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NEAL BLOUGH

REFLECTIONS ON THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN SEPARATION AND ASSIMILATION IN ANABAPTIST HISTORY

The following paragraphs were not prepared as a carefully-researched historical presentation for the Bienenberg colloquium in September 2011, but were given as a more or less spontaneous reaction at the end of the meetings. The invitation to put them in written form is the occasion to give a bit more structure and substance to these remarks.

I. ISSUES SURROUNDING THE DEPORTATION OF 1710 AND THE EXODUS OF 1711

The occasion for the deportation of Bernese Anabaptists was the continuing refusal of the Bernese Reformed Church to accept several key elements of Anabaptist theological self-understanding, including the refusal to bear arms and to kill. This was considered by Bernese civil and religious authorities as irresponsible and dangerous.

At the same time, there were vigorous “inner-Anabaptist” discussions going on because of the split between followers of Amman and Reist. These discussions were divisive to the point that people involved refused to ride on the same boat as those from the “other side.” One of the main issues of these difficult conversations was that of “separation from the world” over against “assimilation” to the larger cultural and sociopolitical context. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the Bernese authorities, both sides of this conflict were sufficiently “separatist” to warrant prison or deportation.

It is important to notice that among European Anabaptists, the question of “separation” over against “assimilation” was a constant point of tension and dialogue. The Absonderung described and prescribed in the Fourth Article of Schleithem (1527) was an element of Swiss Anabaptist identity, but the notion of a church “separate” from the world was also an important theme among the followers of Menno Simons and members of the Hutterite communities. Debates over this question were an almost constant theme of Anabaptist life from the 1520s until the period of deportation and exodus studied during this colloquium. Such conversations were both “internal” and “external” debates, going on within local communities, and between the different streams of European Anabaptism. One

can legitimately speak of an international network of Anabaptists, including areas within Switzerland, the Netherlands, Prussia, the Palatinate, Alsace, Moravia and even Pennsylvania.

These different regions and communities did not represent a unified or well-structured European Anabaptist reality. But there was an ongoing perception of commonality and the recognition that political and linguistic borders should not divide the body of Christ. The divided Anabaptists of 1710 did not always get along, but they also had a sense that they should not and could not ignore a larger “Anabaptist catholicity.”¹ Dutch “Mennonites” were not yet united, and Swiss Anabaptists were in the process of splitting. Nevertheless, the Dutch played an important role in helping the Swiss, and some Swiss “Amish” were willing to go live among Dutch Anabaptists in the region of Groningen. In spite of divisiveness that is often embarrassing to the descendants of these same Anabaptists, they somehow remained in contact with each other, were aware of each other’s existence and cared enough to argue about important issues.

II. CONTEXT MATTERS: THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN SEPARATION AND ASSIMILATION

The *Absonderung* of Schleithem, i.e. the concept of a church “separate” from the world was a concrete response to the particular context in which Swiss Anabaptism came into being.

We have been united concerning the separation that shall take place from the evil and the wickedness which the devil has planted in the world, simply in this; that we have no fellowship with them, and do not run with them in the confusion of their abominations.

As time went on, this strong impulse toward separation, formulated in a context of total rejection from the surrounding political and religious authorities, became a controversial element of Anabaptist identity. Social historians have helped us to understand that an initial attitude or position formulated at the beginning of a movement can thereafter become a fixed or frozen position in new contexts. For some, the “frozenness” of a strongly formulated initial position becomes a non negotiable element of group identity and self-understanding while for others, it becomes something which needs reformulating or modification because of new circumstances. To “freeze or not to freeze,” to “adapt or not adapt,” that is the question.

¹ The extensive correspondence translated and edited by JAMES LOWRY (*Documents of BROTHERLY LOVE, Dutch Mennonite Aid to Swiss Anabaptists*, Volume 1, 1635-1709, Millersburg Ohio, 2007) witnesses to this fascinating network of Anabaptist relationships. Robert Baecher has assured me that there are many more such documents in regional archives waiting to be added to Lowry’s work.

