

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

BAPTIST AND ANABAPTIST ATTITUDES TO THE STATE A Contrast

In a previous article¹ I drew attention to the variety of Anabaptist understandings of 'the sword', the use of coercion by rulers or the 'state'. I indicated that despite the initial variety within the Anabaptist movements one position, that represented in the Schleithem Confession and denominated by James Stayer 'radical apoliticism', became dominant within Anabaptism for ideological reasons: it made sense of their own experience of state power. Church and state were conceived of as two fundamentally incommensurate and opposed orders such that the Christian disciple ought not, it is claimed, to become involved in the coercion of civil society. It is immediately clear that whatever the similarities between Anabaptists and Baptists, and they are considerable, the two movements diverge significantly at this point. In this article I explore further the character of this departure and some of the theological issues that lie behind it.

ANABAPTISM AND THE EARLY BAPTISTS

The paradoxical nature of the Anabaptist understanding of the state, to which I drew attention in the previous article, is well illustrated in the disagreements amongst the very earliest English Baptists in Amsterdam. In seeking to gain admission to an existing Anabaptist congregation, John Smyth and forty-two others signed their names in 1610 to an English translation of a Confession of Faith drawn up in 1580 by Waterlander Mennonites, direct successors to the first Dutch Anabaptists. This Confession affirmed in Article 18 that the redeemed 'do lift up no sword, neither hath nor consent to fleshly battle'. Article 35 asserted: 'Worldly authority or magistracy is a necessary ordinance of God, appointed and established for the preservation of the common estate, and of a good, natural, politic life, for the reward of the good and the punishing of the evil'. Here we encounter once more the characteristic Anabaptist paradox concerning the state. Article 35 goes on to deny the role of the magistrate in the church and adds the typical Anabaptist note:

Neither hath he called his disciples and followers to be worldly kings, princes, potentates, or magistrates; neither hath he burdened or charged them to assume such offices, or to govern the world in such a worldly manner . . . therefore we avoid such offices and administrations.²

The paradox, that the state is ordained by God but still not a suitable sphere for Christian service, was identified by those separating from Smyth's congregation upon its admission to the Mennonite church. This group, which was later to return under Thomas Helwys to establish the first Baptist church on English soil, clarified its position in the Confession written by Helwys and published in 1611 under the title 'A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in

Holland'. Article 24 records:

That Magistracie is a Holie ordinance off GOD, that every soule ought to bee subject to it not for feare onelic but for conscience sake. Magistraets are the ministers off GOD for our wealth, they beare not the sword for nought. They are ministers off GOD to take vengeance on them that doe evil, Rom 13 . . . And therefore they may bee members off the Church off CHRIST, reteining their Magistracie, for no Holy Ordinance off GOD debarreth anie from being a member off CHRISTS Church. They beare the sword off GOD, - which sword in all Lawful administracions is to bee defended and supported by the servants off GOD that are under their government with their lyves and al that they have according as in the first Institucion off that Holie Ordinance. *And whosoever holds otherwise must hold, (iff they understand themselves) that they are the ministers of the devill, and therefore not to bee praied for nor approved in anie off their administracions, - seing all things they do (as punishing offenders and defending their countrees, state and persons by the sword) is unlawul.*³

After his death in 1612, the followers of Smyth responded to the criticism of the Helwys party with 'Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion', published between 1612-1614, and in its first draft the work of Smyth himself. It contains the following paragraphs:

83. That the office of the magistrate, is a disposition or *permissive ordinance* of God for the good of mankind: that one man like the brute beasts devour not another (Rom. xiii.), and that justice and civility, may be preserved among men: and that a magistrate may so please God in his calling, in doing that which is righteous and just in the eyes of the Lord, that he may bring an outward blessing upon himself, his posterity and subjects (2 Kings x. 30, 31).

84. That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience, and to handle only civil transgressions (Rom. xiii), injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience (James iv. 12).

85. That if the magistrate will follow Christ, and be His disciple, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ; he must love his enemies and not kill them, he must pray for them, and not punish them, he must feed them and give them drink, not imprison them, banish them, dismember them, and spoil their goods; he must suffer persecution and affliction with Christ, and be slandered, reviled, blasphemed, scourged, buffeted, spit upon, imprisoned and killed with Christ; and that by the authority of magistrates, *which things he cannot possibly do, and retain the revenge of the sword.*⁴

