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Abstract

In 1646 seven London churches ‘commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptist’ issued a revised confession with one innovation: to permit a Christian to be a ‘magistrate or civil officer’. Scholars align these churches, the foundation of the English Particular Baptists, with the Separatist-Congregationalist movement from which they sprang. Such analysis neglects their radical political thinking – like earlier Anabaptists, but unlike the Congregationalists, they denied that the state should endorse or enforce true religion. The conditions of 1646 made it possible to realise the Anabaptist vision for the ‘institutional separation of church and state’.

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Reappraising the English Anabaptists in the Time of the Revolution: Article 50 of the 1646 Confession¹

Paul Lusk

In 1646, in the midst of the civil wars in England, seven London churches that were (in their words) ‘commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptist’ published a revised version of their confession of faith. As with the previous version, issued in 1644, this document shows them as theologically Calvinist, and holding to the ‘gathered’ church comprising only believers who are baptised by immersion. Each church is entitled to choose and appoint its own ministry, which the congregation should support financially. The 1646 edition shows evidence of thorough review with detailed improvement to the text. However it makes only one innovation compared with 1644. This is a new Article 50 stating that ‘it is lawful for a Christian to be a magistrate or civil officer’.

The signatories of 1646 included William Kiffen,² who rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel under Cromwell and went on to serve as a prominent and well-connected member of parliament. Among others, Paul Hobson was a captain and later a major under Fairfax in the parliamentary forces, and served as Deputy Governor of Newcastle in 1648. Hanserd Knollys was a chaplain in Manchester’s forces. Samuel Richardson, as well as being a writer of tracts promoting religious toleration and believers’ baptism, was an advocate of soldiers’ rights and a supporter of Cromwell.³ The admission of ‘Anabaptists’ to the army, shocking to many supporters of the parliamentary cause, was defended by Cromwell.⁴ The term ‘Anabaptist’ remained a way for this movement to identify itself in public – for example in the 1659 ‘Declaration of several of the people called Anabaptist in and about the city of London’ or the ‘Humble apology of some commonly called Anabaptist’ (1661). We may judge that the label ‘Anabaptist’ was a recognisable way to identify themselves even if not their own preferred designation – unsurprisingly, as ‘the nickname “Anabaptist” was the dirtiest name a person could be called in sixteenth-century Christian Europe’.⁵

These seven churches (to which an eighth, French, church also joined itself in 1646) are these days known as the foundation of the ‘particular Baptist’ movement. They had no lineal connection with continental or English Anabaptists of the previous century, or with the ‘general Baptist’ movement started by Helwys on his return from Holland in 1612. Rather they arose out of ‘separatist’ churches which were congregationally governed ‘gathered’ churches, but not Baptist. The new ‘Anabaptist’ churches were Calvinistic Puritans who, in their search for a true church, discovered believers’ baptism and formed a series of new churches on the basis of this finding. In a few years from 1638 they came to increasing public notice with mass baptisms in the Thames, arrests at illegal meetings and campaigning literature, prompting controversy. Their revised confession was published as a response to a popular attack published in 1645 by a prominent Calvinistic Anglican, Dr Daniel Featley. *The Dippers dip’t OR, THE ANABAPTISTS DUCKED AND PLUNGED Over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark*⁶ was addressed to Parliament and demanded that ‘of all Heretics and Schismatics the Anabaptist ... ought to be most carefully looked unto, and severely punished, if not utterly exterminated and banished out of the Church and Kingdom’.⁷

Until the 1920s Baptist historians were content to find continuity between English Anabaptists and other Baptists, but since then the tendency has been to see the

seven churches as a new start and to encourage rejection of awarding them a place in Anabaptist history.⁸ In this article I will ask if we may embrace the seven churches of 1644–6 as a culmination of historic Anabaptism. I will propose that it was the moment at which the outcome often celebrated as a central achievement of Anabaptism – the ‘separation of church and state’ – was credibly envisaged. This article will consider the place of ‘the sword’ in historic Anabaptism and the separatist origins of the seven churches of 1646 before examining the debate with Dr Featley. It will then move to a closing argument on the separation of church and state.

