

My task in this paper is to explore some of the paths taken by so-called Radicals of the sixteenth century and to analyze their respective stance.¹ If such pursuit will allow for any conclusions, I shall draw them toward the end of my paper in hopes that these might stimulate further investigation and lead toward constant reassessment of our own position amidst the reforms and revolutions of our own day.

Allow me then to define briefly the key terms as I intend to use them. Neither "reform" nor "revolution" per se imply violence, even though we will have to concede that the use of force or coercion may be present in these processes of change. I do not wish to suggest either that reform and revolution can be readily separated and viewed as distinct or that, on the other hand they *must* be mutually exclusive. However, for the purpose of this paper an idea or activity is held to be "reformatory" in nature when it builds upon widely held ideas and rests on well established practices or institutions, accepts inherited authority in principle, yet seeks to reshape or redefine existing life patterns on the basis of some degree of re-alignment of authority.

"Revolutionary," on the other hand, is taken to mean "overturning what is by offering in its place something that is not yet." The authority principle invoked in the latter case is usually novel or at least altered to such a degree that it does not correspond to any previously acknowledged authority, be it the church, councils, socio-religious or political structures.

Thus, most so-called magisterial reformers of the 16th century might be classified as reformatory in their ideas and methods because of their essential acceptance of inherited authority in one sphere or another. Even among Radicals of the same period men may be found whose position is more akin to reformatory patterns than it is to revolutionary ideas since they are willing to abide by some widely accepted source of authority. In many instances, on the other hand, a clear distinction between reformatory and revolutionary stances is well-nigh impossible. A given man often challenges a source of authority in one sphere of life while accepting unchallenged a traditional authority pattern in another.

To mention but one, I might refer to Caspar von Schwenckfeld, a lay theologian of his day. His acceptance of Scripture as a binding authority is largely within the context of the existing socio-religious framework and not unlike Luther's e.g. In his anti-sacralism, however, he proves revolutionary enough to qualify among his contemporaries as a "spiritualist" who comes dangerously close to heresy.

Thus selecting representative Radicals of the 16th century whose reformatory or revolutionary activities could be readily examined proved much more difficult than might be supposed at first glance. For one, generalizations normally accepted as useful in providing a handle with which to classify an otherwise heterogeneous lot of men proved to be unsatisfactory. This left the alternatives of either proposing new terms as for example "Regenerative Reformers," if regeneration appeared to be a primary concern of a given number of men, or of dealing with specific reformers and focusing on definite pamphlets of theirs which could be described as reformatory or revolutionary in nature.

The latter alternative is chosen as the most productive. Of the many Radicals then who

bear careful scrutiny and renewed evaluation, I have chosen Thomas Muentzer, Caspar von Schwenckfeld and Sebastian Franck, for reasons which will be apparent in the course of this paper.

The first is almost a "natural." Revolutionary spirits in East and West have found in him a kindred soul and have widely hailed him a "father of revolution."² Our own reasons for selecting him may however prove to be largely unrelated to conventional evaluations made on the basis of contemporary judgement or on a superficial reading of his letters and sermons which are alleged to have incited peasants and/or noblemen to revolt. It is our contention that the most revolutionary contribution Muentzer made to his age and to subsequent developments in the church can be found in his Liturgical Reforms, clearly set out in the *Deutsches Kirchenamt* (Easter, 1523) and in the *Deutsch-Evangelische Messe* (1524).

Were we to focus on a single revolutionary concept in Schwenckfeld, on the other hand, his *Stillstand* appears to be a valid starting point. This dramatic decision to abstain publicly, as it were, from celebration of the Lord's Supper implies in my estimation a rejection of Luther's insistence that any valid encounter with God can and must take place in the visible company of the "communio sanctorum."³

The revolutionary element in Franck's writings is undoubtedly his "spiritualism" which enabled him to become the progenitor *par excellence* of the concept of religious tolerance.⁴ To a large measure Franck also suggested some of the avenues by which later generations were to find bridges to religions other than the Christian faith in answer to the question how the God of all men reveals himself on a scale wider than could be encompassed by the Judaeo-Christian tradition. We shall face this issue later in our discussion. At this point, however, we must turn our attention to a brief historical sketch of the growth of the concepts of reform and revolution in the writings of the three Radicals mentioned above. It may not be out of order beyond that point to look for a possible theology of revolution which ultimately underlies the variously stated "manifestoes" of revolution or reform.

