

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Kommunisten! - Part 2

by Leonard Verduin

Leonard Verduin explores the economic principles of Anabaptism and their implications during and after the Reformation, emphasizing the importance of communal support and charity.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:10, Proverbs 19:17, Matthew 25:35, Luke 3:11, Acts 2:44, Romans 12:13, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Galatians 6:2, James 2:15, 1 John 3:17

Topics: "Christian Economics", "Anabaptist Theology"

Description

Leonard Verduin discusses the economic principles and practices of the Anabaptist pioneers, highlighting their emphasis on communal sharing of resources to provide for those in need and their rejection of usury and excessive accumulation of wealth. The Anabaptists believed in helping the less fortunate out of brotherly love and without coercion, advocating for a Christian view of ownership that prioritizes compassion and stewardship. Despite facing persecution and being misunderstood, they stood firm in their belief in assisting those in need and promoting a more equitable distribution of resources.

Transcript

Concerning August Wurzlburger the Clerk of Courts wrote down:

The thrust of his position is that the people of this sect are minded not to let anyone live by begging, but the rather that they who have more than enough lay money together and give sustenance from this. He who is able to work and fails to do so, but chooses to rely on this arrangement, him they bar from their communion and let him pass for a heathen. He says he knows nothing besides this concerning any order, rule, or community of goods.¹⁵

Andres auf den Stultzen, an Anabaptist pioneer (so named because he walked with crutches), outlined his ideas in matters of economics as follows:

The man who doesn't need it, be he clergy or lay person, and practices usury with his prebendary or otherwise, or lays up more goods than he needs in order the more royally to take care of his fat belly, such a man, when compared with a man with needy children who steals because of poverty, in an effort to find a way out for himself and his little ones, such a man is no better in God's sight than the man who steals out of poverty.¹⁶

Hans Scherer said that he had heard this Andres say that "If a man has a big income and with this drives a poor man from his homestead or field, such a man is more wicked than a thief, in God's sight.i

[i. Even secular jurisprudence has come to see the justice of the philosophy here set forth; in many States a creditor cannot divest a man of his shelter, that which stands between him and the elements, no matter how great is his indebtedness. This exemption was already provided in the Old Testament; one could not take and keep as security a man's coat, but had to return it before nightfall, when he would be needing it as bed under him and cover , over him. (Cf. Deut. 24:10-14.) It was forbidden to take either the nether or the upper millstone in payment for debt, for that would be to "take a man's livelihood in pledge" (Deut. 24:6). The medieval world had completely forgotten these humane laws; it sold men into slavery for debt, imprisoned them for debt, without the slightest qualm. The Reformers, although quick to quote the Old Testament when it could serve them, did not recover the Biblical vision which Andres auf den Stultzen is here enunciating. It must be said that the recovery of it, when it came, did not come as the result of the pulpit; it came the rather as the result of the pamphleteer and the journalist. It was the humanizing tendency of the Renaissance rather than the Reformation that gained the victory, these, fed perhaps by the spade work done by the Anabaptists.]

Georg Blaurock, still another Anabaptist pioneer (so named because .he wore a blue coat), testified: "I do not advocate community of goods; however a man that is a Christian will dispense of his goods, otherwise he is not a good Christian."

Conrad Grebel, often considered the father of Anabaptism, said that he "never taught that we must not obey the magistrate; I do not recall that any such matter was discussed as "community of goods."

Julius Leuber, also an Anabaptist, declared before the Court:

"As to community of wives I would say that if anyone teaches that, his doctrine is of the devil and not of God. However, as to community of goods, I am obliged to help the brother near me, out of brotherly love and without being coerced."

To the charge of "community of goods" Menno Simons replied with: "This charge is false and without truth." He went on by quoting Scripture, as follows: "If there be among you a poor man, one of your brethren, within your gates . . . thou shalt not harden thine heart or shut thy hand from thy poor brother." Then he added, with an apparent sense of victory, that although his people had an abnormally large number of indigent ones, thanks to the persecutions and confiscations, "yet not one of the devout who have joined themselves to us,j nor any of their orphaned children, have been left to beg their way This mercy, this love, this community of goods we do teach If this is not Christian practice then we might as well abandon the whole Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, his holy sacraments and the Christian name." He then turned upon those who pressed the charge, "Shame on you ... , you who have been unable with your Gospel and sacraments to remove your needy ones from the streets, even though the Scriptures say plainly enough: 'whosoever hath this world's goods and seeth his brother in need and shutteth up his compassion for him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?'" One would expect that such a reply would put a damper on the charge of "community of goods" as something frightfully wrong, at least until there was some tangible evidence pointing that way.

