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An Introduction to the Anabaptists

by Robert Rodgers

Although there is an increasing recognition among scholars of the contribution of the Anabaptists to the Reformation, their image still tends to be somewhat tarnished as a result of the activities of some extremist groups who were far from typical of them. Mr. Rodgers' contribution will help to set the record straight.

Authentic Anabaptist history has only recently begun to emerge. Hitherto, it has been the custom of historians to cull their information from the movement's enemies and the result has been a caricature of the worst kind. Happily, the Anabaptist cause is now enjoying the fruits of unbiased historical research and the story now being unfolded bears scant relation to that which had formerly been presented to us in the name of history. Says H. L. Ellison:

Until recently, their history has been known to us mainly through the vilifications of their opponents, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, who regarded them as enemies of God and emissaries of Satan; a garbled version of the tragedy of Münster was held to serve as a picture of all. Indeed, the first comprehensive survey of the movement in English, G. H. Williams' *The Radical Reformation*, was not published till 1962. In all the story of zeal, suffering, persecution and martyr-death during the Reformation, the palm must be awarded to these outcasts.¹

This is no exaggeration for it is certain that Anabaptists who died for their faith must be numbered, not in hundreds, but in tens of thousands. These were people who suffered at the hands of both Roman Catholic and Protestant alike and 'even John Calvin, though he did not persecute them, could see little good in them'.²

The gentle Melancthon opposed them to such an extent that, in 1531 he drew up a memorandum on Anabaptism in which the death penalty was prescribed for recalcitrant Anabaptists³ and at Zurich many were executed, often by drowning.⁴

In calling for the death penalty, Melancthon was following the lead of Luther who, though opposed at first to persecution, became so alarmed at the spread of Anabaptism, that he urged the use of the sword against them by right of law (1530).⁵

The Anabaptists were the radical left-wing of the Reformation which felt that the Magisterial Reformers (to use Williams' term) had not gone

¹ H. L. Ellison, Foreword to *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin, 6.

² A. M. Renwick, *The Story of the Church*, 117.

³ D. P. Kingdon, *The Anabaptists*, 15.

⁴ B. F. C. Atkinson, *Valiant in Fight*, 162.

⁵ James McKinnon, *Luther and the Reformation*, 64.

far enough in the matter of reform. They therefore drew upon themselves the opposition of the mainstream reformers and the misrepresentation in history which followed as a result. Paterson is therefore right when he says:

It has been made clear that the Protestant tradition judged this movement by its worst examples, ignored the ethical idealism which entered into their dreams and passed an anathema on all which was merited only by a few. It is indeed one of the tragedies of history that men like Hubmaier and Denck and a great company of victims who followed them to the slaughter, should have been involved in the same condemnation with Munzer and John of Leyden.⁶

That this has been the case must be attributed in some measure to the fact that historians generally have been much too willing to accept uncritically the unfounded accusations of the movement's enemies and, at the same time, too insistent upon treating the movement as a united body. It was far from being that. Its teachings were diverse just as the movement itself was fragmented. 'In view of the variations in teaching and practice which existed among the different Anabaptist groups, it is difficult to give a description which would cover all.'⁷ To speak in general terms, therefore, is to spawn all manner of error.

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The diverse nature of the Anabaptist movement has been underlined by various writers among whom is D. P. Kingdon who says:

The radical reformation . . . was a complex movement composed of heterogeneous elements. It included not only Anabaptists of various types but also groups which exalted alleged revelations of the Spirit above the written Word of Scripture, spiritualisers of varying tendencies and what G. H. Williams calls Evangelical Rationalists. Grouped under the Radical Reformation one may find both political revolutionaries like Thomas Munzer and pacifistic communitarians like Jacob Hutter. One may discover legalists and anti-nomians, wild fanatics and sober pietists. The radical reformation was, to use the vivid image of Rufus Jones, a veritable banyan tree.⁸

Different attempts to group the Anabaptists have been made with varying degrees of success. It is possible to deal with them according to geographical location and to speak therefore of the Anabaptists of Switzerland, South Germany or the Netherlands, each group being more or less represented by an outstanding leader. Others have divided them into three major groups which are The Evangelical, The Revolutionary and The Contemplative, though with the acknowledgement that 'these class-

⁶ W. P. Paterson, *The Rule of Faith*, 89.

⁷ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

⁸ D. P. Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 14.

ifications must not be too rigidly applied because there are some individuals who could be placed in more than one group'.⁹

Undoubtedly, the group that has received a disproportionate amount of attention and has been instrumental in bringing the entire movement into disrepute, is the faction known as the Munster Revolutionaries. Led by Thomas Munzer, the Revolutionaries took over the city and attempted to set up their version of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Theologically and politically the Revolutionaries were far removed from the other various kinds of Anabaptism and ought never to be regarded as the norm.

