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The Early Dutch Anabaptists

By

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THE EARLY DUTCH ANABAPTISTS

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(Read December 30, 1909)

SINCE 1885, when Ludwig Karl Keller published his *Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien. In ihrem Zusammenhange dargestellt* (Leipzig), the question of the true origin of the Anabaptists has been a matter of debate. With considerable ingenuity and show of reason, Keller argues for the historical genesis of the sect from the well-known medieval movements of the Petrubrusians, the Apostolic Brothers, the Arnoldists, the Humiliati, the Lollards, the Spirituals, the Friends of God, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Waldensians, the Moravian Brethren, and the German Mystics. Kolde and Carl Mueller have shown the untenability of this theory, and yet it is appealed to again and again by that class of Baptist historians who endeavor to set up for their theological views a quasi apostolic succession

Sober historians see in the Anabaptist movement rather a "fanatical ultra reformatory tendency," which revealed itself first in Germany in the so-called "Wittenberg fanaticism" of 1521-1522, which was quelled by Luther's return from the Wartburg, which later on associated itself with the atrocious Peasant War and through the collapse of this movement and the scattering of its remaining leaders nestled itself in various European countries. It is not my aim in

this paper to review the history of the Anabaptists in this broader environment, but rather to call attention to some phases of their operation in the Netherlands, prior to the internal reformation wrought among them, by the saintly Menno Simons, since 1536.

The question of baptism has evidently been a moot subject of debate from the earliest days of Christianity, since no definite rules, either as regards its essence or rite, were laid down in the New Testament. The testimony of the Fathers and of the Councils of the Church would seem to indicate that pedobaptism and adult baptism, immersion and affusion and sprinkling, have ever been debated and debatable points. Since Ravenna 1311, the Church however has practically substituted sprinkling for immersion; whereas immersion had been the general practice of the Church up to that date. The change was evidently brought about by the natural falling off of adult baptism, through the cessation of the European missionary period, by climatic conditions and by the view generally adopted that, if children were to be baptized at all, they were naturally to be looked upon as "clinics." The Dutch Anabaptists followed the general practice, and although they rejected infant baptism and demanded a personal faith as the prerequisite of the sacrament, they knew absolutely nothing of immersion.

In a letter from the hand of Dr. S. Cramer, the great Mennonite scholar of the City-university of Amsterdam, to the author of this paper, dated Oct. 19, 1909, in reply to the question whether he had ever found a trace of immersion among the continental Anabaptists, he says: "No, neither the Dutch nor the German Anabaptists or 'Doopsgezinden' have known immersion. There was one case at St. Gall and one at Augsburg of eccentric people. Further no one in the 16th century thought of it. About this there can be no difference of opinion. Only after 1641, after the English Baptists had adopted this rite from the Dutch Collegi-

ants, as the latter had adopted it from the Silezian Socinians, in a few of the Dutch Mennonite congregations, this baptism by immersion has occurred very sporadically. De Hoop Scheffer has proved all this. See his article on Mennonites and Baptists' in Herzog's *Realencyklopädie* Whatever the Baptists have formerly said about immersion among us, in the 16th century, is fictitious and untrue."

This testimony is accentuated by the fact that in all the Martyriology, of the Dutch Anabaptists, reprinted in Vol. III. of the monumental work of Drs. Cramer and Pyper, *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, and in the extended discourse on "True and False Baptism," in Vol. V. of the same series, the subject of immersion is not so much as mentioned.

After 1533 the Dutch Anabaptists fell apart in two wings; the one quiet, God-fearing, with strong but sober convictions of the truth, the other wildly fanatic and revolutionary. Both of these parties furnished their quota of martyrdoms, under the severe "Placards" of the Government, but the fanatic party for a few brief years caused a tremendous commotion in Northern Europe.

The earliest Anabaptist martyrdom occurred in 1527, but the movement grew and in 1531 nine men were apprehended in Amsterdam and decapitated at The Hague, on the single ground that they were Anabaptists. All these martyrs gave evidence of thorough piety and met death with joy. Meanwhile the Saxon Anabaptists had begun to promulgate their views of the near advent of the millennium. Melchior Hoffmann was one of the disciples of Münzer, who lost his life in the Peasant War. He came to Embden in 1531, but naturally filled with the "Wanderlust," he soon departed for Strasburg, where he died in prison. From the disputation between him and the Strasburg theologians, reprinted in Vol. V. of the *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica* we learn some of Hoffmann's views. He denied that Christ assumed his human nature from the Virgin

Mary; Christ was to him neither God nor man, but what some of the Germans would call to-day an "Uebermann." He claimed absolute free will, as over against the divine sovereignty. He denied the possibility of the forgiveness of any sin, which had been knowingly committed. He claimed that pedobaptism was from the devil and that adult baptism constituted the only true bond between all true believers. As has been said above, he was left to languish in prison till his death.

