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The Problematics of “Heresy” and “The Reformation”

1. The Problematical Terms

The topics of our colloquium, “heresy” and “reformation”, are generally recognized as valid cognitive constructs in scholarly discourse. To argue, as I shall do, that we should be better off not to use them in their usual sense may therefore seem whimsical if not also ungrateful. But terms like these are always impositions on the past, creating one possible order of meaningfulness according to a particular retrospective interest. Change the retrospective interest and the whole battery of cognitive constructions becomes liable to rethinking. Such changes of historical vision have occurred in the past, we can expect them to occur in the future, and there is some reason to think that one is taking place now, when on all sides we see venerable themes scorned or neglected in favor of problems and topics that used not to be thought of as historical subjects at all. All of which is merely noted here to frame the following discussion, which focusses only on the two cognitive constructions of our program, “heresy” and “The Reformation”, in their traditional historiographical significations. It will be argued that both of them belong to an outdated construction of history and that both, for different reasons, distort what they include, omit or obscure much that is now regarded as interesting, and should therefore be confined to much narrower semantic fields.

Since I am not an expert in either subject I shall limit my argument to the kind of critical examination of the literature that any reasonably knowledgeable scholar is entitled to engage in. In the same spirit I do not question the scholarly solidity of recognized work in the history of “heresy” and “The Reformation”, including the works whose conceptual apparatus I here criticize but whose positive achievements I highly value. And I should add, finally, that this essay in subversion goes along with the recognition that historical scholarship accumulates knowledge through and across whatever paradigm shifts it undergoes. In other words, even if I am right, and a drastic reconfiguration of some of our ideas of the past is indeed in order, this would in my view be a program for future progress, not a negation of the scholarly past.

2. The Case against “Heresy”

The case against using the term “heresy” was made in 1935 by Herbert Grundmann in his *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*¹, when he observed that both Roman Catholic and Protestant Ketzergeschichte had proceeded from the inquisitorial construction of “heresy” and were incapable of conceptualizing the later-medieval “religious movements” as subjects of study in their own right *within* the context of the whole Christian society². For “heresy” was a term of condemnation used by the repressors of religious movements, whose members never thought of themselves as anything but good Christians³. The modern historian of “heresy” which is to say of hereticated religious movements, must therefore choose whether to take the point of view of the men and women he is interested in, who believed they were good Christians, or to take the point of view of their persecutors who called them heretics. The right choice would seem obvious but in fact almost all such historians choose the other, accepting the Church’s definition of what was and was not heretical⁴. In consequence they must try to use for general cognitive purposes a concept that was shaped to be intrinsically pejorative and judicial. The resulting “heretics” are thereby constructed, usually with sympathy but always in the skewed perspective imposed by the concept, in terms of deviation, doctrinal peculiarities, and the opposition or dissent imputed to them

¹ Historische Studien (Berlin 1935) 267.

² Religiöse Bewegungen, 7 – „Die protestantische Ketzergeschichtsschreibung hat die katholische Ketzerpolemik gleichsam mit umgekehrtem Vorzeichen fortgesetzt ... Auch sie fragt nach den Gegensätzen zwischen Kirche und Orden einerseits, Ketzerei und Sekten andererseits, nicht nach ihrer gemeinsamen Stellung und Wandlung im geschichtlichen Verlauf.“

³ So Grundmann, Ketzergeschichte des Mittelalters, Die Kirche in ihrer Geschichte, 2, G, i, (Göttingen 1963) 2 – “Apart from quite isolated exceptions, there were no heretics in the Middle Ages who wanted to be anything but Christian or indeed did not claim to be the true, good, even better Christians.” All the surviving evidence I know supports this statement. How the “heretics” actually referred to themselves appears here and there in the sources. See Howard Kaminsky, A History of the Hussite Revolution (Berkeley, CA 1967) 177, for the German Waldensians’ terms for themselves and for outsiders: “die kunden” as vs. “die fremden”. And see Anne Hudson, The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History (Oxford 1988) 142f. – The Lollards referred to one of their own as: “a knowen man” (Pecock); “a prevy man” (1511), “gud and honest” (1520).

