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An Appeal for Renewal in an Age of Conflict: Peter Pietersz's 'Way to the City of Peace'

I. Introduction

It is common to associate the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic with economic prosperity, cultural flourishing, and religious freedom. Whereas wars of religion raged in various parts of Europe, and while the northern provinces of the Netherlands were in rebellion against Spain from 1568 to 1648, military hostilities in the Dutch heartland were actually rare. After 1575, financial constraints and uncooperative Spanish mercenary soldiers made it possible for the Dutch to rapidly embark on a path toward independence. By 1579, the Union of Utrecht also provided the constitutional framework for religious toleration. This did not mean, however, that the residence of the Republic escaped religious conflict entirely. As Calvinists had been the driving force in the Dutch independence movement, they acquired positions of power, which sometimes led to repressive measures against Roman Catholics and other religious minorities such as the Socinians and the Mennonites.¹ Within the Mennonite communities there was also persistent intra-confessional conflict. After the Münster uprising and years of uncertainty under the leadership of the spiritualist-inclined David Joris, Menno Simons had achieved some success in bringing about a semblance of unity. Yet his insistence on doctrinal uniformity and church purity, «without spot or wrinkle», led to ongoing discord. Menno Simons argued with Adam Pastor and his followers regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, and he sparred with Nicolaas van Blesdijk and his co-religionists in matters related to the nature of the church. Due to his strict views regarding church discipline, Menno Simons also came into sharp conflict with Waterlander and High German Mennonites. After his death in 1561, Menno's ecclesial views were taken up by other Anabaptist groups, such as the Frisians, Flemish, and High Germans, who would eventually lead to further schisms. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Mennonite community in the Netherlands was tragically divided into at least ten different factions that scarcely acknowledged the legitimate existence of

¹ I accept Piet Visser's distinction of terms, who refers to «Mennonites» as those loyal to Menno Simons, and to «Doopsgezinden» as those who identified with the reforming tradition after the Waterlanders division of 1557 (See Piet Visser, *Mennonites and Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands, 1535–1700*, in: *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1571–1700*, eds., John D. Roth and James M. Stayer, Leiden 2007, 299f.). For the purposes of communicating to a global audience, however, I am using the more generic term «Mennonite» to refer to the various Anabaptist groups in the Netherlands that emerged after Menno Simons.

the others.² While unity discussions achieved some limited successes, divisions persisted causing one Reformed observer in 1621 to refer to the Mennonite conflict-ridden state of affairs as «the Babel of Anabaptism» (*Het Babel der Wederdoperen*).³

In this milieu of religious discord, Pieter Pietersz (1574–1651), a Waterlander Mennonite, wrote a treatise called «The Way to the City of Peace» (*Wegh na Vreden-stadt*).⁴ Published in 1625, it belonged to a genre of writing which had begun to surface in the late Middle Ages after pilgrimages and crusades to holy lands had waned. As Protestant literature of the early modern period, it was «a spiritualized alternative to making the actual journey of penitence, piety, or devotion».⁵ Pietersz's treatise was also a personal and social vision calling for reform and renewal at a time when much of the European world was at war, and when Christian denominations were attempting to differentiate themselves from each other.

Many people found Pietersz's vision compelling. It was reprinted eight times in the Dutch language and eventually published several times in German. Along with other published works by Pietersz, «The Way to the City of Peace» was eagerly read by Mennonites and non-Mennonites in the Netherlands. Eventually it became an inspiring work for Mennonites living in the Palatinate, and in Prussia, South Russia, Canada, and the United States.⁶ While Pietersz's vision of reform was largely forgotten by the twentieth century, «The Way to the City of Peace» stands as a spiritual and devotional classic in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.⁷

In the following I endeavor to bring this writing into focus. I first introduce Pieter Pietersz and his immediate context within the Waterlander community, and then provide an overview of the main themes that run through his work with an eye to Pietersz's vision of renewal. The thesis presented here is that

² Piet Visser, Jan Philipsz Schabaelje (1592–1656), a seventeenth century Dutch Mennonite, and his *Wandering Soul*, in: Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser (eds.), *From Martyr to Muppe – An historical introduction to cultural assimilation processes of a religious minority in the Netherlands: the Mennonites*, Amsterdam 1994, 99. For a brief overview of this early and divisive period, see, for instance, Piet Visser, *Mennonites and Doopsgezinden*, 299–345. For background to Adam Pastor, see Alton S. Templin, *Adam Pastor: anti-Trinitarian Anabaptist*, in: *Iliiff Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1967), 25–31, and George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd edition, Kirksville, MO 1992, esp. 739–742; Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life, and Thought*, Scottsdale, PA., 1981, 196–198.