Before he left Embden he had appointed Jan Tryp-maker as his successor, who was apprehended on a trip to Amsterdam and was presumably one of the seven above mentioned, who were decapitated at The Hague in 1531. From the following of this man arose one Jan Mathysen, a baker of Haarlem, who claimed to be Enoch and moved to Amsterdam. Strange how all these men were attracted by the chief point of danger, as the moth is by the candle-light. From this point he sent out his disciples, two by two, to make propaganda for the Anabaptist cause. Among these disciples belonged Obbe Filips, who became the chronicler of the early Dutch Anabaptists and who also ordained Menno Simons, who was destined to become the reorganizer and savior of the party. But among these pairs, sent out from Amsterdam, belonged also Jan of Leyden and Gerrit Bookbinder, who were sent to Münster in 1533. The story of the Münster catastrophe is too well known to need repetition here. We only point out the fact of the relation of this disastrous event in the history of the Reformation to the Dutch Anabaptist movements. The whole thing originated in Amsterdam; it was made possible by a very considerable influx of Dutch Anabaptists, who between 1533 and 1534 moved from Holland to Münster. When the party there had gained sufficient strength, fanatic members of the sect suddenly burst out upon the streets of Münster, crying—"Get out, O ye godless ones, unless ye want to be exterminated, for every one who refuses to be baptized shall be

killed." Then came the exodus of all who refused to join the rebels, the cruel siege, the unspeakable shame of Münster, the wild vagaries of Jan of Leyden, the final collapse of the defence or rather the surprise of the city, the horrid vengeance on the Anabaptist leaders, and the reversal of the city to the papacy. How strong was the support of the brief millennial dream at Münster appears from the fact that hundreds of Anabaptists were halted at Amsterdam, April 21, 1534, when they were on the point of sailing for Overyssel, whence they intended to march on Münster. On the very next day four Anabaptists, with gleaming swords, ran stark naked through the city crying—"In the name of God. God's blessing hangs over the right side of the city, his curse over the left side." The men were apprehended and summarily executed. Similar scenes were enacted at Haarlem and The Hague. The whole northern part of the country seemed to be laboring under a strange and fanatic excitement; revolution was in the air. The fate of Münster was still unsettled and the fanatic element among the Anabaptists seemed ready for any kind of wild enterprise. Strong measures, in the shape of frequent executions of the ring-leaders of the contemplated outbreak, for a season preserved the peace of Amsterdam. In a placard issued about this time the Anabaptists are called "Melchiorites." It commands the authorities everywhere to hound them out, to execute the impenitent and to compel the penitent to stay in their places of abode for a whole year, with the exception of those—strange proof of the commercial spirit of the nation—who were engaged in the herring fishery. Thus the tendency of the Dutch Anabaptists to succor Münster was curbed and the millennial reign of the Dutch tailor Jan Bokkelszoon of Leyden became a horrid memory. From two books, of which a few copies are still in existence, printed at Münster in 1534 and 1535 ("Eine Restitution edder eine Wedderstellinge rechter unde gesunder Christlicker Leer, Gelouen unde Leuens, uth Godes genaden, durch de Gemeynthe

Christi tho Münster an den dach gegeben;" "Von Verborgenheit der Schrift des Rykes Christi unde von dem dage des Heren, durch to Gemeynthe Christi tho Münster"), we can gain an idea of the theology of the fanatic Münster Anabaptists. They were justly called "Melchiorites," for their theology was almost wholly the same as that of Melchior Hoffmann. They conceived the millennium of the Revelation as realized in their experience. All human authority, though of divine origin, may be resisted if it demands anything contrary to the doctrine of Christ. They believed in justification in the Roman Catholic sense, as a process rather than as a divine act. The sacraments were viewed in the Zwinglian rather than in the Lutheran sense. Pedobaptism was utterly rejected. As regards the humanity of Christ, they believed that his body had passed through Mary as light passes through glass. Polygamy was warranted by the Scriptures, although it was no longer customary in their day. Münster fell in 1535 and a little less than a year later Jan of Leyden, Kregting, and Knipperdolling, the survivors of the Anabaptist leaders, were executed with inhuman tortures, and their bones, inclosed in iron cages, were suspended from the top of St. Lambert's steeple. But this dreary ending of the Münster millennium did not end the fanaticism of the Dutch Anabaptists.

In 1535 an attempt to take the city of Leyden was discovered in time to frustrate the plot and fifteen men and five women suffered death in consequence. In Amsterdam, in October of the same year, Dirk the Snyder, with six other men and five women, burned every stitch of their clothing and ran naked through the streets of the city, yelling at the top of their voices—"Woe, woe, woe, the wrath of God, the wrath of God!" It is a curious fact that apparently every attempt at rebellion was introduced by these Dutch fanatics, through nude prophets. It was so at Münster, three times repeated at Amsterdam, and in several other cases. When these "Naaktloopers" at Amsterdam were ap-

