

Book review

Arthur Paul Boers

Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition, edited by John D. Roth (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

As a young man, I engaged Anabaptism by leaving the faith traditions of my ancestors and joining a Mennonite congregation. Mine was a literal Anabaptist (re-baptized) conversion: it entailed my being baptized as an adult, because my parents had had me christened as a child when I was less than two weeks old.

Anabaptism is trendier now than it was then, and many who engage it today choose not to make the dramatic move that I felt called to. In *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical*

These highly personal pieces explain not just the ideas of the authors but detail how their encounter with Anabaptism changed their lives.

Tradition, United Methodist, Catholic, Christian Reformed, Baptist, and Episcopalian voices interact with Anabaptism and comment on how it has touched, enriched, and enlivened their own Christian theology and practices. The list of contributors includes ethicists, theologians, editors, and a Benedictine monk. James W. McClendon Jr., Stanley M. Hauerwas, Christopher Marshall,

Nancey Murphy, Glen H. Stassen, Samuel Escobar, Stuart Murray, Eoin de Bhaldraithe, Richard J. Mouw, Richard B. Hays, Rodney Clapp, and Michael G. Cartwright are some of the essayists.

These highly personal pieces explain not just the ideas of the authors but detail how their encounter with Anabaptism changed their lives. Predictably, one figure looms large: John Howard Yoder and especially his book *The Politics of Jesus*. But Alan and Eleanor Kreider also figure importantly in many stories, because of their promotion of Anabaptism in the British Isles.

Several themes frequently recur. In many instances, Mennonite witness converted these writers to a peace stance. Other motifs

that impressed them include mutual aid, ecclesiology, church as alternative community, Christ-centered understandings of ethics, the intrinsic interrelatedness of theology and practice. More than one contributor notes that Anabaptism holds key insights for living in a post-Christendom world.

Most intriguing are respectful and loving critiques offered by the authors. Writers repeatedly question Mennonites' sectarian tendencies, proclivity to works righteousness, habitual tendency to legalism, confusion and ambivalence about authority and ordination, resistance to explicit theologizing, and a misguided "restitutionist" view of the Radical Reformation.

A theme that arises often is the paltriness of Mennonite worship. Author after author comments on the over-emphasized horizontal orientation of our Sunday morning services and laments the absence of sacramental theology. Stanley Hauerwas calls our worship "rationalistic and aesthetically thin" (37). The writers contend that this liability can contribute to works righteousness: in the absence of appropriate convictions about grace, we rely too much on human efforts. Richard Hays believes that believers' baptism is more faithful to the New Testament but sadly concludes that Anabaptists have not provided a "profound theological framework for understanding baptism" (131). Many of these interlocutors marvel at how we can be sustained by such infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper and limited memorialistic interpretations of its meaning.

This book takes us some distance from sixteenth-century Anabaptism, not just because of the intervening centuries and changed contexts. Our Radical Reformation forebears saw it as their task to persuade others that the Anabaptist perspective was the only Christian approach and that others professing Christian faith ought to join their numbers. Yet this book edited by a Mennonite historian and published by a Mennonite press celebrates our influence on others who have no intention of becoming Mennonite. I am grateful for the kind words of the various contributors, but I wonder whether part of our sense of affirmation grows out of an insecurity that comes of having been marginalized. I have absorbed enough Mennonite humility by now to wonder whether we should rest easy with the admiration these writers offer.

On a practical note, I was grateful for the book's detailed and useful index. More significantly, this irenically ecumenical contribution has the potential to encourage believers of other traditions to pay attention to the riches of Anabaptism, even as it can help reflectively inclined Mennonites deepen understandings and practices of our faith.

About the reviewer

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