

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN THE MEDIEVAL MYSTICS AND THE SPIRITUALS OF THE RADICAL REFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether or not there are links between the medieval mystics, particularly those of South Germany, and the more radical elements of the reformation has brought forth much dispute. There is a large literature, much of it polemical in style. The confessional approach to history has led to condemnation of the radicals from both Protestant and Catholic theologians. A small group, with an apologetic approach, has defended the anabaptist cause as distinct from the more radical and revolutionary elements, but whilst attempting to distance itself from what Zeman calls 'the embarrassing anomaly of the Münsterite Kingdom'.¹ While the Mennonites have done much research on the period, some of it is biased because of its apologetic nature. For example, we read in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* that Thomas Müntzer had nothing essential in common with anabaptism and was not even interested in adult baptism.² Müntzer was certainly a radical but to say that he did not accept adult baptism contradicts the evidence. Conrad Grebel wrote to Müntzer in 1524 that 'On the matter of baptism thy book pleases us well, and we desire to be further instructed by thee.'³ Grebel goes on in the same letter to say that infant baptism is a 'senseless, blasphemous abomination' and that Müntzer knows this ten times better than himself. Not only did Müntzer accept adult baptism, but this was recognized by Grebel, who is accepted in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* as 'not only the founder of the Swiss brethren movement and the later Mennonite Church but also one of the prophetic spirits of Christendom in its great and insistent tradition of reform and revival.'⁴ To the Mennonites Grebel was acceptable because he was seen as a pacifist, whereas Müntzer was not acceptable because he had taken up arms and was seen as a precursor to the events in Münster.

Even in the sixteenth century there was a desire to condemn radicals. As Whale writes, 'Anabaptism was universally repudiated and reviled in the sixteenth century'.⁵ Luther referred to Müntzer as 'the Devil of Allstedt' and to the Wittenberg radicals (or Zwickau prophets) as *Schwärmerei*, which literally means 'swarming' or 'foaming at the mouth', as in mad frenzy.⁶ There was much dispute in Zürich where formal disputations were held: on 17 January, 20 March and 6-8 November 1525 Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz argued that infant baptism was no baptism.⁷ The council in Zürich, on 7 March 1526, made rebaptism punishable by death. They wrote that although they had attempted to turn the misguided and erring Anabaptists from their errors and had punished several, men, women and girls, some remained disobedient and should be drowned without mercy.⁸ Until the nineteenth century 'Anabaptist' remained a term of abuse synonymous with 'Münsterite' or 'Müntzerite', meaning seditious, polygamous, licentious and

tyrannical.⁹ Marxist historian, viewing Müntzer as a revolutionary hero of popular social discontent because of his role and death during the peasants' revolt of 1525, have claimed the radical elements of the reformation as precursors of Marxism,¹⁰ thereby increasing the desire of others to distance themselves from Müntzer. All this makes it difficult to discern exactly what was going on in the radical reformation. Since the radicals themselves were trying to break with the state church, it is hard to establish connections with the medieval church and its mystics.

So were there links between the radical elements of the reformation and medieval mysticism? Müntzer, on whom the literature is immense and subject to considerable controversy,¹¹ is just one of those to be considered. This paper is limited to the early movements of the 1520s, though it would be interesting to follow the evolution of the mystical elements from the 1520s into the modern free churches.

In the past few decades, with the revisionist approach to reformation studies, the reformers have been recognized as products of their time; some aspects of their theology and spirituality were continued from the fifteenth century and earlier. There were even 'reformers' before the reformation: John Wycliffe (c.1329-1384) has been called 'the Morning Star of the Reformation', for insisting that lordship depended on grace and that everyone in a state of grace has true lordship. Wycliffe's doctrines were taken up in Bohemia by John Huss (c.1369-1415) and his followers, who also advocated that the laity should receive communion in both kinds (*sub utraque specie*), who were thus called 'utraquists'.¹² The reformation did not appear out of a vacuum. There was both continuity and discontinuity with the past.

Some authors say that there are clear links between medieval mystics and the non-magisterial reformers. Zeman includes medieval mysticism as a source of anabaptism,¹³ arguing that this follows from the work of Karl Holl who wrote in 1923 that there was 'no Anabaptism that did not lean heavily on mysticism.'¹⁴ Elton accepts medieval links, in particular to the German mystics, but claims that the radical reformers did not deliberately borrow these ideas but were influenced unconsciously by spiritual traditions.¹⁵ He is not sympathetic to the radicals, who he dismisses as anarchists who only cared that they were chosen by God.¹⁶ He suggests that, because many of them claimed to make 'the inner spirit their sole guiding light', their notions would easily 'boil over into an orgiastic display of unbridled service of self.' Such people were a threat to the *status quo*, like the mystics earlier and so became the target for abuse. Goertz sees a clear link between mystics and radicals. He writes that Müntzer 'shaped the ideas of medieval mysticism that he adopted into a new inwardness, and fanned the coals of apocalyptic expectations, cherished since the late Middle Ages, into a revolutionary fire.'¹⁷

There have been many influences on the radical reformation. Stayer, Packull and Deppermann in 1975 argued that there is polygenesis, not monogenesis.¹⁸ Commenting on an article of Goertz, Stayer argues for a diversity of methodology and a diversity of interpretation on anabaptist studies.¹⁹ As Zeman states, the

question of the medieval roots of anabaptism cannot be addressed without considering the methodology of historical interpretation.²⁰ It is also possible for ideas to appear that have no obvious source, but just appear when the time is right. So there is not only polygenesis but also parthenogenesis.

