

JOHN SMYTH AND THE GHOST OF ANABAPTISM

A REJOINDER

The two articles on John Smyth by James Coggins and Douglas Shantz, published in the January and April issues of the *Baptist Quarterly*, 1984, broach the often debated subject of Anabaptist influence in the evolution of Smyth's successive ecclesiological and theological changes. While both studies shed considerable new light on a variety of aspects of Smyth's thought and development, neither has unearthed any conclusive evidence of direct Anabaptist influence prior to his application to the Waterlanders in 1610. Of the two essays, Coggins's is obviously the more substantial and cautious. He is careful, for example, to note that the possible Anabaptist influence in Smyth's theological shift away from traditional Calvinism may only be assumed on the basis of circumstantial evidence. And in an original and finely reasoned argument, he suggests that Smyth's se-baptism - commonly attributed to the impact of his encounter with Dutch Mennonites - was more likely the product of Smyth's pilgrimage through various phases of radical Puritanism.¹

Nevertheless, the burden of both studies appears to be that the orientation of Smyth's churchmanship and theology was something discernibly different from that of the Calvinist left-wing Puritan and Separatist mainstream. In several instances, the suggestion is made that Anabaptism, or at least ideals similar to those held by the Anabaptists, had already begun to make an impression upon Smyth long before he sought union with the Waterlanders.

Shantz has provided an important contribution to our perception of Smyth's thinking by underscoring the importance of the presence of the risen Lord, a theme that Coggins develops further with reference to the significance of Smyth's understanding of Matthew 18.20 in relation to church discipline.² This should not, however, obscure the fact that this dynamic view of church order - in which congregational discipline proceeds from the living, present Christ - is not germane to Smyth alone. Nor, for that matter, need it be taken as a sign that Anabaptist ideas had infiltrated the ranks of the Separatists.³ Rather, as John S. Coolidge has so artfully demonstrated, the whole drift of Puritan ecclesiological thinking tended toward a living understanding of the church in which the visible institution came to be perceived as an organic community of the saints, informed and quickened by the procreant presence of Christ.⁴

In much the same way, Smyth's emphasis on the Holy Spirit, as delineated by Coggins, did not so much take Smyth out of the Puritan context as it perhaps sheds light upon the manner in which Smyth shared the experiential bent of Puritan piety. As Richard Greaves has observed, Puritanism was often 'dominated by an essentially emotional searching for a spiritual communion with God, made possible by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit'.⁵ Certainly, Smyth's emphasis on the necessity of the

presence of the Holy Spirit in order to comprehend fully the meaning of Scripture,⁶ while very likely similar to Anabaptist convictions, would have been equally at home in a Puritan environment where the Spirit was cast as (to use the phrase of William Whitaker) 'the supreme interpreter of scripture'.⁷

Neither did Smyth's employment of the 'further light' motif necessarily distinguish him in any substantial sense from the Calvinist Puritan mainstream, as Coggins suggests.⁸ That theme had already become firmly embedded in the eschatological framework of Puritan theology long before Separatists like Smyth incorporated it into their own way of thinking.

The common understanding among Puritans of what further light signified, however, was not that the Spirit would reveal truths beyond those which had already been given in Scripture, as Coggins seems to imply. Rather, the Puritans were convinced that the light of God's Spirit was once again beginning to illumine the pages of Holy Writ which for centuries remained hidden behind a dark smoke screen raised by the Antichrist, who occupied the papal chair in Rome. Thus, they believed themselves to be living in a transitional age. Their experience of history led them to assume that the rediscovery of the true meaning of Scripture, a process which began with Wycliffe, Huss and Luther, was not yet complete even in their own time. They were discovering new horizons of biblical truth that the Almighty, in His divine wisdom, had concealed from the first Reformers.

Indeed, many of the more progressive Puritans were conscious that their proposals for reform went well beyond the programmes originally mapped out in the great continental Reformation centres. What lay in the future no one knew for certain, except to say that, given this developing eschatological consciousness, many Puritans expected God to lead them into an even fuller understanding of Scripture so long as they remained obedient to the precious light they already possessed and open to further guidance by the Holy Spirit. As one unidentified Puritan put it in 1573: 'Luther, Bucer, and Melancthon were good men, and yet ... good men carry in them the notes of the corruptions of those times wherein they live, and have their faults, that only as the Lord shall increase our Knowledge, we may still be fashioning of ourselves according to his Word'. The earlier Reformers were revered by the Puritans for their doctrinal reform, but not so warmly praised for their churchmanship because, not having been granted further light, they had retained some of the antichristian corruptions of Rome.⁹

This, then, was the open-ended view of history, derived by way of Puritan expectations, that lay behind the desire of Separatists like Smyth to covenant together 'to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them'.¹⁰ Steeped in this eschatological climate, the metamorphic character of Smyth's career is less surprising than it is indicative of the centrifugal force of radical Puritan thought which sent many others like him ranging across the

shifting terrain of the religious underworld in pre-Revolutionary England.

