



**Andrea Chudaska.** *Peter Riedemann: Konfessionbildendes Täuferum im 16. Jahrhundert.* Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 2003. 420 pp. EUR 44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-579-01649-8.

**Reviewed by** Ellen Yutzy Glebe (Department of History, University of California-Berkeley)

**Published on** H-German (February, 2005)

## **The Evolution of a Hutterite Leader: Peter Riedemann and the Development of Hutterite Identity**

In this biography of Peter Riedemann, an influential leader of the Hutterite movement, Andrea Chudaska's methodology is similar to that of Klaus Deppermann's biography of Melchior Hoffman.[1] She quotes Hans-Juergen Goertz's praise of that work, which "set the standard for a biography that draws together aspects of intellectual and social history" (p. 42). Both biographies tend strongly to the intellectual and are structured around the lives and texts of their central figures. Chudaska's examination of the development of Riedemann's thought is meticulous and may nearly overwhelm many readers. As her title suggests, Chudaska proposes to understand this development as a kind of confessionalization, but this application of theory takes a secondary role in a book dominated by close textual analysis.

Chudaska's work complements Werner Packull's recent monograph on the Hutterites.[2] Like Packull, Chudaska begins with an impressive overview of the historiography of Anabaptism. The clarity of this section, the extensive bibliography, and the deliberate engagement with various scholars throughout the book are among this monograph's greatest strengths. Even readers less interested in the specifics of Riedemann's life or the Hutterites per se should appreciate the comprehensive analysis of the historiographical questions relevant to the broader field of Anabaptist history. Following the introduction, a short description of the source materials—letters, theological treatises, and songs—leads the way into the deeper analysis of those texts. Where possible, Chudaska intersperses biographical information about

Riedemann, but the sparse historical record makes the early years of his life sketchy at best. It is unknown how or when the shoemaker from Silesia first came into contact with the Reformation and Anabaptism, but the fact that the town council in his home town of Hirschberg (today Jelena Gora) installed a Lutheran preacher in the parish church in 1520 allows for certain assumptions (p. 70). Riedemann's first contacts with Anabaptism are harder to establish: the first mention of him in Anabaptist sources is in upper Austria, but Chudaska maintains that available evidence on the question of whether he might have associated with one of the Silesian Anabaptist communities forming as early as 1528 is inconclusive (p. 71).

Following speculation about Riedemann's early life, Chudaska launches into the analysis of Riedemann's texts, proceeding text by text, not only explicating what Riedemann wrote, but comparing his texts with other contemporary theological writings. This analysis is structured around three phases of Riedemann's life and thought.

The first phase (1529-1532) is expressed primarily by Riedemann's theology in the *Gmundener Rechenschaft*. A closing section of this chapter situates Riedemann in relation to the other religious movements of the period. It rightly recognizes the vital influence of Lutheran thought on Anabaptism while also highlighting the differences, which are much deeper than the symbolic issue of believers' baptism. Riedemann, for example, advocated strict ethical standards for the baptized and never resigned

himself to the Lutheran principle *simul iustus et peccator*. At the same time, Chudaska is careful to distinguish Riedemann from the spiritualists with which he has too often been lumped into one category.

The second phase (1532-1542) is characterized by Riedemann's growing importance as a Hutterite leader. The Hutterites emerged as a distinct group during the early 1530s from the loosely organized Anabaptist movement centered around Moravia. During this time, Riedemann traveled as a "wandering apostle" throughout central Europe and recruited new members for the community. He struggled against the schismatic inclinations of Anabaptists in southern Germany, upper Austria, and Moravia, and he proved to be a skilled arbitrator. His efforts—temporarily successful—were impeded by his imprisonment in Hesse (1540-1542). Afterwards, he returned to Moravia to take up a more institutionalized position of leadership. Probably beginning during his imprisonment, Riedemann wrote his *Grosse Rechenschaft*, which remains an important Hutterite confessional document and was instrumental in establishing the conventions of sixteenth-century Hutterite communal life. With her typical attention to detail, Chudaska analyzes influences on the *Grosse Rechenschaft* and then uses it to investigate the balance between biblical literalism and spiritualism in Riedemann's theology.

The last phase of Riedemann's career (1542-1556) is the least important to Chudaska's argument, which explains why this chapter is dwarfed by those that precede it. As a leader of the community, Riedemann worked to implement and clarify his theology. Given the time and environment in which he lived, it is significant that he led the Hutterites for fourteen years and lent stability to a group that—like so many Anabaptist communities—had experienced frequent upheaval. Even with Riedemann at its helm, the community was threatened by Moravian authorities, who were increasingly pressured by Ferdinand I to expel the Hutterites. Following the Schmalkaldic War, they began carrying out these threats. From 1547 to 1551, the Hutterites were driven from their large communities and forced by circumstance to split into smaller groups that could live more inconspicuously throughout Moravia, Austria, and Hungary. Only the escalating conflict with the Turks saved the Hutterites from the further attention of Ferdinand I (pp. 351-352). Shortly before his own death in 1556, Riedemann wrote to a Hutterite missionary who had been sentenced to execution in South Tyrol. In that letter, his last surviving text, Riedemann expressed a heightened apocalypticism and disdain for secular authorities, which might well have been linked

to the recent Hutterite experience of persecution. Riedemann died in 1556 in a community in Hungary, though it is unclear whether he had moved there or was merely visiting (p. 352).

The chronological procession through the texts emphasizes Riedemann's theological development and the confessional consolidation of the Hutterite community. The downside of this approach is a high level of repetition as Chudaska treats topics at multiple points. For readers who wish to understand a particular text better, this organization might be advantageous, but it nonetheless creates a certain amount of tedium for those who would prefer a concise, more thematic overview of Riedemann's theology. The extensive index and detailed table of contents will facilitate finding answers to specific questions. Some questions, however, do not seem to be answered in the text; the focus on Riedemann and his theology blurs peripheral points. For example, when the reader learns that Riedemann returned to Moravia after the death of a leader there, there is no explanation of how he, a prisoner in Hesse, was at liberty to do so (p. 210).

The book also leaves more general questions unanswered. The application of a theoretical approach taken from the wider field of Reformation scholarship suggests that Chudaska's work might break free of the limitations of a historiographical subfield that has remained too distinctly separate, and a more systematic relation of her own analysis to other studies of confessionalization would have been a welcome sign of an attempt to broaden the relevance of Anabaptist history. While the introduction clearly situates her study within Anabaptist historiography, its treatment of confessionalization is much weaker. Similarly, confessionalization receives little explicit analysis in the body of the text, though the use of the term alone brings to mind interesting questions about the interplay of state churches and sectarian Protestantism that historians have yet to consider.

With its detailed analytical style and exhaustive treatment of Riedemann's theology and development as a Hutterite leader, this book should prove valuable for specialists of Anabaptist thought, and the more general sections will benefit those who want a clearer picture of Anabaptism's location in the religious landscape of the sixteenth century.

#### Notes

[1]. Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman: Soziale Unruhen und apokalyptische Visionen im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979);

available in English translation as *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of Reformation*, trans. Malcolm Wren (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987). [2]. Werner Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments During the Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Ellen Yutzy Glebe. Review of Chudaska, Andrea, *Peter Riedemann: Konfessionbildendes Taeufertum im 16. Jahrhundert*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10224>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).