[j. The reader will observe again that whatever the Anabaptists had in mind in regard to "community of goods," it was something intended not for society in general but for a "brotherhood" that came by voluntary association. As we have had occasion to say before, there is nothing vicious about such an arrangement.]

But that was not possible, it seems, to men reared on a diet of sacralism. After similar protestation they took the Anabaptists to the torture chamber. We read:

... he was thrice stretched; he prays God to give him grace to bear the torture. He is told to confess in plain language why he has left the pure teachings as taught by Martin Luther and others Something more must lurk behind all this, namely, that you desire to destroy all government and have all things in common. And even though you say that this community of goods is meant for you and your people only, yet your heart and ambition are far different, in actuality to have the goods of all men in common.

How could this man, with his pain-tortured body, say more? What if a man's solemn assertions, made under such duress, are thrown to the winds?

God forbid that we should be against government or act contrary to it . . . ; we must be obedient to them, whether they be good or bad And as to community of goods, no one is forced among us to put his property in a common treasury and we have no intention of making it common by force. But he who possesses and then sees his brother or sister in need, he is duty bound in love and without constraint to help and to succor.¹⁷

Nothing helped. These Stepchildren posed a threat to the sacral society; and that, to a person of sacralist thought habits, made them nihilists. Only so can we understand the advice, given by a committee of clergymen in Bavaria, in 1528, touching the Anabaptists:

That they have their goods in common and bring them together, each member voluntarily, without constraining any to bring all or even a specified portion of it, this we do not consider an intolerable thing or worthy of punishment. Nor are we able to quote Scripture that militates against it.

But these clergymen, nevertheless, were certain that there was something very sinister about the whole movement -- the book said so. And so they continued:

And yet it is to be feared that where such a small beginning is allowed to go on, permitted and tolerated, then it might with the passing of time increase and attain to greater and more inclusive evil. Therefore our opinion is that also such a confessedly trivial and not very culpable plan should be met and obviated with suitable counter-measures, in view of what is likely to develop out of it.¹⁸

Against such logic it is futile to argue -- as the Stepchildren found out to their dismay.

From the advice given by the Bavarian clergymen, just quoted, it is apparent that they were acquainted with that sector of the Second Front that followed Jakob Hutter and practiced communal holding of property. These people, known to us as Hutterites, continue to do so to this day, in some of our western plains states and in Canada. The story of the origin of this practice among the Hutterites is a pathetic one. It was among a band of fleeing refugees, men and women and little children, who had no roof over their heads other than the forest, having been driven from their homesteads because of their faith. The leader among them, in anguish of soul, spread out his coat on the grass, threw such coins as he himself had upon it, and bade all those who would follow Christ and His Cross to do likewise. All complied. It was here that the Hutterite practice of group ownership originated. In keeping with Acts 2 and 4 several Diener der Notdurft were provided to see to it that each one's needs were met as the common fund allowed. Under the leadership of Peter Ridemann and Peter Walpot this voluntarily-accepted way of life was developed and grounded confessionally, so that today it is a matter of principle still.k

[k. The Anabaptists as a whole "neither praised nor defended" the Hutterite idea, that of combining mine and thine in social holding. We read "Dass aber in Mehren gemeinschaft der gÄ¼ter haben, wollen sie nit lob en noch verteidigen" (Quellen IV, p. 193).]

It should be remembered that even these Hutterites did not think of foisting their views upon others nor of divesting any man of his belongings against his will. One had to agree to such communal ownership to be accepted into the fellowship; but one joined it by an act of free will. There is certainly nothing vicious about this way of life; if there were, then the little company that followed Jesus was a vicious lot.

[l. In a few instances there were people who had joined the Hutterite Briulerschajten, who had therefore put their assets in the common treasury, and who then decided to quit this association -- these people did complain that they were unable to recover anything. This constituted a complicated problem, one that in all likelihood would not be solved to everybody's satisfaction.]

And there was MÄ¼nster, the city in Westphalia where the Anabaptist movement resorted to measures which were later to prove a disgrace to them. Here the Anabaptist leaders did divest those who had remained in the city (long under siege by the armies of the bishop) of their possessions, ordered them to bring their stores into a central commissary, out of which supplies were then rigidly rationed. No doubt there were many in the ill-fated city who brought their goods against their will.

But it must be remembered that the MÄ¼nster tragedy occurred after many years of frightful suffering, almost a decade of burnings and garrottings, banishments and incarcerations, not to mention the torturings. The leaders of the MÄ¼nster rebellion were men who revealed a condition very like unto battle fatigue. In our day they would have been hustled off to an institution. Surely a man who alleges that he has been instructed by the Almighty to behead his own lawfully wedded wife, would in our more enlightened times be hauled off to a place where he could not harm himself or others. Professor Gooch has said that the outburst at MÄ¼nster "must be traced to oppression which goaded men to madness," and with this one can easily agree. As is commonly the case with men deranged, there was present an apocalypticism and a messianism, with hallucinations thrown in.

