

TITLE:

'The Protestant Reformation began long before 1517.' How far were the movements of dissent and heresy in the later Middle Ages heralds and forerunners of the Reformation?

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1. The nature of Protestantism

To examine precursors of Protestantism within the mediæval Church requires a clarification of the nature of the Protestant Reformation itself. The need for reform had been increasingly apparent to many serious Catholics in the late mediæval period.

In reality, the Reformation was the result, rather than the beginning, of the movement that lasted for some two centuries prior to [Luther's posting of his ninety-five theses].¹

The question was how radical the process of reformation would need to be to succeed.

It has been argued that, in the last event, what categorised Protestantism was its schism with Rome rather than its theological agenda. Thus G K Chesterton, speaking of Calvinism in his essay on Chaucer, says that a man

...only becomes a heretic at the precise moment when he prefers his criticism to his Catholicism.²

There were indeed schismatic movements, such as Catharism, which was self-consciously an alternative to Catholicism whilst also being, less consciously, a reaction to it. But the Protestants, and most of the main reforming movements before them, would have preferred to remain within the Church. The Waldenses, the Lollards, the Hussites and finally the Protestants started within Catholicism, and only became schismatics secondarily because they were excommunicated by Rome.

Then again, though a convenient label, *Protestantism* encompasses a whole range of motives and agendas. The primarily theological concerns of

the Magisterial Reformers were not identical with the interests of other groups. These included the wish for direct spiritual experience of radicals like the *Zwickau prophets*, the desire for a complete restructuring of society of many of the Anabaptists, and the political opportunism of the ruling class which was so important in, say, the English Reformation. All these forces were at work in earlier movements too³, though they cannot be said to be central to the most important.

Nevertheless it was dissatisfaction with the *status quo* both in the Church and society (which were regarded as virtually synonymous in the mediæval world) that first motivated most of these movements. Such dissatisfaction was widespread at all levels of society. This was partly because of the '*growing community self-consciousness*'⁴ which challenged unquestioning obedience to a centralised (and foreign) Church, and partly because of the increasing recognition of corruption within its structures.

Yet not all such dissatisfaction led towards Protestantism. Renaissance humanism, for instance, looked consciously to the pagan past for answers. What really characterised the Protestant Reformation, above all, was the *principle* of reformation it soon developed, and this was the desire to return to primitive Christianity, and particularly the Christianity of the Bible. All the important issues, even *Sola fide*, therefore depended on *Sola Scriptura*. This definitive principle may be traced, albeit in tentative form, in the earlier movements.

One more factor remains that was essential both to the Reformation and the earlier movements. This was the *dissemination* of biblical teaching

through preaching. Scholars like Marsilius of Padua had already begun to advocate a more biblical theology⁵. But they lacked any practical ability to overcome the inertia of the existing system because '*they spoke for no widespread body of powerful opinion*'⁶. The true precursors of the Reformation movement, though officially suppressed, all gained popular and political support through the public preaching of their doctrine.

In summary, then, it was the preaching of the Bible that predominantly characterises the Reformation and its closest forerunners amongst the many strands of mediæval dissent.

2. *Historical Survey*

a. Catharism. The first of the important movements is also the most heterodox. *Catharism* (from Greek *catharsis*, purification), arose amongst the Bulgars in the tenth century, and virtually overran⁷ southern and western Europe, with its climax in southern France in the thirteenth. It arose on the border between the eastern and western Churches partly in reaction to the faults of both, and only became *assimilated* to Christianity as it progressed⁸. It incorporated the influence of radically dualistic Paulician (Manichaean) missionaries, speculative monastic theology, and pagan Slavic sympathy for the concept of supremely good and supremely evil gods⁹. I will examine the movement in more detail below. But its widespread success is attributable to factors other than its theology:

What weighed most with those whom the Catharists sought to proselytize were the purity and simplicity of their lives.¹⁰

This contrasted greatly with the debased Catholicism of the time.

