The Prophetic Political Dissent of the Anabaptists - Then and Now

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My father was baptized as a young man in the Church of the Brethren – together with the Quakers and the Mennonites, one of America’s three historic “peace churches.” He told me that it was debated among his fellow Brethren why that denomination had been founded – was it to observe Christian baptism correctly, or was it to express the Christian “peace witness?” The answer seems to have been that baptism was originally more important, but that at a later time peace became more important. The balance of scholarly opinion just now seems to be that if that question were asked about the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement the answer would be the same: the original concern was with baptism but peace came more and more to the forefront.

This does not mean that what we now call “Christian pacifism” was absent from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement. One of the two persons most prominently involved in beginning Anabaptism in Zurich in January 1525, Felix Mantz, stated clearly that he believed that no Christian could kill, and that therefore no Christian should participate in the coercive activities of government. Nevertheless, early Swiss and south German Anabaptism was significantly entangled in the German Peasants’ War of 1525, Europe’s greatest revolutionary mass uprising before the French Revolution. This was not in itself discreditable – the Peasants’ War began as a kind of rural general strike in which lowly people sought a fairer deal from landlords and rulers in the social and economic parts of their lives, inspired, as they thought, by the Biblical ideals of justice taught by the Reformation. Large scale violence began when the upper classes turned their mercenary troops loose upon the striking farmers. Still, connection with the Peasants’ War did not fit with Anabaptist ideas of turning the other cheek in accord with Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Then, nine years later, the European pamphlet-reading public was scandalized when the Anabaptists won the elections to the city government of Münster in
Westphalia, and had the audacity to defend themselves when they were attacked by a Catholic bishop, with the support of both Lutheran and Catholic rulers in the neighborhood. The Anabaptist regime in Münster practiced both communism and polygamy, which further shocked contemporaries, who took great inequalities of wealth and the concubines of rulers to be the normal condition of life. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Anabaptists, Mennonites and Hutterites were entirely peaceful. The Hutterite teacher Peter Riedemann, for instance, agreed with Mantz that a Christian could not be a ruler, and a ruler could not be a Christian. Melchior Hoffman and Menno Simons did believe in Christian rulers, but they did not believe that their Anabaptist followers should ever engage in war or violence. In the 1530s and 1540s when the German Lutherans banded together to defend their religious freedom against the Catholic emperor Charles V, the great Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck warned them against this course. This was not the way that Christians should behave, and it would surely come to a bad end. In 1615 when the prominent Dutch Anabaptist Hans de Ries published his *History of the Martyrs or the True Witnesses of Jesus Christ*, the ancestor of the famous *Martyrs’ Mirror*, he established two factors as the criteria of who were the true Anabaptist/Mennonite martyrs. The martyr must have received believers’ baptism and must be nonviolent. So, if the “peace witness” was not really a reason for Anabaptism coming into existence, and if early Anabaptism was not entirely peaceful, from early on nonviolence was accepted as one of the essentials of Anabaptism.

So how did the Anabaptists get from this early modern testimony for peace to the present day? The movement would not have survived without a greater or lesser degree of toleration from the surrounding societies and governments. Moravia had a tradition of “supra-denominationalism” in the plural religious situation following the Hussite Wars, according to which landowners welcomed peaceable and industrious settlers of whatever religious persuasion. The problem faced by the Hutterites and other Moravian Anabaptists was that the Habsburg government in Vienna was determined to enforce Catholic uniformity on its territories, which it succeeded in doing at the time of the Thirty Years War in the early seventeenth century. Many Hutterites abandoned their faith, but a remnant moved further into eastern Europe, then to Russia, and finally to North America. They maintained a policy of nonviolent separation from whatever society would tolerate them. In the Dutch Republic the Mennonites were
granted toleration from the 1570s, at an early stage of the war of independence against Spain. They gave financial support to the Protestant cause and accepted exclusion from the world of politics, which was dominated by the victorious Calvinists. Dutch Mennonite immigrants were welcomed in the German lands along the North Sea and Baltic coasts because of the commercial skills they brought with them from the Netherlands. The Swiss Anabaptists suffered intermittent persecution throughout the early modern centuries, as a result of which some of them found more tolerant havens in Alsace, the Palatinate, and then in the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania. The Dutch and north German Mennonites gradually assimilated to their societies to the extent that they no longer insisted on special privileges like exemption from military service. A minority of Dutch Mennonites participated in the revolutionary Patriot Movement of the 1780s. In the nineteenth century Mennonites in the Netherlands, Germany and France accepted military service as a duty of citizenship. Hence Mennonite soldiers fought on opposing sides in the First World War, although German Mennonites were permitted non-combatant service in the army because of their religious scruples against killing. The Mennonites in the United States, on the other hand, maintained their nonresistant traditions: in the Civil War they generally took the option of paying for substitutes; but in the Second World War they were recognized as “conscientious objectors” and were given the option of “Civilian Public Service.”

