

Anabaptist Influences on World Christianity

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The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had many sources. Some of these, like springs and streams leading toward a grand river, may be found several centuries before the time of Martin Luther. Such beginnings may be seen in the Cathari and the Waldenses of the twelfth century. During the succeeding centuries of the late middle ages, similar movements of revolt and insistence upon purification of the established church continued to multiply and grow. More and more these new forces attracted the attention of all Europe. They arose in widely scattered geographical areas and represented various cultures and different levels of medieval society.

There were the Christian mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Merswin and the "Friends of God," seeking earnestly for life's greatest reality—the knowledge of God's presence in the soul of man. Likewise there were the Brethren of the Common Life of the fourteenth century, Groot, Ruysbroeck, Radewyn and a' Kempis, who were seeking to find God amidst the common ways of secular pursuits and by a daily practice of His Presence. During the same century, but across the English Channel, John Wycliffe was delivering the Word of God from the enslavement of tradition and the prison house of the so-called sacred Latin language, preaching and printing it in the tongue of the common man. He also made this living Word incarnate by committing it to men who would declare it throughout the by-ways of England. Thus for more than a century the Lollards carried the torch of truth which would urge the masses throughout England toward one of their greatest awakenings.

Also on the continent during the same general period the purify-

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ing work of Huss and Jerome was being accomplished in Bohemia. Here the power of biblical and apostolic truth was being effectively released among inhabitants of the royal palace, students of the university, and common peasants throughout the land. Bohemia was so changed by the impact of such spiritual giants that its purified life has continued to flow throughout much of western Christendom even to the present day. In Italy there was Savonarola, who had determined to live and die for the truth, to declare the Word of God against sin in high places, and to make unmistakably clear the demands of the Gospel to a cultured, wealthy aristocracy who had come to think that they could purchase their way into the kingdom of God.

Erasmus from Holland as a contemporary of Luther performed a great work in the Reform movement. His passion for purifying the church was shared among humanists and other scholars of his day. His insights and declarations made clear that there was much dissatisfaction with the status quo of the church among scholars and intellectuals as well as among the common people.

All these growing forces throughout European Christendom were destined to converge, and in some measure to unite, at Wittenberg in 1517. Here Luther was given command of spiritual forces which had been in training and maturation for several centuries and by numerous generals. The achievement of the Reform movement of the sixteenth century was made possible only by the events which had been taking place for many generations. Luther became the man of the hour in whose time these many forces were to be given a united voice. But this united voice was destined to continue but for a season.

Just as there had been a process of converging before and leading up to 1517, almost immediately following this era of unification there is the appearance of several major divergent movements within the church. Those who adhered very closely to Luther in theology and practice united largely under the teaching of the Augsburg Confession. A second family within the general structure, but differing in some minor teaching and under the leadership of Zwingli and Calvin, were those who have since been designated as the Reformed. A third family may be known as the Anglicans. While this section of the Reform movement is sometimes desirous of being considered neither Roman nor Protestant, it is rather difficult to deny the effect which Protestantism has had upon the life, thought, and theology of Anglicanism.

The fourth great branch of Reform is sometimes designated as Anabaptist. Others have given to it the name Radical. Perhaps the most accurate and comprehensive name would be Independents. This family includes within its membership many of diverse and differing opinions and extreme theological position. Often its purpose has been a consuming desire to return the Church to the apostolic spirit, life,

and practice. Because of its extreme emphasis upon the right and authority of the individual, it has tended to become divisive, even within its own ranks. However, the Church must never forget that some of the most valuable influences and most important contributions to its thought and life have been made by these Independents. It is to a special group within this general family of the Protestant Reformation that we purpose to give attention—the Anabaptists.

The immediate historic beginnings of Anabaptism are to be found at Zurich in 1525. Here the movement had its earliest organization under the leadership of Conrad Grebel, a young associate of Zwingli. Both Grebel and Felix Manz had been influenced by the teaching of Balthasar Hubmaier. Among other convictions which these held was that of disbelief in any scriptural authority for the baptism of infants. While it was from this point of belief that the Anabaptists were given their name, yet there were many other and more important elements of belief in which they differed both from Romanism and Protestantism. The first to receive such "valid" baptism at the hands of Grebel at Zurich was George Blaurock, who in turn proceeded to baptize the whole company there gathered. This radical evangelical movement spread very rapidly in Switzerland, Southern Germany, Moravia and Austria. Its views seem to have spread nearly as swiftly as those of Luther. The representative reformers of the first generation including Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, Knox and others sought to refute Anabaptist doctrine by publications as well as debate. Such doctrine was likewise condemned by the leading creeds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was also condemned by the laws of the Empire and other civil governments. Persecutions and mass deaths by Catholics, Protestants, and civil authorities followed in such rapid succession that the movement was all but destroyed. However, a few survivors persisted in their beliefs and practices, and have kept these ideas alive across several centuries. Presently there seems to be a renewed interest in some of these concepts of the left-wing Protestants. It is toward such concepts that we now direct our attention. What were the basic beliefs of the Anabaptists? And how are these beliefs affecting and influencing the contemporary thought and life of Christianity in general?

