

Returning to the Sources: Menno Simons and Abd al-Wahhab

Introduction

For most Americans, the terrible carnage of 9/11 stands out as an unforgettable event unlike any other. Many remember the very place they stood, sat, or walked when the news of the tragedy first reached their ears. But for the Amish of southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, there is another day equally as terrifying, but one which struck much closer to the heart of this quiet community of faith. October 2, 2006, was a day that began like any other but turned tragic as a lone gunman entered an Amish schoolhouse and opened fire on ten innocent girls. As the news unfolded in the following days, the Amish response of benevolence to the perpetrator's family caught the attention of the world. What was it that motivated a people to forgive and then reach out to the family of the killer? How could families whose innocent daughters lay in hospital beds or coffins respond by showing love and forgiveness in the midst of what some of the Amish called "our 9/11?"¹

Two "9/11s"—one committed by adherents to a religious persuasion which convinced them that it was their duty to kill the "infidel," the other against a community known for nonviolence and love of their enemies as taught by Jesus. Interestingly, both groups sprang out of renewal movements which arose after centuries of deviation from the early forms of their religious traditions. Their adherents were called back to the historic faith of their respective religions by influential men such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Wahhabi Islam and Menno Simons in the Anabaptist tradition.² These men labored with unreserved commitment by entreating their people to return to primitive forms of religious practice as found in their sacred sources, thus deeply impacting their communities of faith even into the twenty-first century.

Although there were many who influenced the development of Wahhabi Islam on the one hand and the Anabaptist tradition on the other, there is one man in each whom we will focus on in this paper. In the following lines, we will compare the lives of Abd al-Wahhab and Menno Simons as we consider the things which shaped their views of the world and their commitment to following, with deep conviction, what they both believed to be true. Furthermore, we will reflect on the specific beliefs and emphases each of them embraced, which helped shape their communities of faith. Lastly, we will consider the continued influence of these leaders on the groups which have descended from their teaching and remain alive in the 21st century.

Menno's Early Life and Influences

Both Menno Simons and Abd al-Wahhab were nurtured in environments of religiosity. This was especially evident in Simons' life in that he was selected by his parents to become a Catholic priest. During his studies to enter the priesthood, he studied both Latin and Greek, as well as the writings of many early church fathers. No doubt he also became well-versed in the teachings of the Catholic Church in order to fulfill his priestly duties. However, throughout his preparation to become a spiritual leader, Simons had not studied the Scripture itself. In *The Confession of My Enlightenment, Conversion, and Calling*, he admitted that until the time he had become a priest, he had never touched the Scriptures.³ The lack of concern he showed for spiritual matters was reflected by the life he lived. While not performing his priestly duties, Simons' time was spent with fellow priests in frivolous activity. He says that:

In our daily life my two companions and I with others spent our time in card-playing, drinking and other diversions as, alas, is the way and nature of such idle persons. Then when we talked a bit about Scripture, I could not say a word without being ridiculed, for I did not know at all what I was aiming at—so concealed was God's Word from my eyes.⁴

¹ Daniel Burke, Amish Search for Healing, Forgiveness after "The Amish 9/11," *The Pew Forum*, October 4, 2006, <http://pewforum.org/news/display.php?NewsID=11501> (accessed December 12, 2009).

² The Amish are an sect within the Anabaptist tradition

³ Irvin B. Horst, *Menno Simons: "Confession" and the New Birth* (Lancaster: Lancaster Historical Society, 1996), 9.

⁴ Ibid, 10.

Life for this wayward priest was about to change as he began studying the scriptures for answers to nagging questions about the Eucharist, baptism and other matters of faith.

His search began with questioning the Catholic belief that the communion bread and wine were the actual flesh and blood of Christ. At first, the thoughts were cast aside as mere "whisperings of the devil," and Simons continued his duties as a priest.⁵ For two years, he battled those doubts but was afraid to pick up a Bible and study for himself. Finally, he concluded that studying the Scriptures could surely not do too much harm, so he began a diligent study of the Eucharist in Scripture.