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL?

What is meant by a spiritual of the radical reformation? The term 'Radical Reformation' comes from G. H. Williams' book of that title, in which he divides the radicals into different categories, bringing some order to the confusion of their diversity. The term 'spiritual' is due to Bernard Reardon, who splits the radicals into anabaptists, spirituals and rationalists, although noting that the divisions should not be used rigidly. All shared certain elements, in particular separation of church and state. All were suspicious of institutions. Reardon claims that 'Reformation radicalism' was not a 'self-consistent movement', because it did not organize reformist campaigns like the Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians.²¹ They would have been inconsistent if they had attempted to organize such reform: by its very nature, the radical reformation could not set up a Reformed Church. The radicals accepted diversity as necessary to the church, and could only organize their own church, on the basis of believers coming together freely.

Some have used the term 'spiritual' to describe unacceptable parts of the reformation. Thus J. S. Whale equates all spirituals with the *Schwärmerei*,²² whom he sees as Montanists, who disapprove of the established church and are made restless by the contrast between 'empirical and ideal Christianity'.²³ In fact, *Schwärmerei* is a term that historically could only be applied to the Zwickau prophets of 1521, so named by Luther.²⁴ It should not be used of spirituals in general.

Reardon writes of those he calls spirituals that they are distinguished by their mystical bent and their concern for the inwardness of true religion through the enlightenment and guidance of the Spirit.²⁵ Such definition would self-evidently link the spirituals with mysticism, without making it clear whether or not such people existed, so it cannot be the starting point for this paper. Neither can anabaptists be defined by their view of baptism. The Schleithem Confession of 1527²⁶ has often been used as normative for anabaptists, although its emphasis is on the nature of the church, not on baptism. Gritsch writes, 'Neither theological nor sociological terms of classification have been very successful in providing a working typology for the Radical Reformation'.²⁷ However, although all typologies have blurred boundaries, they are still useful.

A spiritual is better defined as someone who views scripture as secondary. Anabaptists are then people who consider scripture to be primary. This is close to West's distinction between evangelical anabaptists and spiritualists.²⁸ By this definition, spirituals, but not anabaptists, can be linked with mystics, who also fail to regard scripture as primary. Most anabaptists, however, can show a spiritual

side: there are no pure anabaptists and no pure spirituals, but rather people somewhere on a scale between the two. These anabaptists can in practice come very close to the position of spirituals. The basic question is which is primary, the Holy Spirit or scripture? After the second disputation in Zürich in October 1523 Grebel wrote, 'Zwingli, the herald of the Word, has cast down the Word, has trodden it underfoot, and has brought it into captivity.'²⁹ Zwingli was taking the most rigid view of the authority of the bible. Even Grebel recognized that scripture had to be interpreted by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit had to be tested against scripture, making what is now known as a hermeneutical circle. Similarly, Müntzer was not a pure spiritual. As Gritsch accepts,

Müntzer finally solved the problem of religious authority by identifying his own will with that of God. But his writings show that he had sufficient theological insight to know that once the subjective experience of the Spirit becomes authoritative, the Bible also still has some authority, since men with the same spiritual experience must have written it.³⁰

Müntzer did accept some biblical authority.

The term 'Anabaptist' used to refer to all radicals of the reformation and is still sometimes thus used, particularly by people unsympathetic to the radicals. In this paper the terms are used as defined above, while recognizing that although the two groups had different emphases they were not mutually exclusive. The rationalists, who were generally anti-trinitarian, are not considered here, because they were not at their most active until the mid-sixteenth century and they did not have much contact with anabaptists and spirituals until later.

WHAT IS MEDIEVAL MYSTICISM?