The ‘Anabaptists’ of 1646 maintained, against non-baptist Congregationalism, that the state had no part in enforcing true religion, but rather that the state’s role was to uphold liberty of conscience. In this respect they upheld a central claim of historic Anabaptism, and the conditions of 1646 enabled this claim to be translated, for the first time, into the institutional separation of church and state.

The Sword in Historic Anabaptism

For many, one good reason for overlooking the ‘Anabaptist’ credentials of the seven churches is that a defining feature of historic ‘Anabaptism’ is the rejection of physical force and, accompanying that, the rejection of any holding of state office, as set out in Schleithem in 1527. Modern ‘Anabaptists’ see pacifism and non-involvement in the state as defining aspects of the inheritance from the sixteenth-century movement.

James Stayer questioned this characterisation in his study, *Anabaptists and the Sword*.⁹ He drew attention to a number of figures in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist camp who did propose that those of their persuasion could be involved in civic office and accept military duties. Stayer suggests that on the matter of relations with the state, there are in fact four ‘compass’ positions found among sixteenth-century Anabaptists:

1. *Crusading*: Force (including action via the resources of the state and deploying force to resist the state) is a legitimate means to achieve Christian goals.
2. *Realpolitical*: Force (including politics) is legitimate to achieve Christian purposes but its use necessarily contaminates the project for which it is deployed and the actors who use it.
3. *Apolitical moderation*: Force and politics are necessary for social cohesion – for the ‘life of society’ – and Christians take their part in this necessary process.
4. *Apolitical radicalism*: All force is corrupt. Christians take no part in its use, and no part in political life.

A fifth position is also possible. This would view the state as illegitimate, leading to an anarchist reading of politics. Stayer says that this position is not found at all among sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Anabaptists always recognised the legitimacy of state authority (in accordance with Rom. 13) even when taking the view that Christians may not participate in its application.

He finds the fourth ‘compass’ position – that identified especially with the Swiss brethren as enshrined in the Schleithem declaration – emerged as the most widely accepted position among Anabaptists later in the century. However the acceptance that this was a *defining* feature of Anabaptism is, he suggests, the result of work by North American Mennonites, notably John Horsch (1867–1941), his son-in-law Harold

Bender (1897–1962) and John Howard Yoder (1927–97), writers who cast sixteenth-century Anabaptism as the forerunner of the modern Evangelical Mennonite movement.

During the early formative years of Anabaptism the first, crusading, position, is associated with millennialist expectations of the early return of Christ, to be accompanied by the violent overthrow of the state. Both Hans Hut, active in Moravia, and Melchior Hoffman, in Strasbourg, held this position, but did not practise or advocate immediate violence in pursuit of the Anabaptist cause. The expression of crusading violence came in Münster in 1634, resulting in the disastrous ‘kingdom’ under Jan of Leyden with enforced baptism and polygamy, the Catholic recapture of the city and a lasting stain on the reputation of Anabaptism.

The second and/or third points on the compass are notably represented by Balthasar Hubmaier, a gifted theologian and preacher who embraced the Reformation in the early 1520s and became an active Anabaptist in 1525. He worked mainly in Waldshut (in southern Germany, near the Swiss border) and in the Moravian city of Nikolsburg (now Mikolov in the Czech Republic). Hubmaier argued for religious freedom and maintained that holding government office and armed guard duties were appropriate for a Christian. His converts to Anabaptism included the aristocratic rulers of Nikolsburg, and for a few years he was protected by the city–state governments in both Waldshut and Nikolsburg, against the efforts of the Catholic Austrian monarchy to capture him.

The Schleithem articles declared that it was impossible for a Christian to be a state officer, essentially because no Christian could legitimately use physical force in any capacity. Hubmaier replied in *On the Sword*, published in early 1528. He answers the Swiss Anabaptist ‘brethren’, seeking to rebut their scriptural arguments. Schleithem holds that the state and the force it applies are necessary to maintain order among unbelievers living in the ‘Abomination’, but among believers who are in the ‘perfection of Christ’ church discipline, up to excommunication, suffices to replace the power of the state.