To his shocking surprise, Simons concluded that centuries of precedent within the Catholic Church were wrong on their belief of transubstantiation. He could find no evidence in scripture that the bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Christ. This was a radical conclusion to arrive at since Catholics were taught that the pope held the final authority and thus his decrees were divinely inspired. In addition, the church held the reigns of political power which since the time of Saint Augustine were used to wipe off "heretics" from the earth. Simons had to decide if he would trust the church hierarchy and thus be safe and live in security, or rely on the scriptures, the source of Christian doctrine, and face great suffering.

Through his studies and with the help of writings from Martin Luther and other reformers, Simons concluded that the Scripture was to be trusted over the tradition of the Church. However, despite this new conviction, he was not yet willing to break with the Church and face the consequences. He continued in his office as a priest for some time thereafter. During the years 1528–1531, as he continued his studies in the Scriptures, he began seeing more and more of the error of the Church. As a result, his preaching changed, and he became known as an "evangelical preacher." Nevertheless, Simons was still not willing to let go of his position or his comfortable life, which he knew he would need to abandon if he chose to follow his new beliefs. But more was to come that would push him further away from the Church.

In 1531, Simons heard strange news of a man who was executed in the neighboring city of Leeuwarden for being rebaptized. He had never conceived that the Catholic practice of infant baptism was unscriptural. However, the odd reports encouraged him to return to a diligent search of the Scriptures on the subject of baptism. To his surprise, Simons could not find any support for the Catholic Church's practice of infant baptism.

He then went on to study what the Church Fathers had to say on the subject and discovered that, contrary to the Scriptures, they taught that infant baptism was right and good. Again, he concluded that the Scripture could be trusted over church hierarchy. Horsch describes Simons' conclusions: "only believers, who take upon themselves the obligations of membership, should be baptized and become members of the church."⁶ Bender puts it this way: "Menno concluded that 'all were deceived about infant baptism'—the Catholic Church, priests at Pingjum, the church fathers, the reformers—and that baptism on confession of faith alone was scriptural."⁷ This new knowledge was further evidence to Simons that the Catholic Church had strayed far from New Testament teaching, yet he continued in his priestly duties.

While performing his religious duties, Simons also became an ardent opponent of the radical Münsterite sect. They were a violent group who practiced rebaptism but set about establishing an earthly kingdom by force. From early 1534 until June 1535, this sect ruled the city of Münster with an iron grip. Their radical approach helped cement the prevailing view that Anabaptists were revolutionaries and that their movement must be crushed. Simons was bold in speaking out against the Münsterites and began to feel a great sense of responsibility for these lost souls. He writes of the heaviness he experienced: "The blood of these people, although misled, fell so hot on my heart that I could not bear it. Neither could I find rest in my spirit."⁸ He saw his own life of ease in comparison to those who died for a false cause and thought to himself:

⁵ Harold S. Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings* (Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1936), 3.

⁶ John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1942) 188.

⁷ Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings*, 9.

⁸ Horst, "Confessions," 14.

Miserable man that I am, what am I doing? If I do not lay bare the right foundation of truth because of the fear of the flesh; if I do not with all that is in my power point the innocent, straying sheep—who would gladly do what is right if they only knew how—to the pastures of Christ; oh, how their blood (although spilled amiss) will rise up against me at the judgment of the almighty and great God!⁹

The weight of this became so heavy on his heart that he cried out to God for a change of heart and thus soon left the priesthood.

The change of direction was drastic and would cost the former priest much pain and heartache. He was not only defying the state and its power; Simons deliberately chose a life of commitment to Christ which would welcome much suffering. Horsch describes it:

Shortly after his renunciation of Romanism Menno Simons was baptized by Obbe Philips. He took this step in the face of the fact that to unite with the evangelical Anabaptists would make him an outcast and a fugitive. From sincere and compelling conviction Menno united with a people who had been summarily outlawed and condemned to death. A life of ease, comfort and worldly honor he, for conscience' sake, exchanged for a life of homelessness, poverty, and continuous danger of violent death.¹⁰

The bed of ease in a state sponsored church was over and was exchanged for a life filled with suffering while he called many to return to primitive Christian practice as found in the sources.

