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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

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Baptist Roots: The Use of Models in Tracing Baptist Origins

The interpretation of historical evidence is greatly affected by the particular approach of the historian. In this essay Mr. Whittock explores and illustrates this thesis with particular reference to the early history of the English Baptists. The author, a graduate in Politics of Bristol University, now teaches history at Queen Elizabeth's School, Wimborne Minster, Dorset.

The use of the analytical model has become common practice amongst social scientists and historians as a means by which concepts and events can be studied in a systematic fashion. However such models also have a place in the study of Church tradition, since the Church is a social and historical phenomenon as well as a spiritual one. Models have a number of applications and none more useful than when used in the analysis of Church traditions and origins. In order to illustrate this point it is necessary to choose a subject concerning which there have been differences of opinion. Then more than one model can be constructed as a means by which the various shades of opinion can be ordered and analyzed in a structured form. In such a manner the model's ability to convey various approaches to a subject can be amply demonstrated.

A subject concerning which there has been much debate is that of the relationship between English Baptist churches and the continental Anabaptist movements in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the 17th and 18th centuries Baptist writers denied any links with the movement. In the 19th centuries writers tended to be more amenable to the idea of some relationship. For these later writers the possibility of continuity was attractive. Such continuity could extend the roots of the English Baptists further into history. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the situation had become more complex. Writers such as Burrage, Box and Burgess denied any connections with the Anabaptists; Heath, Vedder, Langley and Pike were prepared to countenance links between the two movements. As the century has progressed so has the debate. Valuable contributions have been made by writers such as Hudson, Payne, Knappen, Horst, Torbet, West

and White.¹ As the debate has continued so the lines of argument have become increasingly blurred. Stark alternatives have been discredited in favour of a more realistic appreciation of the subtleties and complexities of the issue.

The debate has not been assisted by the nature of the Anabaptist movement. The use of the word 'movement', in the singular, is perhaps not historically correct. It would be more accurate to describe the Anabaptists as being composed of a mass of, sometimes conflicting, ideologies that altered and developed over time. Some adopted a biblical basis whilst others opted for a loose antinomian theology, that often rejected orthodox creedal forms. Yet others became involved in a radical millenarianism, such as those at Munster (1534). Such characteristics could make the confession of links with these movements highly controversial. This became particularly true amongst the Calvinist Particular Baptists in England in the 17th century. Here the wish not to be related to the continental Anabaptists hardly made for objective historical analysis.

This present study is not an attempt to examine the history of the Baptist church in England. That has been done elsewhere at length. What this study attempts is to identify the main criteria used by historians concerning this issue. Having identified the main criteria it is then possible to construct an analytical framework about them. This then constitutes the particular model in question. At no time will it be suggested that the writers quoted actually admit to using the model to which it is suggested that they subscribe. What is intended is that the models themselves will serve as a vehicle for the systematic analysis of current opinions.

From a study of the published material it seems that the denial of a relationship between the English Baptists and the continental Anabaptists rests on an Organic Model of Church History. (This term and all subsequent terms, concerning models, has been coined as part of this study). The Organic Model is an attempt to trace Church history by reference to the structural interrelatedness of the subject matter studied. For this model the primary material consists of creeds, confessions and catechisms (other, possibly more idiosyncratic, evidence from theological works and apologetics being of secondary importance). According to this model each church tradition must be pre- and post-ceded by an officially recognized and empirically measured adherence to it as

¹ See I. Sellars, 'Edwardians, Anabaptists and the problem of Baptist origins', *Baptist Quarterly* 29, 1981, 97-112.

