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The Radical Reformation

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Preface

This work brings together a variety of writings – published and unpublished tracts, letters, declarations, and lists of articles – illustrative of both the rich diversity and the fragile unity that existed in the political thinking of some major radical reformers of the early Reformation in Germany. To give the volume a coherent focus, the texts selected for translation have been drawn from a single decade, the 1520s. They concern the central event of that decade for German society, the Peasants' War of 1524–26, the most massive European popular upheaval before the French Revolution. During the period 1521–27, as Reformation radicals confronted the issue of revolution, and subsequently had to deal with the reality of a failed revolt, the basic patterns of the radicals' thought about society and politics were established.

Politics for the radical reformers was inseparable from religion, as it was for the vast majority of sixteenth-century Europeans. The texts assembled here are "premodern" in the sense that their criticisms of existing social and political arrangements, their legitimations of change, and their visions of an alternative society are animated by Christian ideas and values. But rather than attempting to categorize the writings in terms of a theological typology (Anabaptist, Spiritualist, etc.), I have presented them in roughly chronological order. This arrangement is appropriate to the inchoate nature of Reformation radicalism during the 1520s and to the evolution that radical thought underwent over the decade. Before 1525 no radical aimed at establishing a separatist church or "sect." This alternative emerged only after the failure of the Peasants' War. The sole exception to a

chronological ordering comes at the end. Hans Hergot's *On the New Transformation of the Christian Life* was published a few months before Balthasar Hubmaier's *On the Sword*; presenting Hergot's writing last allows Hubmaier's work to be juxtaposed with *The Schleitheim Articles*, which set forth a position that Hubmaier sought to refute, and allows Hergot's work to serve as a recapitulation of some central themes of the collection. The documents appended to the writings present some of the programs of the peasantry and the urban artisan classes during the upheaval of 1525. They show the relationship between the religio-political convictions of the radical reformers and the concrete aspirations of the commoners during the Peasants' War. In many cases the radicals directly participated in, or influenced the framing of these programs.

Some of the writings presented here have been translated before, but all these translations are new, done from the best German editions of the texts. The combination of accuracy and readability in translating is elusive. In the interest of readability I have felt free to divide sentences, alter punctuation, add paragraph divisions, and occasionally eliminate redundancies.

The radicals usually cited Scripture in a general way – ordinarily their references are to whole chapters or psalms. Often I have offered more specific verse references, which have been enclosed in square brackets, as has editorial material in the texts. But the radicals insisted that specific scriptural verses must be understood in context; sometimes they wanted a reader to examine whole chapters or psalms. The Vulgate's nomenclature has been modernized according to *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*.

This book owes much to the generous help I have received from several individuals and institutions. The preparation of the volume was made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose support enabled me to spend the academic year 1988–89 in Germany. While there I benefited from the library resources of the University of Tübingen, both the main library and that of the Historisches Seminar. All the personnel of the Historisches Seminar were kind and helpful, but I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Professor Dr. Hans-Christoph Rublack, who did a great deal to make my year enjoyable and profitable. He facilitated the move from the U.S., shared office space, suggested secondary literature, and offered his expertise in translating difficult passages.

The seminar we taught together in the summer of 1989 on the political theory of the radical reformers was a pleasure. I worked through first drafts of the translations with Dieter Jellinghaus of Stuttgart, who offered numerous corrections and suggestions. My wife, Carol Baylor, and my parents, Murray and Elisabeth Baylor, also suggested many stylistic improvements. Dr. Robert W. Scribner of Clare College, Cambridge, shared with me a draft translation of *To the Assembly of the Common Peasantry*. Professor Ulrich Bubenheimer of Heidelberg gave generously of his great knowledge of Thomas Müntzer, and I profited from our discussions about Karlstadt. I also discussed Müntzer with Dr. Dieter Fauth, who lent me source materials. Dr. Gerhard Günther of Mühlhausen encouraged me and provided me with a copy of his manuscript analyzing *The Eleven Mühlhausen Articles*. Professor Joe Dowling, chair of Lehigh University's Department of History, reduced my teaching load to give me more time to work on the book.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the notes:

FB   *Flugschriften der Bauernkriegszeit*, ed. Adolf Laube and Hans Werner Seiffert, 2nd revised edn. (Cologne/Vienna, 1978)

MSB   *Thomas Müntzer, Schriften und Briefe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Günter Franz with the collaboration of Paul Kirn (Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformations-geschichte, 33) (Gütersloh, 1968)

QGTS   *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, vol. I, Zurich, ed. Leonhard von Huralt and Walter Schmidt (Zurich, 1952, 1974); vol. II, Ostschweiz, ed. Heinold Fast (Zurich, 1973)

PSMB   *Thomas Müntzer: Politische Schriften, Manifeste, Briefe*, ed. Manfred Bensing and Bernd Rüdiger (Leipzig, 1973)

WA   *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. Iff. (Weimar, 1883ff.)

WA Br   *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar, 1930–85)

Introduction

I. The radical Reformation

Radicalism in the sixteenth-century Reformation first appeared in the
stormy early years of the movement in Germany and Switzerland.
Especially from 1521, the year when Luther was condemned at the
Diet of Worms, a powerful current of popular evangelicalism convul-
sed society. During the early 1520s a cause which had begun with the
defense of Luther in his conflict with Rome entered a phase of rapid
proliferation. Evangelical preachers appeared in numerous towns,
gaining a widespread following among the laity. And, contrary to
popular stereotype, the laity did not always follow clerical leaders.
From urban bases the Reformation quickly spread to the countryside.
With this rapid growth, the reform movement inevitably became more
diversified and its message more diffuse. Influential new centers of
evangelical theology appeared, such as Zurich where Ulrich Zwingli
emerged as the dominant figure. In addition to those of Wittenberg
and Zurich, a variety of other Reformation programs were also initi-
ated at the local level. Here preachers and laymen advanced their own
understanding of slogans initially made popular by Wittenberg
theologians ("the pure gospel," "Christian liberty," "the priesthood
of all believers," etc.). As the Reformation spread – through a flood of
printed literature, but, more importantly for lay commoners, through
sermons, public debates, and less formal oral channels – it also
absorbed preexisting socio-economic grievances and political aspira-
tions, and gained a revolutionary momentum. This popular movement

culminated in the Peasants' War of 1524–26, or, as it has also been termed, the Revolution of the Common Man.

Reformation radicalism must be considered in the fluid context of this powerful social movement. The radicals are commonly viewed as a fringe element in the Reformation – "marginal" reformers or "reformers in the wings." But during the early 1520s they were the ideologists of the popular evangelicalism that swept Germany and Switzerland. Like the popular Reformation, the radical reformers were driven by a fervent, impatient desire to see sweeping reforms made on the basis of religion. The radicals also insisted that Reformation meant much more than changes in devotional practices and ecclesiastical institutions; public life as a whole was urgently in need of Christianization. Two other important features of this popular evangelicalism are reflected in the themes of Thomas Müntzer's *Prague Protest*: bitter anticlericalism and apocalypticism. The clergy as a whole – but especially prelates, theologians, and monks – were held responsible for the pervasive corruption of Christendom. Müntzer, like many commoners, charged the clergy with preaching a false faith designed to sustain their privileged position in the decayed social order. The social counterpart of this anticlericalism was an exaltation of the "common man" – a term which the popular Reformation and the radical reformers used to designate, not the destitute lower classes, but the modestly propertied peasants and artisans who had no share in government. Radicals held that the common man, rather than the monk or priest, was the better Christian, a model of simple but genuine piety, better able than the clergy to understand the essential message of the gospel. Secondly, *The Prague Protest* and the popular Reformation were suffused with apocalyptic expectations, a conviction that history had reached its "harvest time," and that God was about to intervene directly in the culmination of human affairs. Anticlericalism and apocalypticism were both strong emotional forces, contributing to the urgency of the commoners' demands for change. But it is doubtful if either can explain the distinctive politics of the radical Reformation.

