DISSENTING SPIRITUALITIES IN HISTORY

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THE EARLIEST Church council, other than the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), for which evidence has survived was held c. 172 C.E. in Asia Minor under the chairmanship of Apolinarius, bishop of Hierapolis.[1] The Council was called to deal with the crises provoked by the spread of a dissenting movement now known as Montanism but at that time called 'the New Prophecy' by its friends and designated as 'the Phrygian heresy' by its opponents. The Council excommunicated the founders: Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla, denouncing their prophetic utterances as profane and their movement as heretical.

Prophetic ecstasy: Montanist enthusiasm

There is no evidence that the earliest Montanists believed or taught anything which was doctrinally heretical. The main charge against Montanus was that he

> was filled with spiritual excitement and suddenly fell into a kind of trance and unnatural ecstacy. He raved, and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down generation by generation from the beginning.[2]

'Spiritual excitement', 'trances', 'unnatural ecstacy' and a type of *glossolalia*, linked with an unusual way of prophesying presented the Church with an unfamiliar spirituality. It was this, rather than the content of the prophecy, which caused bishops such as Apolinarius the greatest concern. Later, it was alleged that Montanus and the women prophetesses blasphemously equated themselves with the Godhead[3] but it is clear that any statements they made quoting the Godhead in the first person were merely intended to convey that they, as prophets, were the mouthpieces

of the deity. These statements also served as legitimating formulae authenticating their prophecies, which, at least in part, were communicated in intelligible language as the hearers could understand the content, even if they disagreed with it. The ecstatic utterances which accompanied the intelligible statements probably were not intended to be viewed as part of the prophecies themselves, but as further evidence of their inspired nature.

What confused Montanus's hearers was the absense of any authoritative means of discerning the origin of the inspiration: did it derive from the Holy Spirit or from an evil spirit? In other words, was Montanism an authentic new prophecy, as maintained by its adherents, or was it a demonic pseudo-prophecy? The bishops assembled at Hierapolis judged it to be the latter and in so doing not only denounced Montanism as heretical but set the precedent for relegating all forms of ecstasy or 'enthusiasm' to the boundaries, if not beyond the pale, of orthodox spirituality.

Montanism, however, did not cease to exist merely because it was condemned at Hierapolis. It remained a dissenting movement until the middle of the sixth century when, as a final act of defiance during the persecution by John of Ephesus, the last known Montanists burned down their churches on top of themselves.[4] At times, their development was quite independent of Catholic churches in the same region, but it is also evident that in some instances adherents of the New Prophecy remained within the Catholic Church. An example of this is the 'Montanist circle' at Carthage of which Tertullian was a prominent member.[5] Montanism, therefore, makes an interesting first case-study for an examination of 'dissenting spiritualities in history'.

Dissenting groups present the historian with special problems. History is written by the winners, not by the losers. Consequently the data which has survived about Christian dissenters is far less than that which has survived about groups which were deemed orthodox. Often, as in the case of Montanist writings, material was deliberately destroyed in order to rid the Church of any visible evidence of dissent. This was especially so if dissent was equated with heresy, which almost invariably, it was. Toleration permitting distinctions between dissent, schism and heresy is a later rather than an early phenomenon in the history of Christianity. Despite this, for at least some dissenting groups, sufficient material has survived to enable historians to reconstruct not only the main

outlines of their history, but also to present a reasonably accurate account of specific aspects, such as their spirituality.

'Spirituality' is a term which eludes precise and consistent definition. For the purposes of this article it refers to the intentional way in which various dissenting groups of Christians sought to inculcate an experiential relationship between themselves and God as well as to the distinctive behavioural patterns which resulted from this as these groups sought to live out the implications of their relationship with God. Spirituality, by this definition, therefore refers both to private and corporate worship and to related acts of 'practical Christian living'.

In examining the spirituality of dissenting groups it is also important to take cognisance of the way in which, directly or indirectly, the original cause of their dissent affected their spirituality. In the case of the Montanists, for example, openness to ecstatic prophecy was not only the cause of conflict between them and Catholic Christianity, resulting in dissent, but it was also the single most important factor determining their distinctive spirituality. This does not mean that Montanism is to be viewed as an early form of Pentecostalism. There is no evidence that 'rank and file' Montanists had ecstatic experiences, fell into trances, or practised *glossolalia*. Ecstasy was the prerogative of Montanist prophets and (especially) prophetesses; the original trio as well as their spiritual successors.