Much has been made of MÄ¼nster; to this day, especially with men with a sacralist hangover, it affords an easy dismissal of all that the Stepchildren lived, and died, to achieve. But MÄ¼nster was far from being typical of Anabaptism as such. As that great historian Toynbee has said, MÄ¼nster was "a caricature of the movement." Or, to quote Professor Gooch once more, "the tragedy of MÄ¼nster drew attention to a phase of the movement that was far from typical of its real nature." MÄ¼nster must be dealt with as the lunatic fringe of Anabaptism.

It was to be expected that MÄ¼nster would be repudiated by the Anabaptist camp itself. A very scathing rebuke of MÄ¼nster, written in 1535 (the year of MÄ¼nster's capitulation) , and allegedly by Menno Simons, bears the significant title "The Blasphemy of Jan van Leiden," and is an almost fierce denunciation of MÄ¼nster.

One gets the impression that among the enemies of the Stepchildren the news from MÄ¼nster was quite welcome. It gave them an opportunity to say something that all human beings dearly love to say, namely, "I told you so." They had predicted that Anabaptism would lead to chaos; and now there was laboratory proof that they had been right. They pinched the last drop of propaganda value out of the unhappy event. A pattern was set that continues to almost modern times, the pattern of painting the picture of Anabaptism on the canvas of MÄ¼nster.

[m. Early in this century Edward Armstrong (in his *The Emperor Charles V*, p. 342) wrote, with specific reference to the Anabaptists: "Whenever they momentarily gained the upperhand they applied the practical methods of modern Anarchism and Nihilism to the professed principles of Communism." The only excuse for that kind of writing is the fact that the sources were not yet available then. No reputable historian of more recent times would repeat Armstrong's words.]

By making Münster typical of the movement, men were likewise able to blame Anabaptism for the Peasant Revolt. This misconception also continues to this day. There is no need to deny that the peasants were emboldened by the writings of Münster; but the revolutionary ravings of this fanatic jarred on the souls of the Stepchildren from the start. Did not Grebel and his colleagues hint very plainly that cooperation between him and them was contingent upon his abandonment of revolutionary tactics? It so happens, however, that the essential outlines of the story of Anabaptism can be told without reference to either Münster or the Peasant Revolt. Neither of these was cherished by the Stepchildren.

In conclusion it must be stressed that the Stepchildren's idea in the area of economics was a much-needed thing in the age of the Reformation. The medieval world had been rather callous in the matter of the "haves" and the "have-nots." A change was very much needed. And in the days of the Reformers' earliest agitations, they had shown a tendency to suggest certain changes.

[n. Wilhelm Pauck thinks the early Bucer was inclined to some form of "Christian communism." (Cf. his "Martin Bucer's Conception of a Christian State," in the *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. XXVI.) This would not be surprismg, seeing that the Reformers in their earliest years were kindly disposed toward many of the items that later came to be known as Anabaptist excesses.]

Luther had, in these days of the dawn, broken a lance for much-needed reform, had said that "all begging should be made to end, in all of Christendom." Even this statement, mild enough it would seem, was deeply resented by his Catholic opponents, who would be sure to be hurt by any rearrangement in the area of "mine and thine." Jerome Emser, the "Billy-goat," as Luther affectionately called this his archenemy in the Catholic camp, took him to task for saying this. Emser said it was --

Picardian rather than Christian; for the Picards have the practice of not letting anyone of their number go begging But Alexius earned heaven by begging and Martin and Elizabeth as well as Hedwig and all God's servants became well-pleasing to God by the giving of alms Just as water puts out fire so do alms take away sins. It is therefore not a good thing that begging be discontinued; lots of good works will thereby be brought to their end!

[o. "Picard" is a synonym of "Waldensian." Luther used the two terms interchangeably, as did many in his day.]

