

The Mystical Radicals (Zwickau Prophets)

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Just as the Swiss Brethren considered themselves initially Zwingli's disciples who were intent on implementing his original reform program, so, too, the Saxon radicals saw themselves as disciples of Luther to one degree or another.

What complicates these relationships is that Luther himself changed, as did Zwingli, during those early critical years of the Reformation. At precisely the time during 1515 to 1516 when he began to lecture on the book of Romans with its emphasis on the righteousness of God, Luther discovered a fragmentary version of a mystical document known as *The German Theology*, a fifteenth-century writing.

Thinking it to be the product of John Tauler, to whom he had already been introduced, Luther published it with an introduction in which he wrote the following, and I quote,

Unlike the work of the general run of preachers and teachers, this little booklet does not merely skim the surface like foam on the water but has been drawn from the depths of the Jordan by a true Israelite. To judge from its content, the material is very similar to that of the illuminated Dr. Tauler of the Order of Preachers.

And to his friend, Georg Spalatin, he wrote, and I quote again,

Should you find pleasure in reading a pure solid theology in the German language very similar to that of Christian antiquity, then procure for yourself if you can the sermons of John Tauler of the Order of Preachers. What I send you here is an unknown excerpt of his total work. For I have not found either in Latin or German a more wholesome theology or one in greater conformity with the gospel.

By 1518 he had discovered and published a complete version of *The German Theology* with an equally laudatory preface, but gradually Luther became aware that mystical theology with its emphasis on the divine spark within, on God's presence in the abyss of the soul, and on the inner word was in conflict with his newfound Pauline theology, and by 1521 he had broken with mystical theology in fundamental ways, but men like Thomas Müntzer had under his influence turned to Tauler and regarded the latter as the mutual source of their inspiration. In other words, he saw Luther as a fellow disciple of Tauler. To what extent Karlstadt and others were likewise influenced is not clear, but Karlstadt was later to manifest similar spiritualistic tendencies.

We have already seen how the Zwickau prophets upset Melanchthon by their visit to Wittenberg on December 27, 1521. Melanchthon emphasized that in the matters of infant baptism and alien faith the prophets had appealed to the authority of Luther. Certainly Luther's emphasis on salvation by faith alone would appear to exclude one's being saved by someone else's faith, even that of the church, and if one was saved by faith alone, how could children have a saving faith or what good did baptizing them do? Whatever the sources, the specific sources of their appeal to Luther, the prophets like Karlstadt and Müntzer all saw Luther in one way or another as their teacher.

The Zwickau prophets clearly also had an impact on the thinking of Karlstadt, on the thinking of his brother-in-law Gerhard Westerberg, and on Martin Cellarius, the friend of Melanchthon who had studied with Melanchthon at the University of Tübingen and who had then followed the famous Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin to the University of Ingolstadt. There Cellarius had ended up studying theology with John Eck, but he was now with Melanchthon once more in Wittenberg. The prophet's relationship with Thomas Müntzer is somewhat different, as I have argued in my book on Thomas Müntzer. By the time Müntzer encountered them in Zwickau, a town to which he came in mid-1520, he had already developed his theological position fully.

It was the similarities of their positions that attracted them to one another when after six months in Zwickau, Müntzer was transferred to their church, but there were also differences which led to the alienation of the prophets from Müntzer after the latter's return from Prague in late December 1521. It is probably no accident that Müntzer did not accompany them to Wittenberg in late December 1521.

Two things in particular the Zwickau prophets left as their legacy. The first is doubt in the biblical validity of infant baptism and the second is an emphasis on an interpersonal revelation.

Karlstadt, Westerberg, and Cellarius were all in one fashion or another influenced by these ideas, yet aside from Gerhard Westerberg, no one from this group was ever rebaptized and Westerberg's baptism never really took. Though they virtually all opposed infant baptism, they laid stress instead on the very one-sided baptism of the Holy Spirit. As with mystics generally, the external rites of the Christian faith were to them unimportant. In this respect an observation is in order.