They preached a wild millenarianism and insisted that God's Day of Wrath was about to break and that the Saints would dominate the governments of the world. They appealed strongly to the power of the sword to impose their views and during their brief control of the City there were many excesses.¹⁰

Among those excesses one might mention that of polygamy which appears to have been introduced during a siege of the city initiated by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Munster. The city, it seems, had four times as many women as it had men and Bockelson, who had assumed control upon the death of Matthys, proposed that polygamy be practised.¹¹

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This highlights for us a point of the greatest importance relating to the difference between the Revolutionaries and the other representatives of Anabaptism. In increasing measure, the former appealed to the Old Testament in support of their views and practices so that it became normative for their theology and especially for the constitution of the Church.¹²

There can be no doubt at all that the happenings at Munster 'decided the reputation of Anabaptists for many years to come'¹³ though, happily, the Presbyterian Church Historian A. M. Renwick had the candour to write: 'In the past most historians have represented these wild fanatics as being the founders of the Anabaptist movement. Research has shown that this view is undoubtedly erroneous.'¹⁴

To understand the Anabaptist movement as a whole, one must turn aside from the abnormal events of Munster and base one's judgment upon the total picture. Only then may one be in a position to appreciate the view of the Mennonite historian, H. S. Bender who has described the Anabaptists as

⁹ William Klassen, *Covenant and Community*, 91.

¹⁰ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 115.

¹¹ S. M. Houghton, *The Anabaptists*, 166.

¹² Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹³ Houghton, *op. cit.*, 166.

¹⁴ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

essentially a peaceful, evangelical and creative religious movement of great power, conceiving itself as reproducing New Testament Christianity and as completing the arrested Reformation begun by Luther and Zwingli.¹⁵

In a treatise on the '*Incarnation of Christ*' published in 1549, the great English bishop, John Hooper, opposed what he took to be the standard Anabaptist position on the subject. He asserted that they denied that the Lord Jesus received his humanity and manhood from Mary and that they supposed that he brought with him a pre-existent manhood from heaven.¹⁶

This, however, refers not to the teaching of the Anabaptists in general but to Melchior Hoffmann in particular. His peculiar Christology, whilst embraced by quite a few, was certainly not representative of the entire movement. He taught that Christ was born 'out of' but not 'of' Mary.

As the heavenly dew falls into the shell of a mussel and changes there into a pearl without taking anything over from the shell, so the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, fell into Mary's womb and there of itself became the spiritual pearl, namely, Jesus Christ.¹⁷

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In other words, Hoffmann viewed the Virgin Mary as a pipe or conduit through which Christ merely passed. This, of course, was a revival of the ancient heresy, Docetism, which advanced the view that Christ's body was either a phantom lacking material substance or else of celestial, not earthly, origin.¹⁸

There were also the Anti-Trinitarian Anabaptists, particularly the Transylvanian Unitarians under their leader, Francis David, whose views cannot be regarded as representative of the entire movement. When Faustus Socinus advanced his heresies in Poland, David was instrumental in leading Racovian Anabaptism in the direction of Socinianism.¹⁹

Furthest removed from the fanaticism of the Munster debacle were men of the calibre of John Denck who may be placed in the Contemplative category. Their position was somewhat akin to the Quaker ideas of today since they spoke of following the 'inner light' or the 'inner word' though they did, in fact, administer the ordinance of baptism whereas the Quakers do not.²⁰

¹⁵ H. S. Bender, *The Anabaptists and Religious Liberty in the Sixteenth Century*, 87.

¹⁶ Hooper, *The Incarnation of Christ*, 80.

¹⁷ Houghton, *op. cit.*, 168.

¹⁸ Cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 400.

¹⁹ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, xxxi.

²⁰ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 30.

Sometimes the 'spirituality' of some groups was carried to an unwarranted extreme and issued in an asceticism completely foreign to the teaching of the Word of God. Such ascetics lived in desert places, denied themselves the usual foods, drinks and clothing and hoped thereby to follow the example of John the Baptist.²¹

Clemens Ziegler is another leader whose vagaries, though more or less confined to his immediate following, have been treated as though normative for the whole movement. He propagated the belief that the body is evil and the spirit alone is good and to him must be apportioned the blame for the Anabaptist reputation of believing in universal salvation.²²

We need to remind ourselves, however, that the existence of fanatical revolutionaries on the one hand and mild, meditative pacifists on the other, the emergence of Docetic tendencies in Christology or Unitarianism in the Doctrine of God, in no way precluded the possibility of the movement's having within its ranks many who were both evangelical and orthodox. Time and again the voices of orthodox Anabaptists were raised and their pens employed against the heresies springing up in their midst.

