

Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist

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Sociologically speaking, the emergence of explicit, formal theological reflection among Anabaptists¹ is one instance of the adoption of mainstream twentieth-century practices by these groups. It is of a piece in important respects with the acceptance of modern clothing styles, and with the employment of radio, television, faxes, and the Internet not only for information and entertainment but also to express and disseminate Anabaptist beliefs and values.

When cultures which regard themselves as distinctive take up widely-used vehicles of expression, questions naturally arise as to whether these vehicles pervert that distinctiveness. Is the particular content of their tradition being subordinated to forms of expression which inevitably distort or even deny it? Or do those new forms provide means for expressing the original content at least as adequately, and with more relevance, than before? Such questions can be asked, for example, about the impact of the Internet on the Anabaptist value of community. Does use of the Internet harm community, by devaluing its face-to-face dimension and rendering it more impersonal? Or does it enhance community by making it more quickly available to more people?

Similar questions can be asked about the employment by Anabaptists of commonly recognized theological concepts and styles of discussion—for these, after all, have been developed largely by other traditions and within general academic settings. Does framing our issues in thought-forms devised by Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, secular, and other academics inevitably distort what earlier Anabaptists meant to say in contrast to such groups? Or can it help us express our own distinctiveness more fully both among ourselves and to others?

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Let me begin by making a distinction between explicit and implicit theology, following Robert Friedmann. Explicit theology is found in scholarly articles, books, and discussions, and in formal creeds, confessions, and position papers. It seeks to formulate precisely what is to be believed, and to derive this from identifiable presuppositions, norms, or grounds through a carefully reasoned method. Implicit theology refers to those basic convictions which guide the practices and worldview of a religious group but are expressed loosely if at all, and usually without clear connections to norms, grounds, or other convictions. As Friedmann says, even if a group lacks explicit theological documents, “no serious religious movement can be thought of without an underlying implicit theology.”²

If this is so, then our question cannot be whether we Anabaptists ought to be theological in the most basic sense, for we already have an implicit theology. Our question, rather, concerns what kinds of gains or losses we may experience when we seek to make explicit our largely implicit theology in our encounter with a universe of theological concepts, tomes, and forms of communication developed largely by other traditions.³ Should we seek to create theologies so uniquely Anabaptist that they exhibit as few positive points of contact as possible with these others? Or can we interact positively with, and even appropriate elements of, other traditions and remain distinctly Anabaptist?

To answer these questions I will briefly outline five features which characterize any kind of Christian theology, implicit or explicit. Next, I will describe these features more fully, give a deeper rationale for some of them, and indicate my understanding of how they should operate in an explicit theology done in Anabaptist perspective. I will then illustrate the role that twentieth-century theologies can play for Anabaptists by examining two very different ones: Hendrikus Berkhof’s and Rosemary Ruether’s. Finally, I will recapitulate my overall thesis.

Five basic features of the Christian theological task

All Christian theologies:

(1) Are done from the perspectives of particular groups. They are shaped by the specific experiences and concerns of such groups. There can be no

“theology in general” whose particular emphases and ways of expressing them are untouched by such realities.

(2) Intend to make at least some universal claims. Because theology speaks about God, is confessional, and dialogues about ultimate concerns, it intends to speak universally.

(3) Assume or affirm a norm, or norms, which are criteria for determining what beliefs can be affirmed. Among these might be Scripture, communal consensus, communal tradition, religious experience, ethical imperatives, or others.

(4) Are related both critically and positively to certain theologies from the past. All Christian groups define themselves by differentiating themselves from some preceding and contemporary groups and by affirming their similarities with others. Though those with an implicit theology might not recognize such similarities and differences, these are clear when a group is understood in historical perspective.

(5) Are related both critically and positively to certain theologies and other kinds of belief-systems in the present. These differentiations and similarities exist whether or not a Christian group has explicitly reflected on them.