³ Hermann Faulkelius, *Babel, Dat is Verwerringhe der Weder-doperen onder malkanderen*, etc., Middelburg 1621, noted by Nanne van der Zijpp, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1980, 81, note 17.

⁴ The English translation is «The Way to the City of Peace», in: *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, Scottdale 1995, 234–283. For this essay I also consulted Dutch and German editions: *Wegh Na Vreden-Stadt: Waer in aengewesen werdt hoe men de Vreede mach bekomen*, in: *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, 3rd edition, Amsterdam 1715, 1–63, and *Ausgewählte Schriften von Peter Peters*, Elkhart, IN. 1901, 11–115.

⁵ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 234.

⁶ Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO), Art. «Pietersz, Pieter» (1574–1651). Accessed May 15, 2019.

⁷ For a relatively recent discussion of Pietersz's vision, see Tom Harder, *The Way to the City of Peace: The Anabaptist Utopia of Pieter Pietersz*, in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78, no. 4 (October 2004), 525–542.

Pietersz's vision resists neatly defined categories of description, and that it reflects the spiritual hybridity and fluidity that was characteristic of the religious climate of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands. I also conclude that Pietersz's vision strikes a balance in spirituality and theology that is worth considering in current discussions about renewal.

II. Pieter Pietersz and the Waterlanders

Pieter Pietersz was born in the city of Alkmaar in 1574. He was a carpenter and mechanic, and for a brief period of time he experimented in the building of watermills. While obtaining little or no formal theological education, he became known for his work as a preacher and writer who served the Waterlander congregations of De Rijp and Zaandam in north Holland from about 1600 until his death in 1651.⁸

The Waterlanders were a branch of the Dutch Mennonites whose views tended to be moderate, orthodox and progressive. They could not accept Menno Simons's version of the incarnation, inherited from Melchior Hoffman, which stipulated that the Word had become flesh but did not take on the flesh of Mary.⁹ They also rejected Menno's belief in a church «without spot or wrinkle», and they were critical of the way in which Menno and his colleagues, Dirk Phillips and Leenaert Bouwens, carried out strict church discipline for the purposes of preserving ecclesial purity. In contrast to other Mennonites groups, the Waterlanders also tended to be more involved in Dutch society and they often demonstrated a willingness to engage ecumenically with other Christian communities. Within this environment, Pieter Pietersz preached in his local congregation and would also travel considerable distances to support and encourage other Waterlander congregations. He wrote extensively, publishing a variety of devotional writings including tracts, sermons, hymns, and prayers. A number of his writings were collected in a volume entitled *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, which was first published at Harlingen in 1651.¹⁰

Beginning in the 1620s, Pieter Pietersz became a leader of a renewal movement, the members of which came to be known as the *Vredestadsburgers* («Citizens of the City of Peace»). The other primary leader of the movement was Jan Philipsz Schabaelje, who authored the widely read *Lusthof des Gemoets* («Pleasure Garden

⁸ For background to Pietersz life, see, for example, *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, 1–4; *Ausgewählte Schriften*, 6–9; Hermannus Schyn, *Uitvoeriger Verhandeling van de Geschiedenisse der Mennoniten*, Amsterdam 1744), 588–596; J. J. Honig Jr., «Reizen naar de Eeuwigheid», *Doopsgezinden Bijdragen* 36 (1896), 1–35, especially 18–26; P. C. Molhuysen and P. J. Blok, *Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek* 8, Leiden 1930/ 2008, 1255–1257.

⁹ Menno's view was somewhat at variance with the Apostles Creed and the Council of Chalcedon of 451 that presumed that Christ's flesh came from Mary and that Christ was born of Mary.