Hubmaier does not see things this way. Unfortunately, says Hubmaier, we are all part of the earthly kingdom, whether we like it or not. The secular state is necessary to secure order and protection, state power is ordained by God, and Christians have a duty to support it. Accordingly Christians can and should be rulers and judges and may be able to perform such duties better than others. Some critics (including Stayer) suggest that in this book, Hubmaier moves to a Zwinglian position. I do not see this. Nowhere does Hubmaier suggest that the state has a duty to promote true religion or a true church, or to suppress religious dissent. It is also suggested that Hubmaier was serving the interests of his aristocratic protectors.¹⁰ True, unlike his fellow believers elsewhere, he did find local authorities supportive and well-intentioned, but after he had become a prominent Anabaptist, his visit to Zwingli’s Zurich resulted in immediate imprisonment and torture. He was constantly under threat from the Austrian authorities. He knew the malevolent potential of state power. When, soon after *On the Sword* appeared, he was handed over to the Austrians, it was probably a naïve trust in the integrity of his fellow theologians that left him defenceless when he was framed for insurrectionism¹¹ and burnt at the stake in 1538 (his wife was executed by drowning).

Stayer admits that Hubmaier was exceptional. There are no later cases of sixteenth-century Anabaptists taking such a thoroughgoing position on the legitimacy of Christian involvement in the secular state. Pilgram Marpeck led Anabaptists in Strasbourg while serving the state as a civil engineer. He sought to deny the state's right to interfere in church business. Marpeck presented a case for tolerance, but the authorities developed a strategy of banishing leaders and potential spokespersons and containing widespread Anabaptism as a generally illegal, semi-clandestine movement – not allowing it to develop coherent proposals for its acceptance but also not consistently physically suppressing its activities, and never resorting to taking the life of its participants.¹² Rink called for rulers to grant liberty and suggested that such a person could be considered a 'Christian prince'.¹³ Later, the Waterlander Mennonites thought that it might be possible for believers to serve in government provided they refrained from 'counselling bloodshed or anything against conscience', and Stayer suggests that this was the position held by Menno Simons himself. But all acknowledged that in practice this would be very difficult. The Hutterites had a robust answer to such ideas. Their 1577 'Article Book'¹⁴ identifies the 'gates of hell' against which the church will prevail (Matt. 16:18) as being the state: it is inevitable that the state will impose religious conformity using violent means to enforce a 'wicked life'.¹⁵

Stayer explains that Hubmaier made an 'attempt to establish an enclosure of legitimacy for Anabaptists in cooperation with the political authorities through fundamentally political means'.¹⁶ But we are more familiar with the position taken by Anabaptists in the Bern disputation of 1538, whereby church discipline among believers replaces the state authority needed in the world:

We grant that in the non-Christian world state authorities have a legitimate place, to keep order, punish the evil, and to protect the good. But we as Christians live according the Gospel and our only authority and Lord is Jesus Christ. Christians consequently do not use the sword, which is worldly, but they use the Christian ban.¹⁷

England: Separatism and the Seven Churches of 1646

Anabaptist activity was known in England from the 1530s. Fourteen Dutch Anabaptists were burnt at the stake in London in 1535. After being warned by Lutherans of the spread of Anabaptism in England, Henry VIII issued an edict banishing Anabaptists in 1538. A prominent Anabaptist, Joan Boucher, was burnt in 1550. The founding creeds of the Church of England, the 42 Articles of 1553, specifically criticised alleged Anabaptist teaching. John Whitgift, Queen Elizabeth's anti-Puritan Archbishop of Canterbury from 1583, preached and wrote against Anabaptism.

However, the seven London churches of the 1640s owed their origin not to the Dutch-influenced Anabaptism known in earlier English generations but to the movement known as separatism – congregations of Puritan persuasion that met outside the Church of England and thus were illegal 'conventicles'. After her Act of Uniformity of 1558, Elizabeth I strove to impose conformity in the performance of worship in her Church of England. Puritans demanding Calvinist reform were imprisoned, banished and, eventually, hanged. The 1593 Conventicles Act subjected to imprisonment and, after persistence, capital punishment anyone failing to attend parish churches or in any way encouraging non-attendance. Separatists were forced to flee the country. Some went to Holland and became Baptists, influenced by Mennonite Anabaptism. John