In describing these five features, I have not outlined a “theology in general” to which specific beliefs would have a secondary, more particular role. Nor have I described a foundation upon which less important, more particular beliefs might be built. In fact, I have not mentioned any theological beliefs, primary or secondary, at all. I have only described formal features that outline the territory which can be called “theology.” When I affirm that theology in Anabaptist perspective must operate within these parameters, I am not saying that it must somehow be “added on” to something more fundamental. I am only saying what formal features it must have to be considered as theology. Neither am I claiming that Anabaptist discourse which did not fall within this territory would be illegitimate. I am only claiming that it would not be theological discourse.⁴

Anabaptism and the basic features of the theological task

Why can these five features be regarded as basic to theology, and how should they function in a theology in Anabaptist perspective? Here I will speak about explicit theology.

Particularity. Christian theology has always been done from particular perspectives. While awareness of this fact was probably not as strong through most of Christian history as it is today, virtually all explicit theologians of the past must have recognized it to some degree. Medieval theologians, for instance, would identify themselves not only as Christian but also—and often emphatically—as, say, Franciscan or Dominican. Dominican theologians would be keenly aware that their heavy and controversial adherence to Aristotle had hardly been universally practiced in the Church, and that it contrasted with the Franciscan predilection for Plato. Similarly, Reformation theologians were highly conscious of their commitment to Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican theology, and usually also to certain schools within these traditions. Few, if any, reflectively aware explicit theologians would have maintained they were doing “theology in general.”

Accordingly, Anabaptist theologians should acknowledge that they are viewing theology’s subject matter from a particular perspective. They should admit that they will give certain issues and ways of looking at them fuller consideration than others. They should affirm that however objectively they seek to consider certain doctrines and issues, their awareness is mediated through the lenses of their own tradition.

Universality. While aware to some extent of the particularity of their perspectives, few explicit theologians, if any, have ever thought that all their assertions were valid only within their own traditions. Most have endeavored to make at least some claims which would be valid for all who call themselves Christians. This remains true in fact, if not in theory, for contemporary theologians who emphasize the particularity of their constructions.

James Cone, for instance, asserts that “the finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One, who reveals through his death and resurrection that God himself is present in all dimensions of human liberation.”⁵⁵ Somewhat similarly, Rosemary Ruether affirms that Jesus “manifests the *kenosis of patriarchy*, the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste and speaks on behalf of the lowly.”⁵⁶ (Note, in passing, the similarities of these statements to Anabaptist emphases.) These theologians, despite their very strong advocacy of particular groups, seem to be making assertions about Jesus which all

Christians ought to accept. Whatever their theoretical views about universality, the rhetorical or persuasive power of such statements seems to stem from the strong implication that oppression and patriarchy are always—universally—wrong, and that liberation is always God’s will everywhere.

Universality is a characteristic of at least some theological statements for three reasons. First, theology speaks often of “God.” Now “God,” as Gordon Kaufman correctly stresses, is the name for what is ultimately most real in the universe, That Which stands beyond and critiques all particular opinions and perspectives. Thus whenever theology speaks seriously of God’s character, God’s will, God’s action, etc., it *intends* to speak of something which is universally true, even though its expression reflects its author’s particularity in some fashion.

Second, theology is never mere disinterested description of states of affairs. Its language is always, among other things, confessional or convictional: an expression of whole-hearted commitment to ultimate realities, and therefore confession which will issue in committed action. Theological affirmations express, at least implicitly, this kind of commitment on the part of the theologian and seek to elicit it, at least implicitly, from readers. The statements from Cone and Ruether are good examples. Though one could perhaps be a relativist in regard to disinterested truth-claims, it does not seem possible to be a total relativist when it comes to commitment and action. To commit myself unreservedly to a cause, expressed in God-language, I must act as if the ultimate thing I am aiming for—say, peace—is a value which ought to be actualized everywhere. I cannot act as if various forms of violence were equally valid. My particular actions may not always be perfectly pacifist and my understanding of peace may be flawed, but I will be aiming or intending to actualize a value which is always good.