As a popular movement, radicals stood at the center, not at the periphery of the Reformation. But the commoners' cause was not the whole of the Reformation. The radicals came to differ with other, more moderate, "magisterial" reformers over matters of scope and strategy, as well as in their underlying attitude toward the popular

movement and the prevailing structure of politics. The magisterial reformers rejected traditional ecclesiastical authority but did not question the authority of existing secular governments. They wanted reform with the approval and backing of princes and urban magistrates. They hoped, as Luther did, for a princely authorization that would leave much control in the hands of the clergy, or they felt it legitimate, as Zwingli did in Zurich, to pressure an oligarchical city council to institute change. But in the last analysis the magisterial reformers asserted a basic Erastianism. Rejecting traditional ecclesiastical authority, they clung more firmly to existing secular authority, which they held to be ordained by God. They also deeply distrusted the common man and feared that his participation in politics would lead to anarchy. They were willing to proceed only as far as authorization would allow. The ecclesiastical counterpart to this view of secular authority was the magisterial reformers' view that the power to proclaim the meaning of the gospel – and to advise secular authorities about the interpretation of Scripture – should remain in the hands of a university-trained, properly ordained clergy. Reformation radicalism was, in the first instance, "internal dissent" within the Reformation – opposition to the paradigm for change set forth by such magisterial reformers as Luther and Zwingli.

Nowhere was this internal opposition more forcefully expressed than in Müntzer's savage criticism of Luther. Beginning with his *Sermon to the Princes*, and reaching a climax with his *Highly Provoked Defense*, Müntzer's attack on Luther was simultaneously personal, theological and political. Although his final work acknowledged Luther as having inaugurated the Reformation, Müntzer excoriated him as a vain academic who led a pampered life, as the theologian of a morally flaccid faith which relied on a literal view of Scripture, and as the toadying accomplice of secular rulers whose primary aim was the exploitation of their subjects. In Müntzer's view, and in that of the radicals generally, a Reformation guided by the magisterial reformers did not go far enough; it was incapable of bringing about the sweeping improvement of society which they sought. By remaining at the disposal of existing elites, the magisterial vision of reformation failed to perceive how deeply Christian society was flawed.

Recently it has been suggested that while there were Reformation radicals – a heterogeneous group of internal critics and dissenters –

there was no "radical Reformation" in the sense of a positive move-
ment with any cohesiveness of thought and action. Was there no more
to Reformation radicalism than a heuristically useful but negative
"unity in opposition"? There does not seem to be an identifiable set
of theological doctrines that radicals shared and that set them apart.
What are commonly claimed as distinctive emphases in radical
theology – biblical literalism, opposition to sacerdotal and sacramental
thinking, moral earnestness, and reliance on personal experience and
direct revelations – do not clearly distinguish the radicals from the
magisterial reformers. The same is true for the notion that the
magisterial reformers sought to reform an existing institutional
church, while the radicals aimed to reinstitute an apostolic church. In
addition, efforts to construct a theological typology of the radical
Reformation commonly emphasize its fundamental internal dif-
ferences and tensions – e.g. those between so-called "Spiritualists"
(such as Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt in Saxony), who held that
the believer may receive divine revelations independently of Scripture,
and "Anabaptists" (such as Conrad Grebel or Felix Manz in Zurich),
who were committed to a biblical literalism. But such categories fail to
do justice to an early Reformation theological context that was as fluid
as the social context. Anabaptism, formerly regarded as the most
unified strand of the radical Reformation, is now seen as emerging
from diverse origins, and for some early Anabaptists (e.g. Hans Hut
and Hans Denck) Müntzer's influence was formative. In recent
research Karlstadt too has emerged as an important influence on the
Zurich radicals who were among the progenitors of Anabaptism. In
short, distinctions between Spiritualists and Anabaptists are of doubt-
ful value, especially during the early and mid-1520s, and the possi-
bility of constructing a distinctive theology for the radical
Reformation as a whole seems remote.