Smyth established a congregation in Amsterdam and sought union with the Mennonites. One of his group, Thomas Helwys, disagreed on some points – one being the relationship with the state. Helwys held that a Christian could be a magistrate.¹⁸ He returned to London in 1612 to found what is generally regarded as the first modern English Baptist church, in Spitalfields.¹⁹ He also published the book considered to be the first in English to advocate full religious liberty. ‘Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever’, it is not a matter for the civil power to punish those who offend only in matters of religion, he wrote in *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, addressed to King James. The king had Helwys and his followers jailed in Newgate, where Helwys soon died. One follower, known by his initials H.H., wrote an appeal to Parliament from those suffering lamentably only for their consciences and were ‘faithful subjects falsely called Anabaptists’ (the appeal was rejected).

John Murton, Helwys’ deputy and successor as leader, wrote two books in 1615 and 1620 answering critics and defending freedom of religion. This latter book came into the hands of Roger Williams, who included a commentary on it in his *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644). Williams claimed the text was written in milk on the paper used as bottle stoppers, and smuggled out of Newgate. Murton died in prison in 1626. By then followers of this, the earliest English Baptist movement, amounted to 150 members in London, Coventry, Lincoln, Salisbury and Tiverton.²⁰ They were ‘general Baptists’ with Helwys’ Arminian soteriology – holding that Christ died for all, and that all people have free will to decide whether or not to accept salvation. The seven London churches of this study were Calvinist: holding that salvation is for the ‘elect’ and that a fallen human (being utterly sinful) cannot freely choose a saving faith, but that this is gift of God, a fruit of grace. The seven churches had no connection, at any rate so far discovered, to the Helwys network.

The seven churches of 1644 and 1646 arose at least in large part from the church known as ‘JLJ’ following the initials of the three ministers who led it from its formation in 1616 into the 1640s – Henry Jacob, John Lothrop and Henry Jessey. Jacob’s Puritan leanings and published hostility to the Episcopalian system led to his imprisonment in 1609. On release he left for Holland to be part of John Robinson’s Leiden church from which the *Mayflower* pilgrims left, via England, for the new world in 1620. Under Robinson’s influence, Jacob found that:

a visible church was constituted by free mutual consent of believers joining and covenanting to live as members of a holy society, and that such a church should elect its ministers, elders, deacons, and the congregation should be governed by its officers. In short, a true church under the Gospel contains no more congregations but one.²¹

Jacob did not join the *Mayflower* emigrants, but later left for Virginia in 1622. Lothrop, his successor as minister, was arrested in 1632 with most of the rest of the congregation, eventually released from prison on condition he left the country. He went to New England and founded the community of Barnstable in Massachusetts, in 1639.

Henry Jessey took over the JLJ church ministry in 1634. The church met in a number of locations in different parts of London. Within a congregational, Puritan framework it seems to have had a degree of flexibility, able to accommodate a range of views as its members pursued the idea of a true church. It did not insist on a full split with the Church of England – allowing that there were true congregations within the

Church of England and that members could attend their parish churches (a position called ‘semi-separatism’).

A series of what became the seven London churches ‘commonly though falsely called Anabaptist’ resulted from departures from the JLJ church in the late 1630s and early 1640s. Such secession appears to have followed reflection on the nature of the true church and striving to conform to the New Testament pattern, in which believers’ baptism is, compellingly, represented as part of the understanding of what it is to be a Christian. Spilsbury, one of the eleven signing both the 1644 and 1646 versions of the Confession, led the first group to form a Baptist congregation having parted (on good terms) from JLJ in 1638. In January 1640 over sixty ‘Anabaptists’ were brought before the House of Lords having been arrested for holding a service when they should have been in the parish church. They held that ‘they would not go to their Parish Churches: That those Churches were not true Churches; and that there was no true Church but where the Faithful met’ and that they should not obey the King ‘but in civil things’.²²

Among their number were Thomas Gunne and John Webb, both signatories of the first, 1644, version of the Confession of the seven churches. Webb was connected with the church of Kilcop (another signatory to both editions), which in 1640 sent an emissary to Holland to look into the practice of the Mennonite Anabaptist churches and then decided on baptism by immersion as the New Testament model.²³ This emissary, Blunt, had earlier been associated with the JLJ network. Kiffen had been part of Jessey’s church for many years when he attended a ‘disputation’ between a prominent Puritan clergyman, Daniel Featley, and Anabaptists in 1642: this appears to have finalised his conversion to a baptistic position. He left Jessey’s church and was another among the eleven who signed both editions of the Confession.