In many ways the spiritualism of these mystically inspired Saxon radicals was similar to the spiritualism to be found in Platonic Christian humanists. John Tauler, for example, knew very well that the mystical view of the soul did not have a biblical origin, that it in fact derived from Plato and Proclus, yet they justified this view through the neo-Platonism of the young Augustine especially to be found in his *Confessions* written before he seriously encountered Paul's theology of the righteousness of God that was to have such an impact on Martin Luther.

Along with this Platonic emphasis on the soul as the secret abode of God with its consequent potential for man to become divinized, as even Augustine argued in an early letter to his friend Nebridius; he spoke of becoming or growing god-like in leisure. There also came the concept of conversion through the power of the Holy Spirit. To a certain extent, this was also based on Augustine's account in his *Confessions* of his own conversion. It's a very famous account, but we don't have time to go into it at this point.

In the preface to Tauler's sermons first published an aliphatic edition of 1498, the story of such a mystical conversion, ostensibly the conversion of John Tauler himself, prefaced the sermons. It was especially on Thomas Müntzer that Tauler's sermons exercised a great influence. He was said to have carried a heavily annotated 1498 edition of Tauler with him constantly, but that document was lost in a church fire in the late eighteenth century.

We have already seen Karlstadt's conflict with Luther after the latter returned from the Wartburg. In recent years, scholars have de-emphasized their early theological differences and stressed the tactical differences with respect to the implementation of

reform.

And is it quite clear that Karlstadt was more willing to defy Frederick's intervention in that process than Luther was, but there may also have been more of an emphasis on the Bible as divine law and emphasis on the Old Testament in Karlstadt than there was in Luther.

Luther's division of the Bible into Law and Gospel, with the New Testament regarded as primarily gospel, as primarily promise, and the old regarded as primarily law with its greater emphasis on the freedom of the Christian may also have played a role in their separation.

At the same time, one should not discount the influence of the Zwickau prophets with their tendency to put the mystical inner word above the written Word or the Scriptures and their rejection of infant baptism. This emphasis on the divine spark within or on the inner word also led to a kind of theological anti-intellectualism, and this manifested itself in Karlstadt fairly quickly.

When Luther returned on March 6, 1522, from the Wartburg and reversed the already instituted reforms, thus discrediting his old ally Karlstadt, the latter reacted in anger by writing a fiery response, but this fiery response was not allowed to be published by the authorities. As a consequence, Karlstadt withdrew from the fray and immersed himself in German mysticism for a period of time. In February of 1523, he left the University of Wittenberg, rejected the academic life as one of arrogance, and adopted the role of the exploited peasant urging his neighbors to call him Brother Andrew.

In the summer of 1523, he was called to become the pastor of a church in Orlamünde. Having greater political freedom in this setting he had images removed from his church, he refused to baptize infants, and he moved away from Luther's interpretation of the Eucharist, that is, from the doctrine of the real presence, to a symbolical interpretation. He translated the Psalms into German for his congregation, and he conducted the entire service in the vernacular. This was too much for Luther, and so he asked the Saxon princes to remove Karlstadt from his position. Banished by the princes, Karlstadt responded by attacking Luther's Eucharistic interpretation, arguing that since Luther could not defend his ideas on the subject; he was forced to use the power of the princes to silence his enemies.

By this time, Zwingli had also developed a similar interpretation of the Eucharist, a factor that was to have important consequences later on; indeed, important political consequences. A number of things now took place that were to bring Karlstadt and a few other Saxon radicals into initial contact with the Swiss Anabaptists.

We will investigate these connections in a broader context later on. Here, however, the outline of this context must be described.