Let us begin somewhat arbitrarily, with the years 1522-23. At this point, some five years after Luther's *Thesenanschlag*, the novelty of priests leaving Mother Church by defiantly breaking vows of celibacy and obedience, of printers challenging the "institutions" of Medieval Europe through underground publications of annotated Bibles and bold theological pamphlets had slightly worn off. A more serious second stage of reform had begun – less dramatic perhaps, but more significant in the long run than the former phase, in that it was given a delineation of "fronts" within the obviously diverse evangelical camp. Positions had to be consolidated on grounds that might be acceptable within the terms of Christian tradition or could at least be subject to the authority of the working of the Holy Spirit.

In Germany, Luther had broken virgin ground with his major pamphlets of 1520, notably, *The Babylonian Captivity*, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* and *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*.⁵ Through these he had alerted the questing minds of his age to the far-reaching prospects of reform. But apart from the immediate challenge to a narrowly conceived view of Papal authority in matters religious and political, Luther does not appear to have intended 'revolution' in our use of the term.

How far, in fact, he wished to remain dissociated from such overthrow of existing authority is apparent in his rejection of Carlstadt and the "Bilderstürmer" on the one hand, and of the peasants on the other, when they sought his support in their demands for justice and for a fairer share of the land which they tilled.

In Switzerland, another major area of ferment, issues were clarified in the Zürich Disputations in which Zwingli pleaded for the support of the City Council in his endeavour to reform the entire nation. His *67 Theses or Conclusions* and the subsequent "*Exposition and Substantiation of the Conclusions*" are brilliant testimony of the far-reaching peaceful nature of the Swiss reform movement. Anabaptist and Catholic opposition notwithstanding, Zwingli was able to lead his people onto new plains by largely treading former paths which he simply sought to clear of all the outgrowth of the Middle Ages.

The fascinating discovery a twentieth century observer makes when viewing these events in the sixteenth century lies in the fact that political, social and economic problems and consequent unrest, brought about by unresolved issues, are clarified, attacked and often overcome by no more or less potent a weapon than recourse to spiritual renewal in terms largely of Biblicist reform. As we shall see in the case of Thomas Muentzer, a most profound influence is exerted by his liturgical reforms which somehow become the password of revolution since these are coupled with prophetic vision and zeal and an absolute demand on the commitment of all those who accept them as a viable alternative to the historical (hence "dead") faith of Christendom at large.

Thus it may be said in reviewing the history of the period under discussion that the process of alignment and consolidation, apparent not only in the areas mentioned, but indeed elsewhere, fully affected all strands of a largely Feudalist-oriented Europe. Whether nobleman or burgher, priest or peasant, everyone seemed to sense at least the magnitude of the movement toward change. By 1524-25 some of the sparks that had been nursed for about a century of sporadic unrest broke into full flame in the Peasants' Revolt.⁶ Actual incidents of the revolt are recorded for May 1524 in the region of the Black Forest. Within a year of this date the revolt reached its climax, notably around Muehlhausen, a town with which Thomas Muentzer was intimately connected. By August 1525 the uprising is stayed, not without considerable bloodshed, destruction of invaluable treasures and a definite re-alignment of positions along lines that could hardly have been anticipated by any one.

We have given this cursory sketch of events in order to see the work of Muentzer, Franck and Schwenckfeld in the proper environmental context, but must now press on to a more detailed overview of the work of each of these three men.

Our starting point for Thomas Muentzer (1438-1525) is his writings recently published in a critical edition by G. Franz.⁷ These are in some way supplemented by contemporary sources pertaining to the Peasants' Revolt.⁸ The most apparent discrepancy in these is the relatively unrevolutionary style of much that Muentzer wrote, contrasted, however, in the contemporary sources by the widespread reputation he enjoyed as an allegedly revolutionary spirit. The discrepancy is not too readily explained. One may venture a guess, namely that Muentzer is drawn into the maelstrom of unrest and revolt because of his sympathetic voice on behalf of the oppressed. When he addressed his "beloved brothers at Stolberg" in an effort to dissuade them from "mischievous rebellion" (July 18th, 1523) no one apparently heeded the title but everyone obviously noticed such statement as this, that "the rightful reign of Christ must come about after the glory of this world is laid bare. Then the Lord shall come to rule and to push the tyrants to the ground." And again, how melodious in the ears of the frustrated and oppressed peasants must have sounded the words further on in the same document, "What the world despises, God lifts up, and what appears to be foolishness, is wisdom with him," etc. (paraphrasing I Cor. 1, 15-18).