Mohammad Abd al-Wahab's Early Life and Influences

Contrary to the early life of Menno Simons, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was much more serious about his religious duties from childhood. He was born around 1703 in al-Uyayna, in the eastern part of modern-day Saudi Arabia, and was educated in the Islamic faith by his father. By the age of ten, he had memorized the entire Quran and grew to be known as a man of vigorous religious conviction who, according to Natana DeLong-Bas, "believed in the importance of living one's religious beliefs in both private and public life."¹¹

Although some question the scholarly credentials of Abd al-Wahhab, historical records indicate that he was a serious scholar of Islamic sources. As mentioned, he had memorized the entire Quran and was an avid reader of the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad—the Hadith. From early in his life, Abd al-Wahhab was surrounded by knowledgeable Islamic scholars and used the power of the pen to spread his influence. After going on the Hajj, he spent the next four years studying in the holy city of Medina, an important center for Islamic knowledge and intellectual exchange. There he studied under influential men like Abdullah ibn Ibrahim, a famous Indian Sufi scholar. Furthermore, while studying in Medina, Abd al-Wahhab devoted much of his time to studying the works of Ibn Taymiyya.

Ibn Taymiyya was born in Syria in 1263 and was an earlier reformer of the Hanbali school of Islamic thought. He advocated a strict adherence to ancient forms and viewed foreign Mongol invaders as infidels who should be violently resisted. According to Allen in *God's Terrorists*, the Hanbali school of jurisprudence was "the last, strictest and least popular of four main schools of law in the Sunni tradition."¹² As Abd al-Wahhab continued his studies in the early sources of Islam through the eyes of men like Ibn Taymiyya, it only reinforced the views he already held: that Muslims of his day and the majority of Islamic scholars over the previous centuries had lost their way. As a result, his life-long pursuit became centered on calling people to discover what was hidden in the sources of Islam, a work which brought much trouble.

Occasionally, Abd al-Wahhab's devotion to returning to primitive Islamic practice brought him into conflict with his family, friends, and local authorities. Due to his activities, al-Wahhab's father was dismissed from his judgeship in 1726 and moved to Huraymila. At first, Abd al-Wahhab continued on in al-Uyayna trying to rectify "pagan"

⁹ Horst, "Confessions," 14

¹⁰ Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe*, 192.

¹¹ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

¹² Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), 44.

practices within Islam. But he soon reached the conclusion that "words alone are of no avail" and left the area to join his father.¹³

It was through words and the pen that Abd al-Wahhab first tried to combat the apostasy he saw in Islam. Although not all scholars agree with this view, Delong-Bas in *Wahhabi Islam* purports that throughout much of his teaching experience Abd al-Wahhab advocated a gentle approach to bringing revival in the Muslim world. Rather than quickly taking up the sword to enforce his new version of Islam, Abd al-Wahhab preferred a method of persuasion by the word and pen over violence. An example of this was when Abd al-Wahhab began preaching his message of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) in his hometown of al-Uyaynah. "He started by engaging the townspeople in a series of discussions about what *tawhid* is and how people violate this principle, often unintentionally."¹⁴ Despite his seemingly early tendency toward a benevolent approach, he himself and many of his followers later deviated from peaceful coexistence with their opponents and began to use force.

Their Religious Environments

In order to understand the message and impulse of both Menno Simons and Abd Al-Wahhab, it is necessary to grasp at least a small bit of the religious environment of their particular eras. Since throughout the history of the church and of Islam its theology has been influenced by its surroundings, an understanding of the particular social and religious challenges of the day will help one comprehend the relevance and impact of the calls for renewal.