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Menno Simons, founding father of the Mennonites, and described as 'a man of integrity, mild, accommodating, patient of injuries and so ardent in his piety as to exemplify in his own life the precepts he gave to others', was utterly repelled by the views of the Munster revolutionaries and went into print against them. He describes his own position thus:

No-one can truly charge me with agreeing with the Munster teaching. On the contrary, for seventeen years until the present day, I have opposed and striven against it, privately and publicly, by voice and pen. Those who, like the Munster people, refuse the Cross of Christ, despise the Lord's Word and practise earthly lusts under the pretence of right-doing, we will never acknowledge as our brethren and sisters.²³

The views of Clemens Ziegler were repeatedly rejected by Pilgram Marpeck, an outstanding engineer who was renowned for his work in building water-conduits for the city of Strassburg. The views of the extreme ascetics were opposed by Cornelium Veh 'since John's asceticism was meant as an object lesson to the Pharisees and has no relation to us'.²⁴ Hoffmann's Valentinian Christology was rejected by Scharn-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ S. M. Houghton, *op. cit.*, 168.

²⁴ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 94.

schlager and others and the term 'inner light' never appears, for example, in the writings of Marpeck.²⁵

Again, very many were stoutly Trinitarian in their doctrine of God and defended the biblical concept against the Unitarians. In their *Verantwortung* Leopold Scharnschlager and Pilgram Marpeck assert

that in order to maintain the true almighty God in Christ in (or with) His two united natures, we contended for several years against certain spirits which denied that some time ago.²⁶

This probably refers principally to Scharnschlager's opposition to Hoffmann's Christology in 1532.

The doctrine of God and Christology naturally leads one to a consideration of the Holy Spirit and in this area too, Marpeck sought to make himself abundantly clear.

For Marpeck, the Holy Spirit is not some pantheistic spirit that floats around the universe, or an inner light, but is specifically given to us and related to us. He has been sent to lead Christians into all truth. His work is not some ecstatic phenomenon unpredictably and unrelatedly laying hold of the individual in a spectacular way, but related to the Scriptures.²⁷

41

Thus we see that the fiery fanaticism of Munster and the doctrinal deviations of individuals or groups, cannot with propriety be deemed descriptive of the entire Anabaptist movement. We may now also appreciate the tremendous danger in passing upon them a collective anathema. Anabaptism was one of two fronts against which classical Protestantism sought to establish its position. To its right was the Roman Catholic Church which it regarded as Antichrist and to its left was the Anabaptist movement which it regarded as 'a three-headed Cerberus and called the monster abusively, without their wonted theological precision, almost interchangeably, libertinism, Anabaptism, fanaticism'.²⁸

We are now in a position to consider the positive stance of the majority of Anabaptists. There can be little doubt that the fundamental difference between them and the Magisterial Reformers was their view of Holy Scripture and, arising from that, their view of the Church.

The Evangelical Anabaptist doctrine of Scripture differed radically from the Munsterite practice of appealing almost exclusively to the Old Testament. If anything, they laid the greater emphasis upon the New

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70 (footnote).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁸ Williams, *op. cit.*, xxx.

Testament and in this were opposed by the Reformers who sought to treat both Old and New Testaments as equally authoritative. Bullinger, indeed, went so far as to liken the Anabaptists to Marcion who has the doubtful distinction of having been the first to cast aspersions upon the Canon of Scripture.²⁹

Klassen states that this accusation was made because the Anabaptists rejected categorically the analogous position of circumcision and Baptism that Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Calvin and Peter Martyr used to prove the necessity of infant baptism.³⁰ Whilst this is undoubtedly correct as far as it goes, it is more accurate to assert that the Doctrine of Scripture determined the Anabaptist view of the Church which, in turn, regulated their view of baptism.

One authority cautions us against the idea that the Anabaptists rejected the Old Testament as Scripture since no evidence to the effect has yet been adduced. He does concede, however, that 'some leaders cautioned their readers to read primarily the New Testament'.³¹

42 Of course, the Anabaptists rejected the ethics of the Old Testament as no longer valid for the Christian. They insisted that the means of eliminating enemies and heretics used in the Old Testament economy could not be employed by the Christian under the new economy. They were wont to compare the attitude of Christ towards his enemies and the treatment meted out by Elijah to those who opposed him. In this context they often spoke of a 'covenant of servitude' over against a 'covenant of sonship'.³²

The Radicals utterly rejected the concept of a sacral society which the Magisterial Reformers had inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. It will readily be appreciated that this affected a multiplicity of doctrines and practices such as baptism, oath-taking, bearing arms, war, usury and worship.³³

The Magisterial Reformers regarded the Church as a viable society existing in correlation with the state. The magistrate was seen as an officer of the church with the duty of suppressing heresy even by violent means. Zwingli, in the preface to his commentary on Jeremiah, says: 'The Christian is none other than the good and faithful citizen and the Christian city none other than a Christian Church.'³⁴ Therefore, as far as the mainline Reformers were concerned, any child born within the

²⁹ Klassen, *op. cit.*, 105, footnote.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² Klassen, *op. cit.*, 105.