Furthermore, it would seem more probable that Robert Browne's concept of the church covenant grew out of previous experiments in Separatism rather than an Anabaptist example. Early in the 1570s, a full decade before Browne seceded from the established Church, several of the more impatient London Puritans had already progressed to the point of reformation without tarrying, and bound themselves together into a church estate by covenant.¹¹

The 'mutualist' or conditional covenant understanding of ecclesiology that was so characteristic of Separatist thinking, and the source of which proved so elusive to B. R. White,¹² may possibly also be linked to certain theological modifications that had begun to occur within Calvinism. As R. T. Kendall has persuasively argued, the Puritan search for soteriological assurance through evidence of good works and outward obedience to the laws of God - a predilection of Calvin's successors and not the Genevan Reformer himself - produced the legalism for which the Puritans are often remembered.¹³ Although the Puritans tended to use unconditional covenant rhetoric when confronting the radical claims of the Separatists, Puritan hard-liners themselves often joined the idea of obedience in matters of church government with assurance of salvation when embattled with the hierarchy in the Church of England.¹⁴ They believed that, on the basis of the second commandment in the Decalogue, God required conformity to the biblical pattern for church order. Any breach of that commandment, as the Puritan, Dudley Fenner, explained, dissolved the covenant relationship between God and his people, while compliance brought them 'into a covenant of life and blessedness, yea, and that eternal'.¹⁵ This fusion between obedience to a biblical form for the church and the covenant relationship provided the theological catalyst for all the radical demands of left-wing Puritanism ever since Thomas Cartwright first told Whitgift that ecclesiology was a matter 'of faith... and of salvation'.¹⁶ It was then taken up by Separatists like Browne, incorporated into the church covenant and, in turn, functioned as the theological mainspring for their religious radicalism.

At several other points, Coggins has cut Smyth free of the Separatist and Puritan context perhaps too neatly and in rather curious ways. In one instance, Coggins seems to suggest that congregationalism and Calvinism were somehow alien to one another, pointing to the apparent inconsistency of 'staunch congregationalists' holding a 'Calvinist attitude to the state'.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Coggins argued that Smyth's 'congregational' interpretation of Matthew 18.15-20, 'is one of the distinctives that set apart Smyth and his followers from the Puritans and from other Separatists'.¹⁸ This may be true with respect to Francis Johnson after 1611, when he reinterpreted the key phrase, 'tell the church' to mean 'the elders' and not 'the congregation'.¹⁹ But Smyth's congregational reading of this crucial passage was hardly novel, even if at times he may have employed more radical forms of expression regarding the sub-

ordinate role of the ministry than most Separatists.²⁰ Separatists and many Puritans had been interpreting Matthew 18.15-20 along similar democratic lines for at least three decades prior to Smyth's involvement in Separatism. The first Puritan *Admonition* to Parliament offered a decidedly congregational interpretation of Matthew 18.17 when the Admonitioners explained that, according to this passage, 'the whole church hath authority over the members of the same' as an immediate donation of Christ. They also warned that all decisions made by the consistory must be brought before the whole church lest the elders 'usurp authority over the whole church... and bring in a new tyranny of theirs'.²¹

Finally, both studies by Shantz and Coggins describe the early Stuart religious setting, within which Smyth made his theological pilgrimage, in the vaguest of generalities. Neither study offers evidence of a substantial understanding of either the Puritan environment or the thought of the Continental Anabaptists, which certainly is needed in order to identify clearly possible sources for significant themes in Smyth's writings. With the exception of scattered references to Calvin's *Institutes*, Smyth's thought is considered virtually in isolation. This is a serious flaw in studies that purport to address the key question of Smyth's debt to the Anabaptists in the course of his mercurial career. As B. R. White observed about Separatism in general,²² given the lack of concrete evidence of Anabaptist influence before 1610, the onus of proof still rests with those who claim to see traces of Anabaptist thought in Smyth's writings.

NOTES

- 1 James R. Coggins, 'The Theological Positions of the First English Baptist: John Smyth, c.1565-1612', *Baptist Quarterly* XXX (April 1984), pp.247-264.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.250.
- 3 Douglas Shantz, 'The Place of the Resurrected Christ in the Writings of John Smyth', *Baptist Quarterly* XXX (January 1984), p.202.
- 4 John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England*, (Oxford 1970). See also, Stephen Brachlow, 'John Robinson and the Lure of Separatism', *Church History*, 50 (1981), pp.229-300, for an interpretation of John Robinson's use of Matthew 18.17-20 similar to Coggins's exegesis of Smyth's use of the Matthean rule for church discipline.
- 5 Richard L. Greaves, 'The Nature of the Puritan Tradition', in R. Buick Knox, ed., *Reformation Conformity and Dissent* (London 1977), p.258. See also, G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (London 1967).
- 6 Coggins, p.256.
- 7 Quoted by H. C. Porter, 'The Nose of Wax: Scripture and the Spirit from Erasmus to Milton' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1964), p.165. See also John R. Knott Jr., *The Sword of the Spirit* (Chicago, 1980), pp.13-41, for the Puritan appreciation of Scripture as the living Word.

- 8 Coggins, pp.249, 256.
- 9 Albert Peel, ed. *The Seconde Parte of a Register* (Cambridge, 1915), p.96. Note also the critique of first generation English Reformers by Edward Dering in Patrick Collinson, *A Mirror of Elizabethan Puritanism* (London, 1964), p.27.
- 10 William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. S. E. Morison (New York, 1979), p.9.
- 11 Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford, 1978), p.25.
- 12 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford, 1971), pp.53-56.
- 13 R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979).
- 14 Stephen Brachlow, 'Puritan Theology and Radical Churchmen in Pre-Revolutionary England' (D.Phil.thesis, Oxford University, 1979), pp.13-24; 35-46.
- 15 Dudley Fenner, *A briefe treatise upon the first table of the lawe* (Middelburg, 1587), Sig.DI.
- 16 Thomas Cartwright, *A reply to an answere made of M. Doctor Whitgifte* (n.p., 1574), p.14.
- 17 Coggins, p.264, n.130.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp.250, 253.
- 19 White, *op.cit.*, p.146.
- 20 David Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd* (New York, 1974), pp.38-40.
- 21 W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestos* (London, 1954), p.111; 119. For a more detailed discussion of congregational tendencies in Elizabethan Puritan literature, see Stephen Brachlow, 'The Elizabethan Roots of Henry Jacob's Churchmanship: Refocusing the Historiographical Lens', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, forthcoming.
- 22 White, *op.cit.*, p.164.

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