But this promise of renewed social sensitivity contained in the early Reformation was not realized. Luther became more and more conservative in the matter of economic reform. He was being blamed for the unrest that was manifesting itself among the peasants. It seemed that the Stepchildren's agitation for more responsible ownership was contributing to the unrest. It seemed that the Reformation age, far from causing the lot of the dispossessed to improve, actually made it worse. And this only made the Stepchildren increase their clamor for conscience in the matter of property. One of them, Jorg Schnabel, at any rate, said in the course of his trial:

In the days when the papists were in the ascendancy it did not happen that poor people were forced to surrender their house and field; now however they are being dispossessed. And the magistrates at Wolkstorff have been heard to say that if they were to listen to their preachers then they [i.e., the poor] would not be sitting there any more, then their Excellencies would deal more severely with them.¹⁹

Interest rates had gone up. When it is recalled that in those days people did not borrow money unless they were in distress, this only made a bad situation worse. Schnabel said, "The rate of usury is one florin on twenty; but now they take a malter of corn, which is worth two or two and a half florins. The Church used to take five percent, which is forbidden in the Bible."²⁰

It was the heartless usury, practiced by the Protestant Churches, in typical medieval style, with the Church's money, that had driven this Schnabel into the arms of Anabaptism. He had left the Lutheran Church, of which he was the treasurer (so that he had firsthand knowledge of what was going on), because it put out its money on interest while many poor people who lived in the shadow of the Church lived in dire poverty. Conscience-stricken over such a policy, he had appealed to the pastor, to the mayor, to the City Council (Marburg), but to no avail. He thereupon turned in his books and joined the Anabaptists." This was in 1538. In this new company Schnabel found the sensitivity toward human distress that he had missed in the established Church. In this Anabaptist congregation one of the questions put to a prospective member was, "If need should require it are you prepared to devote all your possessions to the service of the brotherhood and do you agree not to fail any member that is in need and you are able to help?"

Although the Stepchildren's idea of "community of goods" was opposed by the Reformers and their following, so much so that a Protestant clergyman was deposed for supporting it, it may be said of this item, as of so much that was an integral part of the vision of these Radicals, that it was finally accepted as a valid Christian ideal. The Reformed Churches of the Low Countries in later times established something of an enviable record in giving of their substance to alleviate human misery; fantastic sums of money were sent, for example, to the distressed Waldensians of the Piedmont, in 1698. But even after so many years it was remembered that in this practice of Christian stewardship, the Stepchildren had led the way. In those days a person, who was 'not an Anabaptist, wrote with them in mind: "Although the people of the Reformed Church of Holland do indeed deserve to be commended for their benevolence toward the poor, yet in this virtue particularly, true of these people. Moreover they are careful to dress unassumingly."²²

In our own times the children of the Stepchildren continue in the erstwhile vision as to the duties that devolve upon him who calls something his own. The relief programs of the Mennonites are known throughout the world and need only to be mentioned. Wherever there is human suffering, there these descendants of the Stepchildren are likely to put in their appearance to do what can be done to help.p

[p. When a few years ago a devastating tornado struck the city of Flint in southeastern Michigan, several trucks carrying scores of young men arrived on the scene; they pitched their tents on the Fairgrounds, and proceeded to help clear away the debris and relieve the distress caused by the disaster. They were Anabaptists (Mennonites) from a neighboring State. After the city was back on its feet, they disappeared as unceremoniously as they had come.]

Whatever it was that men meant by "community of goods," it was a good thing. It is not too much to say that if the Western world had listened to these Radicals and had taken over their ideology and practice (which is to ask too much), then Karl Marx would have had little with which to sustain his economic

theories, would have had little to write about. And that would have made a vast difference in the course of world history.

We propose a posthumous nod of approval to a band of men and women who pioneered for a Christian view of ownership, a view that was referred to disdainfully as "community of goods." All who respond to this proposal and who are also bound by the Belgic Confession will want to do something about the passage: "we detest the Anabaptists ... who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men."q The Stepchildren were saying things which the Reformers should not have shrugged off with some ancient cliches and the sinister charge of *Kommunisten*!

[q. It would at least be a step in the right direction if the text of the Belgic Confession as it was fixed at the Revision Synod of 1566 were replaced with the text of the original version. Guido de Bres, the author of this Creed, had said: "Nous detestons tous ceux qui veulent reietter les Superioritez et Magistrats et renverser la iustice, mettans communautez des biens et confondant l'honestate que Dieu a [sic; a misprint for a] mis entre les hommes." The Revision Synod replaced the verb form *mettans* with *introduis*. The reason for the change is not given, of course, but may be significant. *Mettans* is from *mettre*, a verb meaning to bring about by fiat (cf .. the perfect participle of this verb, *mis*, as it stands in this same sentence, in *que Dieu a mis entre les hommes*) whereas *introduis* is from *introduire*, a verb meaning to introduce in any fashion. *Mettre* means to introduce in dictatorial fashion, to introduce as God introduces; *introduire* means to introduce in any way, even by completely democratic procedures. The version of 1566 is therefore much more sweeping than the original version; for the text of 1566 condemns the "community of goods" practiced by the Hutterites; the text of 1559 (composed in that year but first printed in 1561) does not.

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