In September of 1524, Grebel, Manz, and their friends wrote letters of inquiry to Thomas Müntzer, to Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and to Martin Luther. The only one that has remained that is still in existence or that has been rediscovered is the letter to Thomas Müntzer. Standing at a critical juncture of their theological development, the Swiss Brethren began seeking external confirmation for the actions they were about to take in the city of Zurich. Karlstadt sent his brother-in-law, Gerhard Westerberg, to meet with the brethren. He himself also came shortly after toward the end of October 1524.

It is clear from the record that Karlstadt and Westerberg met with Felix Manz in Basel, where they attempted to publish some of Karlstadt's writings, possibly a tract on baptism which has since been lost, and some writings on the Eucharist. It has been argued that Karlstadt had a major impact on the Swiss Brethren, but I regard this as rather doubtful, and I will give my reasons in the lecture on humanism and Anabaptism.

In any case, unlike the Swiss Brethren, Karlstadt was never baptized upon his confession of faith, nor did he to our knowledge ever rebaptize anyone himself. Westerberg, however, was rebaptized, and he was rebaptized in the city of Münster in February 1534, but he left the movement and returned to the Reformed Church in Brandenburg later on.

The essential difference between the two poles of the movement, that is, the Swiss center and the Saxon center, was the mystical element in the thinking of the Saxon radicals, a thinking that denigrated the externalities of the faith, especially water baptism, emphasizing rather the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the interior aspect of the faith to the detriment of the external is particularly apparent in Thomas Müntzer. Just before the Leipzig disputation of late July/early August 1519, Thomas Müntzer had an intense encounter with the writings of John Tauler in the city of Orlamünde.

Particularly important for his reading of Tauler's sermons was the introductory story of Tauler's ostensible conversion, a story that has been entitled the *Meisterbuch*, a story the German Jesuit scholar, Heinrich Denifle, discredited as a forgery in the late 1870s. This Taularian emphasis Müntzer combined after the Leipzig debate with a reading of Eusebius's church history, the sermons and letters of Augustine, and the Acts of the Council of Constance. All three of these volumes he ordered from a Leipzig book dealer before he even left the city.

The books that he ordered were a direct response to the issues raised at the disputation. That disputation had placed Augustine at a very critical juncture in the history of the church, it had dealt heavily with John Hus and his heresy, and so church history became very important. The whole development of the church came under discussion, and so Thomas Müntzer in his theological development and the books that he reads for this theological development are a direct response to the issues raised by Luther and John Eck at the Leipzig disputation.

By the time he came to Zwickau, that is, Thomas Müntzer came to Zwickau, in May 1520, a little less than a year later he was well on his way to integrating the various aspects of his thought into a coherent theological hold. At the center of his thinking lay the mystical neo-Platonic concept of the abyss of the soul where God or the divine resided.

The *Meisterbuch*, that account of Tauler's conversion, had taught him that when the Holy Spirit comes over a man, as it had apparently come over John Tauler, and when it was joined with the divine already in man, two things happened. First, a person was then empowered to live his Christian faith. Second, when this had happened, that person had the Word of God nakedly within him.

Listen to this passage from the *Meisterbuch* after Tauler was supposed to have experienced a cataclysmic conversion. The person speaking is a pious layman who has apparently led Tauler to his conversion of the Holy Spirit. And I quote,

Dear Sir, the pious layman says thou must understand that now for the very first time thou hast found the true, the great grace of God. I say to thee that now for the very first time, thou hast been touched by the most high, and this thou must know, as formerly the letter has somewhat killed

thee, so now shall the same make thee alive again. For now thy teaching comes from God the Holy Ghost whereas before it came from the flesh. Now thou hast the light of the Holy Ghost received from the grace of God and thou hast the Holy Scriptures in thee. Therefore, hast thou now a great advantage and in the future far more than formerly thou shalt understand the Scriptures for thou knowest full well that the Scriptures in many places seems to contradict themselves but now that in the light of the Holy Ghost thou hast received divine grace to possess the Holy Scriptures in thyself, so wilt thou understand that all Scripture has the same meaning and is never self-contradictory.