By the mid-1640s, around thirty-five congregations were practising various forms of separatism in London. Tolmie²⁴ classifies these into thirteen independent gathered churches, nine separatist and five general Baptist, in addition to the seven ‘particular Baptist’ churches considered here. The ‘independents’ comprise mixed congregations including Anabaptists. In 1644, Kiffen, having come to a Baptist position, departed from JLJ and set up his own congregation. A conference took place to consider how Jessey should respond. At this conference the independent and separatist churches were represented – the ‘whole spectrum of organised radicalism’.²⁵ It agreed that Jessey should retain fellowship with the breakaway Baptists and not excommunicate them. Jessey himself was baptised in 1645, though he continued to serve a mixed congregation in the ‘JLJ’ church. The churches signing the 1644 and 1646 Confessions held to the closed communion, where only baptised believers could share the table where Christ’s death is remembered in the bread and wine.

The Featley Debate

The first, 1644, ‘CONFESSION OF FAITH, of those CHURCHES which are commonly (though falsely) called ANABAPTISTS’ was addressed to ‘all that fear God ... for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in Pulpit and Print ... cast upon them’.

The second edition in 1646 was addressed to Parliament, referring to Dr Featley and his ‘Book lately presented to you’ with ‘many heinous accusations unjustly and

falsely laid against us'. In this book, Featley presents himself as a Calvinist defender of the Reformation. Among the 'Heretics and Schismatics' who threaten the Reformation, the Anabaptists are the most dangerous because of the openness of their 'audacious attempts on Church and State', along with the 'forwardest of the Brownists' – placing the Anabaptists at the forefront of the separatist movement.

Featley's book²⁶ appeared in 1645, but refers to a debate held in Southwark in 1642. The book includes notes of the debate and mostly consists of a dialogue with Anabaptist positions on well-known points of difference: baptism, the church, the ministry, the oath and the magistracy. Why the delay in publishing? The book, Featley says, would have 'slept securely by me in a whole skin of Parchment, had not the clamours of the Adversaries awaked it, who cry down Paedo-baptism, and cry up Anabaptism, not only in the Pulpit, but also from the Press, to the great offence of godly minds, and the scandal of the Church'.²⁷

These Anabaptists, Featley says, 'defile our rivers with their impure washings' while people disqualified by class and education are seizing authority:

I wonder that our doors, posts, and walls sweat not, upon which such notes as these have been of late affixed: On such a day such a brewer's clerk exerciseth, such a tailor expoundeth, such a waterman teacheth ... If cooks ... instead of mincing of their meat fall upon dividing of the Word; if tailors leap up from the shop-board to the pulpit, and patch up sermons out of stone shreds; if ... they enter not into the Church, but break into it; if they take not Holy Orders, but snatch them to themselves: do we marvel to see such confusion in the Church as there is?²⁸

Featley notes of Anabaptism 'the peculiar malignity this heresy has to magistracy' striking at the root of authority by denying the 'legislative power to propound our earnest Laws in matters of Religion ... Other of their errors fight against the Church, but this against the State: others against piety, but this against Politie.'²⁹

Featley's note of the 1642 Southwark debate does not mention the magistracy. When he comes to this question, after recognising that 'our Anabaptists' do not hold to all the errors of their continental counterparts,³⁰ he proceeds to dispute the view he attributes to them on the magistracy: that a Christian may not be a civil magistrate, that the office of magistrate lies outside the perfection of Christ, and that the biblical provisions for ruling authorities to enforce religious laws apply to the 'stiff-necked' Jews but not to Christians. Here Featley conducts a debate with familiar sixteenth-century Anabaptist positions. But he is alarmed by a more recent development. The 'presses that sweat and groan':