By the time Menno Simons and Abd al-Wahhab entered the world scene, both Islam and Christianity had adopted religious rituals and dogma which, according to these two men, went against the original religious sources. In Christianity, there was a growing level of ignorance within the priesthood. Like in Simons' experience, many held their offices for financial gain more than spiritual impulse. In addition, the Church had strayed from following the principle of loving one's enemies—even if it meant death—to a powerful Christendom which persecuted and killed dissenters. Not long after the Council of Nicaea in 325, the great theologian Saint Augustine had completely reversed Jesus' teachings to love one's enemies. He justified the use of force to bring about "good" by saying:

So if we want to declare or recognize the truth, there is a persecution of unrighteousness, which the unholy inflict upon the church of Christ, and there is a righteous persecution, which the church of Christ inflicts upon the unholy. Moreover, [the church] persecutes in the spirit of love; they in the spirit of wrath.¹⁵

Through the influence of Constantine, Saint Augustine, and religious leaders, many Christians had abandoned Jesus' way of suffering love. Conversely, they followed the advice of men like Charlemagne, the Christian king of the Franks, who said, "If there is anyone of the Saxon people lurking among them unbaptized, and if he scorns baptism and wishes to absent himself and stay a pagan, let him die."¹⁶ No doubt, the practice of Christianity had drastically changed, and Simons discovered this apostasy through his study of the Scriptures.

Furthermore, Menno Simons lived in a time when Europe was desperately afraid of the neighboring Muslim Turks, who made occasional attacks into European territory. From a political perspective, it was imperative to have a united nation under the authority of the state-controlled Church. The Anabaptist teaching of love for all people, even one's enemies, was not only heretical in 16th-century Europe; in the eyes of the Catholic Church, it was a serious threat to the fabric of the state. Dissenters could not be tolerated.

In addition, "Christian" feudal lords took advantage of the poor masses while the Church demanded money for indulgences to guarantee a good afterlife. Saint Mary and other saints were sought as intercessors, and the doctrines of purgatory and the use of holy water, holy oil, and other relics had slowly eroded the foundation of Christian faith as found in the New Testament.

¹³ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 7.

¹⁴ Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 19.

¹⁵ David W. Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up* (Tyler, TX: Scroll Publishing, 1999), 139.

¹⁶ Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellion World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 31.

Most notably, there was a general decline in spiritual commitment throughout Europe, in which only religious rituals were considered important for salvation. No longer were all Christians expected to live a transformed life; only "special" and holy people such as monks and nuns were considered capable of living holy lives. The masses lived practically pagan lives with little knowledge of the sources of Christianity.

The Fall of Islam

Similarly, Islam had gone through centuries of change and deviated from its origins. As Islam spread through Asia and the East, it adopted many local religious practices. Although at times local folk rituals were used as secondary methods for protection, some became an integrated part of the growing Sufi wing of the Islamic religion.¹⁷ Abd al-Wahhab abhorred the approach of many Muslims who, rather than practicing *tawhid* and worshipping the one God whom the Prophet Muhammad had revealed, now visited the graves of dead saints to obtain *baraka* (blessing) and help in times of need. DeLong-Bas writes that "For the eighteenth-century reformers, one of the major signs of the deterioration of Islam was the adoption of rituals and beliefs from other religions such as praying to saints and believing that they could grant blessings or perform miracles."¹⁸

Colonialism was another factor in the shaping of Wahhabism. Not only did the British give Wahhabi warriors the arms needed to conquer territories, but the sentiment throughout the Muslim world during this period became increasingly inward-focused.¹⁹ Muslims who had been taught that Islam is the final religion and that they were the best of people were now under occupation and weak. This caused some Muslims to respond radically by fighting back and others to look inward and ask what went wrong. Allen writes that Wahhabism "

Would have gone the way of all extremist cults but for the fact that it appeared as a champion of faith at a time when the world community of Islam, the *umma*, began to question why it was that the triumph of Islam was not proceeding as ordained."²⁰

Hence, there was an emphasis on returning to early Islam so that Allah would again fight for Muslims and deliver them from the rule of infidels as he did in the first centuries after the advent of Islam.

