

Foreword

AMONG THE MANY EXPRESSIONS of Christianity to which the epithet “radical” has been applied, the Anabaptists of the Reformation period and the base communities of late twentieth-century Latin America stand out. In both these movements there is evidence of an appeal to the roots of the Christian faith and a non-conformity vis à vis political power. Both in different ways sought to work out the message of the Bible in the context of life. The proposal to explore possible analogues between these two movements is timely. Michael Bochenski’s book argues clearly and persuasively that there are connections which are well worth exploring.

The world of late mediaeval piety and of emerging Renaissance humanism was one that, perhaps above all, rediscovered human worth. The individual could know and experience God outside of—and sometimes in the face of—what the Church as an institution had become. Anabaptists like Hubmaier and Denck were the products of that world who, in the process of engaging with new ideas, rediscovered their faith and their own place in the plans and purposes of God. In Gramscian terms they were “organic intellectuals,” as also are liberation theologians, such as Gutierrez and Mesters. They experienced something similar to the Anabaptists as they brought their world, bitter experience of poverty and the Bible together. They came to see their vocation not just as priests or religious but as fellow human-beings in solidarity with those who suffer. Of course, like the Anabaptists before them they were always looking over their shoulders at the institution they belonged to, wondering what its reaction would be to their bold restatement of the faith handed down. The conviction of many liberationists was that they were actually practicing the insights of Vatican II. They therefore found it all the more disturbing when they found themselves the targets of investigations, and even death squads, as—again—the Anabaptists had before them. For the radicals of the sixteenth century and

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the liberationists of the twenty first the Kingdom of God was and is always bigger than the Church. To become involved in the search for justice is to work with God whether atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Catholic, Lutheran or Jew.

Radical Christians in both of these movements turned to the Bible. Experiences of God were validated by, and in turn informed the interpretation of, the Bible. The movement for Hans Denck, as for the modern liberationists, was from life to text not vice versa. The Church as an institution was not the be all and end all in the search for God. Experience, of life, of God, an open heart and the Bible sufficed. In Anabaptist communities across sixteenth century Europe the text of life and the text of the Bible came together in community. The same was true of the base communities in, say, Sao Paulo, Brazil, where a newly found bias to the poor led to demands for a new water supply or a campaign against a corrupt politician. In both Anabaptism, and the grassroots communities supported by liberation theologians the Bible, interpreted in the course of life, was found to illuminate everyday reality. Reading the Bible in community, and drawing on experience, helped God's poor to become more confident people as their human worth was affirmed. They learnt to tackle not just the presenting issues but the underlying causes of the poverty and in so doing understood more of the Bible and what it meant to be disciples of Jesus. The sacred, the text of life and the text of experience flowed creatively together. The results were remarkable. Radical Christianity found full and confident expression and transforming faith communities were born.

But which way to turn inwards or outwards? To the joys of heaven or the redemption of earth? What Latin American liberation theology re-discovered was hope in a this-worldly kingdom of God, and, as this study demonstrates, this was also true of some radical Anabaptism, for good or ill, in the sixteenth century. The separation of the sacred and the secular meant nothing to a Hutterite community or to a Brazilian literacy campaign graced by what Michael terms here "an ecclesiology of the ordinary." The world of prayer and work, worship and irrigation, farming and the sacraments became inextricably intertwined in both contexts. For in both movements a new understanding of evangelization developed, as Michael demonstrates towards the end of his book, which was not preoccupied with getting more people into Church but more with helping human beings live out the whole of life, as people of committed faith, on the journey towards heaven. These faith communities challenged what Christendom

had become but then sought to transform it. The Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church and is for earth as well as heaven.

Readers will be less surprised by such views as far as liberation theology is concerned. Michael's particular contribution is to demonstrate the fact that Anabaptism has been a very diverse phenomenon and the reputation for sectarianism and separation from the world does not do justice to the movement as a whole. That is a novel insight which undergirds the critical comparison we find in this book and gives it its distinctive place in modern theological scholarship. I share Michael's conviction that the importance of these two movements is far from over as the twenty first century unfolds.

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