Ecstatic prophecy affected Montanist spirituality in two main areas. The first of these was the liturgy. Epiphanius relates that in Montanist services one could often observe

> seven virgins wearing lamps and robed in white who come in and prophesy to the people. They manifest a sort of enthusiasm which deceives the people present and makes them weep.[6]

This emotionally charged segment presumably occurred during the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens'. The 'Liturgy of the Faithful', however, was also distinctive in Montanist services as Montanism had women bishops and presbyters[7] who, presumably, participated in the celebration of the Eucharist. While prophetesses appear to have been distinguished from 'clergy' it is at least likely that the equality granted to women and men prophets in Montanist circles was not unrelated to the equality they granted to male and female clergy.

The second area in which ecstatic prophecy affected Montanist spirituality was in terms of life-style. Tertullian, on a number of occasions, strongly defended ecstasy as an essential dimension of divine-human communication. He tells, for example, the story of a prophetess at Carthage who regularly experienced revelations 'in ecstasy of the Spirit' during the (Catholic) liturgy and who would, after the service, report her visions to members of the Montanist circle.[8] For Tertullian, the importance of these revelations was that they communicated the ethical demands of the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete) who through the New Prophets had ushered in a new age.

Tertullian admitted that on this issue there was disagreement between his group and others whom he disparagingly calls *psychici* in contrast to the Montanist self-designation *pneumatici* (i.e. 'spiritual ones'). This self-designation reveals that the Montanists believed that there were two possible achievable standards of spirituality, the higher of these being for those prepared to comply with the demands made by the Holy Spirit through the New Prophets. This involved practising what opponents of Montanism denounced as 'unwarranted novelties'. For example, Hippolytus complained that Montanists 'introduce . . . the novelties of fasts and feasts, and meals of parched food and repasts of radishes'.[9] Tertullian, nevertheless, defended these, and similar, practices by claiming that they were not new, but merely more rigoristic applications of what Christ and the apostles had already taught. According to Tertullian this stricter approach to personal piety was not only demanded by the circumstances of living in times of potential persecution ('An overfed Christian will be more necessary to beasts and lions, perchance, than to God'[10]), but was made possible by the final outpouring of the Paraclete. This also empowered the *pneumatici* to live out the high ethical demands of the Paraclete, whose commands against second marriages, flight during persecution, and involvement in idolatrous pastimes, such as gladiatorial shows, and for sexual abstinence and rigorous fasting had also been communicated through the Montanist prophets.

Lay mysticism: Beguine piety

The desire to practice ethical purity was not the exclusive domain of the Montanists: it has been a dominant feature of Christian spirituality throughout history. The way in which certain Christians have gone about organizing structures to enable them to live pious

life-styles, however, has led not only to dissent, but also to charges of heresy. The Beguines, our second case-study of dissenting spiritualities, is a fascinating example of this.

Unlike the Montanists, the Beguines have no clearly identifiable founders. Their early history is part of the wider women's movement in Europe during the later Middle Ages. At that time, an increasing number of pious women (*mulieres religiosae*) wanted to take up religious life. So much so that the established Orders were incapable and, later, unwilling to absorb them. By the end of the twelfth century, independent lay 'convents' had appeared in North Western Europe, especially in the Netherlands and the Rhineland. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the movement spread to Poland, Bohemia, Switzerland and France.[11]

The original Beguines (not yet called that) came from aristocratic and middle-class backgrounds and were well able to establish their own communities. These communities, beguinages, varied from being contained in a single building to consisting of cluster-housing on the scale of small villages. The beguinages were not highly structured. While a mistress was in charge and the Beguines wore a habit, they took no vows. There was no monastic rule—although they usually met for common prayer. After a trial period, they were allowed to join permanently, but could leave whenever they wanted. They lived simply, in apostolic poverty—which they adopted as an important part of their spirituality. Poverty, for them, however, did not mean the rejection of all property, but it did mean living without superfluous goods. Beghards, who were the male counterparts of the Beguines and who, on the whole, came from lower social strata, often practised mendicancy, begging (as their name implies) with their characteristic cry 'Bread for God's sake'.