Both Abd al-Wahab and Menno Simons (along with the Anabaptist community) viewed the corruption of their religious orders a consequence of decrees given by scholars and religious leaders throughout the centuries. Rather than being formed on the foundations of their own holy books and the examples of early leaders, Abd al-Wahhab and Menno Simons believed that Islam and Christianity had been shaped by other influences. They now set about to establish a new order of committed believers by calling their people back to the sources.

Their Message: Return to the Sources

Probably the most striking similarity in the emphasis of Menno Simons and Abd al-Wahhab was the call to return to the sources. Simons was influenced by living during the rise of humanism when *ad fontes* (to the sources) was the cry of the scholars. This slogan led to a renewed interest in studying the Bible and, in the words of Dyck, "led to the Reformation."²¹

In addition, the idea of *ad fontes* became a springboard for Simons' vision of a New Testament church which would reflect the primitive church and be faithful to the way of Christ in life. Although Simons was an avid student of the Scriptures, he saw Christ as the central source for Christian theology and a pattern after which to live. It was not simply the text of Scripture he was interested in rediscovering; rather, he believed that Scripture must be understood through the eyes of Christ's life and teaching. He wrote that we should accept "no doctrine but the pure unadulterated biblical Word, explained and understood with the heart and made explicit by Jesus Christ."²²

¹⁷ This was especially true in the Sufi expression of Islam

¹⁸ DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 8.

¹⁹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling From the Extremists* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 63.

²⁰ Allen, *God's Terrorist*, 21.

²¹ Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 437.

²² Horst, "Confessions," 14.

By pointing people back to the sources of Scripture and ultimately Christ, Simons and other Anabaptist leaders were ignoring centuries of Catholic Church decrees. On the contrary, they believed that no matter what the cost, one should be willing to break with the corrupted Church to follow the teaching of Scripture.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was also committed to returning to the sources. He saw the writings, legal opinions, and commentaries of Islamic scholars as corruptions of true Islam and was furious over bold claims which turned human ideas into divine mandates. Furthermore, he claimed that the religious *ulama* advocated things which were contrary to the way the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers lived and taught. To bring the change he sought, al-Wahhab believed that all Muslims should become familiar with the Quran and the Hadith and not merely depend on religious teachers for direction. In his mind, the Quran was the only reliable source from which to develop religious dogma and laws for right living. Allen writes that "The Wahhaby acknowledges the Koran as divine revelation; his principle is 'the Koran and nothing but the Koran.'"²³

This was a radical move by Abd al-Wahhab, since it put him at odds with over a thousand years of Islamic jurisprudence and garnered much opposition to his teaching. However, he was not to be moved by years of precedent in the Islamic community. Despite the odds against him, Abd al-Wahhab set out, in the words of Algar, "to dismantle the complex and intricate structures of law, theology and mysticism, not to mention religious practice, that had grown since the completion of the Qur'anic revelation, and to find a way back directly to the twin sources of Islam, the Quran and Sunna."²⁴ His goal was to recreate early Islam as he saw it in the sources.

Both Abd al-Wahhab and Menno Simons were ignoring centuries of religious dogma which had steepled their communities of faith in ignorance and caused them to depart from the basic principles of their own religious traditions. They determined to call as many as possible back to the practice of primitive practice based on the early sources.

Commitment, Discipleship, and Love

After leaving the priesthood and spending a year studying the Scriptures, Simons was approached by Anabaptist leaders who requested that he accept ordination. This was a monumental decision which he knew would intensify the opposition to come. After pondering the implications, Simons agreed and was most likely ordained in 1537.

In this new position of leadership, he began to teach and write extensively about his discoveries from Scripture. He taught that baptism was a free choice and that only those who wished to associate themselves in true disciplined obedience to Christ should be offered it. Simons wrote that only those who "with their whole heart believe the precious Gospel of Jesus Christ which has been preached and taught to them, [and those who experience] a change of mind, renounce self, bitterly repent of their old sinful life... they therefore receive holy baptism as a token of obedience which proceeds from faith."²⁵ He decried the practice of infant baptism and said that only those who could make a conscious choice to join a community of Christian faith should be granted baptism.