Despite the absence of theological unity, the radical Reformation
had more cohesiveness than that of a common opposition to
magisterial reformers. In the first place, many radicals thought of
themselves as constituting a unified movement or informal party. At a
time when communication and transportation were slow and
uncertain, they sought contact and dialogue with one another. The
Letter to Thomas Müntzer from the Zurich radicals around Conrad
Grebel, for all the disagreements it mentioned, also expressed a
striking awareness of a shared identity, a sense of solidarity with

Müntzer and other radicals in Saxony and Thuringia that overrode theological differences. Müntzer himself developed a network of contacts and communications with fellow radicals. He was in contact with Karlstadt and sought to win him for a political alliance. When Müntzer left Thuringia in the fall of 1524 he met with Hans Hut, probably with Hans Denck, and perhaps with his Nuremberg publisher Hans Hergot. After leaving Nuremberg, Müntzer traveled to southwestern Germany and Switzerland where he made contact with other radicals, including Balthasar Hubmaier. Similar networks of mutual contacts can be established for other radicals, suggesting that they had a sense of common identity.

In some cases this subjective sense of unity was no doubt misguided. Müntzer's efforts to win Karlstadt to a political alliance is a case in point. Nevertheless, on certain basic issues it is possible to find agreement among radicals that provided the basis for their sense of identity. This agreement was not monolithic, of course. It lacked the ideological uniformity that an organized political party or church can provide. As a political movement rather than an institution, the identity of the radical Reformation is to be found primarily in terms of two issues. Radicals were in rough agreement about a strategy for bringing about Reformation and an underlying conception of politics which it implied.

In contrast to the magisterial reformers' reliance on the support of the secular authorities and on postponing change until it was won, the radical reformers were the theorists and executors of immediate Reformation through direct action from below, a strategy which is defended in Karlstadt's tract, *Whether One Should Proceed Slowly*. Radicals took the view that each community had the right to restructure its life immediately according to the gospel as understood by the community. Like Karlstadt, the radicals also held that zealous Christians (the "elect" in the community, whether the pastor or pious laymen) had the obligation to initiate changes even if others disagreed – or, as the radicals saw it, did not "yet" understand the reasons for change. They embarked on a campaign of Reformation through provocation: shouting down sermons by those they held to be preaching something other than the pure word of God; engaging in iconoclastic assaults on images and shrines they regarded as embodying blasphemous practice and superstitious belief; transforming old usages and initiating new ones without asking the permission of

superior authorities. Some refused to have their children baptized or to pay tithes and other dues, demanding that laws be changed so as to conform to the gospel.

This strategy contained no principle for compromising or adjudicating differences with those who disagreed. The radicals were convinced of the righteousness of their cause and, like the popular reformation for which they spoke, assumed that collective forms of decision-making would bear them out. But despite their image as wild-eyed fanatics, some radicals took the view that everything need not be changed at once. Müntzer at Allstedt and Hubmaier at Waldshut were critical of infant baptism yet retained the practice for parents who wanted it. Nevertheless, Müntzer at Allstedt, Karlstadt at Orlamünde, and the radicals around Grebel at Zurich all identified the magisterial reformers' justification of a gradualist approach – postponing reforms in order not to offend the weak – as a pious hypocrisy contrived to conceal their subservience to secular authorities.

The strategic differences between magisterial and radical reformers were symptomatic of a more fundamental difference in their politics, especially in their attitudes toward the authority of existing secular rulers. Above all, what gave the radicals their coherence as the Reformation's "left wing" was the rejection of a hierarchical conception of politics in which legitimate authority, whether secular or ecclesiastical, devolved from the top down. Instead, the radicals' vision of politics was rooted in notions of local autonomy and community control which also implied an egalitarianism. The radicals were the most articulate theorists of a "grass-roots" paradigm of Reformation, one based on principles of communalism that grew out of the late Middle Ages. In addition to asserting traditional communal rights to administer certain local affairs, the radical Reformation stood for the right of each local community to hear the gospel preached in pure form and regulate its life according to the gospel. The radical Reformation also advocated community control over the local church, including the rights of each congregation to choose its own minister and to control the use of ecclesiastical payments. In 1522 Luther had indicated support for this kind of communal Reformation; by 1524 he opposed it.