People use the idea of mysticism in a loose way, probably even more now than thirty years ago when Knowles argued that the words 'mystic' and 'contemplative' had both become very popular and extremely ambiguous.³¹ The problem arises because mysticism is supra-biblical. It implies more intimate communication than is found from a purely rationalistic approach to faith. Knowles identifies three types of theology: natural theology, dogmatic and speculative theology, and mystical theology. The first is our knowledge of God 'as Maker and Governor', which we have by 'a natural process of reasoning'. The second is learned from the 'inspired writers of Scripture, and from the words and works of His Son, Jesus Christ'. Traditional mystical theology is then described as (1) utterly different, (2) immanent and received, and (3) incommunicable.³² This is presumably an accepted Roman Catholic position, as the work received an *Imprimatur* in the pre-Vatican II days of 1961. Nevertheless, to speak of 'traditional mystical theology' is in itself something of a contradiction. Mysticism will always be marginal in a church that wants to check theology against both scripture and traditional doctrine. If it is really utterly different, immanent and received and incommunicable, then it can hardly be called traditional, yet this description of mystical theology is

commonly accepted.³³ Just as Müntzer had the difficulty of distinguishing his own will from that of God, Knowles writes, 'The ultimate for all must be: that the will of God is alone to be considered, and that what does not tend to the union of the individual human will with the divine will is of no supernatural worth.'³⁴ There is always a subjective aspect of mystical experience, which medieval theologians saw as based in 'the ground of the soul' (*Seelengrund*) or the inalienable and irrepressible 'spark of the will and reason'.³⁵

It has been claimed that 'the medieval mystic was the residuary legatee of Platonism, and the pattern of his thought was therefore dualist'.³⁶ Whilst medieval mysticism had Platonism as part of its intellectual inheritance, it interpreted and developed it in new ways. Mysticism was common in the late medieval period, particularly within the two Mendicant Orders founded in the early thirteenth century, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Cohn sees both orders as arising to combat the heresy of the Free Spirit, and orders in general as a way for the church to control and use the emotional energies which had been threatening its security.³⁷ He thinks this ceased to be effective towards the end of the thirteenth century when the Beghards began to flourish. Referring to them as 'quasi-mystics', he claims that in their experiences can be recognized a condition familiar to every psychiatrist and psychoanalyst as a characteristic of schizophrenics and paranoiacs.³⁸ Cohn is keen to distinguish orthodox mystics from quasi-mystics, whom he sees as nihilistic megalomaniacs,³⁹ but is reluctant to accept anyone as an orthodox mystic. Using Jungian psychology to understand chiliastic movements and human nature, he claims that chiliastic movements are driven by paranoia, maintaining that, both in the Middle Ages and with Nazi and Communist leaders of this century, 'eschatological phantasy' has led to a 'truly psychotic irrationality'. Many people, prone to see life in black and white, are led towards paranoia.⁴⁰ This may be so, but Cohn himself may have fallen into this trap in trying to dismiss 'quasi-mysticism': it is relatively common for authors to claim that people whose views they disagree with must be mad, heretical, or both.⁴¹ Cohn's book is still very useful, because it points out features that distinguish both mystics and radicals from the rest of society.

In the medieval period, the influence of neo-Platonism underwent a change of emphasis. Subjective mystical experience gained in importance relative to the objective mystical theology of the Patristic period.⁴² It was not until the ninth century that the writings of Dionysius were made available to the western church in Latin translation by John Scotus Eriugena. The most influential Dionysian book was *The Mystical Theology*, although it is very short and only a small part of his total works. His *Celestial Hierarchy* presented a cosmology that was less acceptable. Petry's *Late Medieval Mysticism* gives good coverage of a number of mystics of the period, of which but three types probably influenced the reformation; as Packull points out, there was cross-fertilization between these.⁴³

German Dominican mysticism. The Order of Preachers, known as the Dominicans, was founded with papal approval in 1216 by the Spaniard, Dominic

Guzman (c.1170-1221). Ten years earlier he had begun preaching with papal legates against heretics in the South of France. They travelled on foot, without funds, begging bread and preaching.⁴⁴ A Dominican, Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327), has been described as the fountainhead of German mysticism,⁴⁵ which was based chiefly on Dionysian neo-Platonic teaching in which the fully mystical contemplation of God in darkness was accompanied by a new, infused love and knowledge.⁴⁶ Eckhart explained the Trinity in terms of a neo-Platonic emanation theory of creation. The Father become self-conscious through the birth of the *logos* or Son, which was the object or mirror in which the Father recognized himself. The Holy Spirit is then the medium of communication within the Godhead. Thus creation begins with a division within the Godhead. Salvation is a reversal of the creation process, where the diversity is brought back into unity through the *unio mystica*.⁴⁷ Some of Eckhart's work was declared heretical in the bull *In Agro Dominico*, 1328. Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361) and Henry Suso (c.1295-1366) were successors of Eckhart, and through them his work is thought to have been made known to the reformers. Luther is known to have read Tauler's sermons.⁴⁸ Tauler's terminology was also used by the spirituals.

*Franciscan mysticism.*⁴⁹ The Franciscan Order was founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226). His spirituality was based on total obedience to Christ, prayer at all times, desire to suffer with Christ and love of nature in all its forms. After his death, argument arose within the order about the strictness with which the rule should be adhered to. The close followers of Francis came to be called the 'Spirituals' and took the strictest view of the rule.