The exchange illustrates the relationship and the difference between Mennonites and early English Baptists. At the point of church and state the Baptists of Helwys'

party show their similarity to (and possibly their dependence upon) Anabaptism in the insistence on religious liberty and the non-interference of the state in matters of religion. This is a significant religious and political departure for both movements. But while being in accord with Anabaptist doctrine at this point they also revised it in a Reformed direction which allowed them to embrace and participate in the state in its secular function while denying its jurisdiction in the spiritual. Anabaptism, by contrast, consigned the coercive function of the state to the 'world' and separated from it, unable to reconcile the personal demands of discipleship with the corporate responsibilities of rulers. It was a 'permissive ordinance' only, necessary in a fallen world but not a proper sphere of service for the follower of Christ. J. R. Coggins has argued that behind the more robust Baptist position lay the nationalism of English Puritanism and its belief in England's destiny as an elect nation. Those who embraced this needed to be able to conceive that England's king could be a Christian. In a manner parallel with the Smyth/Helwys rejection of the Calvinist version of the doctrine of election, Helwys argued that God would not destine a ruler to rule and then damn him for it.⁵

English Baptists, following the example of Balthasar Hübmaier, developed a view of the state which stood somewhere between Anabaptism and Zwinglianism/Calvinism. Christians might with good conscience serve the state, even its coercion, as the means of maintaining elementary justice. But the state ought not to interfere with conscientious matters of religion. Clearly, this would create a conflict if a Baptist were required as a magistrate to exercise religious coercion but not if the crimes in view were of a civil nature. A potential disadvantage of this was that by affirming state power positively in matters temporal and civil it became harder to argue that such beneficial powers should not also be used in the religious sphere.⁶ In addition, historically, the Baptist position has rendered it vulnerable to nationalism.⁷ Yet the Anabaptist-Mennonite position has lacked a basis for involvement in civil or political society and has fallen, where it has been maintained, into a world-denying 'apartism'. The Baptist-Mennonite distinction, which reflects that between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions in general and so is of wider relevance, concerns at root a divergence of judgement concerning the nature of state power: Anabaptists conceive the civil power as a fallen, rebellious power which is nonetheless over-ruled by divine providence in order to serve God's purpose of preservation. The fact that God uses it providentially does not constitute a reason for Christian participation in its coercion. By contrast the Reformed tend to view civil government as a benign power given as a blessing by divine grace and therefore most certainly to be viewed as a sphere of Christian service.

CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN PRESENT MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE

In view of the legacy bequeathed by Anabaptism it is instructive to note the extent to which modern Mennonites, especially in North America, have been forced to

review their position as they have emerged from their agricultural hinterlands and committed themselves to more mainstream cultural and theological reflection. Evidence that Mennonites are adapting their heritage is considerable.⁸ A significant shift was advanced by J. Lawrence Burkholder in a thesis submitted in 1958 at Princeton but only published in 1989.⁹ It is worth examining in some detail. The work criticizes Mennonite social thought of the 1950s, especially the influential apolitical non-involvement of G. F. Herschberger's *War, Peace and Non-resistance*¹⁰ which it saw as a metamorphosis of the early Anabaptists' political radicalism.¹¹

According to Burkholder, Mennonites, emerging from the isolated, agrarian existence of a German-speaking minority in an English-speaking society, were beginning at this time to encounter the ambiguities of power. The extent of the Christian's responsibility for secular society was perennially problematic since holding power is dangerous, but not doing so is desertion from responsibility (p.2). In the sense that Anabaptist-Mennonites have increasing access to social power they now faced their own Constantinian dilemma: how was it to be used Christianly? Non-resistance, from which the whole of Mennonite social thought was inferred, required extensive re-examination (p.6).

Social responsibility required an identification with the world of which attitudes to political office were present tests, as they were during the Reformation (p.17). The tension involved here is that of reconciling the God of the cross with the God who makes politics a calling. The requirements of the Sermon on the Mount placed pure principle above practical possibility and so could prove irresponsible, not preparing people for the ambiguities of holding power (p.19). Mennonites had traditionally stressed the discontinuity between the church and the world, yet love implies involvement with the neighbour and in a society where life is no longer composed simply of primary relationships, the neighbour was now a corporate neighbour. When Jesus renounced physical and institutional power, where does the disciple find norms for a complex and institutionally developed world in which the absolute ethic of love is no longer a simple possibility (p.30)?

Non-resistance was a particularly acute problem in this regard. The Anabaptist position on the sword was paradoxical, proclaiming the sword to be ordained by God yet not to be wielded by the Christian. Government was conceived as exercising a negative function. Even when providentially ordered and though its administration be relatively just, the sword is tainted and 'devilish'. Schleithem rejected for Christians the administration of either retributive or distributive justice (pp.70-71). Mennonites therefore had a theology for separation from the world but not for the political participation which was presently opening up to them. Justice lay outside their vocabulary, being seen as an Old Testament concept to be contrasted with love (p.181). Christ's lordship was practically limited in the Mennonite tradition to the church, thereby separating the work of God the Creator from that of Christ the Redeemer and neglecting the implications of the Logos

christology of John and the christological passages in Ephesians and Colossians. The broader implications of Christ's rule were thus excluded (p.215).