But Thomas Müntzer now added through his reading of Eusebius and his reading of Augustine a number of other elements to his thought. Eusebius showed him how the apostolic church filled with the Holy Ghost had lived its faith and had been a pure church, a church of wheat. In that same history, however, Eusebius quoted from the writings of one of the early church thinkers by the name of Hegesippus that with the death of the apostles the church had become a prostitute and had forced the Holy Spirit to leave it. Hence, tares had filled its ranks, and Thomas Müntzer now wants to recover that apostolic church. He calls the new church that he wants to bring into being, he speaks of it as the *futura ecclesia*, as the future church, but he also speaks of it as the new apostolic church.

From Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the tares, he gathered that the tares would not be removed from the church until the time of harvest, that is, until the end times. Only then once the tares had been removed would the Holy Spirit return to the church and only then could such a new apostolic church be born.

And this was Müntzer's preeminent goal: the reestablishment of the apostolic church or the re-emergence of the apostolic church which he called "the new apostolic church." But in Augustine's context this could take place only in the time of harvest or in the end times when the tares would be separated from the wheat. It should not surprise us then to see Müntzer misinterpret the uprising of the peasants, that is, the Peasants' War of 1524 to 1525 as a sign of the end times which would lead to the rebirth of the apostolic church. But that of course did not happen, for the peasants were defeated and Thomas Müntzer was himself executed in June of 1525.

During Müntzer's active period from May 1520 to his last days in the city of Neuhausen, he continued to baptize children, even though he polemicized against infant baptism especially in his treatise of 1524 known as *The Protestation*. He laid stress on the interior baptism or the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Indeed in his interpretation of John 5 verses 1 to 10, the story of the moving of the waters at the pool in Bethesda, he interpreted water as "spirit." Water baptism had nothing to do with the creation of an apostolic church for him. The Holy Spirit and His return had everything to do with it.

Further, his emphasis on the inner word, on the Holy Spirit within, allowed him to denigrate the written Word or the written Scriptures. He therefore called Luther, who was a student of the Bible, a scribe and a Pharisee, a man bound to the letter and a slave to externals. He spoke like mystics and humanists about the deification of man by various stages. He did not speak of salvation through the righteousness of Christ, and Thomas Müntzer believed himself to be one of the elect servants of God, as he repeatedly called himself, who through the Holy Spirit within him could separate the wheat from the tares.

What led Thomas Müntzer into revolution, however, was not only his view of the apostolic church, his view of the return of the Holy Spirit in the time of harvest; it was first and foremost Duke George of Saxony's and Count Ernest of Mansfeld's attempt to use the 1523 Nuremberg Edict to suppress his gospel by interpreting it in a Catholic sense. He came to see Catholic rulers as the essential revolutionaries because of their opposition to that very edict, which he like Luther interpreted in a Protestant sense, and he came to see "pious Christian princes" like Frederick the Wise of Saxony as "unwilling to eradicate Catholicism as they should according to Deuteronomy 7.

We shall deal with the Zurich letter later on in another lecture. Here all we need to say is that that letter from Conrad Grebel to Thomas Müntzer of September 1524 never reached Thomas Müntzer and was much later discovered in the archives in the city of Schaffhausen among the papers of Conrad Grebel's brother-in-law Joachim von Watt [also referred to Joachim Vadian].

Contrary to Heinrich Bullinger, there never was any physical contact between Thomas Müntzer and the Swiss Brethren. Clearly there were two very different movements, one originating in Zurich, the other having its source in Saxony. There are similarities

between the two, but there are also differences, and there were some contacts as we have seen between Karlstadt and Felix Manz, Gerhard Westerburg and Felix Manz, others as we shall see later on between Martin Cellarius and to the people in Zurich. But can one speak of them simply as the two poles of a similar movement, or are the differences between them too fundamental, too great? These questions we shall explore in the last four lectures of this series.