prehended, they steadfastly refused to be clothed, saying that they were the naked truth and the images of God and therefore ashamed of nothing. Afraid of a general uprising, the authorities kept the gates of the city closed and doubly manned, and the fanatics were executed on the 25th of October. That this outbreak was a true attempt at revolution was proved by the fact that nearly a thousand Anabaptists appeared before the city, who were, however, easily dispersed. Almost simultaneously, in the eastern part of the country, a similar outbreak occurred, in which the old convent of Bolsward, in Frisia, fell into the hands of the fanatics, who destroyed its beautiful images and paintings in an iconoclastic frenzy. The revolt was speedily quelled, however, in a torrent of blood, by Jurgen Schenk, stadholder of Frisia. To prove that the air was literally filled with a spirit of fanatic revolt, it is a matter of history that before the close of the year 1535 another effort was made to surprise the city of Amsterdam, notwithstanding the failure of a similar attempt only a few weeks before, as described above. The leader this time was Jan van Geelen, a man of parts, one of the very few who had escaped the massacre of the Anabaptist revolutionaries at Bolsward. Silently he gathered a considerable force of his co-religionists in the chief city of Holland. He ingratiated himself with the authorities, who of course did not suspect his identity, and chose the time of the annual feast of the guild of the "Brothers of the Cross" to accomplish his purpose.

It was decided to surprise the city by night. Whether with any ground or not was never known, but the Anabaptists were of the opinion that the majority of the citizens were on their side. The bell in the city-hall was to ring out the signal of a general attack. Towards night, in the midst of the guild-festivities, the burgomasters were advised of the intended coup, apparently through the treason of one of the Anabaptists. They were more or less in their cups and pertinaciously refused to believe the warning until in their

wranglings so much time had elapsed that about fifty of the Anabaptists had actually appeared on the Dam, the great open space before the city-hall, and had surprised the guards of the building before the burgomasters were aware of their mortal danger. They escaped, by a rear entrance, in the nick of time, whilst the watch was killed behind them. The fright of a drunken constable, who climbed into the tower to save his life and drew up the rope of the bell after him, in the insane dread that his pursuers might utilize it to reach his place of concealment, was the means of saving the city. Naturally the tocsin never sounded and the general attack was therefore never made. Quietly the city-militia were summoned and all streets leading to the Dam were completely closed. In an attack on the rebels made by one of the burgomasters, Pieter Kolyn, and a party of citizens, the latter were crushingly defeated and the leader lost his life. At break of day another attack was made with better success. The Anabaptists were swept from the open plain into the city-hall, which was taken by assault, in which nearly all the rebels were killed. Twelve were taken captive and were publicly executed with that barbarity for which the times were noted. This incident will help us to understand the fact that, of all the cities of Holland, Amsterdam was the last, a few years later, to take the side of the Prince of Orange. Münster was wholly lost and Amsterdam nearly so to the cause of the Reformation by the excesses of the fanatic Anabaptists. The government now was thoroughly aroused to the danger of this fanatical sect and spared no pains to weed them out. A systematic search for Anabaptists was made in all the chief cities and whenever found they were punished with great severity, especially in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leyden, and Hoorn, as also in the smaller cities of the northern provinces. This course, says Wagenaar, "soon caused the Anabaptists to relinquish the hope of founding a millennial kingdom" in Holland. The Anabaptist colony in England was greatly augmented by this persecution.

Wagenaar tells us that even before its inauguration, immediately after the failure of the attempt on Amsterdam, two shiploads of Anabaptists came to anchor off the harbor of the city, but when they learned that the plans of their leaders had miscarried, they immediately set sail for England and were seen no more.

Menno Simons, who in 1536 began his work for the reformation of the Dutch Anabaptists, earnestly warned against all resort to arms on the part of his followers and so completely regenerated them that they became noted for their passive resistance and their almost fanatical dread of arms, war, swearing, and all manner of violence. The very word "Anabaptist" prior to 1536 and subsequent to this period forms a study in antitheses. As was said above there always had been a stratum of better-minded Anabaptists from the very beginning of their historic career and these of course shared the cup of bitter persecution with their fanatic brethren. In a little more than one year—1534–1535,—in The Hague alone, more than sixty Anabaptists were executed, whilst six hundred received grace after they had abjured their faith. The records of the Dutch Inquisition, covering those early years, would seem to indicate that, contrary to general opinion, the judges were most lenient with those who could be persuaded to recant, and that literally no pains were spared to bring about such recantation. This is my conviction after studying the book of Anabaptist martyrdoms. Of course, as we all know, things became different after the Spanish Inquisition, under Alba, had taken matters in hand.

The Anabaptist wave of the Dutch Reformation was altogether elementary. They were, whatever they may have been or done, the pioneers of the movement. They were to be followed by the Sacramentists, who in turn were to give way to the stability and strength of Calvinism, the reformatory type which was best adapted to the national spirit.

The story of the Anabaptist movements in Holland is

full of romance, of violent change, of wild enthusiasm, of dramatic situations, and, in its later or reformed stage, is characterized by that latent strength, by that marvellous conservation of force, which later was to mark the Quaker movement in England, with which it stands unquestionably historically connected.

Rude and crude as they often were, the Dutch Anabaptists were the heralds of the dawn of the day of liberty, political as well as religious, in the land of the dikes.