⁴ I offer a small bouquet of preuves; many more could be added. According to Raffaello Morghen “L’historien doit considérer comme hérétique celui que l’autorité religieuse de ce moment historique reconnaît comme tel” – in: Jacques LeGoff (Ed.), Hérésies et sociétés dans l’Europe pré-industrielle, 11^e-18^e siècles (Civilisations et Sociétés 10, Paris 1968) 16. Another scholar (whose name I failed to note as I copied his words) tells us that “It is impossible for the historian to formulate a concept of heresy which would not be that of the Church”. Jeffrey Burton Russell believes that “The best criterion for orthodoxy at any given moment is the position of the pope” – in his Dissent and Reform in the Early Middle Ages (Berkeley 1965) 3. Malcolm Lambert writes, “I have written as a historian, not a theologian. I have taken heresy to mean whatever the papacy explicitly or implicitly condemned during the period” – in his Medieval Heresy. Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus (London 1977) xii; the passage is unchanged in the second edition, Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation (Oxford 1992) xi.

by their ecclesiastical judges, rather than in terms of modes of religiosity within the common Christian religion. Why Grundmann himself continued to speak of "heresy" after he had shown how bad it was to do so⁵ is hard to understand, and the same goes for heresiologists since 1935 who have recognized the power of his work but have not suffered the *crise de conscience* it calls for.

One reason may be that the modern mind finds the idea of heresy attractive, both in its original Christian signification of individual choice in matters of religion⁶, which is now one of the "human rights" established by Western Civilization even in officially Catholic countries, and in its secular extensions such as independence of thought, the sovereignty of conscience, the spirit of liberty or even rebellion. But historians who approach the medieval "heretics" with these favorable connotations in mind are also aware that the medieval connotations of "heresy" were quite different: the term was never used in the medieval sources simply as an objective designation of free choice, separable from the context in which such choice always figured as inherently vicious. Furthermore, the conditions under which free choice became heresy were stipulated legalistically rather than religiously by the Church from the eleventh century on, as it moved away from the patristic emphasis on deviation from the true faith, to an emphasis on the heretic's rejection of the Church's authority, particularly the pope's⁷. Heresy in this sense was a judicial category: if the Church's judicial agents – bishops or papal inquisitors – deemed a particular belief or practice to be an error, they officially admonished the erring person to renounce it; if he or she refused to do so this disobedience was criminalized as "contumacy", and such contumacy was heresy⁸.

⁵ So in a series of important articles, most notably, *Der Typus des Ketzers in mittelalterlicher Anschauung*, in: *Kultur- und Universalgeschichte* (FS für Walter Goetz, Leipzig, Berlin 1927) 91–107; *Oportet et haereses esse. Das Problem der Ketzerei im Spiegel der mittelalterlichen Bibelsexegese*, in: *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 45 (1963) 129–64; *Ketzerverhöre des Spätmittelalters als quellenkritisches Problem*, in: *Deutsches Archiv* 21 (1965) 19–575.

⁶ So e.g. St. Jerome's definition, in: *Decretum Gratiani*, 24. q. 3, c. 27: "Heresis grece ab electione dicitur, quod scilicet eam sibi unusquisque eligat disciplinam, quam putat esse meliorem. Quicumque igitur aliter scripturam intelligit, quam sensus Spiritus sancti flagitat, a quo scripta est, licet ab ecclesia non recesserit, tamen hereticus appellari potest, ... eligens que peiora sunt."

⁷ I follow *Othmar Hageneder*, *Der Häresiebegriff bei den Juristen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts*, in: *The Concept of Heresy in the Middle Ages (11th–13th C.)*, ed. W. Lourdaux, D. Verhelst (Louvain, The Hague 1976) 42–103; cf. *idem*, *Die Häresie des Ungehorsams und die Entstehung des hierokratischen Papsttums*, in: *Römische historische Mitteilungen* 20 (1978) 29–47.

⁸ I have outlined this development more amply in my *The Problematics of Later-Medieval "Heresy"*, in: *Husitství – Reformace – Renesance*, ed. J. Pánek et al. (FS für František Šmahel, Prague 1994) 133–54, esp. 138–43. Some particular points may be noted here: see *Hageneder*, *Der Häresiebegriff*, 63ff., for the point that contumacy implied a denial of the Roman Church's magisterial primacy; for the treatment of heresy as *lèse majesté* by the civilians see *Helmuth G. Walther*, *Häresie und päpstliche Politik: Ketzerbegriff und Ketzergesetzgebung in der Übergangsphase von der Dekretistik zur Dekretalistik*, in: *The Concept of Heresy*, 134; and cf. the papal "Ad abolendam" of 1184 (X. 5. 7. 9) for an example of the indiscriminate anathematization of the merely disobedient along with the deviant.

