

An Anabaptist Approach to Economic Systems

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EDITORS' NOTE

This survey article is the first of a series which will cover the various strands of Christian thinking in economics. As attested to by the large bibliographies on Christianity and economics which have appeared in earlier editions of this Bulletin (Fall and Spring, 1988) there is in fact much to survey. Our hope is that this series will prove useful in orienting members to the viewpoints, major studies, and theological foundations of the significant work that has already been done in our discipline. Future articles will cover distinct approaches within both contemporary Protestant and Catholic economic thought.

When the "Swiss brethren" baptised each other in 1525 in Zurich, Switzerland, they were fully aware that they could be sentenced to death for their belief. This break with Ulrich Zwingli and the town council of Zurich marks the formal beginning of the third wing of the reformation, frequently called the Anabaptist radical reformation.

What made this revolt of the Swiss brethren radical in comparison to the reformation efforts of Luther and Calvin is that the Anabaptists did not seek to establish political control over the geographic area where they lived. Lutheran reformers simply replaced Catholic governmental units with Lutheran units. Calvin did the same in Geneva, but the Anabaptists had neither the power nor the desire to make their belief the basis for political domination.

At the heart of the Anabaptist movement was a strong belief that the Scripture was the story of God's people and its teachings were intended to be applied in everyday life. Living in the kingdom of God faithfully meant following the teachings of Scripture which included the hard sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. The applications of faith needed the wisdom and support of the community of God and so the church became the primary focus of each person's identity; the state was clearly secondary. Being a citizen in the kingdom of God was the first calling of believers.

This viewpoint stood in contrast with much of church history from the time of the Roman emperor Constantine to the reformation era. Since Christianity was the state religion and one was born into that religion, there was no way to distinguish between true believers and those who were Christian in name only. Since the government and the church shared political power and dominated the lives of the total citizenry, religion became a political business and the masses learned little about true faith. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli lamented the sorry state of the exercise of faith, but they did not effectively challenge the bond between the prince and the priest. Thus when the early Anabaptists broke with Zwingli on the baptism issue there was far more at stake than a controversy over when one was baptized. To reject infant baptism was to challenge the entire political, social and religious structure which had held society together for a thousand years. To separate religion from politics was heretical and treasonous.

Because of this view that there are two kingdoms, the secular and the sacred, and that the Christian is first a citizen of the kingdom of God, it was easy for those who supported the church and state marriage to include any political misfit or dissident group under the Anabaptist umbrella. Indeed, in the early days it was a difficult matter to maintain organized groups for worship and fellowship.

Devastating persecution that systematically eliminated most of the group leadership for over a century kept this movement struggling for survival in the mountains of Switzerland, and in Germany. In Holland they faced the same hostility until persecution finally abated somewhat in the 1570's.

The early leaders would have preferred to live peaceably with the state and society around them. Since the Bible taught respect for authority they were willing to obey all laws that did not violate their conscience, but they would not support violence nor state control over religious practice and belief. The community of faith was to be a contrast from the secular world, so citizenship in the secular state was clearly a secondary responsibility.

This review of 16th century history provides the essential background for understanding the Anabaptist theological tradition. That tradition has renewed relevance in the late 20th century as western culture is rapidly moving into a post-Christian era. The challenge that Anabaptists now have is to develop these models in a political era of toleration and even acceptance. Gone is the necessity of isolation and hiding. Anabaptists today are integrated into society much like other religious groups and they face many pressures from the world to sell out to more subtle gods than the state.

This background is needed to better understand the key tenets of Anabaptist teaching which influence economic thought and behavior. It is far easier to follow Anabaptist behavior than it is to document systematic Anabaptist theology because, unlike the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, systematic theology has not been extensively developed by Anabaptist thinkers. Discipleship concerns fill the publications of the Anabaptists, but systematic theology has been conspicuously absent until recently. The same could be said for attention to philosophical and methodological debates.

Anabaptists have been concerned with issues of justice, fairness, and community-building, and have not said much about either the deductive reasoning which dominates modern economic thought or the methodological critiques which have been made against mainstream economics.