Joachim of Fiore (c.1135-1202), a Calabrian Cistercian monk, was a mystic who had a strong influence on the Spirituals.⁵⁰ He spoke of the coming age of Spirit, where apocalypticism was to be transformed into a *via crucis* of non-resistant suffering and pacifism. His biblical interpretation was allegorical and he used the Book of Revelation to predict history. He developed the doctrine of the three *status* or ages in history: the age of the Father, which was the age of the Law and the Old Testament; the age of the Son, which was the age of grace and of the New Testament; and the age of the Spirit, which was the age of love, freedom and the *spiritualis intellectus* and was to be the culmination of history, when all men would be contemplative monks rapt in mystical ecstasy. To bring about the third age, the 'everlasting gospel' (*evangelium aeternum*) was to be preached. Joachim contradicted the traditional Augustinian view that the Kingdom of God was already realized as far as possible on earth. Previously this form of chiliasm had been condemned as heretical but now it seemed more acceptable, although some of Joachim's views were condemned in 1215 and 1256.

John of Parma, a Spiritual and Joachimist, was elected Minister General of the Franciscans in 1247.⁵¹ He was succeeded by Bonaventure (c.1217-1274) who was not a follower of Joachim and had his own brand of mysticism. His *The Soul's Journey into God* envisages the physical universe and the soul of man as mirrors and

as rungs in a ladder leading to God, with a seven-stage journey, the seventh being one of ecstatic rapture. Two of his other works, *The Tree of Life* and *The Mystical Vine*, both dwell on the life of Christ, the basis of all of Bonaventure's mysticism.

*Cistercian and Augustinian mysticism.*⁵² The great Cistercian was Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), whose mysticism was affective and penitential and who was well-known for his asceticism. His mysticism showed a strong neo-Platonic influence and it is likely that he knew of the Greek mystical tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius. The Augustinian School of St Victor on the Seine in Paris had a similar bent to Bernard. The successive canons there, Hugh (c.1096-1141), Richard (c.1123-1173) and Adam (d.1192), showed a combination of mysticism and scholasticism. Unlike some mystics, this group showed no hostility to reason and science. Hugh of St Victor wrote, 'Learn all you can. You will find later that nothing is wasted.'⁵³

The fourteenth century saw a great flowering of mystics, not only on the continent but also in England, but the continental reformers do not appear to have had contact with the five great English mystics, Richard Rolle, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.⁵⁴ There were other women mystics, in particular the Beguines and Hildegard of Bingen. These were thought to be related to a sect known as 'The Brethren of the Free Spirit' and were said to repudiate the church and its sacraments, believing themselves to be one with God. At the Ecumenical Council under Pope Clement V at Vienne in 1311-12, it was said,

We have been told that certain women commonly called Beguines, affected by a kind of madness, discuss the Holy Trinity and the divine essence, and express opinions on matters of faith and sacraments contrary to the catholic faith, deceiving many simple people.⁵⁵

Since Davies devotes over thirty pages of his book, *Meister Eckhart*, to the influence of these religious women on Eckhart, it seems reasonable to suppose that they could have influenced the reformation as much as any other group of mystics.

CONTINUITY BETWEEN MYSTICS AND SPIRITUALS?

Some people, in taking a confessional approach to the reformation, assume that it can have gained nothing from medieval mysticism. For example, Whale sees mysticism as a Roman Catholic phenomenon which derives from 'the fifth-century impostor who pretended to be Dionysius the Areopagite and whose teachings were taken over wholesale from the pagan neo-Platonist Proclus.'⁵⁶ This accords with Cohn's claim that medieval mysticism was a remnant from Platonism⁵⁷ and continued only in the psychotic.

How, then, would connections be recognized between mystics and the reformers, in particular the spirituals? One traditional definition of a mystic assumes the proximity of God and man, while that of a spiritual assumes a gulf which can only be bridged by the mediating role of Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ This would imply that there

could be no links between mystic and spiritual, for the one assumes the immanence of God in man and the other assumes transcendence. This, however, is not the end of the story.

As early as 1885 in *Die Reformation und die alteren Reformparteien*, Ludwig Keller argued that there was a continuous descent from medieval sects to the reformation, when they were gathered together into a great, though somewhat chaotic, movement by the radical leaders of the sixteenth century.⁵⁹ In 1892 Alfred Hegler, a philosopher and church historian in Tübingen, argued that the basic source for the radicals was medieval mysticism. The written source was the *Theologia Deutsch*.⁶⁰ Ozment says Müntzer possessed a copy, although that is not proven. The *Theologia Deutsch* was written by an anonymous priest in Sachsenhausen in the late fourteenth century. The name came from the 1518 edition by Luther. The work echoed justification by faith and consisted of fifty-six chapters of a pastoral character. Their style is simple and direct.⁶¹ They could have been spiritual addresses and they stress self-abnegation and abandonment, while distrusting excessive learning. This work appears to have been relatively well-known. Jones, in *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1909), shows many intellectual connections between certain anabaptists and earlier mysticism. His book, unusually accurate in its scholarship, is more useful than some recent work.