Third, in order to dialogue genuinely about comprehensive issues, all participants must be committed, even if only implicitly, to examining their own statements in light of truth-criteria on which they can agree. All are committed to revising their assertions in view of deeper and wider grounds for truth, and ultimately in view of grounds acceptable to all possible participants, if such can be found.

Of course, as participants begin discovering where they really agree and differ, their awareness of what such criteria might be will be somewhat

vague and unformulated, and may become more so as they proceed. Only through the dialogue process can these criteria become clearer, and then not perfectly so. But for such dialogue even to begin, it must be moving towards albeit if half-consciously, and willing to accept, universal principles which all participants could affirm.⁷ (This is so even though such participants will also aim to express and acknowledge their genuine diversities, and may do this more often than the former.)

Here again, universal truth is a reality, yet not something which any party fully possesses but something which all parties intend to discover or actualize or express. Here universal truth, as in the two previous instances, is present as a goal towards which people strive from the vantage-point of their own particularity. Theologically, universal truth is an eschatological reality. It is “not yet” fully present—it is something that we will fully know and experience only at the End. Yet it is “already” present—something which we grasp partially and which draws us further on.

If many theological statements intend to express universal truths,⁸ then affirmations by Anabaptist theologians, though uttered from a particular perspective, cannot all be limited to describing what those sharing that perspective happen to believe. Simply to describe the beliefs of Anabaptists in any given era, valuable as that is, is an historical and not a theological undertaking. To speak theologically from an Anabaptist perspective involves intending to make claims valid for all Christians.

When Anabaptists speak theologically, we are not simply saying that we happen to emphasize, say, peace, because we come from a particular historical and social location. We do not mean to say that those who come from other locations have just as valid reasons to advocate violence. We are saying that peace is God’s will for all persons everywhere, however difficult it may be to specify exactly what peace may consist of in certain situations. Such affirmations indeed bear the stamp of our particular location and may not be perfectly suitable for every other situation. But it is our *intention* to make them as suitable for as many situations as possible.

In stressing the intention to make universal statements, I do not suggest that one can prove them true in a way which should be satisfactory to all people. I am not advocating a foundationalist position where assertions are based on rational grounds available to everyone. I understand our universal affirmations to be affirmations of faith.

Norm(s). Even if faith statements cannot be proven rationally, every Christian theology involves some norm or norms in light of which its affirmations are validated. To make its claims clearly and coherently, explicit theology in Anabaptist perspective needs to show how its assertions are connected with norms. To validate universal claims by its norm or norms, it must make a convincing case that it or they are truly Christian, that it or they should function normatively for all who want to call themselves true Christians.

Lack of clarity about norms is a weakness of some current Anabaptist theologizing. It is easy to assume that some themes, such as peace, were and are universally held by Anabaptists, and to avoid questions of their ultimate normative basis and of why it ought to claim all Christians.⁹

Closer examination, however, shows that no norm or belief can be derived from Anabaptist history alone. Many different convictions on important topics, including peace, have been held by Anabaptists in different times and places. In view of this, one might seek to derive Anabaptist beliefs from a privileged and therefore normative historical period, perhaps the sixteenth century. Yet even then, beliefs on such major topics as peace, the nature of Jesus Christ, and the shape of Christian community varied enormously. Even if we divide this era into earlier and later phases, numerous diversities still appear.¹⁰

At best, one might perhaps determine some kind of consensus of major beliefs held by most Anabaptists in most times and places. Perhaps these might form a kind of normative Anabaptist tradition, functioning somewhat as tradition has in Roman Catholicism. But we would still have to ask whether this consensus was arrived at on the basis of certain assumptions operating at a deeper normative level. And we would still have to ask why, with regard to all the slices of history that claim to be Christian, this particular one was selected as normative. If theology in Anabaptist perspective affirms that its norm(s) should be authoritative for all Christians, what reasons can it give for privileging this one historical stream?

