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ANABAPTIST STUDIES

A Review Article

Klaus Deppermann, *Melchior Hoffman*, T. & T. Clark, 1987, 432 pp. £24.95. ISBN 0-567-09338-7; Daniel Liechty, *Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists*, Herald Press, 1988, 166 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 0-8361-1293-8; Peter Matheson (editor and translator), *The Collected Works of Thomas Muntzer*, T. & T. Clark, 1988, 490 pp. £24.95. ISBN 0-567-09495-2; *Classics of the Radical Reformation*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 1985, ISBN 0-8361-1251-2, 814pp, and translated and edited by H. Wayne Pipkin & John H. Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, 1989, ISBN 0-8361-3103-7, 606pp.

These five books make very different but valuable contributions to the study of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Klaus Deppermann provides a much needed study of the life and writings of Melchior Hoffman whose story played an important part in the radical developments of the 1520s and 1530s; Daniel Liechty's work is a good example of a painstaking piece of research into the scanty resources concerning a much more obscure teacher; while Peter Matheson demonstrates with care and honesty just how difficult it is as yet to draw together a reliable English text of Muntzer's writings.

Malcolm Wren's very readable translation of Professor Klaus Deppermann's important study of Hoffman is most welcome. It helps to underline once more that the radicals did not develop only from Zurich, nor did they all share the style or emphases of the group there. The book serves to widen our knowledge of Hoffman and his relation to other radicals considerably. In his introduction Deppermann reviews the position of Hoffman scholarship and then seeks to chart the development of his views. Hoffman, a furrier and lay preacher, first appeared in Livonia in 1523 as a Lutheran propagandist. After a short stay in Stockholm, he moved to Schleswig-Holstein and left Lutheranism, largely over the interpretation of the meaning of the Eucharist. On this he seems to have been closer to the mysticism of Carlstadt than to Zwingli (p.151). At the same time he believed in the imminent return of Christ. Neither view endeared him to the Lutherans.

He arrived in Strasbourg in June 1529 and was to be closely linked with that city until his death in prison there in 1543. While at first he found a friend in Bucer, he made his lasting relationships with the radicals and under their influence his views quickly developed. Since he believed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was herself a sinner, he easily became convinced of the view that (p.215) 'Christ could only have been a spotless sacrificial offering if he had brought his body with him from heaven and had passed through Mary like water through a pipe'. This view he first published in his commentary on *Revelation* in 1530. At the same time he seems to have accepted the rightness of believer's baptism. Deppermann believes that the Strasbourg radicals came to believer's baptism less because of the Scripture teaching than because of their conviction of the nature of the Church. They believed, he says (p.217), that 'the enforced union of church, state and society, which resulted from infant baptism, was a form of "evangelical Judaism"; for them the true church was a voluntary society of the reborn'.

Although Hoffmann's interpretation of Scripture was certainly idiosyncratic, he was also a realist. So he recognized that the Spirit's work in history has always been thwarted by human sin and, especially, legalism. Hence, yesterday's true prophets (p.256) - the Jews, the primitive Catholic church, Luther - have become tomorrow's false prophets. Deppermann argues that Hoffman could be extremely

critical of those who disagreed with him, while holding enough ambiguity in his own apocalyptic teaching to be the true father of both the Munsterites and the pacifist Melchiorites.

While the late 1520s and the 1530s were a difficult time both economically and because of social unrest, these were not, in the author's judgment, enough *by themselves* to lead to apocalyptic excitement either in Strasbourg or elsewhere. But, given the sense which many had that history was approaching an end and given the extra excitement afforded by Hoffman's own dogmatic proclamation of the near return of the Lord, there was more than enough to make the authorities uneasy.

Hence Melchior Hoffman was imprisoned not because the government had evidence that he had plotted rebellion but because they were convinced that his teaching *could* lead to bloodshed. Responsibility for the Munster uprising and all that followed from it was widely attributed to him. Meanwhile, today, arguments between Mennonite historians and others about whether or not Hoffman himself was really a pacifist have been inconclusive and seem likely to remain so. As Deppermann points out (and as is typified by the English Fifth Monarchists a century later), there is no strict correlation (p.341) 'either positive or negative, between apocalyptic expectations and revolutionary activity'. Nor, of course, is there any guarantee that a principled pacifist might not change his or her views under peer pressure or that of events themselves. This book is exciting and important: it must be read by all interested in Anabaptist studies.

