

EDITORIAL

The Modern Rediscovery Of the Anabaptists

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Until a generation ago, interest in Anabaptist studies was largely confined to scholars within the tradition. It was the work of the church historian Ernst Troeltsch, who gave impetus to investigation of this historic movement from outside contemporary related groups. In our country, Roland H. Bainton and Franklin H. Littell pioneered in out-group investigations, while George H. Williams has popularized the view that the Anabaptists constituted a Radical Reformation whose annals are of much significance for studies in Church History.

Anabaptists were, of course, subject to severe persecutions in the sixteenth century; and the prejudices which grew up at this time tended to inhibit scholarly studies in the primary sources for the history of the movement itself. Scholarship in our century has found it necessary to cut through the often-repeated calumnies by which persecutions by "established" Protestant groups were justified. It is tragic that the Reformation, which brought such relief in terms of freedom to the Church of Christ did not create a similar sentiment for freedom within Protestantism. The half of European Christendom which was freed from bondage to Roman Catholicism developed too little tolerance for those who did not conform to their usages.

It is ironical that the "left-wing Protestants" who desired to work for what they firmly believed to be the complete reformation of the Church became the victims of state-church Protestants no less than of Roman Catholics. The pattern of Church-State relationships which developed since Constantine was disrupted but never shattered by the developments

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in Wittenberg, Zurich and Geneva in the sixteenth century. And within the major branches of the Reformation, the same spirit of intolerance led the "Protestant Establishment" to deal with harshness with those who did not conform to their usages and their beliefs.

The rediscovery of the work of the lesser known Protestant figures of the sixteenth century has led, in turn, to a growing appreciation of their work. One notes in this connection especially such names as Menno Simons, Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock. Several factors have led to the renewed emphasis upon these and others, usually referred to as Anabaptists, in our time. Among these factors are the growing awareness of the provisional and incomplete nature of the mainstream Reformation and the rediscovery of the deeper merits of the left-wing movements within Protestantism.

I

The major achievements of men like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin have tended to obscure the fact that they left a great deal undone which thoughtful persons of our century now feel ought to have been accomplished. The positive achievements of the sixteenth century, imparted a sacrosanct quality to the period which until recently concealed from view the degree to which European Protestantism retained such features as Constantinianism and intra-church coercion. It may fairly be said that the development of "Free Churches" in the New World contributed to the opening of the path of criticism of established Protestantism.

It is not difficult to forget, for instance, that with the Peace of Augsburg in 1648, coming at the close of the Thirty Years' War, the religion of the Prince still determined the faith of the realm. And in the American colonies, there was accepted for more than a century a system of colonial state-churches. From the practical point of view, the state-church pattern led at times to servile obedience to worldly civil rulers upon the part of religious leaders. It was when the viability of conventional church-state cooperation came to be called into question that larger criticisms of Reformation policy came to the fore.

It has come to be accepted among church historians that Luther and Calvin held reforming theories which, for one reason or another, they failed to put into practice. Among these were freedom of the religious conscience, the inherent right of self-government for Christian congregations, and nonconformity of the Church to the world. It was the failure to carry through these principles and the radical attempt of such groups

as the Anabaptists to do so, which has by contrast shown the incompleteness of the Reformers' work.

This awareness has not gone unnoticed by Roman Catholic writers. The role of Free Churches in carrying forward reformation of the Church is noted by the lay theologian Michael Novak:

In our day, the Free Churches have become less like Catholic religious orders and more like 'a church'; and now the Roman Catholic Church is at last following the Free Churches in the rejection of the Constantianian order. For Catholics increasingly appeal to the vision of the Church as the covenanted people of God, and employ the methods of open discussion, lay participation, and consensus as important in the daily life of the Church.¹

From the point of view of Protestantism, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the left-wing reforming movements pioneered the way in developing a new religious life-style. Seen in this light, the American pattern of "free" and "sect-type" Churches is a lineal heir of Anabaptist tradition, mediated through what Franklin H. Littell calls "radical Puritanism."

II

This suggests the second factor which has given impetus to Anabaptist studies in our time, namely the rediscovery of deeper elements of merit within left-wing Protestantism itself. The decisive quality of Anabaptism is suggested by the title of George H. Williams' volume, *The Radical Reformation*² or Walter Rauschenbusch's calling it a "root and branch" reforming movement.³

First and most obviously, the Anabaptists sought to restore the usages of early Christianity. Their emphasis was, not upon episcopal continuity or uniformity of tradition, but upon the quality of apostolic life. This led to a rejection of established hierarchies of structures of canon law and of radical division of believers into clergy and laity. They

1. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, art. in II, 3 (1965), p. 426.

2. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1962. See p. xix.

3. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, pp. 401ff.

felt, further, that the "establishment" of the Christian Church under Constantine represented its "Fall", so that they represented a return to true Christian faith and true apostolic practice.

Again, Anabaptists felt deeply that they were re-establishing primitive Christian usages in their rejection of infant baptism and of 'promiscuous' church membership. Menno Simons (1496-1561) became convinced that the Catholic Church was wrong in its practice of infant baptism, partly as a reaction to the execution of Sicke Freerks in Leeuwarden in 1531 for accepting re-baptism.⁴ His attitude toward church membership was derived from the long spiritual struggle which led to his conversion.⁵

Separation from the world, closely related to the Anabaptist view of church membership, was held to have been lost with the "Fall" of the Church in the fourth century. Anabaptist leaders felt that the Constantinian Church imitated the "ways of the nations" in being conformed to the world; so that the essential otherworldliness, which ought to typify the Christian, was lost. In the Anabaptist societies, leaders and followers alike sought to restore the pilgrim quality of life, and to inculcate the conviction that there must be a discontinuity of life-style between the believer and the worldling.

Another feature of Anabaptist belief and practice has been, of course, their emphasis upon nonviolence. It may be said that this emphasis derived impetus from the kind of treatment which they received at the hands of civil rulers. But its roots were more profound than this, and were grounded in Anabaptists' general view of Scripture as normative for Christian action, and their special concern to embody the Sermon on the Mount. There is not space here to consider in detail their larger understanding of the relation of the Christian to the State. In summary, however, it centered in their understanding of Love to mean the complete abandonment of the principle of war and violence.

In our time, when the entire question of violence is coming under scrutiny, and when resistance to military service is increasing (even in humanistic and non-religious circles) the historic witness of Anabaptist and related 'Peace Churches' has become a subject for detailed study.

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4. In some records he is called Sieke Freerks Snijder. See Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism*, p. 171.
 5. John Christian Wenger, *Even Unto Death*, pp. 43ff. See also Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism*, pp. 172ff.

Noteworthy especially is the fact that Mennonites opposed the resort to war when both Protestants and Catholics endorsed it, not only as an instrument of political policy, but as a means to extending religious influence. Anabaptists repudiated war, under whatever circumstances, from the beginning--and not merely (as some sociologists have maintained) after the failure of social revolt in the form of the Peasants' War (1524-27) or the defeat of the Davidic experiment at Muenster in 1534-35.

The ambiguous nature of today's warfare, and especially the war in Southeast Asia, has led in some quarters to a new and serious study of the Christian roots of pacifism. Anabaptist studies have proved to be especially challenging here, for Anabaptists' opposition to war was but a part of a larger opposition to compulsion. It is to be expected that an era which feels itself threatened by the massive forces of public constraint and whose freedom seems to be placed in jeopardy by a galloping technology, would explore all avenues by which public constraint was resisted in the past. In other words, Anabaptist studies seem to yield, not only support for opposition to warfare, but a formula for resistance to the forces of statism in general. It is somehow sensed that the followers of Menno Simons found a way to the substitution of spiritual power for temporal force.⁶

Finally Anabaptist studies have intrigued contemporary churchmen who are groping for a model for a newer and non-Constantinian form of involvement in society. Slowly but surely, it is becoming apparent that the church is less than capable of assuming responsibility for society, at least in any medieval sense. The feeling prevails that perhaps some of the sixteenth-century movements may be able to teach us moderns something. The chronicles of the Anabaptists abound in instances in which Christian men and women of dedication were able to make an impact upon magistrates. This does not mean that they sought public office, at least as a general policy. But they worked for social holiness in ways which left a mark upon the usages of the time.

While the contemporary descendents of the Anabaptists are not subject to the disabilities which they encountered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they still represent a minority of persons within society

6. Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 91.

who seek to take with much seriousness the responsible exercise of their duties as citizens. Their work in distressed areas, their concern for education, and their cooperation with self-help programs are well-known. In this unostentatious way, they seek to transcend all political lines for Christ's church, and to build a universal fellowship of believing men and women. Thus, many see in their life-style a model for "responsibility in" rather than "responsibility for" society.