Contemporary Anabaptists are sometimes embarrassed by the perceived legalism of their ancestors or of various conservative or “old-order” groups still in existence. The numerous conflicts and divisiveness present in Anabaptist history make many of us leery to even imagine that “separation” could be an important issue in today’s world. After all, numerous practices of “exclusion” in contemporary Western society move us in the direction of becoming “inclusive.” Among the issues that contributed to the organization of this colloquium, organizers underlined the importance of immigration and religious pluralism in Europe as well as recent Mennonite efforts to be in dialogue with Reformed, Lutheran or Catholics. In light of these questions in our own context, the religious intolerance of the Bernese authorities and the divisiveness of the two Swiss Anabaptists groups being deported are not attitudes or practices that we find attractive. Nevertheless, to do history well means to first of all understand people and events on their own terms before comparing them with contemporary situations.

The contexts of the Anabaptists who gathered at Schleithem in 1527 and of those being deported from Switzerland in 1710 were not the same, but they had much more in common with each other than with the contemporary European circumstances of today’s world. In spite of these differences in context, if we look carefully at today’s world, many of the same issues that were being faced at Schleithem are still with us today. A comparison of the two seemingly different worlds might contribute to a renewed understanding of the importance of “separation.” Or to say things differently, perhaps we can “unfreeze” the notion in our own context by examining the original context in which it was formulated.

For Swiss Anabaptists, “separation” implied the refusal of certain ways of dealing with problems, while at the same time attempting to formulate alternative solutions on the basis of the Gospel and Jesus. It was not a question of “avoiding” the world, but of dealing with the “world’s questions” in different ways. In the 1520’s, peasants used the practice of *Bann* and even *Meidung* in response to unjust economic practices. When lords and landowners refused to comply with peasant requests for social justice, peasant bands boycotted production and consumption thereby attempting to “separate” themselves from an unjust economy. Perhaps a new look at the original reasons for Anabaptist “separation” and their continuing presence in today’s world can help us both understand the importance of “separation” and to more easily recognize its “frozen” forms.

In 1500, Europe was “Christian.” Nevertheless, the Christendom of this period was capable of deporting Jews from entire countries (many more than the Anabaptists deported from Berne). This was also the period in which Europe (Spain, Portugal) began sending explorers and gradually became world-wide empires, or in other words, the beginning of European colonialism. Charles V ruled more territory outside of Europe than within. There was also continuing

tension with Islam, the fall of Constantinople, the continuing military advances of the Turks. Difficult and conflictual relations with Judaism and Islam have continued to be part of European history and are at the heart of some of the most difficult political problems that our world is currently facing. Christendom's participating in the creation and development of these difficulties can scarcely be denied. Schleithem and Anabaptism were a profound critique of this kind of Christendom and call for "separation", i. e., a refusal to participate and the effort to elaborate alternative practices and responses.

Swiss Anabaptist nonviolence was also formulated within the context of Article 4.

Thereby shall also fall away from us the diabolical weapons of violence--such as sword, armor, and the like, and all of their use to protect friends or against enemies--by virtue of the word of Christ: "you shall not resist evil."

These words were written in rejection of the above mentioned forms of coercion practiced by Christian governments with Church approval. They were also written only two years after the slaughter brought about by the peasants' movement, a movement based on a "people's" understanding of the Gospel, repressed by Christian princes and armies. Violence among and between Christians continued to grow in the years following Schleithem and was still part of the landscape by the beginning of the 18th century when Anabaptists were being imprisoned and deported.