After a massive Crusade of persecution, which more or less destroyed the culture around Albi as well as the sect, Catharism petered out in its native Balkans in the fifteenth century.

b. Waldensianism. The Catharists are sometimes bracketed together with the movement started by Pierre Valdes of Lyon in 1173¹¹ as ‘proto-Evangelicals’. But the differences between them demonstrate the distinctives of the ancestral line of Protestantism, as I will show later.

Unlike the Albigenses, the Waldenses were *‘fundamentally biblicist’*¹². Valdes’ conversion led to a community of lay people living in voluntary poverty, and preaching the Gospel through vernacular translations of the Scriptures. It was their insistence on preaching without Rome’s ordination which led to their excommunication. But it was the doctrines they subsequently developed from their reading of Scripture which formed the basis for their condemnation by the Inquisition.

Expelled from the region of Lyon, Valdes’ mendicant preachers spread their message where they could, including the Cathar strongholds of Lombardy and Provence. But their main successes were in central and eastern Europe. The diffuse nature of their ministry, together with its foundation primarily on Scripture, led to some variation of their doctrine (though they were sufficiently organised to call a general council in 1218 to unify their teaching¹³).

No doubt this lack of central control sometimes led to local adoption of heretical ideas, but it would appear that the similarities the inquisitor Gui found to the Cathari¹⁴ owed much to a tendency to tar all heretics with the

same brush. Certainly the application of the term ‘Waldensians’ to partly orthodox, self-righteous and violently self-reliant groups in the Alps during the sixteenth century seems to owe more to the prejudices of local churchmen than to any historical link with Valdes’ movement¹⁵.

Even so, it must be recognised that, despite their very different motivations, they must have seemed to their contemporaries very like the Catharists in their insistence on poverty and their anti-clerical stance. To the people, the example of their lives, like that of the Cathars, may have been more important than the theological content of their preaching¹⁶.

In truth the Waldenses remained quite close to Catholicism, except that

...the preaching of the Word remained fundamental to their belief and practice.¹⁷

One group even returned to Rome, after a debate, in 1208, forming a community called the *Poor Catholics*. They clearly saw themselves in the mainstream of Christianity.

c. Wyclif and the Lollards. In John Wyclif, dissent found the pattern that was eventually to lead to the Reformation under men like Luther. Here was a scholar of formidable intellect who became thoroughly convinced of the supremacy of Scripture in establishing doctrine and practice. Yet he combined this with the conviction that ordinary people should hear Scripture preached in their own tongue, and hence established the band of itinerant preachers, initially intellectuals but later laymen, who became known as Lollards.

Yet as a Scholastic, there seems to have been something of a gulf between his writings and the popular preaching of his translation of the Bible,

which may explain why he was the '*morning star*', rather than the dawn, of the Reformation. In his writings, '*much scholastic subtlety is a fault*'¹⁸. His very individualistic system, unlike that of the Reformers, did not include a doctrine of the Church capable of answering who should decide the interpretation of Scripture. This made him vulnerable to Church censure, and prevented the movement becoming fully organised. This was perhaps inevitable in fourteenth century England:

Through the circumstances of his time he was forced to dwell on the destructive rather than the constructive side of his theories, thereby differing from Calvin and the Presbyterians with whom, otherwise, he had so much in common.¹⁹

Nevertheless his ideas achieved wide intellectual circulation, and were a major influence on Hus (who was taught his philosophical realism²⁰) and the later Reformers. Additionally, popular Lollardy continued to thrive in England despite persecution, forming a seedbed for the later success of Protestantism.

d. John Hus and the Bohemian Reformation. Initially a brilliant, though spiritually shallow, academic Hus seems to have been converted just prior to his ordination:

But when the Lord gave me knowledge of the Scriptures,
I discarded from my foolish mind that kind of stupid fun-
making.²¹

Here was an intellectual and biblical preacher, in the mould of Luther or Calvin, whose works would be thoroughly at home amongst Protestant writings. Indeed it would seem that only his martyrdom limited the influence of his theology to Bohemia. Luther later acknowledged this, as he came to

understand that the man he first saw as a heretic taught nothing else but what he himself found in Scripture:

The same cause existed in the time of John Hus and many others, and they had a harder time of it than we do.²²

3. A comparison of two contemporary movements.

As I have stated, the contrast between two superficially similar movements, the Catharists and the Waldenses, illustrates why the Reformation must be seen not just as one of a long line of heresies, but as the culmination of a movement which was not really aware of its own existence.