Daniel Liechty's work is a good example of a painstaking piece of research which attempts to uncover the life and teaching of a far less important early Anabaptist leader from very scanty sources. He is careful not to claim certainty where there is none. Probably Andreas Fischer came from Luttau in Bohemia where he had been born in 1480. He went to the university of Vienna and was later influenced by the teaching of Hans Hut. Then he was brought to accept the Seventh-Day Sabbath by Oswald Gleidt. Whilst Liechty makes his bricks very cautiously from the small amount of straw available, he is concerned to establish that Fischer stood in the Austrian Anabaptist tradition of Hut (p.34f.), although, in emphasising literal obedience to the fourth commandment, he was taking his concern for the restitution of the apostolic church further than Hut and most other Anabaptists. Like Hut, Fischer seems to have believed that one should not be baptised before the age of thirty (p.93). He did not, as his opponents alleged, believe himself perfect but, like many other radicals, he probably did believe that God had given the true believer power to live and not sin. Equally, it would have been all but impossible to move in the radical circles he did and remain untouched by their enthusiastic eschatological expectations (p.101).

Nevertheless, Fischer's especial significance perhaps lies in his conviction that the 'fall' of the church took place not at the 'conversion' (whatever its true nature) of Constantine but when Pope Victor I cut the church off from its Judaistic roots by insisting that Saturday be replaced by Sunday as the Christians' holy day. Fischer, accused inevitably and falsely of being a Judaizer, nevertheless did take a more sympathetic view of Israel and the Jews than did the mainstream reformers. He believed that Jews and Christians worshipped the same God and that Israel had a continuing place in the history of salvation (pp.104f., 109f.).

While this brief study raises more questions than it can hope to answer, it is in many ways a model of the kind of research which needs to be carried out even now among Reformation and Puritan radicals.

Peter Matheson's volume represents a third kind of contribution to Anabaptist studies: the provision of primary documents.

This first edition in English of Thomas Muntzer's *Works* is, as the editor says,

long overdue. However, as he outlines the difficulties he has faced, the scale of the task quickly become apparent: 'Virtually every key term can be translated differently according to the interpretive framework chosen'. For obvious reasons he has tried to leave such issues as open as possible while 'indicating where the translation is debatable' (p.x). Matheson says he has tried to keep the 'earthiness and freshness' of Muntzer's own writing, while sometimes allowing his judgment of its spirit to take primacy over the letter. But the very breadth of Muntzer's vocabulary and its own lack of precision heighten the problems of the interpreter, a role which the translator cannot avoid, especially in this case.

While Dr Matheson recognizes that his translation is based on an edition of 1968 which is already out of date, he nevertheless explains that he has received help from those preparing a new edition. His book provides the most substantial corpus of Muntzer's writings for the English reader which is likely to be available for some years to come.

The liturgical writings, though of very great interest, have been virtually omitted: they would not only have added an estimated further two hundred pages to the present volume but would have involved very considerable difficulties of translation and interpretation. However, the unquestioned publications by Muntzer are included, as is all his available correspondence, together with some fragments of his unpublished jottings and notes.

As an interim contribution to Muntzer scholarship this marks a very considerable achievement but it is likely in coming years to be supplemented by not only the ongoing debate about its meaning but also by new material added to the present collection.

Meanwhile the American Mennonite publishing house, Herald Press, has for some years been developing an important series for Reformation historians, *Classics of the Radical Reformation*. In this the most recent volumes have been *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* and *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*.

The *Sources*, from the Anabaptist side, are largely composed of the letters of Conrad Grebel. On the 'official' side they include formal statements from leaders like Zwingli and a large number of documents such as those announcing the first formal public disputations about baptism and the trials and executions which were to follow. Each letter or other piece has a brief introduction setting it in context and the collection as a whole is of immense value for the reconstruction of the development of the Reformation in Zurich 1520-25. After the documents there are fifty pages of what Dr Harder terms 'character profiles', which are effectively potted biographies of most of the people involved. Before the indices there are two hundred pages of footnotes. Some of these are merely references to other documents or to Scripture texts, but many include valuable discussions of the meaning of the passages to which they refer and extra information for which any student of the period will be grateful.