orthodoxy. Only this truly constitutes continuity. Thus in order for churches 'A', 'B' and 'C' to be regarded as being in the same tradition the following exercise must be carried out. The confession of church 'C' must be comparable to its parent church 'B'. That of 'B' must directly relate to its predecessor, church 'A'. It may help to use historic examples: the first Particular Baptist church established in the 1630s by John Spilsbury (or church 'B') had its origins in the Baptist faction of a London church, founded in 1616 at Southwark, by Henry Jacob (or church 'A'). By 1644 church 'B' had been instrumental in the production of the London Confession of Faith. It had done so in close collaboration with seven later churches (or churches 'C'). This confession was in keeping with the confessional statements of church 'B' and the Baptist faction in church 'A'. Thus churches 'A', 'B' and 'C' exhibited a confessional continuity. They were consequently part of the same theological 'structure'. They were also directly related as regards members from one church assisting in the establishment of the other churches. This model consequently has two facets:

- (i) structural continuity by direct propagation
- (ii) continuity by comparability of official doctrine (confessional continuity).

One facet is clearly an integral part of the other in this model. However (ii) is the determining factor. Direct propagation is not enough if it is not accompanied by doctrinal similarity (i.e. confessional continuity). This model is capable of being verified empirically. Church confessions can be compared with those of their antecedents. Although individual church members may have heterogenous backgrounds, theologically speaking, it is the official creeds, compiled by recognized authority organs that are the measure of the relationship between that church and other churches. According to this model the Particular Baptist churches of the 1640s, '50s and '60s had their origins in pure English Calvinistic stock. They arose out of the separatist traditions inherent in the Church of England since the 16th century. Spilsbury came directly from this tradition by direct structural propagation. Much more importantly the church that he founded possessed confessional continuity.

The Organic Model is one that has been frequently adopted by Baptist historians. An analysis of the factors influencing their opinion clearly points to the Organic Model as the best expressing the sum of their ideas. By it the contention can be maintained that the continental Anabaptists contributed nothing to the Baptist

tradition in England. This is because the Baptist churches established after 1611/1612 (General[Arminian]Baptists) and after 1638 (Particular[Calvinistic]Baptists) had either excommunicated members with Anabaptist tendencies (as with the General Baptists) or by statements of faith which rejected Anabaptist beliefs. Examples of these include the Calvinist confessions of 1644, 1656, 1667, the Philadelphia confession of 1742 and the General Baptist confession of 1660. According to the model the General Baptist too had no Organic link to the Anabaptists.

The General Baptists trace their origins to a separatist congregation formed at Gainsborough (Lincs.) in 1606. This group emigrated to Holland, led by John Smyth, in 1608. Another prominent member was Thomas Helwys, who financed the venture. In Holland Smyth published a book called the *Character of the Beast* in 1609 and the same year baptized himself and other members of his congregation. This administration of the rite (by affusion) was a significant move from his former paedobaptist beliefs. Smyth went on to advocate a union with the Dutch Waterlander Mennonite church (that had arisen out of the moderate wing of the Anabaptist movements). He believed that this church constituted a baptist tradition more legitimate than his own. This caused a split in Smyth's congregation and this is the point often seized on by exponents of the Organic model. Thomas Helwys and others returned to England to found a church at Spitalfields in 1611 or 1612. The church in Holland eventually dwindled and vanished. In this way the direct organizational link between the Mennonites and the General Baptists was broken. More importantly the confessional continuity was severed. The split had occurred over confessional issues (including the Mennonite doctrine of the incarnation and the ordination of elders). It would appear to be a classic example of conformity to the Organic Model. There was no structural or confessional relationship between the Spitalfields church and the Anabaptists since Helwys and his group rejected union with the Mennonites. The church that might have been an example of both died in Holland.

Echoes of this model appear in the works of a number of Baptist historians. As R. G. Torbet put it 'No historical continuity can be proved . . .'² Similarly W. S. Hudson noted that a proveable link was not possible.³ A similar conclusion was

² R. G. Torbet, *History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge 1966).

³ W. S. Hudson, 'Who were the Baptists?' *Baptist Quarterly* 16, 1968, 303-12.

reached by B. S. White.⁴ The word 'proveable' and the phrase 'historical continuity' best conform to the structure of an Organic approach. As these writers have noted there is no direct relationship between the English Baptists and the Anabaptist tradition. By applying the criteria of the model it is difficult to disagree with them.