The **Catharists**, who have, as I have stated, been observed to show ‘marked reverence for the Scriptures’, in fact

accepted from the Scriptures and creeds only what [they] found convenient to accept. Only the NT was authoritative (in their own version), [they] subordinated the letter to the spirit at whim, and literally interpreted figurative passages.²³

They also accepted apocryphal writings, especially a dialogue between Jesus and St John. In theology they

made use of the terms and formulas of Christian theology in order to give expression to theories which were in reality foreign to Christian orthodoxy.²⁴

Just how foreign can be gauged by a brief examination of their teaching. This flowed from a kind of gnostic dualism descended directly from the Manichaeans. Rejecting, like many today, the ‘cruelties’ and ‘injustices’ of the OT God, they solved the dilemma²⁵ by an absolute dualism²⁶.

An absolutely good God created a world of spirit, populated by human souls, angels etc. The bad God (Lucifer, the Devil, Luciabel) was responsible

for the evil physical world (and hence for the OT), and then seduced many heavenly souls, trapping them in earthly bodies. But these still have beings in heaven, 'spirits', who induce them to repent, reform, and therefore gain readmission to heaven.

Jesus, a created being, was sent by God (in a docetic manner, so as to avoid the evil of physical existence) as an example and teacher. The Holy Spirit, subordinate only to Christ, is even so merely first amongst the 'guardian' spirits in heaven, who are restored as Paraclete to the soul upon repentance.

This myth led to various consequences. The Cathar (purified) led a life of extreme asceticism, avoiding not only the Catholic mortal sins but all possessions, relationship with worldlings (except preaching), untruth, shedding of blood, and sexual activity. For this reason there were very few of these *Perfecti*, perhaps 4,000 in 1240²⁷, though it was their exemplary lives which attracted so many to the cult.

Most adherents were *Credenti*, who might interact more in the world. These had not received the rite of Spirit Baptism and renouncement of the world (the *consolamentum*), as had the *Perfecti*, though they were expected to do so on the approach of death.

Since all souls were created at the beginning, the steady return of souls to heaven meant a corresponding depletion on earth. Consequently there was a doctrine of re-incarnation, even involving transmigration to animals. This explains their vegetarianism, too.

For all this distinctly non-Catholic doctrine, much of the movement's appeal lay in its anti-Catholicism²⁸. It attacked the Church for its admission of sinners, lack of love, persecution, pomp, corrupt priesthood and idolatry. Indeed a major part of its worship consisted of NT 'exposition' which was primarily anti-Catholic²⁹.

As previously stated, **Waldensian** doctrine varied from place to place and time to time, because its preachers were excommunicated and scattered at an early stage. They wandered through rural areas, depending for their doctrine on the vernacular translations of the Scriptures commissioned by Valdes in the early days. There was therefore little opportunity for formalising their teaching.

From the start, though, the movement believed in the supremacy of the Bible, and that the call to preach was more important than ordination. Their preachers were celibate and mendicant, both male and female, and preached from memorised passages of Scripture. Their distinction from the 'lay' adherents resembles that of the Cathars, but was based on a Biblical distinction of office rather than a difference in spiritual purity.

As the movement spread, the dependence on Scripture led some to deny prayers for the dead, the doctrine of purgatory and the use of images; most abjured oaths and all bloodshed³⁰. These things too resembled Catharist teaching, but the reasoning was different.