In the Second World War, a time I remember from my childhood, young men of the Mennonite church were faced very often with unpleasant choices. When their neighbors were exposed to the considerable dangers of military service, they were obliged to become conscientious objectors or to be disfellowshipped from their congregations (although I have learned from my recent reading that 41% of young men of military age from the Mennonite church in fact served in World War II, sometimes in noncombatant roles). Many Mennonites at first believed the leftist idea that the Allies and the Axis were merely two opposing blocs of world capitalism, competing for profits; and that the horrible stories we heard and read about Hitler and Nazi Germany were only war propaganda. When confronted with more complete information about the realities of the Nazi regime, some of them, like my late friend John Oyer, concluded that no other means but military force would have been sufficient to remove this evil. Nevertheless, they maintained their principle that it was not acceptable for a Christian to fight and kill. Many young American Mennonites participated in civilian relief
activities in Europe in the 1940s. They encountered Dutch and German Mennonites who had not only abandoned traditional Mennonite pacifism but, in the case of many German Mennonites had become unmistakable Nazi sympathizers. In these circumstances the Dutch and German Mennonites once again took the Anabaptist peace message to heart, and became involved in ecumenical discussions in the World Council of Churches about the rights and wrongs of war and peace.

One of the American Mennonite spokesmen who was taken very seriously in post-war ecumenical discourse was John Howard Yoder. Yoder studied Anabaptist history and theology at Basel University in the 1950s. He was the most prominent second generation representative of an effort to strengthen American Mennonite identity by an appeal to the “Anabaptist vision” of the sixteenth-century founders. The leader of this movement was Harold S. Bender and its organ of publication was the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, first published in 1927. The group around Bender advocated a teaching of “nonresistance,” grounded in the Seven Articles of Schleitheim of 1527, regarded as the first Anabaptist confession. The sixth of the Schleitheim Articles contains the dictum, “The sword is an ordering of God, outside the perfection of Christ.” This was in the context of an article four on Separation, which classes violence as an element of “the evil and the wickedness which the devil has planted in the world.” Robert Friedmann, a friend and associate of Bender, elaborated on this foundation an Anabaptist “doctrine of the two worlds,” which classed government and the use of force associated with it as part of the world of Satan, as opposed to the world of Christ. This worked very well with the traditional Mennonite ethic of withdrawal from the nasty business of outsiders; but it did not lend itself very well to ecumenical conversation. Yoder advanced a reinterpretation of Schleitheim that had better possibilities for interfaith conversation: “It is possible to hold that two orders of preservation and redemption exist together under the same God. In one of them the sword has no place, due to the normativeness of the work of Jesus Christ, whereas in the other the sword has a limited legitimacy, which is tested precisely at the point of its ability to keep itself within limits. The classic early Anabaptist statement of this position is that of Schleitheim VI: ‘The sword is an ordering of God outside of the perfection of Christ.’” The more conservative Mennonite theologians, in the tradition of Bender and Yoder (hence the “Goshen school”) believed that the best Anabaptist/Mennonite peace theology from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was what was needed by the
Christian church and by the world, to the extent that it was serving God’s preservative purposes.

