Anabaptists and Pietists

Influences, Contacts, and Relations

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Give yourself over completely and with utter abandonment to his grace.1

The relations between Anabaptists and Pietists represent a chapter of confessional history marked by a great deal of controversy, linked as they are to questions of confessional identity.2 The debates have taken place primarily within the Anabaptist-Mennonite historiographical community, and for two reasons. First of all, some feared that Anabaptist congregations had picked up “new forms of belief” from the Pietist tradition, beliefs which diverged from their spiritual beginnings and their original confessions of faith. Secondly, besides the issue of identity, the question of the relations between Anabaptism and Pietism offers an excellent case study for examining the exchange of beliefs and convictions among different faith communities. Do religious groups prevail because they insist on holding on to their traditions and confessions, or because they seek to renew their faith and practice?

It should be noted at the outset that the two movements, Pietism and Anabaptism, were by no means homogenous but generated a broad variety of communities and congregations. It is common to speak of three major Anabaptist groups – the Swiss Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites –, but there are various subgroups as well. By the turn of the 17th century, discussions over the concrete practice of faith had brought diversity to the Anabaptist churches and produced different confessions of faith. The Mennonites, for example, were split into the Flemish and the Waterlanders. While all Anabaptists had their major, eponymous article of faith in common, namely believers’ baptism, other articles provided the potential for disagreement. Not all Anabaptists refused the oath, not all were against Christians holding public


office, and not all practiced separation from the world. Some even supported the military in one form or another, such as giving money to support the army.³ A similar variety can be found among the Pietists – including the Pietism of Spener, the Halle Pietism of August Hermann Francke, and Zinzendorf’s community in Herrnhut. At times, however, it will be necessary to generalize and to speak of the “Anabaptists” and the “Pietists,” ignoring the variations and distinctions.

Anabaptism and Pietism were two faith communities with a mutual relationship. On the one hand, the writings of the 16th century Anabaptists and their example of steadfast faith, to the point of being prepared to die for it, were a point of reference and a source of inspiration for the Pietists. On the other hand, Pietist ideas spread to Anabaptist communities at a time when they had come to be marked by traditionalism and lack of vibrancy in their faith and practice. Pietist ideas were often welcomed by Mennonites as a source of renewal within their faith communities. The sources reveal a sense of a spiritual emptiness, of an allegedly “cold” and “fruitless” faith.⁴ A letter in April 1757 from Mennonites in Amsterdam to Peter Weber, Mennonite minister in the Palatinate, describes the spiritual condition of the Mennonites at that time: “The darkness is great and the Gospel unknown; […, v.S.] no one notices that his heart has turned away from God; no one feels the need for a gracious saviour, because everyone lives virtuously; confident that their salvation is certain, the whole congregation is on the verge of tumbling to their death.”⁵ H.W. Meihuizen described Mennonite beginnings as a “gathering of those who were converted and knew themselves saved.” In a second stage, the church became the institution that mediated conversion and salvation; and finally, they became convinced that there could be no conversion or salvation outside the Mennonite church.⁶ This confessionalized phase, marked by orthodoxy and orthopraxis, challenged church members to search for renewal via interconfessional contacts.

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