If one can surmise from Anabaptist literature what methodological position might best fit Anabaptist economic thinking, the inductive institutional approach seems to provide the best fit. People create structures and develop ideas which socialize behavior. In the community of faith these structures and ideas, informed by scripture and the Holy Spirit, make the practice of kingdom-of-God values possible. In the secular world, the fallen nature of humanity leads to structures and practices that socialize people toward selfish behavior. The pursuit of self-interest does not necessarily lead to the kind of social harmony that is Christian. It may lead to allocative efficiency, but justice and fairness concerns are left unaddressed.

However, some institutional structures and values, even though secular, result in more desirable outcomes than others. For this reason, Anabaptists are more willing to accept the waste of a welfare program than the waste of a military-industrial structure. The ethos of the former imparts a more caring tone to society than the ethos of the latter. Institutions socialize people in any given time and place, and therefore the events of history are more like special cases than they are repetitive examples of a mechanistic world. This analysis of methodology provides clues for understanding the three Anabaptist economic agendas that are discussed later in this paper.

Even though Anabaptists have not systematized and theologized much of their practice, there is a set of core beliefs that drive that practice. These beliefs are clearly articulated from the early leaders to the present writers.

Among these beliefs are the following

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four central themes:

1. God's work in the world is accomplished in two ways. First, His full intention for people is to have them reconciled to Him through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Those who believe become disciples of Jesus in His church where a radical new life is lived according to Scriptural teaching. This new life gives a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God.

2. Second, even though God is sovereign over creation, he does not coerce people to follow Him. As a result of the fall and the selfish bend that pervades people, the secular world functions to achieve its goals as it sees fit. Although there is enough good nature and common sense in people to prevent chaos from taking over, the norms established in society are not derived from scriptural teaching. In fact, Christian values may often not work in the alien environment of secularism. Therefore, to reform the secular world toward Christian practice while people remain in their sinful state is futile as an overall strategy.

3. Where participation in the secular world does not require abandonment of Scriptural teaching, the believer is loyal to the secular authorities. Where Biblical values teach an alternative to the way of the world, the Anabaptist rejects the secular practice even if it is the best that the world can do, given its fallen nature. The Biblical theme of nonviolence is the most obvious area where Anabaptists most often part ways with the secular world, because they typically will not take up arms. How Anabaptists see capitalist values contrasting with Biblical values is a central point to be discussed later in this paper.

4. The clearest evangelistic outreach is the witness of the effective model of faithfulness. This model cannot be developed or practiced alone because God meets his people best in a community of faith that seeks together to find His will. The story of the Old Testament theocracy and the New Testament church is so

central to the Biblical message that to succumb to the individualistic world view of the enlightenment is to be blinded to the primary method of the kingdom of God. The implications of this belief on economic organization is an important theme that must be returned to later.

To summarize, a two-kingdom view of the Christian life is the key factor that separates Anabaptist thinking from mainstream protestant thought. The role of community, which is derived from the two-kingdom view, is much more important to Anabaptists than to most other protestants. For Anabaptists, the strategy of reforming the secular structures becomes more of a hoped for by-product of effective modeling. This contrasts with the strategy of infiltration of those structures, which frequently characterizes the mainstream protestant approach to secular reform. Anabaptists today hold their views even as they are mainstreamed into society, and so they reject completely the claims of those who wish to characterize them as separatists, isolationists, or naive dualists. The evidence speaks loudly that such a characterization is faulty.¹

The economic applications of this two-kingdom theology leads to at least three separate agendas. The first is to create a vision of what economic relationships might be like in a full reign of Christ. This vision should then be modeled by the church as closely as possible.

The second agenda is to explore the alternative economic systems that are feasible in the secular world, and to support as much as possible the system which is least hostile to the values of the kingdom of God. Anabaptists are not optimistic that secular economic and political systems can foster Christian values, because they begin from a basis of untransformed sinful humanity.