Apart from the occasional encouragement to be bold and to make good use of the entrusted talents, Muentzer's writings contain little that is inciting violence or rebellion. On the other hand, his sermons and pamphlets are pregnant with prophetic fervour and rich with allusions to the prophetic writings of Holy Scripture. He sees himself as the one who is entrusted with the "sword of Gideon" (May 9, 1525). And some adherents, writing him that same month address him as "Christian protector of God's word."

Some of the writings of the years 1524-25 show a persistent effort to distinguish between the good seed and the evil that has sprung up like weeds (*Schriften*, p. 225). Yet, even in the context of the *Protestation oder Erbietung*, in which the admonition appears, Muentzer's concern is more with inward change than it is with outward forms. At the same time allusions to impending disaster appear in some of his correspondence of July 1524. In a letter of 22nd July addressed to Schoessler Zeiss reference is made to prepare for action.

To clarify what he means he writes, "... he who wishes to be a stone in the new church must risk his neck." It may be noted that by August 3, 1524, he had secretly left Allstedt. By August 15th he wrote from Muehlhausen. Is he there in order to "risk his neck" for the kingdom of God, or has he come, as traditional scholarship has maintained, to lead the revolt? I am inclined toward giving him credit for trying to bring the gospel of peace without false compromise. According to his letters certainly, he does not want to be a troublemaker in the sense of being a violent revolutionary. His sword is the pen (*Schriften*, 449-50). He certainly wields it with authority.

The two segments of society which he attacks most forcefully are the priests and the princes. In terms of his own age such attacks are revolutionary in themselves, for he appears to be undermining the very pillars upon which Medieval society built its structures. Thus his *Exposition of the Book of Daniel* – perhaps the most unified of his works – is also the most political of all his writings. The pamphlet is actually a sermon preached before Duke John of Saxony, his son and the chancellor G. Brueck. With great skill Muentzer appeals to the secular arm of society since (so he alludes) the ecclesiastical arm has failed the people. The blame for all troubles in the land is laid at the doorsteps of a corrupt Church (*Schriften*, 242 ff). Unyieldingly Muentzer drives the wedge between prince and priest, church and state. Does he speak from knowledge of things to come? Will he resort to violent deeds if and when his prophetic utterances remain unheard?

Apart from the fact that Muentzer is found among the peasants in Muehlhausen at the height of the unrest we shall likely never know conclusively from his own pen what his ultimate stance was on the matter of violent revolution.

As we suggested above, however, his liturgical writings appear to provide a clue to our understanding of Muentzer's theology of revolution. In an introductory note to his *Kirchenamt* of 1523 (*Schriften*, p. 25), he contends that the office is appointed to "lift the lid under which the light of the world was kept hidden" and to serve unto the "destruction of all the glorious ceremonies of the godless."

His stance is clear. The attack against a corrupt priesthood is all the more poignant in that Muentzer provides the people with intelligible expressions of praise and with divine psalms whose meaning they can understand. By such means he aims to expose the falsehood of the other. How revolutionary for his age such revision of the existing liturgy (believed to have been unchanged from the beginning) really was, becomes apparent when we compare Muentzer's *German Mass* of 1524 with the *Roman Mass* and Luther's *Ordnung*

of 1523. With the exception of a few responses, the Latin is replaced throughout by German readings and prayers. The most striking innovation, however, is to be found, no doubt, in the act of preparation for worship. Here Muentzer orders the priest's confession to be made in silence, and instead of the celebrant's "mea culpa," Muentzer designates the worshipping people to pray for forgiveness on the celebrant's behalf.

As Luther had done, so Muentzer introduced communion of bread and wine for all the people. But unlike Luther he places the entire act in the context of the people's celebration in their own tongue. To dismiss the experiment too lightly would be doing a grave injustice to Muentzer. It was not developed merely for the sake of experiment but, as he himself stated it, to "help a poor degenerate Christendom recover" by providing people everywhere with the pure milk of the gospel instead of the dragon's milk they had been fed by the priests (*Schriften*, 163-64).

It may be noteworthy in passing to observe that he never intended even this improved order to be absolutely binding and that he worked on the principle that Scripture, when used in liturgy, must be translated more according to its meaning and intent rather than according to the letter.

