Christianity (6c3) – Anabaptist/Mennonite Traditions [Reformation Traditions]

1092 words

The Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, the “left wing” of the Reformation (circa 1525), protested the conflation of the church and state, i.e the “corpus Christianum,” rejected the late medieval church’s sacramentalism, and resisted coercion in matters of faith and practice. They have emphasized the ethical dimensions of the Christian Faith, obedience to Christ, strict congregationalism and rejection of hierarchical authority structures.

The relationship of Anabaptist/Mennonites to nature has been very intense. Violent persecution by Roman Catholic and Protestant “state churches” forced the Anabaptists to develop a unique theological and cultural ethos. They settled in isolated areas and introduced innovative farming and conservation practices. Their formal theology of nature and creation remained undeveloped, but nevertheless they worked out their understandings of Christian existence in the world based on their fundamental theological starting point, the nature of Christ’s “new creation” in the midst of the old.

In the place of the “sacramental theology” which included the “created order,” influenced considerably by the “Chain of Being” philosophy in the late medieval church thinking, early Anabaptists preached the “new creation,” and accepted an implicit philosophy and theology that moved the creation to a more peripheral status in practice. Placing highest importance on the “new creation,” Mennonites tended to downplay the “fallen creation” as insignificant in God’s redemptive plan.
The Anabaptists developed an ethical dualism of the “two kingdoms: the “fallen kingdom of this world,” comprised of rebellious human beings and structures, and God’s kingdom, composed of those who lived under God’s rule in the “new Kingdom.” The Mennonites have been less clear, however, about nature’s place (GOOD) as part of the God’s creation and the coming “Kingdom of our Lord.” Some early Anabaptist leaders understood nature as part of God’s cosmic plans, but later Mennonites tended to include nature in the fallen and rebellious kingdom, viewing it as in need of redemption. This derived partly from the classical medieval church, which, in turn, was derived from the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:11-23, and other of his epistles.

Four theological emphases have, however, kept Anabaptist/Mennonites tied to the created order. First they believed that Jesus of Nazareth was truly and fully human yet God’s true son, thus through Christ, God was eternally joined with creation. Creation is not, therefore, to be rejected or ignored, but included in the purposes of God. Second, as Jesus by God’s grace lived the existential realities of first century Palestinian culture, so also do his followers of every age recapitulate by faith his life, death, resurrection, and in the character of their discipleship. Third, they believed that in the mystery of God’s providence, God was somehow present in all things including the movements of nature and moral life. Fourth, God’s redeeming grace was experienced most fully when it is embodied in sacrificial love through peace and justice for all God’s creation.

Nevertheless, the Mennonite view of nature developed ambiguously -- “The problem was that the ‘rebellious world’ and the natural non-human world were not conceptually or existentially separated, and thus, in the process, nonhuman creation became identified with the evil in the world from which the pure were to abstain” (Ackley-Bean in Redekop, 184). The Mennonite tradition was
thus not equipped to see nature as part of the creation that God cared for and loved. Consequently, the positive role that nature would play in the redemption of creation and humankind has only recently being explored, and human responsibility for the care of nature as a requisite for human redemption has not been fully developed.

Nature, defined as the totality of material reality, including the terrestrial universe and planet earth, therefore has had relatively little influence on Mennonite theology and philosophy. Nature (biblically defined as “the Creation”) would be redeemed at the day of the *Resurrection* and *Last Judgment*, as would the human race. More recently, especially due to influence by evangelical/fundamentalist theology, the theological significance of nature has declined. Moreover, focusing on nature came to be associated with the mysticism of the Catholic tradition (Martin), with secularization, or even worse, with paganism or pantheism, i.e., the worship of the created rather than the Creator (Paul in Romans).

The Mennonite theological and reflection on nature has been minimal. Nature was seen as a practical requisite for human existence, which provided the basis for building the kingdom of God, who would glorify and honor him. Ironically, however, most if not all of the confessions begin with God’s first acts in the creation.

The Mennonite active relation to ecology is complex. The earlier European Mennonites and the Old Orders, (e.g. Amish and Old Order Mennonites), who retain an agrarian life, have remained close to the land and view it almost as sacred. Hence agricultural attitudes and practices were oriented to enriching the soil and conserving and preserving natural resources, in order to guarantee future life in its fullness.
But as Mennonites became more acculturated into the economic and social mainstream, farming practices began to reflect more the “extractive” modes of contemporary agri-business. Research has shown that even the “Plain Peoples” were more extractive than restorative in their practices. In the non-agricultural economic sphere, as Mennonites modernized, beginning with Dutch Mennonite commercial corporations already in the early 18th century, they became hardly different from the prevailing commercial/free market capitalistic society.

But significantly, because of increasing pollution and the environmental movement, the Mennonite community has begun to become aware of nature, and has begun to promote awareness and action in response, including petitions to governmental entities. A “theology of nature” is beginning to emerge.

The most promising channel by which Mennonites will increase their commitments to, and leadership in the environmental movement will be via its historical commitment to non-violence, peace and justice, which by implication includes nonviolence to nature. Although has been almost totally undeveloped, its awakening is illustrated by Walter Klaassen’s, “Pacifism, Nonviolence and the Peaceful Reign of God”, which maintains “The visions of the ‘peaceful reign of God’ in Isaiah 11, Romans 8 and Revelation 21 and 22 offer a lot of specific details: peace within the animal kingdom, the total absence of injury and destruction [to nature]’; [and] the liberation of the creation from entropy”(in Redekop, 2000:148).

The increasing activity of the Mennonite community in promoting nonviolence, peace and justice will increasingly include nature. Mennonites increasingly realize that nonviolence, peace and justice cannot ignore nature, because in some ways, it is the foundation or basis of all other levels of
reality. It may be here that Mennonites will make their greatest future contribution.

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Further Reading


