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THE NAKED ANABAPTIST

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used for centuries to discredit anyone regarded as theologically suspect or socially deviant. Even today, when many Christians in Britain and Ireland gladly identify themselves as Anabaptists, this label can still cause consternation in some circles.

ANABAPTISTS TODAY

Anabaptists today can be divided into four communities. First, there are the descendants of the early Anabaptists: the Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites. Second, there are other denominations that began later but drew inspiration from Anabaptism: various Brethren groups, the Bruderhof movement, and some Baptists. Third, there are new Anabaptist churches in many nations as a result of Mennonite and Brethren missionary activities. And fourth, there are neo-Anabaptists, who belong to other traditions but acknowledge the formative influence of Anabaptism.¹⁷

Each of these communities interprets the Anabaptist tradition in its own way. Some have fixed views on most issues; others continue to reflect on the contemporary application of the tradition. Newcomers—new Anabaptists and neo-Anabaptists—may bring disturbing challenges as they interpret the tradition in surprising ways. *The Naked Anabaptist* makes no claim to be the only or most authentic interpretation of the Anabaptist tradition. The core convictions on which this book is based are simply an attempt by neo-Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland to distill the essence of the Anabaptist tradition and apply its insights in order to be more faithful followers of Jesus in our context.

Neo-Anabaptists are inspired especially by the first generation of Anabaptists, which is why this chapter has concentrated on that era. But there is much also to be learned from other Anabaptists who through the centuries have interpreted the tradition in diverse ways, and from other Anabaptist communities today.

Amish and Hutterites

Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland have had least contact with the Amish, who are only marginally present here (there is a Beachy Amish community in Southern Ireland). What we have learned from them has come mainly from books we have read and stories we have heard.

Despite the huge cultural gap between us and the Amish, some of us have been attracted by their strong community ethos, challenged by their whole-life approach to discipleship, intrigued by discerning choices they have made in relation to technology and contemporary culture, and humbled by their capacity to forgive, demonstrated so powerfully in their response to the shooting of five of their children in the Nickel Mines tragedy in October 2006.¹⁸

But we are much less attracted by other aspects of Amish life and faith, some of which are evident also among the Hutterites. Their communities seem to be stuck in a cultural time warp, as they insist on conformity to a restrictive and outdated dress code, require women to be subservient to men, read out old sermons rather than preaching fresh ones, and question whether anyone outside their communities can truly be Christian (although in the final analysis they leave judgment on this issue to God).

We have had some contact with one branch of the Hutterites. I have on several occasions visited the Hutterian Bruderhof outside Robertsbridge in East Sussex, spending time with members of the community and learning about their way of life.¹⁹ In 1993 the Anabaptist Network held its first residential conference there and deeply appreciated the hospitality of the community. We worked alongside them in their fields and workshops, shared their homes, ate with them, and participated in their worship. I have always experienced two competing reactions to these visits. On the one hand, I am relieved to leave a community that I find introverted, patriarchal, judgmental, and in thrall to ossified spiritual and cultural traditions. On the other hand, I feel the challenge of this whole-life approach to Christian discipleship and the attraction of being part of a counter-cultural community.

But if we are willing to look beyond less appealing features of the Hutterite and Amish traditions, we might recognize that these traditions challenge some of the powerful idols of our culture and question our collusion and compromises. In fact, we might discern some Anabaptist convictions and practices in their most naked and unadorned state. For instance,

- They regard all of life as sacred and reject the sacred/secular division that has afflicted Christians in most traditions through the centuries. They are committed to cultivating portions of the earth, as well as communities of Christian disciples, in preparation for the kingdom of God.
- They have rejected the widespread assumption among Christians that all but the most shameful professions are acceptable options and that Christians should be present in most work-places. Instead, they have advised their members to avoid certain trades and occupations as incompatible with discipleship—not only those associated with warfare, but those that cater to human vanity and those that make money without actually producing anything useful.
- They need to be persuaded that the advantages of embracing new technology outweigh the disadvantages. These may make life easier, but they might diminish or destroy community, restrict opportunities for personal growth and discipleship, and require collusion with cultural values that clash with their convictions.
- The use of “casting lots” when choosing leaders may be unusual (although it also has biblical precedents) but indicates reluctance to assume that the community always knows what is best. Selecting candidates, but then inviting God to choose between them, challenges the desire to manage and control such processes.
- The Hutterite practice of sharing possessions in common not only has biblical precedent but is profoundly counter-cultural in societies where private property is foundational to the global economic system and the basis of personal ambition and anxiety.
- Despite sharp disputes, the pressure of living together in close proximity, painful divisions, and human frailties, the Hutterite community has remained committed to nonviolence and has never experienced a homicide.

Mennonites

Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland have had most contact with the

Mennonites, and it is to this branch of the movement that we owe the greatest debt. Many of us encountered Anabaptism through the work and witness of the London Mennonite Centre in Highgate, which for over fifty years has been a source of inspiration, a place of hospitality, a point of connection and conversation, and a resource center for anyone interested in exploring the Anabaptist tradition. Staff members and volunteers from the Mennonite community in North America have embodied this tradition and have shared its distinctive insights on discipleship, community, peace and justice, worship, spirituality, hospitality, and lifestyle. The Anabaptist Network began at the London Mennonite Centre and continues to have a close relationship with this community. Other Anabaptist-oriented groups make use of its facilities and encounter one another there.

Many years ago Mennonites decided not to plant churches in Britain and Ireland or try to establish a denominational presence there. This noncompetitive approach has enabled the London Mennonite Centre to serve a very wide constituency and has meant that Anabaptist values and insights have permeated many other traditions. However, it has also limited the scope for Anabaptist principles to be worked out at a congregational level. For many years, Wood Green Mennonite Church, a small congregation integrally connected to the London Mennonite Centre, has been the only Mennonite congregation in Britain.

While this book was being written, discussions have been taking place about the possibility of setting up an Anabaptist network of congregations, linking existing and emerging congregations in an informal network. Very few of these congregations will be explicitly Anabaptist or Mennonite, but they will support each other's attempts to work out Anabaptist principles in their various communities. The experience of Mennonite congregations elsewhere in the world will be an important resource for this network.

A number of us have visited North American Mennonite churches and seminaries, both to learn from these historic Anabaptist communities and to interpret to them the surprising resurgence of interest in their tradition in post-Christendom Europe. These transatlantic links have been very important to us. Some of us have also valued our con-