print not only Anabaptism, from whence they take their name; but many other most damnable doctrines, tending to carnal liberty ... and a medley and hodge-podge of all Religions. Witness the Book printed 1644. called The Bloodie Tenet, which the Author affirmeth he wrote in Milk; and if he did so, he hath put much Rats bane into it, as namely, That it is the will and command of God, that since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Anti-christian Consciences and Worships be granted to all men in all Nations and Countries; That Civil States with their Officers of Justice are not Governors or Defenders of the Spiritual and Christian state and worship; That the doctrine of Persecution in case of Conscience (maintained by Master Calvin, Beza, Cotton, and the Ministers of the New English Churches) is guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the Altar.³¹

Featley is quoting from Roger Williams. He is slightly confused – Williams does not say he wrote his *Bloudy Tenent* in milk, but that the earlier Baptists' appeal smuggled out of prison, reproduced in his text, was so written. But Featley knows enough of Williams' book to quote verbatim its summarised central demand, for complete freedom in matters of religion. Williams had been in London in 1643–4 on a successful mission to achieve recognition of his newly founded colony in Rhode Island, in competition with the claims of the Massachusetts establishment. He impressed Parliament as an expert on native American peoples, as set out in his anthropological and linguistic study *Key to the Language of America*. Then, in somewhat mysterious circumstances, there appeared on sale, in the London streets, a copy of the letter sent to Williams by John Cotton, the leading minister of Massachusetts, defending Williams' banishment from that territory, when he fled into the forest in 1636, to be protected by his native American friends rather than be forced home to England to face incarceration. *The Bloudy Tenent* set out in full the biblical case for a civil state that does not intervene in matters of religion, for religious freedom for all of all faiths, and a state that is legitimised by popular consent and not by command of God. Williams left this for publication when he sailed back to Rhode Island, to the jurisdiction newly recognised by the English Parliament, and since seen as the modern world's first democracy.

Williams' influence is visible in the 1646 revised Confession. In words reminiscent of Williams' imagery, the authors refer to the life of Christians in a 'walled sheepfold and watered garden, to have communion here with his saints'. In an additional note on civil government, they say: 'The supreme magistracy of this kingdom we acknowledge to be the king and parliament (now established) freely chosen by the kingdom.'

So the state is legitimised by popular consent ('freely chosen'), in line with Williams' thinking. After affirming the duty of all to 'maintain all civil laws and civil officers' the note continues that 'in matters of worship ... it is our wisdom, duty and privilege to observe Christ's laws only ... It is the magistrates' duty to tender the liberty of men's consciences.'

The Separation of Church and State

Haykin suggests that the additional article in 1646 was simply a clarification and that the seven churches had already distanced themselves from Anabaptism by asserting, in 1644, that civil power is ordained by God and is to be obeyed and defended all civil matters.³² However, Anabaptism had always upheld the duty to submit to civil government. The new Article 50, in 1646, conferred on Christians the right to take state office. This was a break with most (though not all) historic Anabaptists, and with the position that Dr Featley attributed to them after the 1642 debate. But it is likely that some of the protagonists of 1646 were already politically and militarily engaged in the Cromwellian cause.³³ Article 50 was probably more clarification than reversal.

But this does not mean they were not part of a wider stream of the distinctively Anabaptist thinking feared by Dr Featley and many who thought like him. We have seen that they studied Dutch Mennonites when it came to baptistic practice, so we know they were aware of what was happening on the continent. In politics, the seven churches broke with Calvinist congregationalism. Some commentaries see the 1644 and 1646

Confessions as continuous with the separatist ‘True Confession’ of 1596.³⁴ However the True Confession held that:

it is the Office and duty of Princes and Magistrates, who by the ordinance of God are supreme Governors under him over all persons and causes within their Realms and Dominions, to suppress and root out by their authority all false ministries, voluntary Religions and counterfeit worship of God ... And on the other hands to establish & maintain by their laws every part of God’s word his pure Religion and true ministry ... yea to enforce all their Subjects whether Ecclesiastical or civil, to do their duties to God and men.