Following from his view of baptism, Simons wrote about the Church as a voluntary gathering of believers who bound themselves together in commitment to Christ and to each other. This community was to provide mutual care and correction and to challenge each other to greater commitment. He urged his community that if they saw a fellow believer in sin, it was their duty to help them return to the truth through "loving admonition and brotherly instruction."²⁶ Simons was deeply concerned for the purity of the Church's doctrine, practice, and witness to the world. He wrote that the true signs of the Church of Christ would be known by:

1. The unadulterated pure doctrine
2. The scriptural use of the sacramental signs
3. Obedience to the Word

²³ Allen, *God's Terrorist*, 55.

²⁴ Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, 10.

²⁵ Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings*, 79.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 79.

4. Unfeigned brotherly love
5. Candid confession of God and Christ
6. Bearing oppression and hatred for the sake of the Word of the Lord²⁷

Furthermore, Simons believed that no person could be brought into this community of faith by force. Conversely, he believed that "Faith is a gift from God; therefore it cannot be forced upon any one by worldly authorities or by the sword."²⁸ He used sharp words to condemn the use of force by both Protestant and Catholic Christians who were bent on forcing Anabaptist believers to recant and return to the state churches.

Discipleship was another key message in Simons' theology. He declared that those who claim to be Christians must live as Jesus taught and reprimanded those who claimed Christ but refused to follow him in life. In his writings, Simons made it crystal clear that all those who live after fleshly desires will not inherit the Kingdom of God. His emphasis that disciples of Christ must seek to live as Jesus lived was given to friend and foe alike. He wrote:

Tell me, dearly beloved, where and when have we ever read in the Word of the Lord that an unbelieving and disobedient or carnal person received the promise of eternal life? I tell you the truth, dear brothers, nowhere and never. About such it is repeatedly written... if you live after the flesh you will die (Romans 8:13).²⁹

Simons believed that a Christian was one who followed Christ in simple obedience to His word, not one who was merely sprinkled with holy water or had faith in his heart. It was the regenerated life of love that mattered most.

Simons also resisted the prevailing view that Christians could engage in war and emphasized Jesus' example of love for all men. Just as Jesus died rather than fighting against his Roman persecutors, he taught that Christians are called to suffer for their commitment to Christ. He was convinced that those who claim to know Christ "cannot fight with the sword," and said that "If Christ fights his enemies with the sword of his mouth, if he smites the earth with the rod of his mouth, and slays the wicked with the breath of his lips; and if we are conformed unto his image, how can we then fight our enemies with any other sword?"³⁰ This commitment to love was to be practiced even to the point of death. Many Anabaptists of that time followed this ethic and gave their lives for returning to the example of Christ and his early followers.

The three themes of community, discipleship and love for all people most clearly define the ethic which shaped the people Simons was so influential in helping to mature.

Commitment and Holy War

Abd al-Wahhab was also interested in developing a community of committed believers. However, the means he adopted to achieve this were very different from Menno's approach. Although as was mentioned, he often began with using words and the pen, his passion for change led him to conclude that the *mushrikun* (associators/unbelievers) should be fought by faithful Muslims following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. In *God's Terrorists*, author Charles Allen writes that Abd al-Wahhab "saw himself as a reformer and revivalist reacting against corruptions inside Islam. He declared holy war on those corruptions and took that war to his fellow Muslims."³¹

After Abd al-Wahhab left his hometown and studied in Mecca and other parts of the Middle East, he returned to Huraymila, where he resumed his teaching. There he urged Muslims to abstain from deviant behavior and return to his version of the "straight path" of Islam. His message was so strong that local slaves attempted to assassinate him. After this incident, he returned to his hometown of al-Uyayna and was warmly received by Uthman ibn Hamad ibn Mu'ammār, the local ruler. The ruler offered Abd al-Wahhab his aunt in marriage, and al-Wahhab

²⁷ John Horsh, *Menno Simons: His Life, Labors and Teachings*, (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1916), 255.