In short, to show that a majority of Anabaptists have believed certain things (if indeed this can be shown) is an historical task, not yet a theological one. To affirm that these things ought to be believed because a majority have thought so is simply to presuppose Anabaptist history as normative, without showing why it ought to be regarded as definitively Christian.

I propose that Anabaptist theological themes ought to be believed because they are, and to the extent that they are, congruent with Scripture (as understood in a nuanced sense outlined below). Accepting Scripture as normative corresponds with some major thrusts in Anabaptist history. Not only have many Anabaptists quite explicitly regarded Scripture in this way; Anabaptists of many generations—including the present one—have regarded fidelity to their origins, to something believed and practiced at their beginnings, as essential for maintaining or recovering what is fundamental to their faith.

But when we turn to original Anabaptist movements, whether in the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries, we find them also seeking to recover and be faithful to a more ancient origin: the grace of God actualized through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and its communal outworkings, as recorded in the New Testament. Large numbers of Anabaptists have believed that their ultimate norms lay not within Anabaptist historical experience but in events of this more ancient past and the biblical witnesses to them.

When I affirm Scripture as authoritative, however, I do not mean it as a "flat" book whose parts all equally express the depths of God's will. Scripture contains an internal narrative trajectory by which the significance of its various writings can be assessed. This narrative is of God's intention to bless the entire world, beginning with creation, renewed through Abraham and Sarah, amplified throughout Israel's history, fulfilled in Jesus, initially concretized through the early Church, and to be consummated at Jesus' return. The center of this narrative is the actualization of God's grace through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; this forms my ultimate hermeneutical criterion. Nonetheless, I do not simply refer to "Jesus Christ" as my theological norm, for we cannot understand his significance apart from the apostolic witness and the overall biblical trajectory.

While this norm is congruent with much Anabaptist history, I do not derive its authority from there. I affirm, on the contrary, that Scripture is the norm for evaluating that history. Unfortunately, space does not permit presenting a more extensive rationale for adopting this norm. Nevertheless, I believe it should be accepted by all who call themselves Christian.

Relation to past theologies. Whether or not Scripture is its norm, so long as a theology in Anabaptist perspective intends to make universal affirmations,

it must critically evaluate both Anabaptist history and other past theologies in light of its norm(s). Anabaptist beliefs cannot be evaluated in isolation from evaluating others. For however ignorant particular Anabaptists may have been of other Christian theologies, Anabaptist beliefs, including implicit ones, have neither arisen nor existed in a vacuum. They have always been shaped by positive influences from, and negative contrasts with, other kinds of Christian belief. So have all other Christian theologies.

Take, for example, justification by faith. This doctrine was first formulated explicitly in the Lutheran reformation. Yet early Anabaptists were clearly influenced by it, and in some respects positively. Important features of what they understood and now understand about “faith” they hold in common with Lutherans. At the same time, sixteenth-century Anabaptists raised various objections against Lutheran formulations, some of which clearly reflect their Catholic backgrounds.

One cannot adequately articulate an Anabaptist theology of faith without being aware of its relationships to Lutheran and Catholic notions. Yet a mere positive reference to justification can hardly be evidence of “building” on a Lutheran foundation or that its Anabaptist elements are mere “add-ons.” Of course, this could be the case. But it is also possible that the Anabaptist elements might configure the overall notion of faith quite differently than what one finds in Lutheranism, and yet positive continuities between the two could still exist.

Similarly, Anabaptist reflection on Jesus Christ was shaped, both positively and negatively, by the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations. Negatively, sixteenth-century Anabaptists noted that these creeds underplayed Jesus’ life and teachings, and protested that verbal affirmation of them apart from Christlike deeds is not really Christian confession. Yet these formulations also impacted Anabaptist Christology positively. Many Anabaptists of the period explicitly affirmed them. Pilgram Marpeck’s emphasis on Jesus’ full humanity and full deity deeply shaped his understanding of Church, ethics, and sacrament. Most Anabaptists understood salvation as “divinization,” as participation in Christ’s divine nature, something impossible if Christ were not both fully divine and fully human.¹¹

Once again, positive references to Nicea or Chalcedon in an Anabaptist Christology are hardly evidence of “building” on a “creedal” foundation, or

that its more uniquely Anabaptist elements are mere “add-ons.” Again, that could be the case. Yet even though positive continuities might exist, the overall Christology could still be shaped quite differently from one developed chiefly from those formulations.

