the American church led him, like many anointed oracles, away from the church and eventually out of the country. Yet the breath of the Spirit remained in his poems, novels and essays. When emotionally and intellectually paralyzed by the tragic assassinations of his friends Martin, Malcolm and Medgar, he turned inward as a poet before he could again turn outward as a social prophet. Baldwin was able to move out of solitude into civil rights solidarity, protest and politics because of a well-furnished interior life.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, Hans Denck offers us a grammar of animacy in face of Mystery. His spirituality of the inner Word and the outer Word reminds us that the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a real effect on the world. Here we find inspiration and empowerment on our way to another world. Therefore, we dream, and we dive deep, deep within. Then, of course, for our neighbor's good and God's glory, we surface.

Email: [hollasc@bethanyseminary.edu](mailto:hollasc@bethanyseminary.edu)

Phone: 412-720-8221

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Holland: A paper/essay presented in the year of “Anabaptism 500: 1525-2025” at the Believer's Church Conference, Amsterdam, June 2025.

<sup>2</sup> A version of this story appears in an earlier essay, Scott Holland, “So Many Good Voices in My Head,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1996) pp. 19-31.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Isaak, *Menno Simons and the New Jerusalem* (Kitchner, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For a study that notes the theological and ethical links of Rauschenbusch to Anabaptism see Donovan Smucker, *The Origins of Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994).

---

<sup>5</sup> In January of 2023, for the first time since its formation in the 1960s, the Believer's Church Conference was hosted at an historically black university and divinity school, Shaw in Raleigh, North Carolina. The conference theme was "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Witness of the Believers Church." The papers and presentations from that important conference are forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> We are seeing an increasing number of references to or treatments of Hans Denck in articles, essays and books. For this paper I have worked with the standard study that provides his German writings and parallel English translations: Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991). Another competent translation of Denck's writings is Edward J. Furcha and Lewis Ford Battles, *Selected Writings of Hans Denck Edited and Translated from the Text as Established by Walter Fellmann* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement, 1525-1531* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977) p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems [1908]: The Other Part, A Bilingual Edition*, Translated by Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press) p. 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Keller, *Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1882).

<sup>10</sup> For an account of the career history and theological shifts of John Horsch see Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1994) pp. 113-146. It was Horsch's son-in-law, H. S. Bender, who attempted to correct the Mennonite Church's drift into fundamentalism by his composition of *The Anabaptist Vision*. Yet as we have seen, Bender exiled or edited out some of the most interesting Radical Reformers from his apologetic presentation and definition of normative Anabaptism.

<sup>11</sup> John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1942) p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Furcha and Battles, *Selected Writings of Hans Denck*, p. 123-124.

<sup>13</sup> For a brilliant treatment of Denck's "kingdom within" see Clarence Bauman in *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck*, "Denck's Spirituality," pp. 21-47. Bauman was a Denck specialist who wrote, "Hans Denck represents the contemplative genius of the Anabaptist Movement at its highest and best. No understanding of the Anabaptist Vision is complete without coming to terms with the uniqueness of Denck's intellectual spirituality: its inner dynamic, its medieval context, its mystic content, and its Jewish roots." p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1928) p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XLIX, No. 2 (April 1975) pp. 83-121.

<sup>16</sup> See Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Protestant Reformation, 1500-1650* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> For a more extended discussion of Denck's mysticism in the historical context of Anabaptism and Radical Pietism see Scott Holland, "Radical Pietist, Anabaptist, Atheist, Polyphaniist: The Question of Brethren Origins Continued," forthcoming in *Brethren Life and Thought*, 2025. Also, for a current treatment of the reception of Hans Denck in Reformation and Anabaptist movements see Geoffrey Dipple and Kat Hill, eds., *New Directions in the Radical Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2023) pp. 27-57.

<sup>18</sup> The clearest discussion of these contrasting forms of mysticism are provided by Werner Packull in *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement*. pp. 18-32.

<sup>19</sup> The revolutionary Müntzer also had his mystical side and an interest in the interior and exterior dimensions of spirituality similar to Denck's. For a nuanced examination of Denck's spirituality, theology and politics see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> The claim that Anabaptism is neither Catholic nor Protestant but instead a "Third Way" can lead some to an unfortunate Anabaptist exceptionalism failing to recognize that complex spiritual gifts and graces in a number of Christian traditions. Yet with the intellectual spirituality of Hans Denck, this neither Catholic or Protestant description seems appropriate. The book on this topic by Walter Klaassen still inspires, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> For a fascinating discussion of these two disciples of Denck see Rufus Jones in *Spiritual Reformers*, "Bunderlin and Entfelder," pp. 31-43.

<sup>22</sup> Furcha and Battles, *Selected Writings of Hans Denck*, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> The best study on this topic remains Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Coutts, *Hans Denck: Humanist and Heretic* (Edinburgh: MacNiven and Wallace, 1927).

<sup>25</sup> Although today many troubling texts from scripture to denominational founding documents are domesticated to read as serene missives offering spiritual comfort, moral instruction and social direction, many New Testament texts

---

as well as some Anabaptist writings were on fire with apocalyptic zeal and expectation which could indeed underwrite revolutionary resistance to Empire and redemptive violence. See Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham: MD: University Press of America, 1992) and Elaine Pagels, *Revelations, Visions, Prophecy & Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> No public or political theology is formed in an ecclesial or biblical vacuum. The Peasants' War had a significant impact on those longing for social and religious reform, especially those who became religious radicals or Anabaptists. A new history reminds us of how culturally, religiously and politically far reaching the Peasants' War was in Germany in 1524-1525. Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War* (New York: Basic Books, 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Cited by Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981) p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, VII* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> "An Interview with Robert McFarlane" conducted by Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee for the podcast "Conversation" of *Emergence Magazine* (May 19, 2025). Also see, Robert McFarlane, *Is a River Alive?* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2025). Unlike my student cohorts of a decade ago, my students today are very interested in mysticism. This seems to reflect a growing interest in the broader cultures of meaning-making from the Americas to Europe to Asia to Africa. Annually new books on mysticism, mystery, wonder and awe are released by major publishers. For example, see the postmodern philosopher Simon Critchley's, *Mysticism* (New York: New York Review of Books Publications, 2024) and Mirabai Starr, *Ordinary Mysticism: Our Life as Sacred Ground* (New York: HarperOne, 2024).

<sup>30</sup> As this essay reflects, for the past year I have been reading Denck and Baldwin in concert and catching sparks from their mutual attention to the inner and outer worlds we inhabit. Each thinker and writer embodies what the late theologian David Tracy called "the Mystical-Prophetic paradigm" in their mode of being in the world. The Baldwin epigraph I accent throughout the essay is found in his *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage International) p. 12.