The third agenda is to carve out a strategy by which believers can relate to the secular institutions in which they are involved without selling out to the secular spirit of those institutions. Hopefully the

relationship that evolves will influence the secular system for good. The remainder of this paper will expand on each of these agendas.

The first agenda requires that Christians glean from Scripture those principles that should guide economic relationships. Anabaptists tend to focus on several key themes.

1. All of God's creation is important to Him and is in need of redemption.

2. Economic welfare is best fostered in the context of community. The community of faith is the primary unit for social action.

3. Christians have a special obligation to identify with the disadvantaged powerless people.

4. Real meaning comes from a life of service to others.

5. High personal consumption can easily warp one's values, create unattainable expectations in others, and take resources away from the more needy.

What is the hope that these principles will be lived out in real life? Only in a coming full reign of Christ will these values be fully realized, but the community of faith today should be giving a glimpse of that coming kingdom by finding ways to practice these principles in its life now. Radical Christian living is possible now, and where it is practiced effectively among believers the church will grow and attract to faith those that God is saving.

Historically, Anabaptists usually lived simple rural lives and had a strong identification with the community of faith. In most cases identifying with the powerless was not difficult because they had little power themselves. They were very productive on the land and carefully stewarded their resources. The local congregation was the social and spiritual focal point for its members, and discipleship expectations were internalized by most of the believers in the congregation. The care-giving structures were both formal and informal so that few members

feared destitution even without the help of insurance companies. In its best moments Anabaptism did much to model radical Christian values.

Each successive generation searches to find its application of the principles discussed here. Expressions of Christian discipleship vary over time and place, but beyond the difficult applications and the sometimes poorly defined vision is an abiding belief that the church can be a foretaste of the coming kingdom of Christ.

Examples of this effort to find alternatives to secular economic life can be seen today in some of the institutions structured by Anabaptists to live out their beliefs. Community risk-spreading through insurance-type organizations, and commitments to share in hardship experiences, are common. They have supported international relief and development efforts, disaster cleanup services, and other social services in a manner that is disproportionately large for their size. The notion that brothers and sisters in the faith care for each other and minister to others in need is considered to be a requirement of the faith experience. Following Jesus daily is still taught as a necessary, though not sufficient, ingredient of being Christian.

To the Anabaptist, the tendency among many Christians to spiritualize, idealize, or localize the difficult teachings of Jesus results in a neglect of radical discipleship in the economic issues of life. Christians then frequently turn the focus of faith toward the discovery of social systems that might work in the secular world. This venture is noble except that the system that is eventually found will require substantial compromises in values that are likely to alter the practice of the believer.

A large portion of the present generation of Anabaptists is quite different from earlier generations. Education, the influx of many who share the ideas but not the cultural heritage, and increased participation in business and urban life have made

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the practice of this first agenda more complex and the exploration of the second and third agendas more urgent.

The second agenda, that of coming to terms with secular systems, requires a theory of the second best. If the world cannot be expected to institutionalize the values of the kingdom of God discussed above, what can be expected of it? In the economic realm this leads to an evaluation of market capitalism as a system of resource allocation.

Non-Anabaptist readers might tend to see this issue as the appropriate starting point of this paper. However, to the Anabaptist, the question of who we are, or more correctly, whose we are and what that belonging means, must be resolved before viewpoints on issues are worth considering. The question of what system does the least damage to kingdom-of-God values is more relevant for Anabaptists than trying to find what secular system is God's favorite. This leads to a posture of constructive criticism of any secular system rather than an advocacy of a chosen system.

An Anabaptist sees many positive things in market capitalism. First, the connection between economic and political freedom means that market systems are more tolerant of Christian practice than most alternative systems. Thus the community of faith can express its counter-culture values more openly. Second, capitalism delivers goods and services in quantities that are unmatched by rival systems. Third, what capitalism does produce is likely to match the wishes of the public because of the efficient manner in which markets process information. None of these virtues is trivial.