Examination of Anabaptist beliefs in light of other past theologies could also indicate that a theme not often found in Anabaptism should be included in one’s current theology. This seemed to be so for me when I first examined the role of the Lord’s Supper in the Reformation era and in Scripture. This led me to give this ceremony and sacraments in general more emphasis than Anabaptist tradition seemed to have done.¹² Since then, however, I have learned that sixteenth-century Anabaptists said much about the Eucharist.¹³ It was later Anabaptism that minimized it. Still, a theology in Anabaptist perspective, because it seeks to be thoroughly Christian, can incorporate themes that Anabaptists have not traditionally stressed and still be decidedly Anabaptist. One could even decide, on the basis of one’s norm, that non-Anabaptist theologies were more correct on certain points than Anabaptists were, and yet one’s overall perspective could clearly be Anabaptist.

Relation to present theologies. What was true in relation to past theologies is true here as well. However uninformed particular Anabaptists may be of other Christian and non-Christian perspectives, Anabaptist beliefs today—again including the implicit ones—do not exist within a vacuum. They exist in both positive and negative relationships with other contemporary kinds of thought, as is the case for all other Christian theologies. Gordon Kaufman, in his earlier work, proposed that the thought-forms of today’s culture provide a certain kind of “norm” for theology.¹⁴ This norm, however, does not determine whether a theology’s content is true but whether its forms of expression are intelligible. If theology deals with “God” and therefore with the ultimate significance of human life, ethical action, and the cosmos, it cannot express these well without engaging at least some current ideas on these subjects.

In seeking to do this in light of its norm, theology in Anabaptist perspective will occasionally find some of its themes related positively to what other theologies or world-views are saying. In these cases it may take over some of their conceptions, or even incorporate some themes not well represented in Anabaptist thought. The mere presence of such elements, however, will no more indicate that these theologies are built on other

foundations than will the occasional appearance of justification or Nicene or Chalcedonian language.

The question of whether a theology is really being done in Anabaptist perspective centers on: (1) whether its overall norm(s) is/are consistent with large sectors of Anabaptism throughout its history (though they cannot be directly derived from that history); and (2) whether Anabaptism provides the dominant particular perspective from which it is being done. Do Anabaptist themes really provide the foremost angle of vision from which questions of Christology, ecclesiology, etc. are asked and in light of which they are answered? Or does some other theology or thought-system? This cannot be determined merely by ascertaining whether elements of other belief-systems, past or present, exist in a theology, but rather by judging whether an Anabaptist perspective more than any other contributes to that theology's final shape.

Anabaptism and some contemporary theologies

Let me concretize my discussion by illustrating how a theology in Anabaptist perspective might incorporate two specific themes from two quite different twentieth-century theologies. Neither of these themes appeared in Anabaptist theologies until the last several years, yet both can contribute to their content and intelligibility without rendering them any less Anabaptist.

Hendrikus Berkhof, a Reformed theologian, wrestles with the traditional Reformed notion of God's omnipotence, which has often centered on the doctrine of predestination. Berkhof is well aware that such a notion can seem to imply that God is all-controlling, and that this is especially problematic to modern people who value human freedom. He notes that Reformed theology has usually sought to derive God's attributes from rather abstract notions of God's transcendence. He proposes instead that these attributes be inferred from what he calls "condescendence."¹⁵ By this Berkhof means God's history with humankind as recorded in Scripture. He traces the general attempt to derive the divine attributes from revelation history to neo-orthodox theology, particularly that of Karl Barth.¹⁶

If we begin with God's condescendence, Berkhof argues we are struck by God's "defencelessness . . . that attribute by which he leaves room for his 'opposite' and accepts and submits himself to the freedom, the initiative, and the reaction of that 'opposite.'"¹⁷ "God steps back" first "by setting a world

opposite to himself.” Then, in creating humans, God “recedes . . . to make room for another. That room is needed because the other is to be a real partner One cannot be a real partner without having one’s own area of freedom and initiative God relinquishes some of his power and makes himself more or less dependent.”