²⁸ Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings*, 97.

²⁹ Horst, "Confessions," 14.

³⁰ John Funk, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (Elkhart: John F. Funk & Brother, 1871), 434-435.

³¹ Allen, *God's Terrorist*, 21.

began teaching ibn Mu'ammār about *tawhīd*. Soon, Abd al-Wahhāb and ibn Mu'ammār formed a political alliance in which Abd al-Wahhāb agreed to support the expansion of ibn Mu'ammār's rule in the Najd if the ruler accepted his theology.

The forming of this alliance gave Abd al-Wahhāb political power to accomplish his religious goals of creating a community of committed followers, so he set out to bring change. The first project was to destroy an ancient sacred tree in the area which had become an object of devotion. Many Muslims came to this tree to seek help in times of need, and Abd al-Wahhāb saw this as *shirk*, an association of partners with Allah. Ibn Mu'ammār gave him a band of armed security guards, providing Abd al-Wahhāb the protection needed to destroy the tree. The second move he made was to destroy a sacred tomb, another object of devotion and a deviation from *tawhīd*. Later, he ordered the stoning of an adulterous woman following the tradition of the Prophet. These three events, along with his criticism of religious and political leaders, helped break the pact he had with the local ruler. After declaring that the religious leaders had abandoned their moral and religious authority, he was escorted out of the area to al-Dir'iyya.

It was there in 1744 that a new alliance was formed with the ruling Al Saud family. Abd al-Wahhāb came with the message that if Muhammad ibn Saud "dedicated himself to the promotion of *tawhīd* and the eradication of associationism (*shirk*), ignorance (*jahiliyya*), and divisions among the people, God would grant him and his descendants rule over the lands of Najd and its regions."³² Abd al-Wahhāb agreed not to interfere with ibn Saud's interest in consolidating power over the region, and ibn Saud agreed to uphold Abd al-Wahhāb's religious dogma.

In the beginning of his sojourn there, Abd al-Wahhāb again used a more peaceful approach in gaining converts to his cause using the pen. However, when that approach did not produce the desired results, raiding and war were the next steps to take in spreading Wahhābi doctrine. In all, the conquest of Saudi Arabia cost 400,000 lives and, according to Algar, "the governors of the various provinces appointed by Ibn Saud are said to have carried out 40,000 public executions and 350,000 amputations in the course of subduing the peninsula."³³

Unlike the peaceful spread of Anabaptist doctrine, it was through political alliance and conquering by the sword that the message of Abd al-Wahhāb spread through the Arabian Peninsula.

Their Influence: Then and Now

Although Anabaptism was already spreading in the northern part of Europe before Menno joined the movement, his commitment to the sources helped stabilize a faltering community. He traveled extensively at great risk and spent countless hours writing volumes of material to give the growing Anabaptist movement clearer direction. According to Bender, "It is not too much to say that the preservation of the Dutch and North German Anabaptists from complete annihilation or at least from absorption into... fanaticism... was due in large measure to the fruitful labors of Menno Simons."³⁴

The influence of Menno Simons is attested to by the fact that he was a wanted man. Authorities offered a large sum of money for anyone who would report his whereabouts and offered pardon to any Anabaptist "if they would bring about the imprisonment of the said Menno Symonsz." Furthermore, in a plan proposed by Mary, regent of the Netherlands in 1541, it was written "were it not for that a former priest Menno Symonsz who is one of the principal leaders of the aforesaid sect... and has misled many simple and innocent people."³⁵ Despite such strong opposition and the constant need to be careful, Menno continued his ministry and called the Anabaptist community to genuine discipleship.

³² Delong-Bas, *Wahhābi Islam*, 34.

³³ Algar, *Wahhābism*, 42.

