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Anabaptism
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The Anabaptists, the By-product of an Age of Ferment.

A. Ever since the scientific spirit has entered the realm of Church History, Historians in opening a discussion on the Anabaptist movement have been purposely indefinite. It is now the accepted thing to abhor a simple interpretation of the movement. We are warned against identifying it too closely with social movements like the Peasants Revolt. It is not to be considered as a radical, anarchic and egotistic wing of the reformation. It is not to be too closely identified with mediaeval pietistic movements like the Franciscans or Waldensians. In fact it is difficult to analyze all the differing views, which came to be associated with the Anabaptists, into one movement. The picture is confusing and the evidence, as yet, insufficient and the most of it biased against the movement. The Best the historian can do is to indicate possible relationships and social forces giving rise to this body of quiet pious people.

Certainly it was a motley crew. Uneducated layman; Peasants, members of the artisan class; monks; learned Humanists; some of the greatest scholars of the age: - all went to ~~make up~~ the movement. Both followers and leaders were drawn from all these groups. And disagreeing as they did on several considerations, the members were still one in fellowship and mutual respect. Condemned by the leading reformers, Persecuted by both organized churches, the movement persisted.

To the confused history of the movement perhaps the statement of ^{quoted} by the Bloomy Dean is the best that can be made. "The Anabaptist movement was a by-product of an age of ferment. That is to say. - first that the age was (and what age isn't) an age of transition. - of violent and far-reaching changes - and secondly that the hope is still maintained by the historian that within the confusion he can find certain social pressures giving rise to the movement under study. There is of course added the suggestion that this movement was not in the main stream of historic development. It was something the restlessness of the times tossed off and then forgot about.

Undoubtedly the first two assumptions are valid. They might apply to any movement in any age. The suggestion of consideration toward the movement is perhaps due in some degree to the author's institutionalist background. Certainly it was an age of ferment and certainly there was plenty of social motivation for a movement like the Anabaptists.

To discuss all the social forces which at this time brought about an age of ferment would fill a volume. There were countless factors in the age whose by-products could quite logically be the Anabaptist movement. The Renaissance had done most of its work. Nations were broadened, the individual common man was freed. Again some attention was given to his importance, his freedom of conscience. It is possible to overemphasize this element in the culture, but it was growing. The songs of this age indicate how its people were becoming increasingly class conscious. It was a period of countless wars. The common fighting man was growing in prestige. Feudal distinctions were breaking down. Europe was experiencing the commercial revolution - at least its beginnings. If the term can be applied to any age, certainly this one was an age of transition. Society was disorganizing to become re-organized into a new synthesis.

At this time the condition of the peasant was both good and bad. They were still the most important of the lower classes. The rising artisan and commercial classes had not yet superseded it in importance except in some few of the commercial cities. The peasant's position had improved to some degree. Food prices were high and farm labour relatively short. The heavy demand on this class for recruits gave it a new sense of its importance. The peasants were becoming self conscious and aware of their own importance. In the face of these conditions there came new regulations for peasant-landowner relationships. It can be shown that they were not so oppressive as they were new and confusing. However many were oppressed under them. As well as this, the land was needed upon of several crop failures. The result was a famine. The peasant class - by this time strongly self conscious, was bitterly oppressed. Crops were destroyed in the countless wars. The Turk was ever threatening on the borders of Europe. The ferment was destined to throw up some movement.

On the political side of life we have countless struggles. The old Empire is breaking down. As Powers within it vie with each other for control it is opposed outright by the rising nationalism. On this side the issue is confused again: nationalism is engaged in a struggle against the localism of territorial services or the free cities. Political forces are in tremendous ferment. The whole history is one story of war and slaughter.

The populace is increasingly self and class conscious, in a time when society is racked by the torments of transition.

One result of these conditions was the Anabaptist movement. Denied as

it can still be considered one movement. Some of the emphases were common enough and these pious people recognized a common bond of fellowship. They were quietly pious people who had caught the view of the individual as an important self-thinking being. He was to be dictated to in matters of religion by no-one. Each man could come to the Bible with an unflinching conscience and interpret it as he saw fit. And they did. Even the poorly educated artisan and peasant read the Bible thoroughly. Often he knew more of it than the priest. The result of this independent reading of scripture was the Anabaptist movement. Of course it was spread on by the evangelism of its leaders but mostly it was the quiet application of Biblical principles to life in stormy times.