However, despite the persuasive nature of the first model, two critical comments can be made regarding this study. The first is a limited one, the second is of much greater importance. As a point of accuracy there is some question as to whether the English Baptist church was 100% removed from continental influences. The Particular Baptist church, founded in 1638, received instructions in adult immersion from a group known as the Collegiants in the Netherlands. Research has suggested that there was a link between the Collegiants and the Socinians. This Anabaptist group practiced baptism by immersion in place of baptism by pouring (affusion). The Socinians influenced the practices of the Collegiants and some sections of the Mennonite church. This point may appear a trivial one but it illustrates some of the problems in the rigid application of as systematic a model as the Organic one.

The second point is of greater consequence. It is simply that another model may be preferred to the Organic. By careful study of other works of historians it becomes obvious that another model can be constructed in competition with the Organic one. Work by other historians (and indeed by some of those already quoted, at other times) can best be described in terms of a model termed the Dynamic Model. According to this one Church traditions may be traced by more than reference to confessional orthodoxy produced by official authority organs. They can be studied by reference to sets of ideas that may jump systematic gaps. In other words individual church members may borrow ideas from sources that are not officially approved of by their churches. Indeed even entire congregations can do this to a limited extent, by refusing to take on board those ideas they disapprove of whilst assimilating those that they do. The Dynamic Model is less amenable to empirical study but stresses:

- (i) the exchange of 'small packages' of ideas without these being part of a total confessional system.
- (ii) laity ideas that may be at variance with official church dogma.

An example of the Dynamic Model in operation is that of the

⁴ B. White, *English Baptists of the 17th Century* (London 1983).

relationship between the Baptist churches of the 17th century and the Quaker movement. This may have been partly due to the similarities between Quaker Arminianism/Universalism and the Arminianism of the General Baptists. However it is likely that another factor was at work—political radicalism. Until the 1660s the Quakers exhibited a pronounced radicalism (a number of Quaker works bear this out, including: *A Lamentation By One of England's Prophets*, J. Naylor, 1652; *A True Prophecy of the Mighty Day of the Lord*, W. Deusberry, 1654; *Some Returns to a Letter*, B. Nicholson, 1653; *An Alarm to All Flesh*, E. Billing, 1660.). Such a radicalism can be traced to the Ranter wing of the Society of Friends and to the pacifistic Anabaptist group known as the *Familia Caritatis*. Despite marked differences in the theology the common thread of political radicalism united a number of otherwise divergent groups, Baptists included. Since these political ideas were bound up with theology it cannot be claimed that these links are non-theological. This dynamic link served to relate substantial minorities in a number of varied groups. A classic example is that of Gerrard Winstanley. He founded the agrarian communist Digger movement in the 1650s. Despite his later Antinomian mysticism he had originally been a Baptist but had come to reject any that 'lived by dipping in water'. The Diggers had contacts with the Buckinghamshire Levellers who were influenced by the more radical continental Anabaptists. There are many such examples of cross fertilization: Samuel Fisher (author of *Baby Baptism, meer Babism*, 1653) moved from the Baptists to the Quakers; Laurence Clarkson (leader of the licentious Ranter group known as *My One Flesh*) drifted from Presbyterianism, through independency and on to Ranterism, via a Baptist group; the Quaker, Fox, addressed joint meetings of Baptists, Quakers and Ranters at Swannington (Leic.) and at Reading (Berks.). The reality of such exchanges has been recognized by writers such as Dr. Payne⁵ and others. It lends colour to Dr. C. Hill's suggestion that Anabaptism was a loose term for any lower class radicalism in the English civil war period. The term had much in common with the modern 'reds'.⁶ Hence Cromwell's fervent denials of there being any in the regiments of the Eastern Association. It is a sobering thought to realize that the charge was being levelled against Calvinist Independents and Baptists. It indicates that much common ground existed between different groups. H. N. Brailsford,⁷ in 1961 noted the dependence of English

⁵ E. A. Payne, 'Who were the Baptists?' *Baptist Quarterly* 16, 1968, 339ff.

