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Anabaptist Story (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

The Anabaptist Story—by William R. Estep. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975. 250 pages. Revised Edition. \$3.95 (paper). Reviewed by Arnold L. Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

Estep is Professor of Church History at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Writing with obvious interest in his subject, he seeks to show the origins of Anabaptism, its relation to the larger movement of the Reformation, its beliefs, and the relevance of Anabaptist ideas for the twentieth century. The work Estep has produced is, on the whole, what he intended it to be, namely, a "satisfactory introduction" to the Anabaptist movement, at least to part of it.

This is not a difficult book to read, though it is scholarly and shows extensive research into sixteenth century sources as well as modern and older secondary works. Prof. Estep writes with commendable style, and he generally keeps his student reader well in mind. Only in Chapter IX does he become prolix, too detailed and overly repetitious. Chapter XI, "Across the Seas and Through the Years," suffers, on the contrary, by its brevity, as it tries in the scope of a mere thirty pages to trace Anabaptism beyond the confines of the European continent and the sixteenth century all the way to the present. Invariably, some groups are not mentioned, while others get little more than passing reference. Really the title is a misnomer, for more than twenty-five of the thirty pages are used to discuss the relationship of Anabaptism to English Separatists and Baptists of the 17th century. Nevertheless, the book as a whole stands quite respectably as the "preliminary word" which its author intended it to be.

In company with most American church historians who acknowledge lineal descent from the Anabaptists—especially the Mennonites—Estep sharply limits Anabaptism, mainly to the Swiss Brethren, the South German group, the Dutch Anabaptists such as Simons, and offshoots from these three. Less desirable groups and individuals he thus seeks to exclude. By definition and specific mention, Thomas Müntzer and those about him are excluded as "inspirationists" rather than true Anabaptists. And while perforce acknowledging the infamous Münster episode to be the work of Anabaptists, Estep dismisses those responsible as fanatics not in the mainstream.

Indeed, the whole Münster affair is brushed aside with slight mention, not discussed or described on grounds that full accounts are available in many other places. Münster, says the author, is not "recognizable Anabaptism" (p. 16). However, the way Estep divides the Radical Reformation into different classes, including one which he defines as Anabaptists, is not at all as generally accepted as he intimates. His own use of the terms "normative" and "biblical" Anabaptists (pp. 140, 199 and *passim*) clearly indicates the difficulty of a simple definition of the name and the movement. This is why I noted earlier that this book is a satisfactory introduction to at least part of the Anabaptist movement; Estep has been more exclusive, perhaps, than he ought to have been.

It is only natural that this writer should treat his subject and those who figure in the story with great sympathy and general approval. One has a right to expect, however, that sympathy should not run away and hide from sound judgment. But there are a few instances where this happens. I do not think that one could get most historians to agree with such statements as "Probably, the most revolutionary act of the Reformation was the institution of believer's baptism," (p. 150) or "No other theologian of the sixteenth century so thoroughly divorced Reformation theology from Roman Catholic mariolatry [as Menno Simons]" (p. 139). And one who read only this book might well get the impression that the only pious people and the only martyrs for their faith in the sixteenth century were the Anabaptists. Of course the author neither says nor believes this, but that impression is certainly left with the reader at times. (See, for example, pp. 22, 49, or 73).

These, and other smaller items notwithstanding, this is a useful and worthwhile book for a first step into an often overlooked area of Reformation history.

Religion In America—by George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., and Charles T. Wellborn. Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, N.Y. 538 pages, \$11.95. Reviewed by Nick Van Til, Professor of Philosophy.

As the title suggests this book covers more than an account of the history of organized and/or institutionalized religion in America. In fact, the first chapter is devoted to "Civil