In the early part of this century there was controversy between Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Holl over the origins of anabaptism. Both agreed that there was a single path in the succession of anabaptists which ran through Zürich, but they disagreed over where the path started. Troeltsch said that the anabaptist movement began in January 1525 in Zürich after the initiation of believer's baptism. Holl claimed that the movement began in 1521, when Luther confronted the Zwickau prophets in Wittenberg. This controversy obscured the possibility of other sources for anabaptism, not all of Swiss origin. The classic paper by Stayer, Packull and Deppermann (1975) has since shown that anabaptism has multiple origins. Medieval mysticism was one influence on the development of anabaptism and the radical reformation.

The case of Thomas Müntzer (c.1490-1525) shows the difficulty of establishing solid links. Ozment says Müntzer knew the work of Tauler. Friesen claims to prove that Müntzer possessed his works.⁶² However, in a review, Cameron writes: 'The book builds over-elaborate hypotheses upon circumstantial evidence, repeats a few source texts several times over, and digresses at unhelpful length about Müntzer's alleged sources.'⁶³ Gritsch also links Müntzer to Tauler and Suso.⁶⁴ The evidence that Müntzer knew the *Theologia Deutsch* appears to rest entirely on the booklist found on the reverse of a draft letter to his father.⁶⁵ This may just have been a publisher's list, and not indicate books owned or read by Müntzer. Evidence that he knew the works of Tauler is also weak. The best evidence seems to have disappeared: apparently there was, in the eighteenth century, a book in the library at Gera called *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum, in quo*

visiones Hermae, Uquetini, F. Roberti, Hildegardis, Elisabethe eht Nechtildis etc., which was bound with the sermons of Tauler. An inscription indicated that the book belonged to Müntzer,⁶⁶ suggesting that he knew Tauler's work and perhaps that of some Beguines. The only explicit reference to Tauler and Suso comes in a letter to Müntzer from a nun, writing after mid-May 1520:

I cannot believe that it was from Tauler or Brother Suso that you learned, or read in their writings, about buying the pretty maidens presents at the fair. Indulge in this to your heart's content; you will certainly find that it does you no harm.⁶⁷

This suggests he had some familiarity with these authors. The best evidence, and that hardly indisputable, for their direct influence is found in the word 'footcloth' (*fusshader*), used by both Müntzer and Suso to symbolize the humiliation that a Christian must undergo; it is something trampled underfoot like a worm.⁶⁸ To state unequivocally that Müntzer knew the work of Tauler is stretching the factual evidence.

Tracing the written sources known to Müntzer does not tell the whole story. He is repeatedly seen as a mystic and an exponent of medieval cross mysticism, in which Christ's redemptive work is internalized by each Christian. This differs from Luther's cross theology which assumes that Christ has already suffered for the Christian. Müntzer's use of the mystical 'inner Word' and his critique of the 'outer order' are a direct corollary to his mystical theology.⁶⁹ To Müntzer, the inner Word was the Father addressing the Son in the soul, and it appears to be interchangeable with the movement of the Spirit.⁷⁰ This fits well with Eckhart's mysticism. Such connections with mysticism are not indisputable and interpretation of them depends on one's view of the transmission of knowledge in the sixteenth century.

Packull, attempting to bring out the connection between mysticism and the South German anabaptists, particularly Hans Denck and Hans Hut, traces a tradition running into South German anabaptism through Müntzer from the *Theologia Deutsch*, Tauler and Eckhart, and concludes by emphasizing that the South German Baptists took their theological starting point not from the reformers but from a popularized medieval mystical tradition.⁷¹ There were, however, links with the mainstream reformers, but these Packull is not keen to emphasize. Müntzer himself may have learnt of medieval mysticism from the young Luther, as Friesen suggests: 'Müntzer was in all likelihood drawn to a study of Tauler through Luther's writings, especially the latter's introductions to the 1516 and 1518 editions of the anonymous *Theologia Deutsch*.'⁷² Although Luther and Müntzer frequently disagreed after the publication of the *Prague Manifesto* in 1521, this does not deny the possibility that Müntzer's mysticism could have been initiated by Luther.

McLaughlin writes in his book on Schwenckfeld, 'Tracing influences is a dangerous and usually unremunerative activity.'⁷³ This is an exaggeration, but it is difficult to be sure of sources of ideas. Just because one author uses a phrase in

common with another does not mean the idea came from him or her. In this field authors are inclined to claim links on too little evidence. Links may be found by showing that someone possessed and read certain books, by the use of certain words and ideas, or by establishing that certain words and ideas are part of the common intellectual currency, but such evidence will always be open to doubt.

SOME EXAMPLES

It is here only possible to give a taste of some of the connections that have been made between individual radical reformers and mystics. It has been shown that it is more difficult than at first appears to make definitive statements about Thomas Müntzer's connections. What about Caspar Schwenckfeld, generally recognized as a spiritual, and Balthasar Hubmaier, generally recognized as an anabaptist?