Burkholder's critical stance towards his own tradition was informed by the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and John C. Bennett which talked of ambiguity, compromise, balances of power and impossible possibilities (p.11). Churches were socially responsible, from the perspective of Christian realism, if they sought a Christian culture and political order, and irresponsible if they concentrated on a separate church (p.20). Yet, for Burkholder, the concept of the 'responsible society' could still be recognized as an extension of the *corpus christianum* under the conditions of secular pluralism. It represented the ideal of a total society under the domination of the Christian ethos (p.213). Too many questions were left theologically imprecise here concerning the relation of church to society and consequently the church risked merely echoing existing 'responsible' opinion. Here the Anabaptist tradition can help supply the deficiencies (p.205).

Burkholder's programme for a responsible ethic true to the Anabaptist heritage involved seeking brotherhood, peace and mutuality under the conditions of compromise. Solidarity with the world involves ambiguity and responsibility for corporate evil. The place of power in this needs to be recognized. Christians cannot live without the exercise of power, including compulsion and force. Small communities with agreed values minimize such power but the growth of institutions brings increased political power whose use may nevertheless be mitigated by the motif of 'service'. As a comprehensive norm for all relations non-resistance needed re-examination. As an absolute principle it would remove Christians out of the world altogether. A practical alternative was non-violent resistance, allowing participation in the ambiguous struggles for justice but without violence.

Love had to take the form of justice to be effective. This reawakened questions of interpreting Jesus' commands, of how church-society relations in the New Testament were normative for later periods, of the relation of Jesus' ethic to Paul's and of the Old Testament's authority for Christian conduct. These questions needed re-examination while re-affirming the values of non-conformity and obedience to Christ fundamental to Anabaptism (pp.223-224).

In a more recent taxonomy, which takes account of the immense changes in Mennonite thought since the writing of his thesis in the 1950s, Burkholder has charted opinions among contemporary Mennonites on the subject of 'peace'. He discerns four current positions:¹²

(1) *Traditional "biblical" non-resistance* rejects all force far beyond war alone but does so by neglecting the biblical category of justice. It places government outside the perfection of Christ.

(2) *Witnessing non-violence* endorses resistance towards evil through non-violent uses of power, favours peace-making above pacifism and recognizes the claims of social justice. This requires a re-appraisal of government and here there are

various possible sub-categories. *Universal christological non-violence* requires all governments to be non-violent on the basis of the unity of God's will and so risks anarchy. *Middle-axioms non-violence* calls governments to non-violence as an ideal but accepts that the limitation of violence is the reasonable outcome. Violence used by government, however, even in a just cause remains sin. *Two-kingdom non-violence* views government as a natural phenomenon and the minimal use of violence as mandated by God in the maintenance of order. The two kingdoms are however destined for an eschatological unity.

(3) *Dialectical pacifist political responsibility* rejects detachment from the political order in favour of direct involvement in politics, translating the Old Testament offices of king and prophet into the political process and accepting compromises.

(4) *Vocational pacifism* resolves the tension between moral fidelity and political realism by understanding pacifism as a calling given to some. Others may have a vocation to participate in a just war.

CHRISTIAN ANARCHY

Burkholder's original thesis calls for legitimate *aggiornamento* of the Anabaptist tradition. But does it too easily jettison the Anabaptist criticism of government? In a provocative work Vernard Eller has claimed that the Bible's socio-political stance amounts not to the 'radical discipleship' which has become an almost distinguishing mark of progressive Mennonitism but to a 'Christian anarchy' which remains deeply suspicious of claims to realize justice by means of political power structures.¹³ Christ's kingdom is not of this world; it does not pursue its aims through impositional means or what Eller calls the 'arkys', structures of power and domination (p.9). Believers in the Messiah are unimpressed by the claims of all worldly powers (p.2). Anabaptism rejected all 'impositional pressure' and 'arky power', not only violence (p.32). Christian anarchy rejects both legitimation of the *status quo* and revolution. Justice is brought into being by God and not the 'powers' (p.33). This is 'apolitical' only in rejecting deliberate calculation of effects. It is thoroughly political in being critical of the world's definition of politics. It stands apart from all adversary contest and power play and offers a political theology of liberation intent upon liberating humanity from its enslavement to worldly politics (pp.xii-xiii). By rejecting confidence in impositional pressure it exercises considerable political influence, but only in the long term (pp.34-36).