³³ Cf. Verduin, *op. cit.*, 68ff.

³⁴ Zwingli, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, Preface.

territory of this sacral society could hardly be refused the rite of baptism.

All this teaching was decisively rejected by the Anabaptists who sought the complete separation of Church and State, regarded the Church as a 'gathered community' and saw believers as the only legitimate candidates for baptism. The 'conversion' of the Emperor Constantine in 31 A.D. they regarded with suspicion and saw the consequent merger between Church and State as the greatest calamity that ever befell the Church.³⁵

Having recovered what they believed to be the biblical concept of the Church and having regained a Scriptural practice with regard to the ordinance of Baptism, the Anabaptists proceeded to establish a vigorous discipline within their ranks. As far as Menno Simons was concerned, 'a church without the practice of a genuine apostolic excommunication would be like a town without ramparts or barriers, a field without enclosure, a house without doors or walls'.³⁶

This excommunication (the ban) was held to have come in place of the Old Testament sword. Referring to the Church as 'the perfection of Christ', the Anabaptists held that

The sword is an ordinance of God outside the perfection of Christ; the princes and rulers of the world are ordained for the punishment of evil-doers and for putting them to death. But within the perfection of Christ, excommunication is the ultimate in the way of punishment, physical death being not included.³⁷

The Anabaptists emphasised the importance of the Christian community in a practical way in the sharing of goods and production. This was based upon the communitarian passage in Acts 2:44,45 and though implemented by the radicals in Canton Zurich and 'built into their abortive New Jerusalem' by Rothmann and John Beukels of Leyden, it is really the distinguishing feature of the Moravian Anabaptists under Jacob Hutter, founding father of the Hutterites.³⁸

It now remains to notice briefly the manner in which their doctrine affected their every-day lives. For example, as we have seen, the Anabaptists were largely a pacifist movement which refused to bear arms under any circumstances. Indeed, rather than carry a sword, many Anabaptists simply carried a cane or staff and thereby earned the derisive description of 'stabler'.³⁹ Says Verduin:

³⁵ Cf. Kik, *Church and State*, 39ff.

³⁶ Kingdon, *op. cit.*, 21.

³⁷ Cf. Klassen, *op. cit.*, 75, 96.

³⁸ Walker, *op. cit.*, 331.

³⁹ Verduin, *op. cit.*, 63ff.

So widely was the carrying of such a harmless cane thought of as a mark of heresy that we find this feature mentioned in the sixteenth century as *prima facie* evidence of addiction to the heresy that characterised the Second Front.⁴⁰

Common to both the Germanic Anabaptist and Italian anti-trinitarian impulses was the radical pacificism which they saw as an imitation of Christ and the early Church. The German Evangelical Anabaptists, the Protestant Waldensians, the conservatives and radicals within their camps were alike opposed to war, capital punishment and coercion in the realm of conscience. Hence their refusal to bear arms impaired the military potential of the Protestant against the Catholic Cantons.

Usury was anathema to the Anabaptists since they, with others, had been the victims of professing Christians who had exploited the economically under-privileged.⁴¹ Oath-taking was far from being acceptable to the majority of the Radical Reformers though Hans Hut, for example, felt it was permissible in 'community, state and civic matters'.⁴² Kessler describes the Anabaptists as those 'who swore not, not even to the authorities, the civic oath'.

44 Participation in public office was suspect too. As Christ had refused the office of king (John 6:15) and also of judge (Luke 12:13), so, too, must the Christian refuse to be involved in earthly government.⁴³ The *Schleitheim Confession*, quoting 1 Peter 2:21, declared that in suffering and not in ruling, Christ left an example for His disciples to follow. It therefore concluded that 'the regime of magistracy is according to the flesh but that of Christians according to the Spirit'.⁴⁴

In many ways the Anabaptists were ahead of their time. Professor Renwick says that they 'stood for religious liberty at a time when neither Protestants nor Catholics fully appreciated the importance of freedom of conscience'. He further describes them as those who 'have always been pacific, earnest and industrious Christians'.⁴⁵

Ellison goes much further. Speaking of the scriptural riches lost by the Reformation churches by their repudiation of the Anabaptists he proceeds to suggest that, had the Reformers acted otherwise, we would not today be facing a world problem of Communism.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴¹ Williams, *op. cit.*, 448.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴⁴ Williams, *op. cit.*, 185.

⁴⁵ Renwick, *op. cit.*, 116.

⁴⁶ H. L. Ellison, Foreword to *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin, 7.

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