THE ORIGINS OF ANABAPTISM:
ASCETIC AND CHARISMATIC ELEMENTS EXEMPLIFYING CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

by

KENNETH R. DAVIS

The primary purpose of this paper, as requested, is to report on my research into ascetic aspects of the origins of Anabaptism and respond to major criticisms of my thesis. But I have chosen also to fit these matters into a larger theoretical discussion of the problem of origins, as is indicated by the title.

I. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Initially, and appropriate to this anniversary Conference, I raise again the problem of definition, that is, January 1525 marks the beginning of what – Anabaptism? In my book, I subscribed to an affirmative answer, and still maintain that it is the most satisfactory approach to the problem for reasons some of which will follow. That is, I uphold a definition of Anabaptism derived from a theory of monogenesis for the whole movement. It asserts that the movement is rooted in that unique Anabaptist synthesis which developed in Zürich in 1523–1525 and then broadened into several distinctive variants. Accordingly then, one must seek initially Anabaptism’s primary intellectual origins by probing the original and central core of the movement, not the fringes.

Conversely, I am convinced that as historians we must abandon the assumption of monogenesis with some kind of homogeneity for the whole of 16th century dissent in favour of polygenesis and heterogeneity. The former notion has dominated our thinking for 400 years and still subtly influences our use of the name “Anabaptist.” It has led us up dead-end streets, confused our perception of the Reformation itself and its relationship to its immediate past, and perhaps has curtailed, even hidden, useful lines of research.

One aspect of the problem is the looseness with which we have used

1 As found in K. R. Davis, Anabaptism and Asceticism, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1974.
terms, such as "movement," thereby creating serious communication problems among ourselves. For example, though we may agree that a religio-social movement need not have total ideological uniformity, perhaps not even direct institutional connections in all its manifestations, yet surely some significant, functional and perpetuating unity must be present; a unity which includes at least a distinctive vision and a core of fundamental features essential to that vision. Not to insist on such a core for all the parts makes labels, such as "movement" or "Anabaptist," quite useless. Simply to be negatively united (e.g., against the rigid exclusivism of Luther's justification doctrine) or united in some detail (e.g., the adoption of new initiation rites over — against the previously established one, but without concern for a new, common meaning), just won't do.

It would be enlightening to develop a model for Anabaptism as a religio-social movement. For the moment an adaptation of one, for social movements in general, developed by the sociologists G. R. Rush and R. S. Denisoff,2 may be sufficient. They suggest that a legitimate social movement embodies the following features: (1) It is usually attempting to win the world for a single, new vision of society, expressed as an ideology, which is itself a rationalized explanation of past, present and future. (2) It usually arises from a conscious concern for some social problem. (3) It must have a "referential for mobilization," either charismatic leadership or external ideal models, in order to develop. (4) It becomes organized or institutionalized when it is opposed, or made illegitimate, by the establishment.

Herbert Blumer adds another useful element by distinguishing between "general" and "specific" movements. The former are represented as groping towards a new, though still vague set of values, including uncoordinated, impulsive, halting yet persistent efforts for change. Specific movements emerge out of such a background and represent a crystallization into fairly well defined goals, organization and leadership.3

Finally, a social movement may survive when successful institutionalization is followed by the gaining of acceptance or toleration, legal or otherwise. Or, it may end either (1) by being successfully repressed by state power or being co-opted into the state, or (2) by dissipation through the discreditiation of its leadership or its central vision.4 It may

4 Bush and Denisoff, Social Movements, p. 370ff.