Caspar Schwenckfeld (c.1489-1561) comes close to being a pure spiritual. Hvolbeck writes that 'Schwenckfeld asserts the priority and exclusivity of the Holy Spirit in the form of a revelation given to man as a source of knowledge',⁷⁴ and 'He is representative of the spiritualist tradition of early modern Europe and he owes a debt to the German mystical tradition of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and the *Theologia Deutsch*.'⁷⁵ As with Müntzer, it is hard to establish solid links. Hvolbeck tends to exaggerate the mystical connections. McLaughlin, more cautious, considered that Schwenckfeld was one of those pieces left over after the jigsaw was complete.⁷⁶

Born a landed noble and courtier of Germany's eastern periphery, Caspar Schwenckfeld became a notorious religious radical in Germany's southern heartland. He appears to have been a Docetist, who emphasized freedom of the will, the spirit's role in faith and the possibilities for individual regeneration. This led him to redefine the relationship between inner and outer reform. In 1525 he wrote to Luther, adding to the debate over the Lord's Supper. In the process he made his own position clear. Luther maintained that the bread was Christ's body and the wine was his blood. Zwingli maintained that the bread only signified Christ's body. Schwenckfeld found both views offensive. If Zwingli was right, then there was no means for the material bread to affect the soul, which was not material. If Luther was right, then even Judas and other sinners were exonerated and saved merely by partaking of the Mass. Schwenckfeld's way out of this dilemma was to argue that a believer had to be spiritually enlightened in order to receive the spiritual benefits of the Mass.⁷⁷ By 1527 he had moved to a position where the church, its sacraments and its offices seemed to be hindrances and obstacles rather than instruments.⁷⁸ His anthropology was one of a quiet and reflective following of Christ, which required giving up the 'Old Adam' in order to 'put on the new man'.⁷⁹ His language and ideas are flooded with mystical motifs but, as with Müntzer, it is hard to establish his sources. McLaughlin's biography relegates this question to a footnote, apparently because of the difficulty of answering it.⁸⁰ Possible influences are Crautwald (Bishop of Liegnitz), Zwingli, Oecolampadius and

the early Fathers. Tauler has also been singled out as a principal source, although there is evidence that Schwenckfeld did not read much of Tauler until after 1531, by which time his ideas were already formulated. McLaughlin concludes that 'by the sixteenth century Tauler's ideas had become elements of the common intellectual heritage of the literate segments of European society.'⁸¹ This seems a plausible explanation for Schwenckfeld's mysticism but it cannot easily be verified. Another possibility, not mentioned by McLaughlin, is that Schwenckfeld came to his views independently. Certainly his view that the external sacraments had no importance cannot be traced backwards. Perhaps this is an example of parthenogenesis.

Balthasar Hubmaier (c.1485-1528), parish priest of Waldshut, was present at the second public disputation in Zürich in October 1523 and was closely associated with the beginnings of the anabaptist movement. The group of radicals in Zürich also included Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, Ludwig Hätzer and Georg Blaurock.⁸² The first sign of a split between this group and Zwingli came in 1523 over the matter of tithes, not baptism.⁸³ The main difference between them was over the nature of the church. However, it was because of their belief and practice of believer's baptism that in January 1527 Manz was drowned, Blaurock was flogged and expelled, and Hubmaier was tortured and banished from Zürich. Grebel would have been drowned too, if he had not first died of the plague.⁸⁴ After his banishment, Hubmaier moved to Nicolsburg where he came into contact with Hans Hut, which links him to the movement in Moravia and South Germany. There was disagreement between Hubmaier and Hut, although after a memorable disputation, where opponents of both added to the arguments, Hut succeeded in escaping from Nicolsburg.⁸⁵ Hubmaier was eventually executed in Vienna, after being accused of sedition at Waldshut and involvement with the 'revolting peasantry'.⁸⁶

In the treatise, *On Free Will*, Hubmaier comes close to the spirituals, for he holds that 'the spirit of man, which was not implicated in the Fall, enjoys an unobtrusive sovereignty over creation, once it is kindled by the Holy Spirit; for the spiritual man judges all things and is judged by none.'⁸⁷ He also produced evidence that some scriptural passages were outwardly contradictory and said that what counted was a proper understanding of the whole.⁸⁸ Rufus Jones goes further in his assessment by saying that Hubmaier showed a decidedly mystical strain. He demonstrates this by quoting Hubmaier's *Table of Doctrine*:

God draws men in two ways, inwardly and outwardly. The inward drawing is wrought by God, who enlightens the soul within, so that it understands the undeniable truth, and is so thoroughly convinced by the Spirit and the preached word, as to confess from the conscience that these must be so and not otherwise.⁸⁹

So even in Hubmaier there are possibilities of mystical connections.