So we have principles like passive resistance, the freedom of conscience, a benevolent communism. Any attempt to call this movement mechanical falls short on this score - it does not explain the emphatic individualism which so characterized the movement. It was the pious application of this individualism in a culture imbued with the Bible. Whatever connection the Anabaptists had with the Peasant's revolt, this social movement can be seen as in line with their main ideas. Today we look upon the Peasant's revolt as the most natural thing in the world. All demands were the natural outcome of decent principles of individualism. Not coinciding with method the revolt demanded only a modicum of social Christianity. Each community was to dispense of its pastor; the small tithe abolished; the poor were to be allowed to hunt in the forests, and the reservations restricted; there was to be a system of just and fixed rents; forced labour was to be regulated and paid; clerical payments abolished. - Certainly such demands were the natural outcome of the social and political situation. All ideas were self-evident.

B. All the great reformation leaders were determined to dissociate themselves from the Anabaptist movement. Most of the great councils of the day contain anti-Anabaptist emphases. The Reformation communities were no less vigorous in their persecution of the Anabaptist bodies than was the inquisition itself. It would seem that Anabaptism was a movement out of the main line of Reformation development. As has been suggested many historians, the movement has been described as mechanical in essence.

However that philosophy of history which designates as mechanical any church movement which does not vigorously promound the doctrine of justification by faith, makes one definitely impatient. Certainly Anabaptism was in many respects.

akin to medieval Pietism. It is full of Reformation ideas however. Its ideas are definitely in line with Reformation ideas and in many cases contain developments more logical than the more farwinded sects churches. Certainly some aspects like the Chiliasm & many of its adherents were byproducts of an age of ferment. They were aspects which were out of line of the essential history of protestantism. But these aspects were of no means dominant.

The spirit of the reformation was essentially anti-magical. Any recognition of elements of magic in Religion or ecclesiasticism was not tolerated. In this respect Anabaptism was ahead of her more conservative sister movements. Any magical power in the hands of the church or its sacraments was completely denied by the Anabaptists. Thus we have the denial of the power of infant baptism. we have the refusal to use elaborate vestments and ritual. we have the memorial interpretation of the Lords Supper. The priest-hood of all believers is taken to its logical conclusion. The individual conscience is left free. There is self interpretation of scripture. at first ordination is given no importance. The spirit of individualism is strong enough to reject the predestination doctrine of Luther, Calvin and Augustine. In all these respects Anabaptism is even more logical in its reformation doctrine than those movements which have come to be called such.

The difference lies here, - not in the logical development but in the historic development. To the logic of history the Anabaptist movement was not immediately related. The Historical Reformation movement was more realistic. It better fitted the logic of events. It adapted itself to the social situation in more realistic fashion. Thus the Reformation proper was able to benefit, nay actually be saved, by the movements of nationalism and commercialism. Thus it got its place in history. Its doctrine of church and state fitted the rising spirit of nationalism and its ethic the rising spirit of commercialism.

Thus it can be said that in its social aspect Anabaptism was not in line with the logic of history. However who is to say that history is logical and many of this movement's social ideas have been adopted in churches, lands or are part of the ~~movement~~ avowed intention of the majority of churches. Perhaps even in this realm the Anabaptists were ultimately closest to the logic of history.

Its social doctrine was practical Christianity. Individualism was not carried to the extent that it supported an economic system which was to become a monster without social morals. There was to be a mild form of

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communism. The collecting of interest was not to be tolerated. Lofly ideas of mutual aid were engendered. Here Anabaptism missed the line of immediate historical development.

As also with relation to war, the anabaptists were ahead of their times. Their view of passive resistance, of capital punishment. Their insistence on the separation of church was inappreciated at the time but has since become one of the self-evident elements in a liberal state. The state was to have no religious duties, the churches were to be supported by voluntary subscription and religious toleration was to be absolute.

The Anabaptists were ahead of their times -- their is, if at all, lies their lack of connection with any logical development. To modern eyes this effort to liberalize and humanize the corrupt religion of their time was not only logical but entirely admirable.