¹⁰ Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, Art. Art. «Pietersz, Pieter» (1574–1651) (Accessed May 15, 2019).

of the Soul») and its companion work, the *Wandelende Ziele* («Wandering Soul»¹¹. The *Vredestadtsburgers* often met in conventicle-like circles and sought to emulate a spirituality resembling first century apostolic Christianity. They resisted strict forms of confessionalism that privileged doctrine over religious experience,¹² and they tended to mirror a form of piety that was expressed among groups associated with the *Nadere Reformatie*, which was a kind of second reformation under way at the time among various Christian groups living in the Netherlands, Germany, and England – «groups ranging from the Rijnsburg Collegiants to the scholarly networks around such men as Hartlib and Serrarius with whom some the *Vredestadtsburgers* were also in touch». It is likely that the *Vredestadt* movement «continued in the second half of the seventeenth century with the Mennonite Collegiantism of Galenus Abrahamsz and others».¹³

A major ethical concern for these reforming groups had to do with the dangers of superabundance. Pieter Pietersz wrote an essay called «Mirror of Greed» as a response to the accumulation of wealth that he observed around him in church and society.¹⁴ For Pietersz, and for others in his circle, the amassing of wealth seemed to contradict earlier Anabaptist values of material asceticism and simplicity. In their martyr book of 1631, the Waterlanders, the larger group to which Pietersz belonged, lamented that the current times of material prosperity were partially to blame for the many church divisions that plagued the Mennonite community.¹⁵

Pieter Pietersz experienced religious conflict first hand when he was criticized by the Reformed leader Abdias Widmarius for preaching a sermon that allegedly gave too much attention to Christ's life and example, and not enough to themes of justification and reconciliation through Christ's blood. In his criticism, Widmarius accused Pietersz of applying a Socinian reading to his biblical interpretation – a serious charge since Socinians were a religious minority and not officially recognized within the borders of the Dutch Republic.¹⁶

¹¹ Other prominent members in the group included the bookseller Claes Jacobsz of De Rijp, the preachers Willem Allertsz of Alkmaar and Hans Alenson of Delft and Haarlem, and individuals such as Judith Lubberts and Cornelis Laackhysen. Visser notes that «Pieter Pietersz was probably the leader or 'father', while Jan Philipsz Schabaelje can be regarded as the main ideologist and poet» (Piet Visser, Research Notes: Broeders in de Geest, in: Mennonite Quarterly Review 67, no. 4 [October 1993], 471). For background to the *Vredestadt* movement within the Waterlander milieu, see Piet Visser, Broeders in de geest: de doopsgezinde bijdragen van Dierick en Jan Philipsz. Schabaelje tot de Nederlandse stictelijke literatuur in de zeventiende eeuw, Deventer 1988, 82–133.

¹² Samme Zijlstra notes that within the Waterlander church context, the *Vredestadtsburgers* were especially opposed to doctrinal emphases, and were similar to the Collegiants who were opposed to confessions, along with dogmatic and other congregational directives. See Samme Zijlstra, Om De Ware Gemeente en de oude gronden: Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden 1531–1675, Leewarden 2000, 279f.

¹³ Visser, Research Notes: Broeders in de Geest, 473.

¹⁴ «Spiegel der Gierigheydt», in: *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, 287–316. For commentary on this particular work, see Karl Koop, Dangers of Superabundance: Pieter Pietersz, Mennonites and Greed during the Dutch Golden Age, in: Journal of Mennonite Studies 27 (2009), 61–73.

¹⁵ Visser, Mennonites and Doopsgezinden, 325. The Waterlander martyr book was *The Martelaers Spiegel der Werelose Christenen* (The Martyrs Mirror of the Nonresistant Christians) – the 1631 edition that would lay the foundation of Tieleman Jansz van Braght's Martyrs Mirror of 1660.

¹⁶ Zijlstra, Ware Gemeente, 353.

Pietersz also experienced conflict within his own church community. The issue revolved around whether the Bible by itself was sufficient in communicating the will of God and the message of salvation, or whether an additional «Word» was required, namely the inner Word, or the living Word of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. While the Waterlanders were able to resolve this disagreement by 1626 – concluding that a two-fold Word was in fact necessary for God’s revelation – the issue did not completely die out as major players in the debate continued to battle over their theological differences.¹⁷

In the midst of all these various conflicts, Pieter Pietersz wrote his treatise seeking an alternative way which he hoped would bring about renewal. Undoubtedly, as he was writing his treatise on peace, Pietersz was also thinking about the military battles that were creating mayhem and destruction in the not-too-distant lands just beyond the Dutch borders.