With time new strains appeared in Mennonite pacifist thinking. “Nonresistance” seemed entirely too passive – learning from the examples of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Christian pacifists, Mennonites among them, began to explore the possibilities of nonviolent resistance. Further, more liberal Mennonite theologians thought that the Anabaptist heritage had to be adapted to the conditions of modernity, hence applied indirectly. A contribution to Mennonite peace theology from the generation of World War II conscientious objectors is that of the Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman. His outlook has resonated with contemporary Mennonite theologians like the German Hans-Jürgen Goertz and Bethel College’s Duane Friesen. For Kaufman a three-dimensional theology must be broadened from the traditional one-dimensional appeal to sacred Scripture, to include the second dimension of the historical and personal situation of the interpreter, and the third dimension of current human knowledge (most of it unknown to the writers of the sacred texts). Moreover, the exclusive claim to revealed truth, not only of a particular Christian denomination, but of Christianity itself, must be transcended so that a respectful dialogue can take place among all religions and worldviews. The conception of “the body of Christ” must be expanded from the figure of Jesus, not only in the traditional manner to include the church, “the people of God,” but to include non-Christian incarnations of the divine – to make the point clear I would suggest (in a more explicit way than Kaufman or Friesen), Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela or David Suzuki. Kaufman and Friesen see the core of a peace theology in Jesus’ self-giving love. This goes beyond anti-militarism to the achievement of justice, the accomplishment of reconciliation (one thinks of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa to bring about reconciliation among the peoples after the great crime of apartheid), and the search for “peace with our environment.” Such modern “liberal Mennonite” theologians think of their theology as practical and urgent, focused on the individual human life and the survival of humanity; by implication they think of traditional “one-dimensional” theology as antiquarian, focused on doctrinal correctness, and resigned to leave the issue of human survival to divine providence. They point to unexpected outcomes in recent history like the end of the Cold War as presenting a future saturated with eschatological hope, as well as the obvious fear that human beings may damage themselves and the planet.
In this first decade of the twenty-first century is the prophetic dissent of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, as it has evolved, merely “utopian,” in the sense of hopelessly impractical? Perhaps that is how it looks in the American Midwest. I think, however, there is much to be said for the peace theology in Friesen’s, Goertz’s or Kaufman’s version. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the USA emerged as the world’s only superpower. After an unhappy century of military blocs confronting each other, European militarism is essentially dead. Who could have imagined that two out of three young men of the age for military service in Germany, of all places, would, for whatever combination of motives, decline service in the German Army and choose the alternative of civilian public service? But American militarism is by no means dead. What has happened since the end of the Cold War has not been to the benefit of the USA or of humanity. The use of “hard power,” of the sword, particularly in Iraq, happened in opposition to the will of most other countries; moreover, it has been a disastrous failure, especially for the people of Iraq, who have been its chief victims. Now voices are raised calling for America to return to its traditional use of “soft power,” to work through its leadership in international organizations like the UN and NATO, to scrupulously abide by international agreements and international law, to use its wealth for humanitarian purposes like the combating of poverty and disease. “Soft power” is certainly closer to the Christian peace message than the sword or the nuclear threat; but it falls short by far of any prophetic vision of the world. To return to the traditional issue of whether Christians can kill, it is sobering to realize that the death penalty is now as much the “peculiar institution” of the USA as was slavery in the early nineteenth century. It has been abandoned in Canada and throughout the European Union; this is a practice in which America keeps company with Russia, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia rather than the countries that share America’s democratic values. At a time when it is increasingly evident that the death penalty can and does lead to the execution of the innocent, some American politicians act as if they believe this is an irrelevant issue, “a small price to pay.” But Kauffman’s theme of “peace with our environment” or Friesen’s demand for “loyalty and respect for God’s creation” poses the really big issue – at this point in time only China and America seem willing to put the short-term flourishing of their economies above the long-term welfare of the planet. Only here in the USA have the paid spokesmen of Exxon-Mobil so covered over the hardening consensus of scientists that significant numbers of people still think that
climate science is mere “socialist propaganda.” But at the same time far-sighted capitalists are far ahead of the politicians in recognizing the creation of “green power” as an opportunity rather than a threat. We are at a point in human history where the peace message that was pushed aside into a separated community in the sixteenth century is essential as a barrier to the world’s penchant for self-destruction, whether by a nuclear, or, even more likely, by an environmental disaster. Whatever our specific religious or humanitarian commitments, we must approach this great challenge to our century with hope as well as fear.

Select Bibliography

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THESES

THE PROPHETIC POLITICAL DISSENT OF THE ANABAPTISTS – THEN AND NOW

1. In the sixteenth-century beginning of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement believers’ baptism was more important than nonresistance to violence

2. Some Swiss and south German Anabaptists resisted landowners and princes in the German Peasants’ War of 1525

3. In 1534 and 1535 the Anabaptist government of Münster in Westphalia defended itself against neighboring princes and became discredited for violence, communism and polygamy

4. In 1615 Hans de Ries in his History of the Martyrs established two criteria to recognize true Anabaptist/Mennonite martyrs: believers’ baptism and nonviolence

5. Toleration of Hutterites in Moravia (until the Thirty Years’ War) and of Mennonites in the Dutch Republic helped to secure Anabaptists’ survival

6. Anabaptists from Switzerland, Alsace, and the Palatinate emigrated to Pennsylvania seeking full toleration

7. In the nineteenth century Mennonites in the Netherlands, Germany and France accepted military service as a duty of citizenship

8. In the United States in the Second World War Mennonites were recognized as a “historic peace church” and given the option of “Civilian Public Service”

9. In the aftermath of the Second World War in the World Council of Churches American and European Mennonites reexamined the Anabaptist heritage of Christian pacifism

10. John Howard Yoder advanced a form of Christian pacifism based on an appeal to the nonresistant “Anabaptist vision” of the early Swiss Anabaptists and a reinterpretation of the Seven Articles of Schleitheim (1527)

11. More liberal Mennonite theologians (Gordon D. Kaufman, Hans-Jürgen Goertz, Duane Friesen) have begun a dialogue between traditional Mennonite teaching and modernity, partly inspired by the non-violent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King
12. Using Jesus’ self-giving love as a starting point, they go beyond anti-militarism to achievement of justice, reconciliation of wrong-doers and wronged, and “peace with our environment”

13. In the present scene:
   (a) Militarism is moribund in Europe, but not in the USA
   (b) Capital punishment is detested in Europe but not in USA
   (c) The environmental crisis is taken seriously in Europe but not in North America or China