Caspar von Schwenckfeld (1489-1561), approaches the upheaval of his day differently. His noble birth and lay status in terms of theological training may partly account for the differences. Contemporary sources, who are favourably inclined toward him depict him as a gentle person. He is personally acquainted with the leading Reformers of his day and can boast of intimate associations with Anabaptists and Radicals alike. Yet, to my knowledge, he stays clear of any major confrontation, makes no known reference to the Peasants' Revolt, but instead devotes himself to practicing what might be termed spiritual nurture. Why then include him in a discussion on revolution and reform? At least three reasons come to mind.

The first is his avowed reliance on Scripture as source from which the early church drew its inspiration. In this regard he comes close to Luther's principle of "sola scriptura." Unlike Muentzer, however, Schwenckfeld does not draw on the prophetic aspects of the Bible as much as he relies on the Johannine and Pauline writings, the Wisdom literature and especially the Psalms which he musters for the purposes of promoting the growth of the Christian man.

A second reason is found in a concept at the very heart of the nobleman's life work, viz. the claim that regeneration or rebirth is essential to the new man (the man in Christ). Repeatedly Schwenckfeld writes of this insight.

In short, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven one must undergo a change, a conversion, a mortifying of the sinful, evil desires of the flesh. St. Paul calls it 'a dying unto sin' (Col 3.11), the Lord Christ, 'a denial of self' (Jn. 3.3). I say that the flesh must be reshaped, reformed, renewed within. Yes, a new sap must be poured into the old tree if it is to bear good fruit. In heart and mind we must be changed, humbled, transformed. (*The Life and Mind of a Christian*, 1560).⁹

The new man in Christ is normative in Schwenckfeld's theology, "He is certain of his faith, sealed with the Holy Spirit, secure from eternal death." (The Steps in Regeneration).¹⁰ "His origin is to be found in Christ, the seed, of which the children of God are born" (*Of the Regeneration and Origin of a Christian*).¹¹

The third reason is somewhat more difficult to appreciate in a brief account like ours. Nonetheless, it becomes apparent in the above-mentioned "Stillstand" (abstention from outward participation in the sacramental rites of the church of his day), which in turn reflects a tendency in Schwenckfeld to "spiritualize" the experience of the presence of the living Christ in the hearts of regenerate (true) men.¹²

Taken together, above reasons go a long way in accounting for the nobleman's reformatory activities. In each of the theological tenets which he discusses, he draws on Scripture and Tradition but reserves the right to judge the value of what he has received with the aid of the Holy Spirit of God within him. The revolutionary implications of such an authority principle are far-reaching. While he himself may be judged to have stayed within the boundaries of the Church Catholic, many of his adherents found it difficult to acknowledge any visible authority. Once dissociated from the awareness of the presence in man's life of the living and overarching reality of God, a stance such as Schwenckfeld's is a gate to relativism in matters spiritual. In terms of a medieval world view the nobleman accordingly appears to be highly revolutionary.

Sebastian Franck (1499-1542), on a wider basis perhaps than the other two radicals under discussion, has contributed significantly to the climate of opinion that eventually was to permeate Western Christendom and seems to have reached full bloom in our own generation. In many ways, Frank 'has come of age' long before his time.

The presuppositions underlying his thought are intricately interwoven. As did Schwenckfeld and to some extent Muentzer, Franck drew on the negative theology of Medieval mystics, notably among them, Meister Eckhart and Tauler. From the latter he undoubtedly borrowed the distinction "outward - inward" man. The influence of the *Theologia Deutsch* can only be conjectured but hardly denied.¹³

In his philosophy of history, Franck seems to be guided by Joachim of Fiore. There he found the seed of the prophetic expectation of an imminent beginning of the age of the Spirit. The effects of such a view of history are apparent in a number of ways, but most prominent, in Franck's negative attitude to institutional Christianity and in his insistence that God is to be worshipped in spirit only.

Whatever other sources such as the writings of the Humanists of his day and the ideas of Anabaptists, et. al. may have helped form Franck's thinking, the actual revolutionary impact of his work seems to have centered in his understanding of and attitude to the world, in his concept of Scripture and Spirit and in his ecclesiology. While other theological tenets such as his concept of God are significant to the total picture, they may be disregarded for the purpose of this paper.

Franck's *Chronica* of 1536¹⁴ is clearly his most important contribution to the revolutionary climate of his day. Its very philosophy challenges the value scale of much of the historical writing of the era by demanding that all events be measured in terms of their "spiritual" content. Franck denies for example the validity of comparing orthodoxy and heresy. He further contends that all events can be assessed only after a careful reading of the sources (in other words, that there be a measure of objectivity). In the last analysis, however, he questions the possibility of evaluation at all on the grounds that the operations of the Holy Spirit can be discerned only by the Spirit.