⁶ C. Hill, *God's Englishman* (London 1970).

⁷ H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers* (London 1961).

radicals (including Baptists) on continental Anabaptist precedents. As Dr. Payne put it 'Religious life in the 17th century was like a tumultuous sea, blown about by winds from several directions. That one strong current of air came from the Anabaptist movement . . . I am convinced.'⁸ An example of this is Helwys' church in England. Although he had cut himself off from any Organic link with the Anabaptists, he had certainly borrowed ideas from them. His church's use of foot washing was clearly borrowed from the Mennonite practice. A continued correspondence with the Mennonites can be demonstrated in the history of churches at Coventry, Lincoln, Salisbury and Tiverton. These churches arose out of the original congregation of Helwys. In this way the accuracy of Dr. Payne's observation is borne out even in less radical fellowships.

All the examples used so far have been drawn from General Baptist churches. However evidence to support the Dynamic Model can also be found within Calvinist groups. A noteworthy example is that of the Fifth Monarchy Men. This radical millenarian group of the 1650s and 1660s drew many of its members from Particular Baptist congregations. Their Calvinist leanings are clearly seen in their political tracts (e.g., *The Great Joy of Saints*, Simpson, 1654; the *Norfolk Petition*, 1649; the books of Mary Cary and Vavasor Powell, in particular Powell's book *God the Father*.) Yet they were clearly involved in 'small package' borrowing from continental Anabaptists. As long ago as 1902 C. H. Firth concluded that 'the dividing line between the two was not clearly drawn either in politics or religion'.⁹ They exhibited radical political tendencies and a millenarian zeal often consciously reminiscent of the 1534 Anabaptist revolt at Munster in Westphalia. Many of them expressed doubts as to the validity of the scare stories spread about Munster. They suspected that such tales had been falsified by reactionary forces. Others, in their company though, saw it as an action worthy of copy. Mary Cary wrote how she longed to 'murther (murder) and destroy' the nobility (*The Little Horn's Doom and Downfall*, 1651.). This feeling was reflected in a popular slogan of 1656 . . . 'The lord's people must be a bloody people'. Their implicit and explicit sympathies provide a Dynamic link between two structurally separate movements. They were in many respects 'a form of revolutionary anarchism'.¹⁰ This characteristic served as a bridge

⁸ E. A. Payne, *op. cit.*

⁹ C. H. Firth, *Cromwell's Army* (London 1902).

¹⁰ C. Hill, *Puritanism and Liberty* (London 1969).

between themselves and other earlier revolutionary Anabaptist sects.

The later years of the movement also saw a discernible trend toward Quaker practices. This trend was on a grass roots basis and was contrary to official Fifth Monarchy antagonism towards the Society of Friends. However, both movements had traceable Dynamic antecedents in Anabaptism. This grass roots trend illustrates the fluidity of theological and ideological exchanges, in contradistinction to the rigidity of confessional statements. Such statements, of course, being produced via authority organs claiming doctrinal legitimacy. It also shows that a movement could be related to both the violent and pacifistic wings of the Anabaptists over a short period of some ten years. This relationship has been described by the historian B. S. Capp.¹¹

The clear possibility of 'small package' exchanges was accepted, in effect, by B. R. White when he concluded that 'it is impossible to measure the impact of Anabaptist ideas.'¹² Earlier, R. G. Torbet had admitted that the 17th century English Baptists were the 'descendants of some of the Anabaptists'.¹³ We might amend this so that it reads 'descendants of *some* Anabaptists and of *some* Anabaptist ideas.' We would also be wise to admit that not all the 17th century Baptists took on these ideas. This flexibility is, after all, the main feature of the Dynamic Model.