Neither Anabaptism nor the New Testament church wished, argues Eller, to legitimate the *status quo*, or to subvert it by revolutionary power, or to amass power. Neither made large claims about transforming a lost world. Both trusted God to accomplish his purpose (pp.42-43). Yet Christian anarchists are close to being revolutionists. Characteristically they have emerged in the wake of failed revolutions, whether the Peasants' War (so Anabaptism), or (so the Quakers) the

Puritan Revolution. The 'political' resemblance between revolutionism and Christian anarchy exists in the commitment to peace, justice, freedom and human welfare. But this obscures their radical theological opposition (pp.40-41).

Eller's argument refuses messianic significance to any other than Jesus Christ as the bringer of God's kingdom and justice (p.26). This does not however preclude seeing relative merits in social movements. Neither does it mean that anything beyond the church is of the devil or that all states are equally wicked. But social progress is not advanced by human power structures pitting power against power or by adopting the adversary's values. This dictates that human values are obscured, truth is disregarded and perspective lost in the adversarial mode such structures require (p.12). Worldly politics are to pass away: we need to be liberated from them not enslaved to them, a freedom anticipated in the church (p.184, p.xiv).

The theological issue here concerns the doctrine of creation and whether engagement with structures of power leads to Constantinian compromise.¹⁴ A theology of creation which affirms the goodness, if imperfection, of God's world and the redemption of fallen creation, must include societal structures. Governments are important for human life and are produced by all communities. They are a given of human existence and Christians are involved in the 'push and pull of interests, rights and obligations of citizenship'.¹⁵ Yet scepticism is required about the presumption that God's purposes can be achieved through governmental action. Governments are still Machiavellian.¹⁶

TWO CONCEPTS OF LAW

It is relevant to this discussion that Conrad Brunk identifies two philosophies of law which lie in the background of this whole debate. '*Legal positivism*' finds the ground of systems of law in the will of the ruler and the coercive power that supports it. Law is therefore based on the right of conquest. For a second approach, which Brunk calls '*natural law*', law is not essentially coercive but is rather the product of shared aims, values and principles of conduct reliant upon a moral consensus.¹⁷ The latter concept allows law to be a way of promoting, maintaining and even establishing moral norms.

The Anabaptist view of law and state derives from the Lutheran, two-kingdoms, legal positivist context. In other words, systems of law are seen in negative terms as that which is imposed by an authority dominant over its subjects. Brunk argues that accordingly no significant concept of social justice is found either in traditional Lutheran or in most historic Anabaptist thought. It is unsurprising therefore that the Anabaptists had difficulty reconciling the demands of the two kingdoms. All state functions are referred to as 'the sword' and seen as intrinsically coercive.¹⁸ This basic, criminal law paradigm made all governmental activity suspect. Yet, against this, even Mennonite communities establish law from within their own discussions and decision-making processes to regulate and create moral conduct. Here is a weakness of the Mennonite tradition: failure to see that law can legitimately arise

out of the moral consensus or agreement of a community. Christians do not after all obey the law because of the command to obey authority but rather out of respect for their neighbours. By contrast with Brunk's analysis of Anabaptism, the traditionally Reformed approach to government, in which the concept of covenant has been allowed an important role, has greater affinities with the natural law approach and a strong commitment to achieving a just civil realm. Both Lutheran and Reformed traditions can be seen to reflect the socio-political contexts from which they emerged, the Lutheran the princely territory or oligarchically-ruled city and the Reformed the corporate ethos of the early modern city.¹⁹

Law is necessary for the proper ordering of developed human societies. Communities of love need both orderly systems and the sanctions which motivate compliance. Even church discipline is a coercive sanction in this sense. Applied to the state this pattern of thought allows for a contractual approach in which law can be used to pursue justice and righteousness. Anabaptism inclined because of its suspicion of rulers toward a minimalist view of the state.²⁰ But as long as law does not outrun public morality but rather grows out of it, it can serve as a moral teacher. It can help heal the sick, feed the hungry and free the captives; and the church helps to build the public morality out of which law grows.²¹ In this sense, the search for justice in the public and civil realm is not Constantinian because it seeks for consensus and agreement and not imposition, but it does make its claim upon the state.