On the negative side are problems that contrast with the Scriptural principles listed in the first agenda. First, markets do not cope well with the externalities of pollution and other environmental concerns. Second, markets idealize the individual at the expense of the community and the high degree of job-related

mobility tears at the chords of social solidarity and family stability. Individual freedom is thought to be thoroughly positive rather than an enemy of a caring community where obligation and responsibility rivals freedom as part of the social glue. Third, there is nothing in market theory that provides special landing nets for the disadvantaged and the losers in the market game. Fourth, social harmony is achieved in the service of one's own interests rather than in the service of another's needs. This rather offensive sounding viewpoint is given validity because of the role that competition plays in providing incentives which encourage people's best effort. The down side of this value is that it easily evolves into a justification for ignoring those who need our help most. A fifth concern about a market oriented society is the way in which high productivity can foster excess and self-sufficiency. More is better than less, one deserves all he can produce, and security is found in the material.

These five criticisms of market capitalism are real concerns for Anabaptists because they are in direct contrast with the five Biblical principles listed as particularly important to Anabaptists. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Anabaptists find it hard to become fervent apologists for a market system. They frequently are critics and attempt to counter all of these negatives in their communities of faith. Pessimistic constructive critics may be an appropriate label for many Anabaptists. They are pessimistic about the ability of secular society to practice Christian values. They are constructive in that they do not have a better secular economic model to offer so they seek to improve capitalism on the margin instead of tearing it down. Consequently, they can merely try to lean against the existing system in hopes that they can bend it for good in some small way.

Anabaptists also are concerned about some more general societal trends that they believe market capitalism helps to

foster. The growth that markets foster comes through impersonal markets that change the way people understand the world and themselves. First, the world is seen to work more by rational mechanistic patterns than by providence, a process often referred to as secularization. Second, people find their identity in what they do in life rather than in who they are. Moorings which provide accountability, like the family and church, are all but gone. Third, interpersonal relationships that were trusting and personal now become contractual, impersonal and legal. Litigation is the preferred means of working out differences.

All of these qualities are inherent in a technological modern world, and it is unfair to lay the blame for all of this at the feet of market capitalism. However, capitalism does provide the justification for these trends since competitive markets thrive on independent, impersonal exchanges. To the secular world the enormous output generated by markets is payoff enough for what values are lost in the process. The Anabaptist has a different rating of the costs and benefits involved and therefore tends to be critical of the trend.

One Anabaptist author of the Mennonite denomination recently suggested that while Anabaptists rejoice in the fall of corrupt forms of communism it would also be appropriate to work for the dismantling of materialistic capitalism:

Mennonites have a special role in helping humanity avoid the dangers of worshipping a particular culture and becoming triumphal about it. Mennonites emerged during the age of religious triumphalism when an official belief system was promoted by the state and deviants were punished or annihilated. Thus we know that: (1) we are the creatures, the worshippers, and hence often the victims of our own cultures: (2) the ultimate blasphemy is to worship our own creation and to

believe it as the ultimate truth: (3) the only protection against diabolical cultures is membership in communities which are committed to the transcendent kingdom-of-God ethic, as demonstrated by Jesus.

Mennonites will not rejoice at the demise of secular systems such as communism while uncritically supporting the prosperity of capitalism. They will rather judge every cultural system by the objective and ultimate truth contained in the Gospels.²

It is not surprising that Anabaptists, who see the secular world as being inherently distant from kingdom-of-God values, accept and support market capitalism with caution and some skepticism. They feel like pilgrims and strangers in a system that tolerates, but cannot warmly embrace Biblical teaching. Yet they must live in this world and they are becoming increasingly intertwined in its institutions and enterprises. This leads to the third agenda for discussion. How does the believer interact with a system that may be the best available, but in which many serious flaws exist? The simple answer is to reflect on how any stranger and pilgrim reacts in a foreign land where that person's values prevent the melting pot concept of integration. The first strategy is similar to what Jeremiah instructed the Hebrews to do while they were captive in Babylon.

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jeremiah 29: 4-7: NIV)

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Seeking the peace and prosperity of a city involves interaction in the economy of that city in ways that promote peaceful, sustainable growth. For 20th century Anabaptists that involves work in the American economy in as productive a manner as possible. Owning businesses, working in the professions, and laboring in the goods and services sectors of the private and public economy are all appropriate activities for the Christian.