Then eventually this defenselessness “reaches its nadir on the cross where he is unable to save himself, where God is silent, and where free and rebellious man triumphs over God.”¹⁸ It continues in the Holy Spirit, who works through “defenceless means,” and who too “goes the way of the cross, because everywhere he is resisted and grieved. And where he wins human hearts for himself . . . he also molds them into the defenselessness of not avenging themselves, of turning the other cheek, of the preparedness to suffer.”¹⁹ However, Berkhof also recognizes that this defenceless God, according to the biblical narrative, will ultimately bring all the divine purposes to consummation. Even through suffering, God conquers all opposing forces. God, then, is also the universe’s “superior power.” Consequently, instead of referring to God as “omnipotent,” Berkhof speaks of God paradoxically as “the defenceless superior power.”

Most Anabaptist theologians could profit from Berkhof’s discussion of this and other divine attributes. It seems quite legitimate to adopt his term, “defenceless superior power,” into a theology in Anabaptist perspective. Berkhof, who has wrestled with traditional Reformed theology more than most Anabaptists, may have attained greater insight into the relationship between “omnipotence” and the Bible’s divine “condescendence” than most of us. To charge any Anabaptist who used “defenceless superior power” with building on Reformed theology would be quite misguided. This theme is very consistent with Anabaptism. On points like this, Berkhof has perhaps come more than halfway from traditional Reformed theology to Anabaptism. This is one indication that many “mainline” theologies have changed significantly from Reformation times and cannot be simplistically lumped together in an oppositional stream.

Consider a very different current theology. According to Rosemary Ruether, Jesus announces “the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste and speaks on behalf of the lowly.”²⁰ This emphasis seems quite consistent with Anabaptism. Ruether affirms it in the context of asking whether women can regard Jesus as normative. In general, she accepts one

strand within the biblical texts as normative for her theology—the “prophetic-liberating tradition.” It includes the themes of (1) “God’s defense and vindication of the oppressed,” (2) “the critique of the dominant systems of power,” (3) the vision of a new age which overcomes unjust systems and installs God’s reign of peace and justice, and (4) “the critique of ideology.”²¹

Jesus’ significance can be found chiefly in the fact that he renews this prophetic vision.²² Ruether adds, however, that women play an especially important role in his ministry. Women of the oppressed and marginalized groups often emerge as representatives of the lowly. For Jesus, “women are the oppressed of the oppressed. They are seen as the bottom of the present social hierarchy, and hence . . . in a special way, as the last who will be first in the Kingdom of God.”²³ For this reason, women can accept Jesus as their liberator; his maleness presents no obstacle.

Ruether takes a central biblical and Anabaptist theme, that Jesus identifies especially with the marginalized and lowly, and extends it with an insight which is also biblical: that women are often the lowliest of the lowly. I do not know that this particular emphasis has appeared anywhere in Anabaptism, at least before recent times. Yet this is no reason it should not be incorporated into a theology in Anabaptist perspective.

These two examples show ways in which twentieth-century emphases from non-Anabaptist theologies need not dilute, but can enrich, theologies in Anabaptist perspective. This does not mean, of course, that Anabaptist themes cannot be subordinated to non-Anabaptist schemes in undesirable ways. An example might be Ruether’s use of the prophetic-liberating tradition “as a norm through which to criticize the Bible” itself.²⁴ As employed in her overall Christology, it leads to rejection of Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Logos.²⁵ Although some Anabaptist theologians might largely concur with her reasoning, on the basis of both Scripture and sixteenth-century Anabaptism, not to mention Anabaptist tradition in general, I would not.