III. An Overview

Pieter Pietersz’s «Way to the City of Peace» is a work consisting of several sections that constitute teachings, a complaint of peace (perhaps hearkening back to a writing by Erasmus with the same name), spiritual songs, and a prayer.¹⁸ The heart of the composition takes the form of a dialogue, a didactic method of teaching that was not uncommon in Pietersz’ day. The dialogue is between an inquiring Pieter who has been searching for the City of Peace, and Jan, a mature spiritual traveller, who has found the City and is willing to elaborate on the nature of Christian pilgrimage and citizenship.¹⁹

Not unlike Augustine’s *City of God*, Pietersz imagines the City as the church in heaven where people are at peace and in right relationship with God and with others; at the same time it is also an earthly reality, where the citizens of peace, as the church, mirror the ideals of the heavenly city. Yet, at the present time, the earthly reality fails to reflect the heavenly ideal. The church finds itself in the midst of a perverse generation, consumed by conflict and by those who are «good and evil», «wise and foolish, pious and frivolous».²⁰ Pietersz longs to rectify

¹⁷ For background to this debate see W. J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis van de Doopsgezinden in Nederland 1600–1735, tweede deel, eerste helft*, Haarlem 1940, 142–176; Gary K. Waite, *The Drama of the Two-Word Debate among Liberal Dutch Mennonites, c. 1620–1660: Preparing the Way for Baruch Spinoza?*, in Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers (Eds.), *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform*, Göttingen 2017, 118–135; Karl Koop, *Word, Spirit, Experience, and the Practice of Patience: Learning from the Waterlander Mennonite Twofold Word Debate*, in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92, no. 4 (October 2018), 521–537.

¹⁸ The 63 pages in the 1715 edition of the *Opera* are divided up as follows: title page and listing of scripture texts (1f.), a brief preface (3f.), a dialogue between Jan and Pieter (5–42), a complaint of peace/lament concerning peace – «Klage des Vredes» (42–47), a reverent prayer (47–49), a conclusion (49–52), followed by further teachings (52f.), spiritual songs (54–63), and an index (63).

¹⁹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 236.

²⁰ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 256, par. 28; see also 255, par. 26.

this situation by calling for renewal that impacts the heart, which sees reality with a different set of lenses and ultimately leads to a new social reality.²¹

There are no idle people in the City; neither is anyone employed in useless trade that leads to shameless profit. Everyone is busy seeding and harvesting for the welfare of all. «Some grind grain, while others use it to make bread to eat.»²² The point of all this work is to help those who are in need.²³ Citizens receive their calling and particular vocation from God. They busy themselves in a quiet manner, confident that they can trust the one who has called them to their work.²⁴ To be a citizen of this City of peace involves watching and praying, and it includes humility, patience, and long-suffering. At the same time, it takes effort, and even a willingness to do battle in order to keep «pride, greed, and pleasures of the flesh out of the heart».²⁵

Interestingly Pietersz hardly uses the word «weere-loos» in his writing, a Dutch term along with its German counterpart that is sometimes translated into the English language using words like «nonresistant» or «defenceless». Pietersz chooses the word «vrede/vreede», – «peace» – a word that in Pietersz's writing seems to suggest engagement, even battle against evil.²⁶ Yet such combat is not waged solely with tools made of human construction. In fact the greatest weapon at the disposal of the Christian is «a firm faith and trust in God» with Jesus leading the way.²⁷

While Pietersz frequently uses language rich in metaphor, he chooses plain speech to address the violence and the conflicts that consume his age. There are, for example, those who call themselves Christians yet participate in wars, or are involved in murder and robbery. In particular, Pietersz takes aim at merchants – and in this instance he is likely thinking of the growing number of Mennonite businesses that equip their ships with weapons such as canons, and who use «powder and lead, guns and swords in order to protect their goods».²⁸ The root cause of such violent behaviour is «the terrible devil of greed» and the willingness «to serve the god of mammon».²⁹ For Pietersz, no citizen of the City of Peace can agree to participate in such murderous activity. Followers of the Lamb of God are those who are readily willing to suffer and would rather be torn limb from limb than to use murderous weapons of self-defence.³⁰

²¹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 248, par. 20.

²² Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 253, par. 25.

²³ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 246, par. 17.

²⁴ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 244, par. 16.

²⁵ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 235.

²⁶ *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, 34, par. 42; Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 271, par. 42. The term «weere-loos» in Dutch or «wehrlos» in German is often translated as «nonresistant» or «defenceless». The Dutch spelling – «vrede/vreede» – varies in the text of the *Opera*.