What is important is that all decisions in economic life are guided by the values of the first agenda rather than by the secular world. Activity, either as a consumer or a producer, that leaves creation worse off or maintains a bad ecological situation is not appropriate. Economic behavior that increases the disparity between the living standards of the rich and the poor should be questioned. High earnings from productive activity need not increase this disparity because consumption need not climb with earnings. Where there is ambiguity in working out decisions, the collective wisdom of the community of faith should be tapped in some way to provide a perspective that goes beyond personal bias and narrow self-interest.

The priority of faith and its practice in a church community must be carefully maintained. Where economic demands compete with family life and church activity, the economic demands are seriously questioned. Conscious decisions to sacrifice professional advancement for the family or church should not be a rare occurrence. Anabaptists expect faith to conflict with the activities and priorities of the world rather than to be a natural complement, and they are concerned about the tendency of the believer to be bought out by the lure of success and power that the world offers.

There is a sense that the Christianity of the western capitalistic world is involved in a new Constantinianism which links capitalism, democracy and religion. The high productivity of markets and their link

to political and religious freedom provides a respectability to the trend. What happens in the process is that faith becomes individualized and private, easy grace covers the compromises that must be made on the road to success, a message of self-sufficiency replaces a call to identify with the poor, a gospel of wealth is first practiced and then preached, and a prophetic challenge for social reform is replaced by a rebuke of private sin. When all this is housed under the umbrella of pluralism the package is complete and radical Christianity disappears.

Thus the Anabaptist interaction with the world is an uneasy one. Gone is the separatism of a generation or two ago, but many Anabaptist business persons feel that their brothers and sisters in the faith are still very skeptical of extensive involvement in the corporate world. The Anabaptist vision, articulated formally as recently as 40 years ago by Harold S. Bender of Goshen College, saw Anabaptists as primarily the builders of faith communities that would attempt to model what the kingdom of God might be like.³ This vision has driven Anabaptist practice since its beginning and that vision still holds center stage in Anabaptist thinking.

However, that vision is being qualified by a view that a more outward looking interaction with the world might create a needed tension that could make faith more dynamic and effective. This viewpoint is forcing Anabaptists to consider corollaries to the basic vision that encourage both the modeling of values and the infiltration of the secular structures in order to bring some measure of redemption to those structures. The present moderator of the Mennonite Church suggests that,

We need to rethink and restate the church-world relationship. Contemporary Mennonites give signals that they see 'being in and for the world' in opposition to 'being over against the world.' However, in the teachings of Jesus (and in early

Anabaptism) these are not opposites but twin truths that support each other . . . The survival of a Mennonite people may well depend on our ability to embrace the bipolar truth of separation and mission and to do it joyfully (Matt. 5:11-12).⁴

The important question that remains is how receptive will be those secular structures to a Christian message in a post-Christian era, and what will be the cost of such an infiltration mission in terms of the practice of radical Christian values. ■

¹ For a more expanded description of the sociological and cultural changes in the Anabaptist world see John Ruth et al., "American Anabaptists: Who They Are," *Christianity Today* (October 31, 1990), pp. 25-36.

² Calvin Redekop, "Communism and Christian Triumphalism," *Gospel Herald* (October 23, 1990), p. 727.

³ Harold S. Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April, 1944), pp. 66-68.

⁴ George R. Brunk, III, "A Theology for Mennonites," *Gospel Herald* (October 23, 1990), p. 724.

Selected Readings in Anabaptist Economic Thought

There is not a great deal of literature on Anabaptist economics, but several sources might be helpful in gaining a better background on the subject. The first two sources are helpful in understanding the Anabaptist history and the basis of their social ethic. The third looks at historical economic relationships of Anabaptism.

The rest, in order of publication date, are writings for the laymen by authors that reflect Anabaptist ideas in the books cited.

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4. Kreider, Carl. *The Christian Entrepreneur*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980.
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