THE INFLUENCE OF JACOB STRAUSS
ON THE ANABAPTISTS.
A PROBLEM IN HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY.*

by

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In a stimulating essay on methodology in intellectual history, Quentin Skinner decides that most historians of ideas, as well as social scientists working with ideas within history, place themselves into one of two camps or orthodoxies as he calls them, which stand diametrically opposed to each other on crucial questions of interpretation and meaning.¹ Those in the one camp decide that the text alone is determinative for meaning. The scholar need not examine contextual factors in order to ascertain meaning. Those within the other orthodoxy insist that meaning is revealed entirely by examination of context, by holding up a framework of religious, social, economic and political factors, within which framework alone ideas can be understood.

Within the development of this thesis Skinner focuses more directly on causality, and even more particularly on the transmission of ideas from one person to another.² The “text-only” scholar should trace ideas from one person to another by a rigorous comparison of texts, identifying remarkable similarity of idea and finally similarity of peculiar phrase or word. He need not examine contextual factors in order to help discover sources of ideas. The “context-only” scholar on the other hand will expect to find causes or origins exclusively by the most careful scrutiny of the religious, social, economic and political context current at the time in which the ideas were expressed; this context is rigorously determinative for the particular idea.

One may doubt the absolute accuracy of Skinner’s formulation of the issue, in that he denies in effect the existence of any way stations be-

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between his two orthodoxies, without denying a high degree of validity to his observation. But surely in his formulation of the historiographic problem of causality Skinner touches on a topic which is germane to the historiography of Anabaptist origins. Historians writing on Anabaptist origins have generally fallen into one of two camps. There is on the one hand the “text-only” scholar who assiduously compares the writings of those persons who may have influenced the incipient Anabaptists with those of the Anabaptists themselves. By his strict application of conventional historical methodology he usually narrows the field of persons who might have influenced the Anabaptists to a very few, or more frequently to one. Thus the “Zwingli-only” thesis of Harold S. Bender and the “Müntzer-only” thesis of Holl. On the other hand there is the “context-only” scholar who projects Anabaptist origins from prior religious dissidence, especially sectarian, or from social-economic factors such as the Peasants’ War. One thinks of Keller, or with significant modifications of Gustav Hammann today; or one thinks of the general trend of Marxist historians.

This paper is directed toward the “text-only” scholar on the grounds that his distortion of history is the prevalent one in Western circles. It is significant that among most of us the “context-only” scholar is too easily dismissed as perpetrator of a misconception about origins of ideas that is so mistaken as to be worth no serious consideration. But in lightly dismissing the “context-only” scholars the “text-only” scholars have pushed the historiography of Anabaptist origins into historical inaccuracy and distortion which call for rectification.

3 H. S. Bender, Conrad Grebel, c. 1489–1526, Goshen, Indiana, 1950, 191–203; Karl Holl, “Luther und die Schwärmer,” chap. vii of Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte, I, Tübingen, 1924, 420–67. Holl does not specifically declare Müntzer to be the exclusive founder or originator of Anabaptism. Indeed, in his major essay on the topic, the one most frequently cited and the one cited in this essay, Anabaptism itself remains a marginal consideration. Rather Müntzer emerges as originator by virtue of the emphasis Holl places upon his thought as a mystic, together with Holl’s further judgement that all Anabaptism derives from mysticism to a greater or lesser degree. By virtue of exclusive emphasis on Müntzer a “Müntzer-only” thesis does indeed emerge; this is the way scholars have interpreted Holl, for example, F. Heyer, Der Kirchenbegriff der Schwärmer, Leipzig, 1939, 2–3.


5 Unfortunately Western scholars have still not, on the whole, taken Marxist scholarship on Anabaptism seriously. Since Hammann’s suggestions on links between earlier Waldensians and the Anabaptists cannot be proven, scholars tend to dismiss him. This is a mistake. He does point to background religious factors which were important to the Anabaptists’ world of thought.