Such argumentation inevitably led Franck to a basic scepticism, for in a real sense he denied to men the ability to discern or judge the divine reality in the events of history. This

scepticism, in turn, illuminates Franck's attitude to the world. He sees the world basically as the demonic power, set over against God and intent on claiming the allegiance of man. In his *Paradoxa* (published in 1542) he writes,

“Die Kirche Christi kann mit der Welt weder eins sein noch in Frieden leben ...”. And further on in the same context, “The world is like a perverse spider and like lime, since she sets afire what she is supposed to extinguish and since even honey is poison to her and the word of peace appears to be stirring trouble (aufruhrerisch)”. (*Paradoxa*, Wollgast edition p. 370 and 372ff)

At this very point the difference between the priest Muentzer and the “burgher” Franck is most glaringly apparent.¹⁵ In the pamphlet, *Von de Werelt, des Duyvels Rijcke*, (published 1618) Franck expresses disapproval of the vulgar masses whom he describes as “common, newly-wise, rough, like a stubborn bull,” etc. (Fol. 41). One is not altogether unmindful of the present scene when one reads a description of their behaviour as “childish and plebejan” (kindisch Poebel) (Weltbuch, xxxviii). The only effective means against being swept away by this torrent, that he is able to suggest, is to maintain the nobility of the soul *i.e.* to set oneself apart through a life “grounded in God.”

Muentzer, on the other hand chose to mingle with the masses. Some of the Anabaptists of the day, by contrast, opted for withdrawal from the world. Franck insists over against either of these extremes to choose the world as the testing ground in which ultimately the outward figure (or ‘image’) of the inward reality has to be overcome by true reflection, proper perspective and a striving after the celestial essence. “Risk it all and cling to the kingdom of God,” is his challenge to the men of his age.¹⁶

A second factor operative in Franck's understanding of God's activity among men is his concept of Scripture. Unlike Luther, but similar in intent to Muentzer, Denck and others (and more precisely than these), Franck develops the argument that Scripture is a book which is protected by seven seals against false interpretation.¹⁷ In itself therefore Scripture cannot be conducive to salvation. The children of light alone, because they are under the aegis of God, are capable of benefiting from its allegories. Apart from the Spirit who acts as the hermeneutical agent, as it were, Scripture to Franck is no more than the paper pope which Luther had made it. He insists that the spirit of Scripture is hidden in the letter in order that “no swine may stumble over it and that no uncircumcised may come upon this secret.”¹⁸

What Franck seems to say is obviously that Scripture partakes of the duality of all things: it is hidden, yet revealed, material, yet spiritual, human, yet divine. The key to its right understanding is the Spirit. Again we have come to one of the revolutionary insights of the sixteenth century. Its impact, as we are all aware, did lead, on the one hand, to developments that were destructive of human community, but, on the other hand, to creative self realization of a deeply spiritual level.

Not unrelated to these two concepts is Franck's Ecclesiology. In a popular song he ridicules an apparent anomaly, *viz.* the existence of at least four churches each of which demands recognition for one specific reason or another. Over against their foolish claims, Franck sets those individuals who seek the kingdom of God instead. Their narrow path is the true ‘imitatio Christi’ – the acceptance of Christ's humility and patience and a readiness to bear rejection by the world.¹⁹

In a more profound *theological* vein, the Ecclesiology reflected in the *Song of the Four Churches* is rooted in the currents of thought which carry with them a deep-seated anti-institutionalism and a clearly expressed aversion to visible human constructs of any kind.²⁰ Even Luther, as we well know, speaks of the hidden church as distinguishable from the church in its earthly manifestations. But Luther is fully aware, all the while, of the historicity of that church. Franck, on the other hand, polarizes the two aspects of the Church by positing them as opposites: the church of the Spirit vs. the visible church. To the latter he ascribes a distinct place in the scheme of things by allowing that she served a useful purpose at the time of the Apostles, but has long since lost her value in the divine plan of salvation. The argument is forcefully presented in the *Letter to Campanus*:

"Therefore, I firmly believe that the outward church of Christ, including all its gifts and sacraments, because of the breaking in and laying waste by Antichrist, went up to heaven right after the death of the apostles and lies concealed in spirit and in truth. I am thus quite certain that for fourteen hundred years now there has existed no gathered church nor any sacrament."²¹