Apostolic poverty, for the Beguines, was not a goal but a means to an end. Although engaged in cottage industries such as sewing, embroidery and weaving, enabling them to be self-supporting, the simplicity of their life-style left them with sufficient leisure to explore a variety of ways by which they might find God. Prayer, meditation, fasting and even flagellation was practised and most beguinages had a chapel which, in the early stages at least, was often served by mendicant friars or neighbouring priests. In accordance with current custom the celebration of the Eucharist, penance, and devotion to the persons of Jesus and Mary were encouraged by these visiting spiritual directors. One of them,

Lambert le Bègue, also translated parts of the bible for a group of Beguines as well as writing an account of the life of St Agnes for them.

A reasonably high standard of education and literacy among the Beguines meant that in their search for God they read widely. Particularly popular was a variety of mystical literature which emphasized the inner experience of the soul. The absence of any real controls over the selection of this reading material made the Beguines susceptible to heterodox influences and made the ecclesiastical authority suspect their orthodoxy. The name Beguine, itself, was a pejorative term, perhaps derived from 'Albigensis', suggesting a connection with Catharism.[12]

The earliest official attack on the Beguines appears to have been made in a treatise, by Gilbert of Tournai, prepared for the Council of Lyons (1274). In this he complains not only that they possessed vernacular scriptures but that they drew (unspecified) heretical inferences from their uninformed reading of these scriptures.[13] In 1307, Henry of Virneburg, Archbishop of Cologne, accused them of heretical mysticism.[14] Beguines, by this time apparently, were not only reading suspect mystical literature; they had produced it.

Two notable Beguines, Beatrice of Nazareth and Hadewijch of Antwerp were influential in developing 'bridal mysticism' (*Braut-mystik*). Based on an allegorical interpretation of the images in the *Song of Songs* and emphasizing the spiritual marriage between Christ and his Church, this form of mysticism provided a means of union with God which bordered on the erotic. Another, but anonymous, Beguine was an early proponent of *Wesenmystik*; a mysticism of 'being' or 'essence' based on Neo-Platonist concepts. It described the means by which essential humanity could ascend to God and be absorbed by God's being.[15]

Perhaps the best known extant example of Beguine mystical literature is *The mirror of simple souls*, written by a Beguine named Marguerite Porete of Hainault.[16] The *Mirror* describes seven states of grace through which the soul might perfect union with God. The first four stages are portrayed in terms not dissimilar to those used by orthodox mystics. In respect of the fifth and sixth stages, however, Marguerite employed images traditionally reserved for the soul already in paradise. She also argued that the soul, in these stages, is already liberated to the extent that it has no need of external spiritual aids such as penance, other sacraments, or pastoral care from clergy. Nor does the liberated soul need to

strive for the traditional virtues. In short, the soul can, and should, do what it desires. Despite the extreme language used, the context reveals that Marguerite was far from advocating heretical libertinism. According to her, the soul in these advanced stages had already attained possession of the virtues and would not choose anything against those virtues. Moreover, the soul's identification with the Trinity ensured that the soul's desire was, in fact, God's desire. In the final stage, which has pantheistic overtones, the soul's union with God was complete.

Selective reading of the *Mirror*, however, meant not only that Marguerite was condemned and burnt as a heretic in 1310, but that all Beguines came under the suspicion of being involved in what the Council of Vienne (1312), in *Ad nostrum*, called the heresy of the Free Spirit.[17] A succession of papal bulls, inquisitions, and disciplinary action by diocesan bishops swiftly reduced the number of Beguines and beguinages. By the middle of the fourteenth century, most heretical (or allegedly heretical) beguinages had been closed down and the remainder amalgamated into relatively large ones, enabling strict ecclesiastical oversight. Other Beguines were absorbed in the regular Orders. The experiment of independent lay mysticism had failed partly because of unwarranted suspicion but also because of its inability to contain its spirituality within acceptable bounds.