²⁷ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 235.

²⁸ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 268, par. 41. For a broader discussion on Mennonites and the willingness for some to protect their merchant ships, see, for example, Michael Driedger, *Kanonen, Schiesspulver und Wehrlosigkeit: Cord, Geeritt und B. C. Roosen in Holstein und Hamburg, 1532–1905*, in: *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter*, 52 (1995), 101–121.

²⁹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 268, par. 41. See also 242, par. 12.

³⁰ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 268, par. 40.

For this reason Pietersz even opposes the idea that true Christians can participate as magistrates. Employing a two-kingdom theology that seems to echo some early two-kingdom Anabaptist perspectives,³¹ Pietersz insists that while the worldly office is ordained by God «to punish the wicked [...] protect the pious» and rule the world, such involvement is not befitting of true Citizens of Peace. They live under different governance; their king has rejected earthly kingship and earthly weapons.³² Christ is thus the consummate example for believers, the new paradigm that was foreshadowed by the old prophets of the Old Testament, who long ago were already condemning the use of weapons, and predicting that in the future, swords would be changed to plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:3; Zech. 9:10).³³

Pietersz also takes aim at the conflict and divisiveness that he observes in the churches. He brings to mind the divisions of Christendom, and views such lack of unity as a sign of arrogance, pride, and possession of an evil spirit.³⁴ He is particularly critical of those «who love their own opinions more than they love peace», or whose interpretations and feelings are given priority over the importance of holy unity.³⁵ Pietersz recognizes the reality of doctrinal differences within the wider church as well as within his own community, but suggests that to have theological discussions on the basis of mere human understanding is dangerous.

This is especially the case with respect to the conflict regarding the doctrine of the incarnation. Pietersz indirectly refers to the Mennonite controversy that has persisted for almost a century by suggesting that how Christ became human is not for Christians to investigate.³⁶ The details concerning the way in which Christ was born of a woman and how precisely the child became flesh in his mother's womb is beyond human intellectual capacity. Genuine citizens of the City are silent in regards to these high matters and they are cautious about judging others for their differing opinions. It is enough for the Citizens of Peace «to know that Jesus is given to them for their salvation».³⁷ The highest priority of a Christian, according to Pietersz, is that they «know Christ according to the

³¹ Perhaps one of the best known statements of early Anabaptism, reflecting a two-kingdom, separatist theology is the Brotherly Union of 1527, often referred to as the Schleithem Articles or Schleithem Confession. In particular, article 4 of the confession reflects a strong dualistic mindset. See the chapter «Schleithem Articles/Brotherly Union (1527)» in: Karl Koop (Ed.), *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660*, Kitchener, ON 2006, 23–33. It is difficult to ascertain here whether Pietersz's position was as strict as the drafters of the Schleithem Articles, since the Waterlanders, in their revised Congregational Order in 1581, permitted members to hold some governmental offices, but not judicial offices that required judgments of life and death. See Visser, *Mennonites and Doopsgezinden*, 314.

³² Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 269, par. 42.

³³ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 270, par. 42.

³⁴ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 274–277, par. 44–46.

³⁵ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 274f., par. 44.

³⁶ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 272f., par. 43. Among Dutch Mennonites, the Melchiorite-Mennonite doctrine of the incarnation was in dispute for some time. See Alfred R. Van Wijk, «Een mislukte poging tot vereniging: Christologische meningsverschillen onder doopsgezinden in het jaar 1640», *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 40 (2014): 81–112.

³⁷ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 274, par. 43.

Spirit». ³⁸ This entails being at one with Christ and following in his footsteps, ³⁹ a posture that inevitably involves the exercise of endurance, long-suffering and patience. ⁴⁰

On matters related to church discipline, Pietersz believes that the practice of expelling persons from the community should be avoided, and only exercised under extreme cases. ⁴¹ If some sort of discipline is warranted, the overall aim should be to help the sinner for the purposes of winning that person over. ⁴² Churches should not construct laws and strict judgments that have no basis in Scripture. Pietersz takes specific aim at the practice of shunning or avoidance that might lead to economic hardship, and considers it wrong when women are banned for refusing to separate themselves from their husbands who are living in sin. Pietersz argues that, according to the Lord's commandments, a wife is not to leave her husband, and «is bound to him as long as he lives [...]». ⁴³