In denying any validity to the visible church of his day, Franck has taken the full consequence of his stance against the visible church, its ministry and purpose. He has in some sense become fully secularized.²² It is undoubtedly this radical turning away from the structure of the church which led Troeltsch to the observation that Franck comes closest to the ancient teaching of Mysticism which advocated the third kingdom or the 'evangelium aeternum.'²³

To sum up our main observations on Franck to this point, we venture to say that he is forced to deny the possibility of reform. At best he could have argued for the restitution of the Church, that had disappeared from earth by AD 131. In actual fact, however, he opts for revolutionary change in his concepts of God as the one who has no name (*Paradoxa*, 3)²⁴ in his attitude toward institutions and the manner in which he argues for a Christianity which is liberated from the Law (*Paradoxa*, 18).²⁵

Fascinated by the duality of everything, Franck seeks to walk the 'via paradoxa' of a sort of evangelical existentialism, illuminated by the inner light rather than being dependent on the knowledge of Christ. Whether or not such a life style allows for a viable theology of revolution, shall be one of our concerns in the second part of this paper.

It may be too rash a judgement on scant evidence such as we have mustered for this paper, to speak of a common *theology of revolution* other than in embryo. Nonetheless, the vents we have traced thus far and the responses we have elicited from three Radicals, (allegedly out of the main stream of sixteenth century transformations, yet colourful and distinct) - seem to suggest a common theological orientation. Thus it may be said that the Radicals under review participate in a world view which does not deny the existence of God nor does it necessarily diminish the significance of man. Even Franck who in some sense is the most pessimistic of the three on that score, speaks of encounter and interaction between God and spiritual men. We may conclude then that a prominent primary characteristic of these Radical theologians (others of their day could easily be included here), is no doubt the acknowledgement and acceptance of authority; an authority - be it noted - that rests

neither with the Pope, nor in the Councils, nor even in Scripture as a collection of writings, but solely in the being and nature of God as he manifests himself in the new man.

Such an authority principle invites disaster. Yet, it is at the same time the affirmation of the possibility of the presence of God's kingdom here and now in a manner that transcends any one structure. Out of this conviction Muentzer for one could exhort his listeners "you must not doubt; God shall destroy all your opponents who dare persecute you."²⁶ For this reason also he could equate the word of God "living in all the elect" to a mother "giving milk to her child."²⁷

I venture to suggest that recourse to such understanding of authority helped Radicals reach an understanding of corporate worship which was largely unfettered by inherited patterns, yet capable of incorporating these in a living liturgy as long as they expressed the worshiper's response to God. The object of such worship was "to declare Christ with-in us by the activity of the Spirit – as he has been proclaimed by the prophets, was born, died and rose – as he reigns together with the Father and the same Spirit, forever making students of us."²⁸

Free from the compulsion of tradition or law yet able to paraphrase a basic Christian credal formula, Muentzer here propagates a valid criterion of a theology of revolution as he engages in creative interpretation of the past in order that the experience of his life be an authentic and active living-out-of and living in the presence of Christ.

There is yet a third element, shared by the Radicals, which may be taken as an important ingredient of a theology of revolution. It is the conviction, frequently stated, that the Church of Christ can respond to the aspirations and needs of a people in transition. To enable such response the Radicals promoted action which would risk the uniformity of socio-political structures and forsake the literalism of Scripture and Ecclesiastical tradition in search of the unity of the Spirit. This unity, of course, found various expressions, hence led to a diversity which was often taken to mean disunity. Nothing could be farther from the expressed intention of these men. When Franck enumerated the paradoxes of life he assumed an all-transcending unity which held together conflicting ideas or warring nations in the history of Christendom. Similarly, Schwenckfeld's brotherhood of the regenerate was never intended to form the nucleus of another church, but simply to make concrete the spiritual nature of the body of Christ. Both men were misjudged by their age and greatly maligned throughout subsequent centuries. We may easily appreciate therefore why Muentzer has been branded to the present day as inciter of revolt, enthusiast and arch spiritualist. All such testimony to the contrary, his writings would lead one to believe that he fell victim to his prophetic zeal and the circumstances of his presence among the rebelling peasants of Muehlhausen at the height of the Peasants' Revolt. He was there likely to help initiate the rule of justice among the oppressed and illiterate – a rule for which he worked, preached and suffered, even though he had no illusion as to its presence among the men of his day.²⁹

How then are we to assess the contribution by sixteenth century Radicals from the vantage point of the twentieth century? Without equivocation it may be said that they were not primarily interested in re-formation.³⁰ They thought and acted rather from an inherent pessimism regarding existing institutions and patterns of authority. In a real sense they were caught in the dilemma of acknowledging the reign of God yet having to admit that this rule could not be contained in or delineated by the structures of their day.