Visible sanctity: Puritan utopianism

All dissent is reactionary in that dissent is rooted in discontent. Individuals or minority groups within a wider group become dissenters when they react against certain beliefs or practices of that group. At this stage, the dissent is often linked with the drive to reform the group from within. Dissent becomes separatist when lack of access to decision-making by the minority has failed to effect the desired change. This results in a crisis which can only be resolved through expulsion or withdrawal. Religious dissent, when it leads to the setting up of alternative 'societies' is often characterized by utopian expectations. Leaders of the new group view it as having the potential to become the ideal society, ushering into being the Kingdom of God on earth. Our third, and final, case-study, the Puritans of Old and New England, demonstrates how utopian expectations not only affect the dissenting group's 'political programme' but also its spirituality.

The word 'Puritan', like 'Beguine' was not a self-designation but a pejorative term. It originally referred to those in Elizabethan England who believed that the English Reformation had not gone far enough in purifying the Church.[18] At first it was more 'a state of mind' than a party; but, gradually, discontent led to the establishment of separatist groups. An inability to find religious toleration led some of these groups to leave England to settle first in the Netherlands and ultimately in that part of North America which they named New England.

Although, undoubtedly, some immigrants went to New England for economic or other motives, early leaders such as William Bradford, articulated the theme that the Puritans went to New England to establish what they could not establish in Old England; namely a working model of what a completely reformed Christian society should be like.[19] Theirs was, to quote the title of one of Perry Miller's books, an *Errand into the wilderness*;[20] a (possibly) temporary excursion into the New World to set up a Holy Commonwealth, which, if successful (as they expected it to be) and if Old England repented (as they prayed it would) could become the pattern back in England. The Puritan dream for reforming Old England was particularly strong during the period of the English Civil Wars and Cromwell's Protectorate when there was a great deal of interaction between the Puritans of Old and New England: some of the same people played leading roles on both sides of the Atlantic.

Puritan spirituality was an integral part of the attempt to create a Holy Commonwealth. The Puritans, in Old England, had rejected the concept of the identification of Church and State. For them the true Church was not a nominal church, co-extensive with society, but a covenanted body of 'visible saints'. In New England, they brought Church and State together again, with the State being subservient to a Church made up of these visible saints. Puritan spirituality both defined and provided the means by which people became and remained 'visible saints'.

The first qualification for membership in a Puritan coventanted society was the ability to convince others that one was of the 'elect'. Puritans adhered strictly to a Calvinistic understanding of predestination and argued that salvation commenced with God's initiative. Evidence of God's grace was experienced by the individual through the conscience, leading to an awareness of sin, repentance (often 'with many tears') and conversion. Puritan literature

abounds with first hand accounts ('testimonies') of the way in which God was perceived to have brought the elect into a meaningful relationship with himself. Permanent assurance of election, however, appears to have been difficult for Puritans to obtain. Doubts as to whether they were really part of the elect seem to have plagued even the most devout. In the case of John Milton, it almost led him to suicide.

The principle of 'by their fruits you shall know them' was applied as a test, albeit an imperfect one, and in their covenants they committed themselves to 'walke together in all his [God's] waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed Word of Truth'.[21] Consequently, the bible, as the guide for visible sanctity, was an essential tool for Puritan spirituality. Not only was it the basis for lengthy expository sermons, but individual Puritans were expected to devote a great deal of time to attentive reading of scripture, extracting precise lessons for personal piety from every verse.[22] Fathers of households also conducted regular family devotions, centred on systematic bible reading.

In an attempt to safeguard their election many Puritans kept diaries or journals in which they recorded their inner spiritual development as well as their insights into the Puritan way of life.[23] They were not afraid to report their failures as their shame at having failed would spur them on to greater efforts next time. Spiritual successes were noted to enable them to be repeated on future occasions. Reading the 'published' diaries of others, or their biographies, became an important Puritan pastime. This form of literature developed into the Puritan novel which had as its basic theme the spiritual journey from this life to the next and which employed the images of Christian warfare. Typical titles were *The plain man's pathway to heaven* (1601), *The whole armour of God* (1616), *Directions for a comfortable walking with God* (1625), and, of course, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress* (1678, 1684).

While Puritans often denigrated traditional forms of spirituality, their practices, frequently, differed little from those of earlier periods. Their spirituality, like that of the medieval Orders, depended upon a regular routine of prayer, meditation, reading, writing and work. The Christian's day and the Christian's week (rather than the Christian's year) were important to them. Departure from established routine threatened Puritan piety.