As we have noted, Pietersz is wary of the theological debate about the incarnation that could lead to schism; yet it is also the case that he does not hold back from articulating his theological convictions regarding a host of other doctrinal matters and church practices. His theology of atonement, for example, presumes that individuals become citizens because of God's grace, and that it is through Christ's suffering on the cross that the debt of sin has been repaid. ⁴⁴ Here, Pietersz is not simply advocating a higher morality, but assumes that God's salvation is ontologically prior to the work that citizens of the City may do. After all, it is the Lord as King who is responsible for building the city. ⁴⁵

Pietersz also has strong convictions regarding believers' baptism and the Lord's Supper and he extrapolates an unmistakable Anabaptist position regarding the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper which he interprets in a spiritualist vein. ⁴⁶ Baptism includes visible water, he states, «which signifies our being washed of sin, which happens truly when we put on Christ and are renewed in the water of the new birth through the Holy Spirit». ⁴⁷ And in regards to the Supper, Pietersz maintains, it is about remembrance, proclaiming Christ's suffering and death for the forgiveness of sins where brothers and sisters observe as one body in the unity of the spirit. «Thus Christ is the true heavenly bread by which

³⁸ This echoes the Waterlander Confession of 1610. See chapter «Short Confession of Faith and the Essential Elements of Christian Doctrine (1610)», in *Koop, Confessions*, 146f., Art. 19.

³⁹ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 274, par. 43.

⁴⁰ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 276, par. 45.

⁴¹ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 262f., par. 37.

⁴² *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 263, par. 37.

⁴³ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 267, par. 39. This issue was the initial cause of schism between Menno Simons and the Waterlanders in the 1557, when the Waterlanders sided with Swain Rutgers, who refused to leave her husband when he had been excommunicated. For a brief outline of events, see C. Arnold *Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction*, Kitchener, ON 1995, 340f. The critique of shunning women for staying with their husbands suggests that the original issue separating the Waterlanders from the close followers of Menno was still an issue during the seventeenth century.

⁴⁴ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 258f., par. 31f.

⁴⁵ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 239.

⁴⁶ On baptism and Lord's Supper, Pietersz sometimes uses the word «*Ordinantien*» and sometimes «*Sacramenten*». See *Opera Pieter Pietersz*, 25, par. 34 and 27, par. 37.

⁴⁷ *Dyck, The Way to the City of Peace*, 261, par. 35.

all believers live, and this is the sacrament which must be understood spiritually, not interpreted carnally, for the flesh avails nothing [...].»⁴⁸ Clearly, Pietersz holds tenaciously to his theological convictions and church practices. At the same time, in the context of wider church conversations, he acknowledges that Christians will have different understandings about many of the important practices of the church. On questions regarding matters of truth, Pietersz demonstrates a broad ecumenism and insists that «judgement belongs to God alone».⁴⁹ Far more important than getting Christian doctrine just right, Pietersz encourages his readers to reach for a higher goal: «A true faith in God with an unfailing trust in the promises of his Son, together with a strong love and longing for the Lord, honest love for the neighbor and for all people [...].»⁵⁰ In the weighing of priorities, Pietersz believes that the unity of the body of Christ should override doctrinal differences. Pietersz highlights the importance of Christian unity, drawing on Pauline metaphors about Christ being the head and Christians constituting the body of Christ. If Christians are indeed ontologically related to Christ and to one another in this way, they cannot be involved in strife.⁵¹ Because Christians are «the body of Christ, bound together in love and peace», backbiting or hatred or vain glory have no place.⁵² Pietersz is aware that the kind citizenship that he is describing is difficult and may even seem impossible to achieve. Quoting Matthew 7,13, he acknowledges that the gate is narrow and the pathway elusive for those attempting to find their way.⁵³ There will be times when Christians will feel discouraged because of their lack of progress due to weaknesses and failures. But Pietersz assures his readers that the journey towards renewal can be attained if one is patient. The destination «is not reached in a day, or in a year». It is «by the steps we climb», he states, and it is «through diligent persistence in the school of Christ» with the «holy life of Christ as example» that Christians will find their way.⁵⁴ Echoing a well-worn theme in Christian pilgrimage literature, Pietersz underscores the value of long-suffering, and patience that is required for those who embark on the road of discipleship as they journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Such a journey must include repentance, a yielding to the will of the God, patience, and a firm conviction that Jesus will lead the way.⁵⁵

IV. Locating the Vision

As we have seen, Pieter Pietersz's vision for renewal resists neat and tidy categories of description. This is so not only because Pietersz communicates through the use of allegory and metaphor and writes in unsystematic fashion. It also had to do with his unwillingness to think of Christian pilgrimage in a reductive or

⁴⁸ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 262, par. 36.