I do recognize the possibility that theologies in Anabaptist perspective might base themselves on non-Anabaptist foundations and might indeed treat Anabaptist elements as “add-ons” to them. My illustrations from Berkhof and Ruether show not only how this need not be the case but how other views can enrich theologies in Anabaptist perspective.

Conclusions

When Anabaptists seek to articulate an explicit theology in the twentieth century, we find ourselves confronted by a world of theological concepts, volumes, and discussion-styles formed largely by other traditions. In seeking to articulate the distinct features of our tradition, should we create theologies which reflect as little positive contact with other traditions as possible? Or, as we asked at the outset, can we interact positively with and even appropriate elements of other traditions and remain distinctively Anabaptist?

We should surely be free to express ourselves in novel ways and to develop unique perspectives or even unique themes when the central thrusts of Anabaptism make them suitable. The form and content of the received theological traditions are not sacrosanct. Sometimes forms developed to express other kinds of insights will be unsuitable for expressing our own. At the same time, it is misguided to avoid positive contacts with other theologies whenever possible. This is because Christian theology—if one affirms my five features of the theological task—inevitably involves not only negative but also positive interaction with other theologies and thought-systems. This is so because Christian theologies, despite the *particularity* of their perspectives, seek, first, to make some affirmations that are *universally* Christian; and, second, to do so on the basis of a universally Christian *norm* or norms. Consequently, one cannot simply assume the truth of common Anabaptist beliefs but must compare them with other claims to Christian truth on the same themes. If the norm of acceptability is what is truly Christian (and not what is simply Anabaptist), certain features of other truth-claims will inevitably be affirmed and incorporated in some way into one's theology.

Constructive interaction with other theologies will also occur because articulation of any Christian viewpoint involves both negative and positive dialogue with *past* and *present* Christian understandings. Few Anabaptist positions, if any, can even be stated without their agreeing at least implicitly with features of other past and present theologies. The positive features of these other theologies will inevitably play some role in one's own.

This necessary positive interaction with other Christian theologies means that these others *can* come to form a general foundation to which Anabaptist emphases are simply tacked on. Crucial Anabaptist distinctives, like peace, can get diminished or lost in the process. But this need not happen. It will not

if, first, one's basic norm or norms are congruent with historic Anabaptism; and second, contributions from other theologies are so configured by an Anabaptist perspective that the latter provides the dominant point of orientation in the majority of cases.

Notes

¹ In most instances, I use "Anabaptist" to refer to the Mennonite and Brethren traditions. When I refer specifically to the original Anabaptist movement, I designate it as "sixteenth-century Anabaptism."

² *Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 21-2; cf. 20: "it is our thesis that no genuine religious movement can exist without certain underlying 'theological' ideas, even if they are not precisely formulated." (cf. 50-1)

³ A third option is to return to the level of implicit theology and reject further efforts at explicit theology. This journal, however, has pioneered the rise of explicit theology among Anabaptists, and this article assumes the general value of what is already being done. It is designed to discuss the character, promise, and potential problems of these efforts.

⁴ Consider this parallel. To affirm that for anything to be considered "music," it must involve several tones or notes at different pitches, is not to indicate a fundamental kind of music to which specific kinds of music, such as "Anabaptist music," would be secondary. Such an affirmation merely describes one feature which anything must have to be considered as music. It would certainly eliminate Anabaptist *fraktur* art from the territory of music. But anyone who complained that Anabaptism was being discriminated against in this way would misunderstand the purpose of the definition. It would, of course, be possible to define music or theology in such a way that Anabaptist music or theology would be eliminated or reduced to secondary status. But my five features of theology do not do this.

⁵ *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1970), 210.

⁶ *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 137.

