An ungovernable faith

By refusing to swear oaths, 16th-century Anabaptists took away the state’s primary tool for control.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler in the March 2025 issue
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Century illustration

On the first day of kindergarten, I emailed each of my children's teachers to let them know that my kids would not join their peers in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Our family is Mennonite, I explained, and we do not pledge our allegiance to the state. It felt strange, sometimes uncomfortable. At times I wondered if this tradition, handed down through generations of Mennonites, is too quaint for our current realities.

But I also know that at the birth of Anabaptism oath-taking was debated as fiercely as infant baptism. By 1527, a group from the Reformation's radical wing had broken away and penned their conviction in a document called the Schleitheim Confession. In their final article, these proto-Anabaptists rejected the civic oaths many people in Europe took each year, which served as a binding legal agreement for each person who agreed to uphold their obligations to the town. Political leaders asserted that violation of the oath would be met with both civic and divine punishments.

For the writers of the Schleitheim Confession, Christians should refuse to take oaths as a simple form of biblical obedience. Jesus commands that our "yes be yes and no be no" (Matt. 5:37, NKJV). Christians do not lie. We have no need to superimpose checks on our truthfulness. By extension, and in conformity to Christ, we do not swear oaths.

But these early Anabaptists also believed in a distinct border between the world governed by kings with swords and the church ruled by the Prince of Peace. Oaths are promises that fetter us to the state's way of organizing the world through coercion and violence. After all, a pledge guarantees the possibility of perjury. As theologian Marius van Hoogstraten reminds us, the church's operation is different. We gather, we discern, we pray, we listen. We repeat these actions over and over because the Holy Spirit's movement forms and reforms our common life as the body of Christ. Oaths barricade against the possibility for transformation because swearing them binds us to a fixed way of interpreting reality. They assume an outcome and hold us to it.

"The Anabaptist refusal to swear oaths was the most radical political act that could have been undertaken by anyone," writes historian Edmund Pries—other than "declaring war against one's overlords." Anabaptists made themselves ungovernable, taking away the state's primary tool of control. Instead, the radical reformers created alternative communities. Authorities sensed the threat and mounted a campaign against the growing peasant movement, killing thousands of

believers in its first decade.

I am thinking about oaths and ungovernability here in the first months of the second Trump administration. I've been reading Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, paying special attention to lesson number one: do not obey in advance.

In recent months, Snyder's warning has gone unheeded. Media corporations shifted toward collegiality with the new administration, while tech companies and governments curried favor with Trump. What is the role of the church in this new landscape, as we witness actions that threaten people made in the image of God? What good is my small refusal to pledge allegiance?

Authoritarianism thrives on inevitability. Enough institutions acquiesce to the structure of power, enough lawsuits freeze media coverage, enough leaders are jailed as enemies of the state that repression becomes a fact of life we learn to tolerate. Countries that have faced down authoritarian regimes did so by organizing ordinary people at each juncture. They cultivated the kind of imagination that refused to let the future be preordained.

We are, by baptism, a people who do not obey in advance.

Under the Milosevic regime in Serbia, each time police arrested an activist, within ten minutes the opposition made a press release and gathered hundreds of people outside the police station. Under the Pinochet regime in Chile, miners organized a national day of protest. People from all walks of life went into the street, banging their pots and pans through the night.

After Hitler invaded their country, Norwegians organized an "ice front." They changed seats on buses, refusing to sit next to soldiers. They pretended they could not speak German. They gave wrong directions and altered street signs. "We must not provoke these people," wrote the editor of an underground paper, "but we should refrain entirely from any intercourse with them and let them feel that they have set themselves totally outside society."

"In times like these," Snyder writes, "individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do." Symbolic actions break the spell of conformity with the regime.

When Christians abstain from the national anthem or decline to swear before a jury, we put on display what the government cannot do. Each time we refuse the Pledge of Allegiance or remove the American flag from our sanctuaries—each act cultivates a pattern of nonconformity to state coercion. Debra Dean Murphy reminds us that baptism “is an act of disaffiliation, conferring an identity at odds with the ways we are named and claimed by family, nation, and ideology.” We are, by baptism, a people who do not obey in advance.

In baptism, we have already given our fealty, and we cannot give it again. Jesus says that we cannot have two masters (Matt. 6:24). Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes that “those who are baptized no longer belong to the world, no longer serve the world, and are no longer subject to it. They belong to Christ alone, and relate to the world only through Christ.” And when the acts of the state contradict our allegiance to Jesus, Christians have made our resistance public and clear. We cannot be governed according to the state’s will. We are already governed by the law of love.