Puritanism has often been caricatured as a joyless form of 'wowserism', permitting no drinking, dancing, fraternizing between the sexes or gambling. This caricature is partly inaccurate and partly unfair. While it is true that Puritans were of 'the industrious sort' who worked hard and had little leisure, there is no evidence that they as a body abstained from alcoholic beverages or banned social dances. The New England practice of 'bundling' during courtship might even raise a few eyebrows in relatively liberated modern societies and the Puritan rejection of gambling was based not on the premise that casting lots was too evil, but that it was too holy, because it was a means by which the God of the bible declared his will. It is true, however, that as Puritanism entered its second and third generation it became more restrictive. The voluntary covenantal faith of the Pilgrim Fathers was not automatically a characteristic of their sons; nor was it evident among others who came to settle in the New England States. The presence of so many of the 'unregenerate' meant that genuine Puritans became a minority in their own society and tried, unsuccessfully, to enforce their spirituality on the rest. The new majority found this too restrictive and, in time, dissented. Puritan utopian expectations remained unfulfilled as covenanting communities, along with visible sanctity, ceased to function.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to recover three 'dissenting' spiritualities from the past; each from a different time and place; each with a different emphasis emanating from the different type of dissent which brought it into being. Taken together, however, they provide a picture of the kinds of spirituality which the Church as a whole has found impossible to adopt as orthodox or mainstream. Prophetic ecstasy was rejected because it failed to convince the Church that it was genuine; lay mysticism was rejected because it failed to convince the Church that it was controllable; visible sanctity was rejected because it failed to convince the Church that it was practical.

NOTES

[1] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical history* 5.16.9(b)–10.
[2] *Ibid.*, 5.16.7, translation by G. A. Williamson, *Eusebius: the history of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p 218.

[3] E.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical lectures* 16.8.

[4] See Labriolle, P. de: *Les sources de l'histoire du Montanisme* (Paris, 1913), p 238.

[5] See Powell, D.: 'Tertullianists and Cataphrygians', *Vigiliae Christianae* 29 (1975), pp 33–55.

[6] Epiphanius, *Against eighty heresies* 49.2.2.

[7] *Ibid.*, 49.2.3.

[8] Tertullian, *On the soul* 9.4.

[9] Hippolytus, *Refutation of all heresies* 8.19.2.

[10] Tertullian, *On fasting* 17.9.

[11] It is important to distinguish two completely different groups in France bearing a similar (but not identical) name. Beguins (note spelling!) was a term used to denote tertiaries and others associated with the Spiritual Franciscans especially in Provence.

[12] The Cathars were heretical dualists particularly active during the twelfth and fourteenth centuries in Southern France, in the region of Albi.

[13] Gilbert of Tournai, *De scandalis ecclesiae*, section entitled *De beghinis* (edited by A. Stroick, OFM, in *Archivum Franciscanum historicum* 25 [1931], pp 61–62).

[14] Text in Fredericq, P.: *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haeretica pravitatis Neerlandicae*, 4 vols (Ghent, 1889–1900), I, no. 161, pp 151–4.

[15] See Bouyer, L. *et al: A history of Christian spirituality*, 3 vols (New York, 1968), II, pp 358–64.

[16] Text edited by Guarnieri, R.: in *Archivio Italiano per la storia della pietà*, 4 (1965), pp 513–635; translated by R. E. Lerner, *The heresy of the Free Spirit in the later Middle Ages* (Berkely, 1972), pp 68–78.

[17] Fredericq, *op.cit.*, I, no 172, pp 168–9, partially translated by E. W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in medieval culture* (New Jersey, 1954), pp 524.

[18] Collinson, P.: *The Elizabethan Puritan movement* (London, 1967), pp 26–44.

[19] Bradford, W.: *History of Plymouth Plantation*, 2 vols (edited by W. C. Ford, Boston, 1912), I, pp 21–35; 53–60.

[20] Miller, P.: *Errand into the wilderness* (New York, 1956).

[21] 'Salem Covenant', in W. Walker, *The creeds and platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston, 1960), p 116.

[22] Mather, Cotton: *Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2 vols (New York, 1957), I, p 103; II, p 578.

[23] Forbes, H. M.: *New England diaries 1602–1800* (Topsfield, Mass, 1923).