⁷ Such conversation also presupposes normative ethical commitments. Authentic dialogue is possible only where all participants are regarded as of equal worth and have an equal right to express their own views and be fairly heard. But to regard all humans as of equal worth is to make a universal ethical judgment or decision about the ultimate value of everyone (or at least about the importance of equal participation among all people.) A somewhat similar argument about dialogue has been developed by Jürgen Habermas. See Stephen White, *The Recent Work of Juergen Habermas* (New York: Cambridge, 1988), esp. 22-4, 48-65; and Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 182-97. For fuller development of this theme, see my articles, "Confessing Truth in a Pluralistic World," in David Shenk and Linford Stutzman, eds., *Confident Witness: Practicing Truth in a Pluralistic World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, expected in 1999); and "Should Anabaptist Theologians Seek to Articulate Universal Truth Claims?" read at the Anabaptism

and Postmodernity Conference held in Bluffton, OH, August 1998.

⁸ To the three arguments for universality above (or four, counting note 7), I can add another. It seems impossible to state the position of total relativism consistently. To say “All assertions are relative” is to make an assertion that one intends to be universally true, and thus to contradict the statement’s content. This is another indication that human thought and language are structured to make affirmations about what is universally true, even if such statements cannot be known to be indubitably true before the *eschaton*. For a fuller discussion, see my “Relativity, Normativity, and Imagination: a Dialogue with Gordon Kaufman,” in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity* (N. Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 204-19.

⁹ E.g., in *Becoming Anabaptist* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), J. Denny Weaver, after candidly describing the violence found among many early Anabaptists, nevertheless concluded that “peace, rejection of violence, and non-resistance” is one of Anabaptism’s “first principles” or continuing “universal” norms (120). Some reviewers noticed that Weaver provided no rationale for extracting this principle from the history he reported (e.g., C. Arnold Snyder in John Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology* [Akron, PA: MCC Peace Office, 1991], 84-86). Weaver acknowledged he had derived it from the Jesus-story, not from sixteenth-century Anabaptism (*The Conrad Grebel Review* 13:1 [Winter 1995], 69-86), and he had identified this story as his ultimate norm in previous publications. When he later critiqued Snyder’s handling of violence in Anabaptism, Weaver seemed to regard history as normative in some sense, for he insisted that confessing Jesus as Lord prevents one from presenting Anabaptism in a way that makes the sword issue optional or secondary. Instead, one must “tell a story in which violence emerges as a failure and the ‘heroes’ advocate nonviolence” (*The Conrad Grebel Review* 16:1 [Winter 1998], 47).

¹⁰ Early Anabaptism is marked not only by some violence but also by literalist eschatological predictions which proved disastrous (see Snyder’s evaluation in *Anabaptist History and Theology* [Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995], 380). In later Anabaptism, though violence and predictive eschatology had faded, rigid Church structures and significant Christological differences emerged.

¹¹ See Alvin Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, The Netherlands: B. De Graff, 1977), and my article, “Anabaptism and Eastern Orthodoxy: Some Possible Similarities?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31. 1 and 2 (Winter-Spring 1994), 67-91.

¹² The results were written up in my *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, Vol. II (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1989), 331-48.

¹³ See especially John Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Kaufman called it theology’s “experiential norm.” (*Systematic Theology: An Historicist Perspective* [New York: Scribners, 1968], 75-80). He has since repudiated the general orientation of this work. But he would affirm the point which I mention and generally support, at least as strongly.

¹⁵ *Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 114-17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ *Idem.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142-43.

²⁰ *Sexism and God-Talk*, 137.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23-24. Ruether adds that this ideology is usually religious.

²² *Ibid.*, 135-36.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136-37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 122-26. Ruether also rejects the way most Anabaptists would understand the historical uniqueness of Jesus. "Christ," she writes, "is not to be encapsulated 'once-for-all' in the historical Jesus" (138). Jesus, as a model of redemptive humanity, "must be seen as partial and fragmentary, disclosing from the perspective of one person, circumscribed in time, culture, and gender, something of the fullness we seek. We need other clues and models as well . . . from many times and cultures" (114).