⁴⁹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 264, par. 38.

⁵⁰ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 265, par. 38.

⁵¹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 252, par. 24.

⁵² Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 255, par. 27.

⁵³ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 234.

⁵⁴ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 280, par. 47.

⁵⁵ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 235.

compartmentalized way. He is committed to holding to seemingly contradictory views together in a way that produces a comprehensive and inclusive vision. So, for instance, citizenship in the City of Peace is about an inward change of heart and at the same time it is about social renewal. It entails spiritual detachment from the world, yet there is an undeniable interest in worldly engagement. Pietersz highlights the importance of hard work, yet insists on the importance of humility, patience, and long suffering, noting that Jesus is the one who leads the way. There are words of judgement particular in matters related to violence and church conflict, but there are also passages that insist that God alone is the one who has the authority to judge. In some parts of the narrative, Pietersz's vision eschews serious theological reflection, yet it is abundantly obvious in other parts of his discourse that theology matters, and that church practices, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, must be seen within an Anabaptist theological framework. That said, Pietersz refuses the path of narrow sectarianism. He recognizes that Christians will have their differences; what matters most is the unity of the church, the one body of Christ, that Christians trust in God and demonstrate a willingness to love their neighbour.

Taken together, the vision of renewal that emerges in the «Way to the City of Peace» is all-embracing, and resolutely seeks to avoid the temptation to reduce the gospel to some narrow expression. It obligates the Christian to engage; yet it also places the future in God's hands, thus reflecting an attitude of *Gelassenheit*.⁵⁶ It champions unity over sectarian division, and advocates for peace in an age of conflict. Perhaps it is precisely this all-embracing characteristic that Christian communities today should consider when thinking about renewal.

Pietersz's vision has been variously located within the broader Christian tradition. Some of his contemporaries maintained that Pietersz's writings resembled the spiritual fanaticism of the Münsterites, although there is little basis for that manner of judgement.⁵⁷ In modern times, Robert Friedmann has concluded that Pietersz's work may have been «one of the very first pietistic writings in Dutch Mennonitism», and may have been influenced by the pietist and mystic, Johann Valentin Andreä (1586–1654). Friedmann notes that Andreä wrote an account of the ideal Christian state in his *Reipublicae christianopolitanae descriptio* «after the manner of Thomas More's *Utopia* or Campanella's *City of the Sun*, a book of the same mildness and spirit of toleration as that by Pietersz». ⁵⁸ Here, further work concerning the relationship between Pietersz's work and the *Reipublicae* is warranted.

More recently, scholars have placed Pieter Pietersz, within the mystical and spiritualist tradition. Cornelius J. Dyck, for example, has suggested that Pietersz's «devout, disciplined manner and his mystical-spiritualist inclination»

⁵⁶ «*Gelassenheit*» points to a spirituality emphasizing yielding to the will of God; an attitude and term that goes at least as far back as Meister Eckhart and found in early Anabaptist sources.

⁵⁷ Kühler, *Geschiedenis*, 172f.

⁵⁸ Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature*, Eugene, OR 1998, 107f. Friedmann indicates that the *Reipublicae* was translated into English by Oxford Press in 1916 under the title *Christianopolis, an ideal state of the seventeenth century*.

was the result of «medieval and *Devotio Moderna* influences», along with those «of Sebastian Frank (1499–1543) and his Dutch counterpart Dirk V. Coornhert (1522–1590)».⁵⁹ In a similar vein, Piet Visser has noted that the leaders of the Vredestadt movement «fostered an inner devotion of a practical ascetic nature, inspired by the late medieval popular mysticism of the *Theologia Deutsch* (German Theology), Thomas a Kempis, Meister Eckhardt and Johannes Tauler, which could also be found in the early Anabaptist spiritualism of Sigmund Salming and Christian Entfelder, and the mystical-spiritualism of the Familists and Matthias Weyer».⁶⁰ These observations by Cornelius Dyck and Piet Visser seem close to the mark. We have seen in Pietersz's vision a spiritualist emphasis when he insists, for example, that Christians should come to know Christ «according to the Spirit», and when he maintains that the sacraments of bread and water are to be understood spiritually. For Pietersz, material reality does not convey grace since, as he states, «the flesh avails nothing».⁶¹ And yet, Pietersz cannot easily be placed solely within a spiritualist framework. He adheres to external ritual, he is concerned about the earthly church, he appeals to the historical Christ who is to be followed, and he is doggedly reliant on Scripture – his writing is chock-full of scripture references.