This was the position exported to New England which formed the basis of the Massachusetts theocracy – congregational gathered churches, a faithful social minority enforcing religious establishment and punishing religious deviation. It was the position that persecuted Roger Williams and against which he defined a new Christian political settlement – one where, in the great and shocking battle-cry of Cromwell’s forces, ‘the civil magistrate shall have nothing to do in matters of religion.’³⁵

In his classic essay on the ‘Anabaptist vision’ Harold Bender wrote: ‘There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state and voluntarism in religion, so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period.’³⁶ He continues that the ‘line of descent through the centuries since that time’ may not be clear and ‘may have passed through other intermediate movements’.

The Confession of 1646 is a critical junction on this historical journey. In the dominant model embraced by sixteenth-century Anabaptism, the ‘separation of church and state’ was not an institutional separation – rather it was a separation into two distinct jurisdictions, one where the ‘sword’ was necessary for the lost to rule each other, the other where the saved lived in the ‘perfection of Christ’ and had no need of any government other than that of the church. This was best achieved where the two jurisdictions lived physically apart, an arrangement facilitated when community of goods maximised economic separation. The distance between the two societies was the gap between heaven and hell. Anabaptists were to be found living in cities and mingling with the unsaved, but they could only do this by remaining furtive and leaderless. The conditions for the institutional separation of church and state – for all to be subject to a civil order that kept its jurisdiction out of matters of faith and religious association – did not exist. This separation became capable of contemplation in the conditions of the English civil wars, when the proper relation of church and state was a matter of practical debate. This depended not just on internal English politics, but also on the experiments underway on the American continent and the interactions happening over the Atlantic.

Conclusion

The seven churches were Calvinist in theology and congregational in ecclesiology. Having come in studying the New Testament to a baptistic conclusion, they sought to establish what this would mean in practice. They looked into what was practised among the Dutch Mennonites before deciding that believers’ baptism by immersion was the way to go. But they also followed earlier Anabaptism in the notion that the state should not enforce religion. This was, to most in the society around them, a deeply disruptive idea. But it was an idea to which Roger Williams gave shape and credibility – not just

as a concept, but as a practical experiment taking place on the western shores of the Atlantic, permissible at a safe distance under the management of a known diplomat and statesperson.

Politics is an experimental and reflexive science, where knowledge does not exist independent of the practical application of ideas. The conditions of 1646 – national and international – created the space for the Anabaptist vision to be translated into the form that could sustain it in the future. The seven churches ‘commonly called Anabaptist’ were illegal, and Featley’s witty criticism had an edge to it – when he said they should be banished or even exterminated, these were credible consequences had they lost the argument. Nonetheless they pressed on. With the blessing of the whole body, some took up the sword – not (just) to defend themselves, but to forge a new kind of state, one perhaps glimpsed by Hubmaier, but fulfilled by Kiffen, Richardson, Spilsbury and the rest.

Notes

¹ A short version of this paper was presented at the East Kent Anabaptist Theology Forum in September 2018. The author is grateful to members of this Forum for this debate; and to Stuart Murray Williams, Dr Ian Randall and the staff of the Cambridge University Library for assistance in research.

² More usually spelt ‘Kiffin’ but I follow here Larry Kreitzer, of Regent’s Park College, Oxford, who shows evidence that ‘Kiffen’ was his own preferred spelling of his name. Kreitzer uses this spelling in his series on *Kiffen and his world*. For a summary of the volumes and contents of this series, see <https://pettyfrance.wordpress.com/2018/03/05/william-kiffen-and-his-world/> (accessed 9 Sept. 2019).

³ R. Greaves and R. Zaller, eds, *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982). Of fourteen representatives of the seven London churches to sign the 1646 Confession, seven appear in this dictionary.

⁴ For example, writing in March 1643 to General Crawford, who was a Scottish Presbyterian. Cromwell is remonstrating with Crawford about the dismissal of an ‘Anabaptist’ officer: ‘Ay, but the man is an Anabaptist ... Admit he be, shall that render him incapable to serve ... The State, in choosing men to serve it, takes no notice of their opinions; if they be willing faithfully to serve it – that satisfies.’

⁵ F.F. Hiebert, ‘The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology’, *Directions* 30 (2001): pp. 122–38. <https://directionjournal.org/30/2/atonement-in-anabaptist-theology.html> (accessed 9 Sept. 2019).