³⁴ Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

Today, the legacy of Menno Simons and the Anabaptist movement is felt in many ways. It was partially through the influence of Anabaptist ideas regarding the separation of church and state that America discovered the principles of religious freedom which seem so normal today. In *The Anabaptist Vision*, Bender writes that:

There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice.³⁶

In 16th-century Europe, these radical ideas were considered a threat to the fabric of a nation and cause for much concern. However, today they seem normal, and one could hardly imagine the modern world without them.

It is not only in matters of church and state that Anabaptist thought has had its impact; the ideas espoused by Simons and his followers have significantly changed the face of Evangelical Christianity. Although many Christians still seek to gain influence over others by involvement in politics, few Christians would dream of a theocratic state as was the case in 16th-century Europe. Klaassen considers the impact Anabaptism has had on Christian thinking regarding the role of the state in religion: "The ancient conviction, held in the church since the days of Augustine, that the world became Christian when the rulers professed Christian faith was seriously challenged by Anabaptists as it is by many Christians today."³⁷ What was at one time "heretical" has now become normal even in the Church.

In addition, the idea of a free church where membership is voluntary has become the norm in America and around the world. Flowing from that idea is the practice of adult voluntary baptism, which was rediscovered by the Anabaptist community but is now standard in many denominations outside of the Anabaptist faith. The impact on our 21st century understanding of missions can also be tied to the early movement when Anabaptists saw neighbors, business associates and many others as outside of the fold of Christ. Rather than assuming everyone in a religious vicinity was Christians, they went about evangelizing starting close home.

Most importantly, the impact of Menno Simons is felt in communities all across America and the world where groups of Christians continue to embrace the values of community, discipleship, and love. Amish, Mennonite, and Brethren churches all point back to their religious roots which began in Europe during the Reformation and were influenced by the writings and teaching of Menno Simons. Although these communities of faith struggle to maintain a clear Gospel witness, through disengagement from war, living a separated life, and serving the poor, they continue to witness to the powerful influence of Menno Simons and the Anabaptist movement.

In contrast, September 11, 2001, gave the world a fresh glimpse of the outworking of Abd al-Wahhab's ideology. Before that tragic day, the world of Wahhabi Islam was nearly hidden from the American mind. But on that day, America came face-to-face with the Wahhabi Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers originated. These men had grown up in a land where the sources of Islam were highly valued and where public beheadings—following traditions found in Islamic sources—are still a common occurrence today.³⁸

Although Abd al-Wahhab may have had a more benevolent manner in the beginning of his teaching career, most scholars would agree that much of today's radical Islamic movement is directly or indirectly tied to Wahhabi doctrine. **Sadly, returning to the sources of Islam has spawned a movement which has terrorized and killed many, including fellow Muslims.**

Furthermore, through the acquisition of billions of dollars in oil money and by controlling the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, Wahhabi Islam has become a powerful influence in the worldwide Islamic community.³⁹ In fact, some scholars say that were it not for the discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, Wahhabi Islam would have gone the

³⁶ Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1944) 1.

³⁷ Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1981) 67.

³⁸ The Associated Press, Saudi Beheaded for Killing his Father, *The Associated Press*, March 2, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=6990487> (accessed December 21, 2009).

³⁹ El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 72.

way of all radical cults.⁴⁰ Their rigorous evangelistic program sponsored by oil money has produced millions of pieces of Islamic literature, helped build many mosques around the world, and supported Islamic education programs to advocate a strict adherence to the Wahhabi understanding of Islam.

Although both Menno Simons and Abd al-Wahhab were men committed to establishing religious communities based on early sources, the means by which they did this and the outcome of their influence look radically different. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab made an alliance, grabbing the reins of power and spreading his message through that power, while Menno Simons relinquished power, security, and ease for a life of ongoing suffering while preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of peace. One was spread by violence and the use of oil money; the other by love and forgiveness. The events of September 11, 2001, and October 2, 2006, depicted in vivid detail the contrasting results of returning to the sources. One brought unmatched violence and terror, while the other offered forgiveness and love in the face of a terrible tragedy.

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⁴⁰ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling From the Extremists* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers), 2005.