Is it possible that Pietersz work reflects early Enlightenment thinking? Recent scholarship has begun to demonstrate convincingly that Mennonites were not only shaped by the Enlightenment, but were also contributors to it. In his study on Liberal Dutch Mennonites and Baruch Spinoza, for example, Gary Waite hints at possible connections between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century spiritualists – persons such as Pieter Pietersz – and the ideas of Spinoza.⁶² This association bears further consideration, but a cautionary note from Mirjam van Veen is also worth considering. She states that while connections between the radical reformation and the Enlightenment may be observable, this does not yet prove that there is an influence of one movement upon the other.⁶³

Perhaps it is appropriate to simply conclude that the spirituality and theology of Pieter Pietersz reflects multiple influences and is situated at the crossroads of several related traditions. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands, most Christian communities inhabited multiple, overlapping religious worlds and tended to be shaped by a plurality of religious streams. Gary Waite notes that the attention to confessionalization in early modern studies has sometimes «led to the impression that religious boundaries and identities were

⁵⁹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 233.

⁶⁰ Visser, *Mennonites and Doopsgezinden*, 325. See also Visser, *Broeders in de Geest*, 128, 131f.; Visser, *Research Notes*, 471.

⁶¹ Dyck, *The Way to the City of Peace*, 262, par. 36.

⁶² Waite, *The Drama of the Two-Word Debate*, 135.

⁶³ Mirjam van Veen, Johan Jakob Wettstein (1693–1754) en continuïteit tussen Radicale Reformatie en Verlichting, in: *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 40 (2014), 161.

clear and firm».⁶⁴ To be sure, there were Calvinists and Mennonites that defined themselves along strict confessional lines; nevertheless, many actually «preferred some kind of syncretism in forming their own religious identity».⁶⁵ While competing churches sought to define their identities as clearly as possible in the religious market place, these groups influenced each other and drew from a plurality of traditions. «Hence, the age of confessionalization went hand in hand with a remarkable hybridity of these confessional traditions.»⁶⁶ Of course not every sort of hybridity will do when it comes to thinking about renewal. However, that so many Mennonites and other Christians, over the centuries, chose to read the «Way to the City of Peace» for inspiration, may suggest that Pieter Pietersz set a tone and balance worthy of consideration even in our own time.

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Abstract

While Pieter Pietersz's «Way to the City of Peace» has been largely forgotten, it stands as a spiritual and devotional classic in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The following essay gives attention to the main themes that run through this work, and argues that Pietersz's vision resists neatly defined categories of description. It also maintains that the work strikes a balance in spirituality and theology that is worth considering in current discussions about renewal.

Keywords

allegory; Anabaptist devotional literature; ecumenism; incarnation; Mennonite; nadere reformatie; peace; pietism; pilgrimage; reform; renewal; spiritualist; spirituality; Vredestadsburgers; Waterlanders

⁶⁴ Gary Waite, *Martyrs and Nicodemites Both? Spiritualistic and Rationalistic Currents within the Dutch Anabaptist Tradition – Dave Joris, Sebastian Castellio, and Pieter Jansz Twisck 1535–1648*, in: Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer (Hg.), *Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) – Dissidenz und Toleranz: Beiträge zu einer internationalen Tagung auf dem Monte Verita in Ascona 2015, Göttingen 2018*, 423. Samme Zijlstra observed this reification of confessional boundaries particularly in the historiography following World War II when little room was given for the overlapping of beliefs between Catholics and Anabaptists. See Zijlstra, *Ware Gemeente*, 60. For a discussion of overlapping boundaries and hybridity in biblical thought as well as contemporary religious experience, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville, TN 1996, 207–211.

⁶⁵ Waite, *Martyrs*, 423.

⁶⁶ August den Hollander, et al (eds.), *Religious Minorities and Cultural Diversity in the Dutch Republic: Studies Presented to Piet Visser on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Leiden and Boston, MA 2014, 3.

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