- The Swiss religious civil wars, which brought about the death of Zwingli in 1531
- The Schmalkaldic War of 1546–1547
- The Saint Bartholomew's day massacre and a half-century of religious warfare in France
- The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648)
- The English Civil War of the 1640's
- Louis XIV's expulsion and deportation of French Protestants, twenty years prior to the Bernese deportation of Anabaptists (1689)

Schleithem and Anabaptism were a profound critique of this kind of Christendom, calling for "separation", i.e., a refusal to participate in violence in the name of Christ. In 1710–1711, Swiss Anabaptists were deported for refusing the same kind of violence, even if the refusal had taken on less dynamic and more "frozen" and less well articulated forms. Refusal to take the same boat, and not to talking with each other seem rather outdated, but compared to other contemporary forms of disagreement among Europeans Christians, it was a rather mild way of dealing with conflict. When the two groups began immigrating to Pennsylvania, they settled next to each other and continued relationships.

III. 1789: MODERNITY AND SECULARIZATION

Anabaptist refusal of Christendom's violence and coercion remained a minor phenomenon within European Christianity and was pretty much "out of sight" by the end of the 18th century. Nevertheless, strong reactions to coercive forms of Christianity began to take shape elsewhere. With the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, several Anabaptist-like elements became part of newly-written European constitutions: freedom of conscience, religious pluralism, and separation of church and state. With these political advances, European Christianity began its decline, a process unchecked until present times. While Anabaptists considered their critique of a coercive Christendom as fundamental elements of the Gospel, European societies now proclaim these same elements as "secular" values.

As previously stated, for European Anabaptists, "separation" was first of all a contextualized response to specific questions and a way of critiquing Christendom's coercive nature. As time went on, a creative response either froze into "timeless forms" or gave way to cultural assimilation. By the end of the 18th century, most European Mennonites had "assimilated" into the options of either Pietistic or Liberal Protestantism. Embarrassment over past legalism led to new solutions that either made separation into an inner spiritual question or totally rejected such a backward idea.

Neither one of these kinds of cultural and theological assimilation (Pietism or liberal Protestantism) kept Mennonites from moving into the strong currents of European nationalism. While remnants of the past trans-European Anabaptism remained, most Mennonites became first of all French, Swiss, German or Dutch, and when their countries went to war, they joined them without asking too many questions. "Sectarian catholicity" was replaced by "nationalistic sectarianism." Critiques of coercive Christendom were forgotten and replaced by narratives of nation and empire.

In the present day context of economic globalization, secularization and a rapidly declining European Christianity, descendants of Anabaptists find themselves in a situation which is radically different, while at the same time facing some of the questions posed by the heritage of Christendom's treatment of Jews, the slave trade, colonialism and ongoing conflict with Islam. With the discrediting and undoing of European Christendom, other confessional traditions are moving toward Anabaptist-like positions, while at the same time Mennonites are becoming aware of the treasures that exist within other confessional families, thus allowing ecumenical conversations that would have been impossible up until very recently.

Without needing to reject the world, since it is in any case God's creation, the question of what "separation" might mean in today's context is perhaps worth asking once again. For what would we risk being deported?

Could “separation” not be defined as corporate or communal differentiation over against violence, injustice and ethnocentrism of a world ruled by economic practices that foster greed and inequality? Does not the growth of Christianity in non-Western parts of the world, the development of a Mennonite World Conference family and ecumenical dialogue with other Christians allow us to imagine an alternative form of globalization, a world-wide network of Christian communities, where there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”?

We are tired of the label “sectarian,” but perhaps it is time to reformulate the debate. Just because something is practiced and believed by the mainstream does not make it “normal” or “true.” Who are the true sectarians? There are groups and nations willing to kill or exploit others not belonging to “their group,” to kill or exploit others hindering their own political goals and economic development. There are those who claim that because of who they are or where they live, they are better than others and deserve to live with a higher economic status. Of course such claims are rarely made explicitly and can easily be formulated in terms of political or economical ideology. But such claims, that all too easily lead to the many unjustifiable situations of violence and suffering in our world, need to be unmasked for what they are, i. e. political or economical sectarianism. Such a world stands in need of those willing to “separate,” even if it means being deported. Separate, not because of hate or self-righteousness, but because this is God’s world and God is in the process of restoring it.

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