The second book, containing the writings, very largely, of Balthasar Hubmaier, is based on the general editorial policy of the series: not every known writing of each author is included, although none judged by the editors to be of importance has been omitted. In this case the various pieces come only from the period after Hubmaier had become an Anabaptist. At the same time, in both volumes, translators have been encouraged to favour 'readability but without compromising the text'. This volume is jointly edited by Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder, both widely known for their work in Anabaptist studies.

Hubmaier's career as a radical reformer lasted less than three years: he was burned at the stake in Vienna on 10 March 1528. However, in this short time he wrote a number of brief papers and a few more extensive ones. *On the Christian Baptism of Believers* (1525) is his most considerable piece on the subject and in it he

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makes clear his conviction that Believer's Baptism (p.127) is a threefold testimony to faith in Christ as Saviour, to commitment to continuing obedience to Him and to church fellowship with commitment to the authority of the congregation. In his tract (1526), giving the opinion both of the Church Fathers and some of his contemporaries, Hubmaier was able to assemble a useful collection of apparent witnesses to Believer's Baptism. In his two major pieces *On the Freedom of the Will*, both published in 1527, he argued for that freedom without denying the part played by God's grace. In another writing on the Christian use of the sword (1527), he tended to align his views with those not of his radical contemporaries but with those of the mainstream reformers.

These two volumes of Anabaptist writings make available a considerable range of documents central to the earliest chapters of their story. They should be found in every college library which is seriously concerned with the radical Reformation.

B. R. WHITE

Chapel Histories

J. H. A. Roberts, *A View from the Hill: A History of Risca and Moriah Baptist Church*, foreword by the Revd John C. Hayward. Moriah Baptist Church, Risca, Gwent, x + 303 pp, casebound, £8-50.

D. Hugh Matthews, *Hanes Ty Cwrdd Castle Street: Castle Street Meeting House - A History*, foreword by the Revd Bryon Evans. Castle Street Welsh Baptist Church, 30 East Castle Street, Oxford Circus, London W1N 7PB, vii + 130pp, £6-95 inc. p&p.

Gareth O. Watts, *Eglwysi'r Bedyddwyr Yng Nghymru: Llyfryddiaeth* (The Baptist Churches in Wales: Bibliography). Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru (Welsh Baptist Historical Society), 1987, 24 pp.

A View from the Hill is an unusual book for it is both a history of the town of Risca and of Moriah Baptist Church. Beginning with a description of the geology of the area, it charts the growth of Risca from a collection of scattered farms through its expansion as an important industrial centre to its present decline. There were a few Baptists in Risca throughout the eighteenth century and from 1747 onwards they were members of the Bethesda Baptist Church at Tydu on the road from Newport to Risca. In 1818 a plot of land was purchased at Risca and a meeting house was erected that year but it was not until 1835 that Moriah Baptist Church was formed as an independent church. The services were in Welsh but Baptists moved into the area who did not know the language and in 1855, with the active encouragement of the minister of Moriah, Bethany English Baptist Church was formed in the town. Welsh continued to be used at Moriah for another twenty-five years, until the Revd Ungoed Thomas, 'without consulting the brethren and without formal notice', changed the services into English. During the ministry of the Revd Samuel Jones the church experienced revival and the membership increased from 309 in 1904 to 495 in 1905. The revival at Moriah broke out independently of the Welsh Revival associated with Evan Roberts, which did not commence until several months later. The church membership reached a maximum of 555 in 1932 and the Sunday School a maximum of 1420 in 1930. The corresponding figures for 1985 were 162 and 82 respectively. The author discusses the factors responsible for the decline of the Welsh chapels and considers that they were more numerous than those discussed by T. M. Bassett in *The Welsh Baptists*. Hugh Roberts is to be commended for seeking to set the story of the church against the background of the economic, political and social changes that have affected the community.