For example prayers for the dead were decried not because a dualistic mythology denied the reality of judgement, but because the Waldensians reasoned that those in hell were beyond hope, and those in heaven beyond

need. Scripture mentioned no intermediate state. Bloodshed was forbidden simply from the fifth commandment, and not because of the transmigration of souls.

Similarly, their anti-Catholicism stemmed primarily from an increasing biblical conviction that Catholicism, as it existed, in many respects denied Catholic doctrine. Evicted from the Church, yet convinced that they were true members, some began to baptise children and celebrate the Eucharist³¹. By 1398 it seems that many rejected traditions of Catholicism such as *'buildings themselves, cemeteries, altars, holy water, liturgies, pilgrimages, indulgences'*³² and so on, because they did not find them in Scripture. These all find their counterpart in the works of Wyclif, Hus and, later, Luther.

4. Conclusion

This survey of dissenting movements in the late mediæval period has omitted many examples which show a more complicated picture than that proposed. For example, Ramihrdus of Cambrai was burnt as a heretic in 1076 for opposing abuses that were also officially attacked by the approved reformers of the time³³. Where then did the Roman church really stand? Henry the Petrobusian, in the twelfth century, started as a zealous reformer, but became increasingly heterodox in his teaching³⁴. Savonarola, in the fifteenth, *'became a hero to many of the early Protestants'*³⁵, yet remained Roman in theology.

Yet there is a demonstrable trend in the main movements towards the agenda of Protestantism. This does not lie purely in rejection of mediæval

Catholicism, for this was common to a much wider constituency (including Rome itself, by the time of the Council of Trent). It does not consist in exemplary conduct, for the Cathari rivalled the Waldenses in this respect – and the Protestants, despite their stress on holy living, had to face much criticism for the behaviour of some of their followers. It does not even depend on popular appeal, for in this respect too the Cathari at least equalled the Waldenses.

As I have sought to show, the true ‘heralds and forerunners’ of the Reformation were those who discovered in the Bible the key to Christian doctrine and practice, and sought to proclaim the truths they found there through the preached word. It took the political and intellectual climate of the sixteenth century, and the rare anointing of men like Martin Luther, to bring these discoveries to widespread fruition.

(2622 words)

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- ¹ Spinka, 1968, p.3.
- ² Chesterton, 1962, p.250.
- ³ E.g. the charismaticism of the *Clerks of Orléans*, executed in 1022; the egalitarian preaching of John Ball during the Peasants' Revolt, and the initial support of John of Gaunt for Wyclif's political thought.
- ⁴ Dowley, 1990, p.330.
- ⁵ Renwick, 1958, p.99.
- ⁶ Southern, 1970, p.50.
- ⁷ Holmes, 1925, p.8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.42.
- ¹¹ 'Later still, under the name of Cathari...various groups of ascetic-minded Christians, characterized by a marked reverence for the Scriptures, spread from the Balkans westwards.' (Renwick, *op. cit.* P.97). This would apply as well to the Jehovah's Witnesses as the Cathari.
- ¹² Costen, 1997, p.55.
- ¹³ Dowley, *op. cit.*, p.327.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.328.
- ¹⁵ Cameron, 1984, p.1.
- ¹⁶ Costen, *op. cit.*, p.57.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.56.
- ¹⁸ Workman, 1926, *Vol.2*, p.5.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Spinka, *loc. cit.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.45.
- ²² Tappert, 1955, p.146.
- ²³ Holmes, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.20
- ²⁵ Unlike popular Evangelicalism today, which simply ignores it.
- ²⁶ Or less commonly by a modified dualism in which the evil deity, created good, separated itself from God.
- ²⁷ Holmes, *op. cit.*, p.30.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ This again is very comparable to the Watchtower Society today, which could scarcely exist if it did not have the Church to criticize.
- ³⁰ Costen, *op. cit.*, p.56.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Dowley, *op. cit.*, p.329.
- ³³ Costen, *op. cit.*, p.52.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.53.
- ³⁵ Dowley, *op. cit.*, p.340.

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