A radical with clear links to the Joachimites is the painter and poet, David Joris (c.1501-1556). He joined the Melchiorites and was baptized by Obe Phillips in

1534. Joris believed that only baptism of the spirit was relevant and that what was needed was inner light. Scripture was of no avail in itself. He saw himself as the Third David and expected the imminent arrival of the New Age, which would come with suffering. In 1543 he fled to Basle, where he concealed his identity.⁹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has highlighted points of contention between different authors in the field and seen that the way information is interpreted often depends on the author's point of view. This is to some extent unavoidable as all are affected by their background. There were many influences on the reformation, including Erasmian humanism, the scholastic tradition and nominalism, popular piety, apocalypticism, and revolutionary traditions.⁹¹ Some mystical ideas were not derived from medieval influences, but have arisen independently. There was not only polygenesis but parthenogenesis.⁹²

Nevertheless, there are some links with medieval mysticism, seen, for example, in Thomas Müntzer, Caspar Schwenckfeld, and even in Balthasar Hubmaier. There are neither pure anabaptists nor pure spirituals, and the boundaries between the two are fluid. There are methodological problems in firmly establishing links with mystics because it is not easy to understand the intellectual climate in which these people were living, nor to be certain which books they had read or which people they had met, except occasionally when there are contemporary sources. This paper has only looked at the development of mysticism and its links with the spirituals, but it is paradigmatic of all historical processes of intellectual development.

NOTES

This paper originated as a dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in partial requirement for the BA degree.

- 1 Jarold Knox Zeman, 'Anabaptism: A replay of medieval themes or a prelude to the modern age', *Mennonite Quarterly Review (MQR)* 50, 1976, p.263.
- 2 Harold Bender & Henry Smith (eds.), *The Mennonite Encyclopedia (ME)*, 4 vols. Scottdale, Pa., 1955-59: vol.3, p.788.
- 3 George Huntston Williams & Angel M. Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia, 1957, pp.80-1.
- 4 *ME* vol.2, p.575.
- 5 J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition: An Essay in Interpretation*, Cambridge 1955, p.201. The word 'Anabaptism' is being used to cover all radicals.
- 6 Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery*, Cambridge 1988, p.100; Whale, *op.cit.*, p.200.
- 7 Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants*, Grand Rapids 1964, p.229.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.223.
- 9 Williams & Mergal, *op.cit.*, p.26.
- 10 Rowland, *op.cit.*, p.90.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.177.
- 12 F. L. Cross (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (ODCC)*, 1957, pp.182, 667, 1401, 1480.
- 13 Zeman, *op.cit.*, p.260.
- 14 Quoted in Zeman, p.260.
- 15 G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe: 1517-1559*, 20th impression 1979, Glasgow 1963, 88.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, 'Thomas Müntzer: Revolutionary Between the Middle Ages and Modernity', translated by James M. Stayer, *MQR* 64, 1990, pp.23-31.
- 18 James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull & Klaus Deppermann, 'From Monogenesis to

- Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins', *MQR* 49, 1975, pp.83-121.
- 19 Response of Stayer to article by Goertz in *MQR* 53, p.211.
 - 20 Zeman, *op.cit.*, p.259.
 - 21 Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 1981, p.212.
 - 22 Whale, *op.cit.*, p.200 note 1.
 - 23 *ibid.*, p.209.
 - 24 Williams & Mergal, *op.cit.*, p.32.
 - 25 Reardon, *op.cit.*, p.223.
 - 26 William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Valley Forge, 1969, pp.22-31.
 - 27 Eric W. Gritsch, 'Thomas Muentzer and the Origins of Protestant Spiritualism', *MQR* 37, 1963, pp.172-94.
 - 28 W. M. S. West, 'The Anabaptists and the Rise of the Baptist Movement' in *Christian Baptism*, A Gilmore (ed.), 1959, pp.223-72.
 - 29 Quoted in Reardon, *op.cit.*, p.213.
 - 30 Gritsch, *op.cit.*, p.176.
 - 31 David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 1961, p.1.
 - 32 *ibid.*, pp.2-3.
 - 33 For example, Steven E. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century*, 1973, p.3, uses the same definition.
 - 34 Knowles, *op.cit.*, p.13.
 - 35 Ozment, *op.cit.*, p.3.
 - 36 Whale, *op.cit.*, p.26.
 - 37 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 1957, p.163.
 - 38 *ibid.*, p.185.
 - 39 *ibid.*, p.185.
 - 40 *ibid.*, pp.307-14.
 - 41 For further examples, see Whale, *op.cit.*, and R. I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 1977.
 - 42 Andrew Louth in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, pp.272-74.
 - 43 Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525-1531*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, 19, Scottsdale, Pa., 1977, p.20.
 - 44 Simon Tugwell in *The Study of Spirituality*, pp.296-300.
 - 45 Packull, *op.cit.*, p.20.
 - 46 Knowles, *op.cit.*, p.37.
 - 47 Packull, *op.cit.*, p.21.
 - 48 Cyprian Smith and Oliver Davies in *The Study of Spirituality*, pp.315-20.
 - 49 The information on Franciscans in this section uses material from ODCC pp.184, 520-21, 523, 727, and John R. H. Moorman in *The Study of Spirituality*, pp.301-8.
 - 50 Marjorie Reeves in *The Study of Spirituality*, pp.292-3, and Cohn, *op.cit.*, pp.99-102.
 - 51 There was controversy but the Spirituals continued within the Franciscan order until 1317 when Pope John XXII permitted corporate ownership. The Spirituals then became schismatics under the name of 'Fratricelli'.
 - 52 The content of this paragraph also uses information found in Benedicta Ward in *The Study of Spirituality*, pp.283-91, and Ray C. Petry (ed.), *Late Medieval Mysticism*, 1957, pp.79-114.
 - 53 David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, 1st edn. 1962, 2nd edn. D. E. Luscombe and C. N. L. Brooke (eds.), 1988, p.130.
 - 54 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd edn. 1990, p.142.
 - 55 Fiona Bowie (ed.), *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology*, translated by Oliver Davies, 1989, p.35.
 - 56 Whale, *op.cit.*, p.254.
 - 57 Cohn, *op.cit.*, p.163.
 - 58 Stayer et al., *op.cit.*, p.108.
 - 59 Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, 1909, p.370.
 - 60 Ozment, *op.cit.*, pp.14ff.
 - 61 Oliver Davies in *The Study of Spirituality*, p.323.
 - 62 Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, A Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth Century Revolutionary*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1990, chs.1 & 2. The 'proof' comes on p.39, where referance is made to the booklist found among Muntzer's papers.
 - 63 Euan Cameron, 'Review of *Thomas Muentzer, A Destroyer. . .*, by Abraham Friesen', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43, 1992, pp.151-2.
 - 64 Gritsch, *op.cit.*, p.184.
 - 65 Peter Matheson (ed. and trans.), *The Collected Works of Thomas Muntzer*, Edinburgh 1988, p.443.
 - 66 *ibid.*, p.407.