At first the radicals did not explicitly repudiate the existing authorities. Both Müntzer's *Sermon to the Princes* and Felix Manz's *Protest and*

Defense were appeals set before secular rulers to do what God had ordained for them. But the radicals also made the legitimacy of government conditional. The most characteristic feature of the radical Reformation was that, unlike the magisterial reformers, radicals made the legitimacy of existing political authority contingent on its willingness to serve the gospel and the needs of the community. Müntzer's *Sermon to the Princes* was also an ultimatum: if existing rulers did not carry out the proper functions of government, the community would assume the power to do this. Müntzer's final treatises of 1524 document how this contingent acceptance of secular authorities was, for some radicals, transformed into support for popular insurrection.

II. Politics and religion in radical thought

The radical reformers saw themselves as pious Christians seeking to live their faith. But it would be false to stress the religious character of their thinking in opposition to the political. The Christian faith and church were so integral to social life that thinking about religion was also inherently political thinking. Religious discourse in the sixteenth century had an unavoidable dimension of political reference, just as ideas about political authority and the polity were articulated in religious language. To say that the radical reformers saw themselves as "religious" rather than "political" in the modern sense is inaccurate; the distinction is anachronistic.

The sacrament of baptism, for example, became a focal issue for early Reformation radicals. Their opposition to infant baptism was based on more than rigorous biblicism. Baptism was a sacrament with socio-political implications. It was a rite of admission into the polity of Christians, an agreement to a social contract. The practice of infant baptism became, for radicals, compelling evidence of how corrupt Christendom had become. To admit infants to the polity transformed the Christian community into something infantile. To refuse to have one's child baptized, as did Hans Hut and others, was to repudiate the bonds connecting both parent and child with church and society. An opponent of infant baptism such as Felix Manz might protest to the Zurich council that he had never taught rebellion; but the authorities saw him as propagating subversive ideas that threatened the whole structure of authority and obedience.

Few radicals shared Luther's notion, designed to meet the political situation in Saxony, that there was a sharp division between "spiritual" and "worldly" kingdoms, and that secular rulers performed functions which had nothing to do with the Christian faith. More typical for the radicals was the view expressed by Hans Hergot that there should be "one shepherd and one flock": God's religious and political commandments were one; authority should be Christian, derived from and governing the community; and the existing divisions of "temporal" and "spiritual" authority should be done away with. State and society were not clearly separated in radical thought. Society was seen in religio-political terms, without a notion of "civil society" anterior to politics.

Nor were the radicals interested in political theory as an abstract set of doctrines about government. Instead, their writings contained a set of norms for living, practical values and principles about how socio-political life should be conducted among people who call themselves Christians. In this sense, their political theory was implicit, a sense of social morality embedded in everyday life. In its essentials this moral economy was simple and conservative, constructed from traditional notions. Christians should live together in harmony and peace (*Friede*) as brothers and sisters, and practice charity (*brüderliche Liebe*) toward one another; the well-being of the commonweal should take precedence over the private advantage of the individual (*Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz*); and if disputes arise they should be settled by divine law (*das göttliche Recht*), a standard of justice derived from Scripture.