Philip Schaff says the chief aim of the Radicals was not opposition to infant baptism, but the establishment of a pure church of converts in opposition to the mixed church of the world.¹ He also makes

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960-63), VIII, 75.

the following observation concerning the fruits of the Anabaptists:

The blood of martyrs is never shed in vain. The Anabaptist movement was defeated, but not destroyed; it revived among the Mennonites, the Baptists in England and America, and more recently in isolated congregations on the Continent. The questions of the subjects and mode of baptism still divide Baptist and Pedobaptist churches, but the doctrine of the salvation of unbaptized infants is no longer condemned as a heresy; and the principle of religious liberty and separation of Church and State, for which the Swiss and German Anabaptists suffered and died, is making steady progress. Germany and Switzerland have changed their policy, and allow to Baptists, Methodists, and other Dissenters from the state-church that liberty of public worship which was formerly denied them; and the state-churches reap the benefit of being stirred up by them to greater vitality.²

Any completely authoritative doctrinal statement for the Anabaptists would be quite impossible. Many varieties of theological conviction cause divisions within the movement itself. The very nature of the group as a whole—that of individual independence—would exclude the possibility of an objective creedal statement upon which even a significant majority could agree. Nevertheless, there are certain general principles of belief in which there may be found general agreement. The first of these is the belief in an immediate and direct relation of the individual soul to God. This was affirmed in opposition to the spiritually deadening influence of ecclesiasticism of the sixteenth century. A second principle upon which Anabaptist life was established was the absolute brotherhood of believers. Both these principles were founded upon the Scriptures and thus contributed a sound note of authority for Christian living in all human relations.

Beyond these general principles of agreement, Professor McGlothlin has suggested that the major beliefs of Anabaptists may be summarized in three areas: (1) Religious views, (2) Political views, and (3) Social and economic views.³

Religious Views

1. In general, the Anabaptists accepted the common Catholic

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 85.

3. William Joseph McGlothlin, in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908), I, 410.

and Protestant doctrine of God as set forth in the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds.

2. They opposed the Augustinian theology of the Reformers, insisting vehemently on the freedom of the will and complete moral responsibility. The theology of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin appeared to them to be contrary to the Scriptures, dishonoring to God, and dangerous to morality. In these views they anticipated Arminius by almost a century.

3. The Anabaptists maintained the right of the individual to interpret Scripture for himself. The chief qualification for correct interpretation of the Scripture was the illumination of the Holy Spirit—a doctrine which was strongly emphasized.

4. The true Church was composed of believers only—"saints." The purity of the Church was to be secured by the baptism of believers only, and preserved by the exercise of strict discipline.

5. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper had no sacramental significance. Baptism was rather a declaration of faith and forgiveness than a sacrament of cleansing or regeneration.

6. Not much is known of the officers and organization of the Anabaptists. Ordination seems to have been in abeyance in the earlier stages of the movement, which was a great outburst of missionary activity among laymen. When charged with preaching in improper places and without proper authority, Anabaptists claimed the authority of a divine call which needed no ecclesiastical ordination or state authorization.

7. On eschatology there were great differences of opinion. The majority, perhaps, held sane and biblical views, but expectation of the early return of Christ bred the wildest fanaticism in others.

8. Anabaptist worship was necessarily very simple. Persecution and the lack of church buildings made it necessary to worship in small companies, in such a fashion as to attract as little attention as possible.

Political Views

1. The Anabaptists regarded the state as a necessary evil, ordained of God indeed, and therefore to be obeyed where its obligations were not in conflict with conscience. The conscience was absolutely free under God.

2. Many of the Anabaptists maintained that no Christian could hold civil office, because such elevation was in conflict with the principle of Christian brotherhood and equality; besides, the infliction of capital punishment was often required, and to kill was under no circumstances permissible to a Christian.

3. They opposed the oath under any and all circumstances, on

purely biblical grounds (Matt. 5:34).

4. The Anabaptists were relentless opponents of war as the great destroyer of human life, which they held to be inviolable. Under pressure they paid war taxes, assisted in building fortifications, and rendered other services of this kind, but they suffered imprisonment and death rather than bear arms.

Social and Economic Views

1. In imitation of the primitive Christian Church, the Anabaptists were strongly inclined to a voluntary and benevolent communism in the acquisition and administration of property (Acts 2:44 ff.). They strenuously maintained that all property belonged primarily to the Lord, and must be freely used in ministering to the needy. They conceived of themselves in the position of stewards, under solemn obligation to administer the Lord's money for the highest good of mankind.

2. They opposed the lending of money at interest, refused to accept interest themselves, and paid it unwillingly to others.

3. They refused to pay ecclesiastical taxes, believing that religion should be supported by the voluntary gifts of religious people.

McGlothlin concludes with a brief evaluation:

Glancing backwards over their views, we see that the Anabaptists were several centuries in advance of their age. They were the modern men of their time. Some of their tenets, then universally anathematized and persecuted, have been adopted by all civilized lands (America and Australia), and are making headway in the older societies, e.g., complete separation of Church and State; yet others are still objects of endeavour, only seen as far-off boons, as, for example, abolition of war. It is remarkable that these simple people should have drawn from a fresh study of the Bible so many great ideas that still float before the race as high and distinct ideals.⁴

This study has sought in brief to indicate some of the numerous sources from which Protestantism arose, how these streams of influence were destined to converge in the early sixteenth century under the leadership of Luther, and how following that period these re-

4. *Ibid.*

covered ideas of theological thought were to issue again in diversity of belief and practice. The particular diversity to which we have here given special attention has become known as the Radical or left-wing branch of Protestantism. Our concern has been to evaluate the lasting contributions which this family of the Reformation has made to world Christianity. We have not sought to emphasize its extreme positions of thought and practice, but rather to suggest that in the assumption of such positions there have emerged some of the most basic ideas of apostolic Christianity.