- 67 *ibid.*, p.17.
 68 *ibid.*, p.208, n.279.
 69 Stayer et al., *op.cit.*, p.109.
 70 Packull, *op.cit.*, p.30.
 71 *ibid.*, p.176.
 72 Abraham Friesen, 'Thomas Muentzer and Martin Luther', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte (ARG)*, 79, 1988, pp.59-80.
 73 R. Emmet McLaughlin, *Caspar Schwenckfeld, Reluctant Radical: His Life to 1540*, 1987, p.106.
 74 Russell H. Hvolbeck, 'Being and Knowing: Spiritualist Epistemology and Anthropology from Schwenckfeld to Böhmé', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, 1991, pp.97-110.
 75 *ibid.*, p.97.
 76 McLaughlin, *op.cit.*, p.viii, and this is the source for the details of Schwenckfeld's life.
 77 Hvolbeck, *op.cit.*, p.108.
 78 McLaughlin, *op.cit.*, pp.100-107.
 79 Hvolbeck, *op.cit.*, p.101.
 80 McLaughlin, *op.cit.*, p.101 n.46.
 81 *ibid.*
 82 Reardon, *op.cit.*, pp.212-13. Note: there is a misprint in Reardon where Wildshut appears instead of Waldshut.
 83 Stayer et al., *op.cit.*, p.97.
 84 Reardon, *op.cit.*, p.214.
 85 G. H. Williams, *op.cit.*, p.225.
 86 *ibid.*, p.227.
 87 Williams & Mergal, *op.cit.*, p.113.
 88 Packull, *op.cit.*, p.104.
 89 Quoted in Jones, *op.cit.*, p.382.
 90 Reardon, *op.cit.*, p.224.
 91 These are all covered briefly in Zeman's paper.
 92 This is an extension of the idea of Stayer et al. that there was not a single source for anabaptism but multiple sources. Parthenogenesis derives from the Greek word *παρθενος*, meaning virgin.

JUDITH Y. HOLYER *Bristol University Free Church Chaplain and Minister to Tytherington Baptist Church*

* * * * *

BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY SUMMER SCHOOL Aberystwyth, 30 June to 3 July 1994

Location: The United Theological College, Aberystwyth, Dyfed, SY23 2LT

Speakers:* The Principal, the Revd Dr Elfed Ap-Nofydd Roberts; Dr David Bebbington; Revd Douglas Sparkes; Miss Tanya Jenkins; Revd David Milner; Professor Keith Robbins; H. M. Davies. [* to be confirmed]

Visit: The National Library of Wales has agreed to receive small groups to use the research room. We have to give ample notice of specific documents requested. Friday and Saturday afternoons will be kept free to allow for this.

Cost: Accommodation - Thursday dinner to Sunday lunch, inclusive, £80-00. (The Society will cover administrative costs). Arrangements can be made for for day visitors.

Booking: Please book early. A non-returnable deposit of £10-00 is required with the booking. Please send bookings, indicating whether full-time or day (indicating when lunch and/or dinner is required), to the Revd Siôr Coleman, 12 Barford Crescent, Kings Norton, Birmingham B38 0BH, no later than Easter 1994. Cheques payable to the Baptist Historical Society.