Needless to say, their theological starting point was lost to the majority of their generation, for the magisterial Reformers, on the one hand, were still largely medieval men who ultimately took refuge in existing structures and attempted reform through compromise. Militant elements, such as the peasants, on the other hand, were prone to take the kingdom of God 'by force.' Under stress, they opted for anarchy – seeking to control power – rather than allowing the recreative forces to bring about the much needed revolutions that would make all things new. In neither camp was there any room for an adequate theology of revolution, a theology that implied commitment to an ultimate concern (to use a Tillichian phrase), allowing at the same time that any awareness of and response to such concern must needs be ambiguous. The Radicals who undoubtedly came closest to a theology of revolution experienced the consequences of the ambiguity of all human existence. They were made fools for Christ; yet, who is to say that their foolishness came to naught?

Conclusion

Harvey Cox argues in his *Secular City* (p. 107) that we live today in a period of revolution without a theology of revolution. If this were the case, we would have reached again a state of 'utter despair' (to use Luther's term) or 'complete meaninglessness' to say it in a Tillichian phrase. Perchance, the theological starting point of the Radicals of the Sixteenth Century offers a possible way out of the dilemma of our day. In other words, the admission – impossible as it may appear to be – that no revolutionary change can be effected which does not begin with a change of heart must be at the centre of any renewing process that acknowledges the activity of God in the affairs of men. The most enduring legacy which the Radicals have left to subsequent generations closely follows this insight, for they recognized that ultimately all human systems and creeds have to be seen as addenda – the mirages of men in the wilderness – and that God alone holds the key to abundant life. To grasp this truth, it would appear, is to be a true revolutionary, for such a stance demands a radical assessment of the human situation as we find it at any given moment in history and an admission of utter dependence in matters of ultimate concern.

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Footnotes

- 1 A precise delineation of the "Radicals" invites controversy. Without taking sides in the ongoing debate, I would refer the reader to G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962; Heinold Fast, *Der linke Fluegel der Reformation*, Bremen: Schuenemann Verlag, 1960; Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, Gesammelte Werke, I, Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1912. Troeltsch above all, and after him a host of North American scholars, has provided useful categories of distinction.
- 2 Recent authors who have dealt with Thomas Muentzer in one way or another are the following: E. Bloch, *Thomas Muentzer, Als Theologe der Revolution*, Stuttgart 1960; H. J. Goertz, *Innere und Aeußere Ordnung in der Theologie*

Thomas Muentzers, Leiden: Brill, 1967; Eric W. Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church: The Life and Thought of Thomas Muentzer, 1488 to 1525*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967; Also, by the same author an article entitled "Thomas Muentzer's Theology and Revolution," M.Q.R. 43 (April 1969) and *The Authority of the Inner Word*, Yale dissertation (1959); Thomas Nipperdey "Theologie und Revolution bei Thomas Muentzer," A.R.G. Vol 54 (1963).

- 3 The problem has been with the church ever since, found adherents and equally fervent opponents (Ritschl-Schleiermacher) and certainly is a live issue in today's struggle between the Pentecostalist movement and those who seek renewal within the church as we know it.