Such principles were hegemonic values, shared by virtually all in the society. But they had a different specific meaning for the radical reformers and the commoners than for the magisterial reformers and the governing authorities. What gave the ideas of the radicals political force was that many commoners shared their view that the moral economy of society was dislocated, and that the behavior of the clergy and secular rulers contradicted the values they professed. Many commoners shared both the radicals' ideal of an egalitarian and autonomous local community as the place where these traditional values were to be realized, and shared their strategy of reforming the local community without the authorization of superior authorities. By 1524 this popular communal Reformation was being realized in several places, with or without the consent of local authorities. As the popular Reformation also came to articulate social and economic grievances,

some authorities sought to suppress it. In this context the radical Reformation faced the political issue that generated the greatest tension, that of the legitimacy of "active resistance," i.e. illegal or revolutionary violence. Here the fragile unity of the radical Reformation came apart. Some radicals rejected any use of coercion as a violation of Christian norms and urged the commoners to resolve differences with their lords peacefully, through negotiation. Others adopted a position they regarded as justified by the Bible, or natural law, or common sense – the right of self-defense. Christians need not always turn the other cheek; repressive violence may be met with counter-violence. Radicals holding this view provided the Peasants' War with its ideological leadership.

The question that divided the radicals was not that of revolutionary violence in the modern sense. Those who sanctioned violence, like Müntzer or the author of *To the Assembly of the Common Peasantry*, justified it on defensive grounds rather than in terms of creating a new social order. Some commoners in 1524 and 1525 may have had little need for this legitimation of their rebellion; but one should not assume that those who participated in the Peasants' War were a monolithic, revolutionary party completely certain of the rightfulness of their actions. And those radical reformers who supported the rebellion performed other ideological functions beyond supplying a justification for violence.

The apocalyptic dimension in the thought of Müntzer and other radicals, often taken as the central, determining feature of their political thought, may have been important mainly for its function in mobilizing the commoners. Müntzer's convictions that history had entered the Last Days, that the corruption of Christendom had reached an ultimate peak, and that the time had arrived for the elect, the commoners, to rise up and separate themselves from the godless, their ecclesiastical and secular rulers – all this lent a powerful sense of urgency to action, but that may be all. There is scant evidence that either Müntzer or other leaders of the uprising were motivated by specifically millenarian dreams of a perfect society, the earthly realization of the kingdom of God, which would endure for a thousand years. Beyond their function as mobilizers, Reformation radicals sought to provide spiritual and moral guidance for the insurrection, sometimes acting as secretaries, chaplains, and charismatic spiritual advisers to peasant armies. They cautioned troops to be

mindful that they were fighting for the honor of God and not for selfish, material or "creaturely" motives. And, as in the case of *To the Assembly of the Common Peasantry*, they presented arguments for the necessity of solidarity. Their warnings about what the failure of the uprising would lead to – an even harsher system of arbitrary princely oppression – were an accurate prediction of German politics in the age of absolutism.

Radical reformers, both those who defended violence and those opposing it, also made a significant contribution to individual political programs which were drawn up during the Peasants' War. In late 1524, in the spring of 1525 – and in the case of Michael Gaismair in Tyrol, in 1526 – the political vision of some radicals solidified as they began to think about alternatives to existing institutions and political principles. Some radical reformers developed political theories that promoted the principles of popular sovereignty, republicanism, and civil equality.

Müntzer's final treatises presented no proposals about government beyond an implicit theory of popular sovereignty in temporal and ecclesiastical affairs: God gave both the power of the sword and the power to remit sin to the community of Christians. As the Peasants' War unfolded, the principle of popular sovereignty led to a variety of republican constitutional theories. For the author of *To the Assembly of the Common Peasantry* the clear alternative to existing principalities ruled by hereditary monarchs – associated, in the work, with both tyranny and blasphemy – was a Swiss-style republicanism, a decentralized polity with elected leaders. Gaismair also proposed a republican constitution for Tyrol, one with a hierarchy of elective government that extended from the local community to the central government of the territory. Unlike the Tyrol, some regions in Upper Germany lacked an existing territorial assembly that could serve as an institutional model to be recast on popular lines. In these territories republicanism took the form of a *Bund* – a covenant, federation or league that would link the local communities of a territory. *The Memmingen Federal Constitution* and *The Document of Articles of the Black Forest Peasants* set forth the fundamentals of such a *Bund* and the penalties for refusing to adhere to it.

The principle of civil equality also emerged during the Peasants' War. Radicals moved from rejecting clerical privilege to the rejection of noble privilege as well; their republicanism led them to break with a