Even the origins of the Particular Baptists in English separatism have not escaped an analysis that may belong within the framework of the second model. In the 1960s G. R. Elton suggested that the Dutch Anabaptists of the 16th century 'exercised much influence on the growth of sects in Elizabethan and Jacobean England'.¹⁴ Earlier than this W. M. S. West had speculated that the reputation of some of the continental Anabaptists caused English separatists to deny any influence on them from these groups. Obviously these 'unavowed origins' (W. M. S. West) are very difficult to trace. Nevertheless some have argued that they did leave some impressions of their 'certain significance with regard to the English Reformation'.¹⁵ Later English Baptists were eager to cover over any such borrowing from such groups. They desired to emphasize that 'their convictions were derived directly from the Bible and not from the

¹¹ B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (London 1972).

¹² B. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford 1971).

¹³ R. G. Torbet, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe* (London 1963).

¹⁵ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London 1964).

traditions of men . . .¹⁶ This, curiously enough exhibits a tendency to deny Dynamic exchanges and, as a logical by-product, lead historians to assume an Organic origin within existing parish churches only. Such an approach ignores other influences, measured in different ways. In short the picture has become remarkably obscured over time. It is probably almost impossible now to be precise on this particular issue. It is probably best to concentrate attention on the lay evidence available for the 17th century, as in this study. Here, as we have seen there is abundant evidence that Calvinist Baptists such as Pendarves, John Vernon, William Allen, and many others, were bridges between the two movements.

In conclusion, it must be said that both the Organic and Dynamic Models have a valid contribution to make to this particular study and to the study of Church history generally. Each model has strengths and weaknesses. The Organic stresses the organizational nature of the Church and its authority structures whilst, some would argue, neglecting the less systematic transfer of ideas among the laity. It can lead to the most scholarly studies despairing of finding any decisive trace of influence,¹⁷ when many lay examples exist. On the other hand the Dynamic Model stresses the fluid exchange of ideas without placing great importance on the creating of 'orthodoxy'. This may neglect the importance of authority structures within the life and witness of any given church. Nevertheless it is a welcome balance to the rigidity of the Organic approach. As Dr. Payne once put it 'ideas have legs'. It is this that is central to the notion of the 'small package' exchanges. In the 1940s A. C. Underwood noted that the General Baptists and the Mennonites had 'declined to enter into organic unity'. However, despite this, he was forced to conclude that the 'General Baptists represented the English version of the sober Mennonite form of the Anabaptist movement with characteristic differences due to a different milieu'.¹⁸ As we have seen such an ambiguous situation also existed as regards the relationship between both Arminian and Calvinist Baptists and the more revolutionary concepts prevalent among the more radical Anabaptist sects.

¹⁶ B. White, *English Baptists of the 17th Century* (London 1983).

¹⁷ L. D. Kliever, 'General Baptist Origins—the Question of Anabaptist Influence', and G. H. Stassen 'Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36, 1962, 291–348.

¹⁸ A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London 1947). A similar conclusion has been reached by I. B. Horst. He noted that the English Anabaptists of the 16th century did make a valuable contribution to the

Perhaps both models have something to offer and complement each other. This at least helps to explain how so much evidence can be amassed for each. Even the same historian can express opinions suitable to both of the models. This surely points to the complexity of the issue. It also suggests that it is vitally important to recognize the need for a more analytical framework within which such contrary material can be systematically considered and dissected. This study is an attempt to create such a framework. Perhaps it also serves to remind us that sweeping generalisations are rarely valid in the study of history.

English Reformation and that later nonconformist ideas concerning church government and worship embraced Anabaptist teachings. However he also came to a conclusion that is particularly relevant to this study. He wrote how 'much more radical was its influence on the movement which was to bear the name "Anabaptist" longest, the Particular Baptists, who were the closest English counterpart to the main line Anabaptists on the continent (Taufers, Mennonites).' I. B. Horst, *The Radical Brethren* (The Hague, 1972).