- 4 Meinulf Barbers, *Toleranz bei Sebastian Franck*, Bonn: Roehrscheid, 1964, is the latest critical study on the subject known to me.
- 5 Characteristically, the *Letter to the Nobility* was written in German, the other two treatises, however, appeared in Latin since the former was intended for the people, the latter two, on the other hand, were designed for the use of theologians.
- 6 For a history of the Peasants' Revolt cf. G. Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, Munich-Berlin: 1935 (reprint, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt: 1968). Cf. Also, G. Franz, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges*, W. Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt: 1963. The author cites documents which go back to 1423 and show signs of conflict between nobility and peasants.
- 7 Thomas Muentzer, *Schriften und Briefe*, (hence, *Schriften*), ed. G. Franz, in *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte*, XXXIII, Guetersloh: 1968.
- 8 Cf. G. Franz, *Bauernkrieg und Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges*.
- 9 Cf. E. J. Furcha and F. L. Battles, *The Piety of Caspar Schwenckfeld*, Pittsburgh: 1969, p. 34.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 15
- 11 *Ibid*, p. 28
- 12 Since about 1526, Schwenckfeld did not participate in any celebration of the Lord's Supper. In at least two documents (of 1528 and 1559 respectively), he states his reasons. Cf. Furcha-Battles, *op. cit.* p. 104 ff.
- 13 Cf. G. Baring, "L. Haetzlers Bearbeitung der Theologia Deutsch, Worms 1528" in *Z.F.K.*, 70, 1959. The author argues that the influence of the anonymous writer of this work is widespread and cannot be rated too highly.
- 14 A fuller title is, *Chronica, Zeytbuch und Geschichtsbibell von Anbegin bis in dies gegenwertig 1536th year*, etc., recently reprinted by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1969.
- 15 I am insisting on this distinction even though both men were ordained. Muentzer never really abandoned the office of a minister of word and sacrament, whereas Franck's major contribution to the 16th century is primarily in the "secular" sphere.
- 16 Cf. *Paradoxa*, 187-189, Wollgast edition, p. 319 ff. A frequently recurring term is Gelassenheit - tranquility, equilibrium which he suggests as the best attitude to adopt in the effort to overcome the world.
- 17 *Das Verbuetschiert mit 7 Siegeln verschlossene Buch* (1539). The opposing forces that have to be countered are fear of men, human understanding, human counsel and human strength, human skill and godlessness or love of world. The inner struggle may be accomplished within man through rebirth, baptism and circumcision in the spirit.
- 18 *Sechshundert Dreyzehn Gebot und Verbot*, Ulm, 1537, (last page). Similarly in his *Paradoxa*, The outward word is merely a "figure of and introduction to the inward word." Cf. particularly Sections 115-125 (Wollgast edition pp. 192-208), and frequently elsewhere.
- 19 "Of Four Opposing Churches, Each of Which Hates and Condemns the Others" (1531), quoted in H. Fast, *Der linke Fluegel*, p. 246. Similar songs were apparently popular. Cf. one by Berner, a Schwenckfelder of sorts, quoted by Wackernagel, *Das Deutsche Kirchenlied*, V, No. 790.
- 20 Cf. G. Müller, *Die Römische Kurie und die Reformation*, p. 19 ff. The author observes a widespread, anti-curialist feeling in Germany at the outset of 1524. He cites the laughter and derision with which the Papal nuntio Rorario e.g. was received in Nurnberg and refers to Strasbourg whose Council had passed anti-Roman legislation.
- 21 *Letter to Campanus*, in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. William and Mergal, p. 149. I have slightly modified their translation to correspond better to the German text.
- 22 M. Barbers, *Toleranz*, p. 62 states the case succinctly as follows: "Fuer Franck der jeder sichtbaren Kirche jede Berechtigung abspricht, von seinen Voraussetzungen her absprechen muss, sind die Sakramente schlechthin Aeusserlichkeiten ohne jedweden Hintergrund, magische Zeichen, die eine unsichtbare Gnade andeuten wollen... So musste Franck sich von der Kirche ... abwenden; jeder sichtbaren Kirche absagen, um zur einen, unsichtbaren Kirche Christi zu gelangen."
- 23 *Soziallehren*, p. 888. By way of an aside it may be noted that in 1528 Franck married a sister of one of the so-called godless painters of Nurnberg.
- 24 Wollgast edition, p. 22
- 25 "The just (believers) have no law," Wollgast edition, p. 303 ff. Similarly also, *Paradoxa* 232 and 233 and 216/17.
- 26 Muentzer, *Exposition of the Book of Daniel*, *Schriften*, p. 258 (my translation).

- 27 Muentzer, *Prague Manifesto*, in *Schriften*, p. 497 (my translation).
- 28 Muentzer, *German-Evangelical Mass, Preface*, in *Schriften*, p. 167 (translation mine).
- 29 Muentzer, "A Letter to the Council of Nordhausen" (after Aug. 15, 1524). *Schriften*, p. 575 (my translation). Muentzer concludes, "The peace of God be with you ... that you may receive truth and righteousness which the world has not received ... by his grace he teaches us to seek after the highest good."
- 30 This must be said even though earlier in the paper we suggested that Schwenckfeld in some of his concepts stood closer to the Reformers than he was to Radical theology.

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