⁶ D. Featley, *The Dippers dip ’t OR, THE ANABAPTISTS DUCKED AND PLUNGED Over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark* (London, 1645) http://downloads.it.ox.ac.uk/ota-public/tep/Texts-HTML/free/A41/A41009.html#index.xml-body.1_div.10 (accessed 6 Sept. 2019).

⁷ In this article in quoting texts of the period I have modernised spelling and punctuation to assist ease of reading.

⁸ For an early discussion of this question see W.T. Whitley and A.J.D. Farrer, ‘Continental Anabaptists and Early English Baptists: The Relation between English Baptists and the Anabaptists of the Continent’, *Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1924/5): pp. 24–36, available on https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/02-1_024.pdf (accessed 6 Sept. 2019). See also (among others) B.R. White, ‘The London Calvinistic Baptist Leadership 1644-1660’ in *Faith, Heritage and Witness* (supplement to the *Baptist Quarterly*, 32 [1987]; ed. J.H.Y. Briggs) https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/supplement-1987_34.pdf (accessed 6 Sept. 2019).

⁹ J.M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KA: Coronado, 1972).

¹⁰ R.H. Wiens, *Balthasar Hubmaier’s Sword: A Circumstantial Development*. M.Th. (Conrad Grebel Institute at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, 2010).

¹¹ So argued by Wiens.

¹² R. Kreider, ‘The Anabaptists and the Civil Authorities of Strasbourg, 1525-1555’, *Church History*, 24 (1955): pp. 99–108.

¹³ Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p. 194.

¹⁴ Attributed to Peter Walpot and published by the Bruderhof as *The Christian and the Sword: an Anabaptist Manifesto of 1577* (Walden, NY: Plough, 2011).

¹⁵ Article 43.

¹⁶ Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, p. 167.

¹⁷ W.R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1996), p. 258.

¹⁸ J. Early, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), p. 34.

¹⁹ Early, *Helwys*, p. 35.

²⁰ M. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds, Reformation Today), p. 25.

²¹ Quoted in D. McConnell, 'The Roots of the Ancient Congregational Church in London, Scituate, and Barnstable, Rev. John Lothrop, Minister' in *Cape Cod Genealogical Society Bulletin* (Fall 2008) http://www.sturgislibrary.org/pdf/roots_ancient_congregational_church.pdf (accessed 6 Sept. 2019).

²² *House of Lords Journal* 4 (16 Jan. 1641).

²³ G. Stassen, 'Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists', *Menonite Quarterly Review* 36 (1962): 322–48.

²⁴ M. Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London, 1616-1649* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 122.

²⁵ Tolmie, *Triumph*, p. 56.

²⁶ Featley, *Dippers Dip't* (see note 6).

²⁷ Featley, *Dippers Dip't*.

²⁸ Featley, *Dippers Dip't*.

²⁹ Featley, *Dippers Dip't*.

³⁰ These errors being specified as Christ receiving his flesh other than from his mother, soul-sleep and polygamy.

³¹ Featley, *Dippers Dip't*.

³² Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, p. 35.

³³ Paul Hobson became an Army captain in August 1644. White, 'London Calvinistic Baptist Leadership', p. 36.

³⁴ This was adopted by English separatist churches in Holland. It can be found on a number of websites which classify it as 'Baptist' – see for example http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Particular_Baptist_Statements_of_Faith.pdf (with the three confessions side by side) (accessed 6 Sept. 2019). But it was in no way 'Baptist' – though it is true that parts of it found their way with little amendment into the 1644 Confession. Glen Stassen offers a detailed examination of the True Confession compared with the position of the particular Baptists of the 1640s and argues that there was some continental Anabaptist influence at work. However, he makes no mention of the political differences between the separatists and the authors of 1646. See Stassen, 'Anabaptist Influence'.

³⁵ The Puritan clergyman Richard Baxter testified of his shock at seeing 'swarms of Anabaptists' discussing this proposition in the Army. See J.P. Lusk, *The Jesus Candidate: Political Religion in a Secular Age* (London: Ekklesia, 2017), p. 82.

³⁶ H. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', *Church History* 13 (1944): 3–24.