CONCLUSION

The Anabaptist view of the state is paradoxical in asserting simultaneously the legitimacy and illegitimacy of the state, but not only so. Its initial vision for social change was changed into quietism and pessimism about the world which in turn led to withdrawal and potential irrelevance. Yet this development remains in tension with its early and inherent missionary commitment.²² The Baptist instinct, along with Anabaptism, was to remove from the sphere of legitimate state power the right of religious coercion. This did not imply for them however that Christians could not serve in other areas of the state's mandate where coercion was necessary to maintain the peace. Anabaptists also recognized the necessity of such state action but believed that Christians should not participate in it. The underlying distinction here appears to centre on whether systems of law are viewed as being imposed by rulers by right of conquest or as growing out of some form of 'contract' between the people. The Baptist inclination in a Reformed direction and so their greater awareness of covenant theology made this contractual approach an easier one to embrace. Consequently Baptist theology offers the greater possibilities of what Alan Wilkinson has called "creative dissent".²³ However, fallen human power structures are nothing if not complex and the pessimism of the Anabaptist view of power has time and time again proved to be warranted. A contemporary theology of the state will need to hold together these two perspectives and do justice to both in order then

to do justice to itself.

NOTES

- 1 'The "Sword": An Example of Anabaptist Diversity', *BQ*. Vol. XXXVI, No.6, 1996, pp.264-279.
- 2 W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Judson Press, Valley Forge. 1959, pp.107, 111-112.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp.122-123 (my emphasis).
- 4 *ibid.*, pp.139-140 (my emphasis).
- 5 J. R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence and the Elect Nation*, Herald Press. Scottsdale, 1991, pp.101, 130-132, 147, 157-158.
- 6 T. George, 'Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol 58 No 1, 1984, p.49.
- 7 P. P. Peachey, 'New Ethical Possibility: The Task of "Post-Christendom" Ethics', *Interpretation*, Vol 19, 1965, p.30. Peachey finds major strongholds of neo-Constantinianism in those 'Free Churches' which most demand the separation of church and state: 'The End of Christendom', Concern Pamphlet No.9, March 1961, p.23.
- 8 J. L. Ruth, 'America's Anabaptists: Who They Are', *Christianity Today*, 22 October 1990, p.29.
- 9 J. L. Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church*, Institute of Mennonite Studies, Elkhart, 1989.
- 10 R. J. Sawatsky, Review of *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church*, *Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol 8, No 2, Spring 1990, p.223.
- 11 B. S. Hostetler, 'Non-resistance and Social Responsibility: Mennonites and Mainline Peace Emphasis, ca.1950 to 1985', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol 64 No 1, 1990, pp.56, 58.
- 12 'Mennonites on the Way to Peace', *Gospel Herald*, 19 February 1991, pp.1-4, 8.
- 13 V. Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy Over the Powers*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, p.5.
- 14 C. Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, p.63.
- 15 S. J. Holland, 'God in Public: A Modest Proposal for a Quest for a Contemporary North American Paradigm', *Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol 4, No 1, Winter 1986, pp.54-55.
- 16 W. Klaassen, "'Of Divine and Human Justice": The Early Swiss Brethren and Government', *Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol 10, No 2, Spring 1992, p.183.
- 17 C. G. Brunk, 'Reflections on the Anabaptist View of Law and Morality', *Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol 1, No 2, Spring 1983, p.6. To clarify Brunk's argument, and in view of other uses of the term 'natural law', it should be appreciated that Brunk uses the term in a carefully defined way here and certainly not as an epistemological category.
- 18 *ibid.* pp.7-9.
- 19 W. O. Packull, 'Between Paradigms: Anabaptist Studies at the Crossroads', *Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol 8, No 1, Winter 1990, p.6.
- 20 Brunk, 'Reflections..', pp. 11-15. In the nineteenth century Liberals were helped by T. H. Green to see the positive potential of the state. The law could create freedoms rather than just eliminate them. Baptists were slow to grasp 'the state as friend': J. H. Y. Briggs, *Freedom: A Baptist View* Baptist Union 1978, pp.22-23.
- 21 Brunk, 'Reflections..', pp.16-17, 19-20.
- 22 A. L. Fitz-Gibbon, 'A Study in Church-State Relations in the Writings and Teachings of the Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century', University of Newcastle MLitt, 1992, pp.217, 219.
- 23 The term is coined by Wilkinson to denote that form of dissent which is aware of and sympathetic to the ambiguities and difficulties of the use of power: *Dissent or Conform?: War, Peace and the English Churches 1900-1945*, SCM 1986, p.xiii.

NIGEL G. WRIGHT Senior Minister, *Altrincham Baptist Church, Cheshire*

* * * * *

Potential interviewers for the Society's ORAL HISTORY PROJECT should contact the Revd Ruth Gouldbourne (Bristol Baptist College, Bristol BS8 1UN).