But this judicial cognizance of error under the aspect of crime made heresy and contumacy judicially convertible: as the *glossa ordinaria* on the *Decretum* put it, “contumacia dicitur heresis”⁹. More concretely, the condemnation of a “heretic” was due not to his “error” but to his persistence in it; so for example John Hus could remark, citing the Archdeacon, Huguccio, and Innocent IV, “maior excommunicacio propter solam contumaciam est ferenda”¹⁰. At this point the procedural, juridical concept of heresy is disengaged from the particular religious ideas of “heretical” groups. Their “error” was *essentially* a deviation from a judicially determined norm; their “heresy” was willful persistence in such movement. It is an entirely negative idea, empty of all religious content except that which can be construed from this peculiar sense of “error”¹¹. It is not surprising, then, that modern heresiological images of “heresy” and “heretics” are elicited not from a *verstehend* attempt to recover the self-understanding of the pious men and women of the religious movements, but rather from one or another sense of what contumacy implies.

3. Filling in the Empty Construct

The empty construct was filled in first by the inquisitors themselves who elaborated a whole heretical type from little more than what the ecclesiastical condemnation implied about its target¹². So we read that the deadly sin of pride prompts the “heretic” to prefer his own opinion to that of the Church and to persist stubbornly in it even after the Church has admonished him to desist. At the same time

⁹ *Johannes Teutonicus*, glossa ordinaria on Decretum, Dist. 40, c. 6 (“Si papa”) “a fide devius”.

¹⁰ In Super IV Sententiarum, ed. V. Flajsšans (Prague 1904) 612.

¹¹ So Helmut G. Walther, *Häresie und päpstliche Politik*, 140, refers to “die Tendenz zur Entleerung des Häresiebegriffes”; cf. 111: “The problem of heresy, for Gratian, was part of the relationship between the church and power in general; hence, in the context of his juristic project, he could have no interest in any consideration of the content of heresies, except in respect to the purity of faith that constituted the *communitas ecclesiae*” – i.e., only as negations of the purity of faith. Cf., e.g., Jean Leclercq, *L’hérésie d’après les écrits de S. Bernard de Clairvaux*, in: *The Concept of Heresy*, 12–26, here 17f., with examples and authorities for the narrow usage, including Bernard’s reference to Abelard’s “heresy”: “haereticum probans non tam in errore quam in pertinacia et defensione erroris.”

¹² For this and what follows here, see Herbert Grundmann, *Der Typus des Ketzers*. The creation of a heretical psyche out of nothing more than the “Ketzertopos” itself has recently been noted by Ralph Klötzer, *Die Täuferherrschaft von Münster: Stadtreformation und Welterneuerung* (Münster 1992) [I use the review in *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter* 58 (1994) 389–90], posing the question, “ob die Täuferherrschaft von Münster eine Logik aufweist, die es verbietet, den alten und immer neuen Ketzertopos weiterzutragen, nachdem individuelle bzw. kollektive Defekte von Psyche und Moral für die Abweichung von einer gesetzten Norm verantwortlich sind”. His alternative, to understand the development of Anabaptism out of its own theology which demanded a new way of life rather than belief in this or that doctrine, would be just as valid for the study of medieval “heresy”.

the "heretic's" egoistic pride makes him suppose that he is better than others, and he therefore assumes the appearance of virtue – he is pale from fasts and other austerities, he is ostentatiously poor, he seems to lead an ascetic life. Even when such appearances proceed from a sincere intention they are tainted by their deeper origin in vice, and their chief function is to seduce the faithful. More often than not, however, the appearance of virtue conceals an indulgence in the delights of the flesh; the victims of inquisition were routinely accused of sexual immorality of every sort, including orgies, bestiality, and sodomy, to say nothing of what used to be called free love. It was along these lines that the spokesmen of orthodoxy created the "heretics" that they condemned. The heretic thus conceived was an instrument of Satan – hence the enemy, the antagonist par excellence¹³.

It is this oppositional image of "heresy", with reversed value signs, that has made the subject so attractive to post-medieval practitioners of *Ketzergeschichte*, whether Protestant, Catholic, or neither. We see it already in the father of Protestant heresiology, Flacius Illyricus, who found his "witnesses to the Truth" precisely in the class constructed for him by the Roman Church's heretication of, as he put it, "all those who before Luther gave witness in some way to the truth of Christ against the errors and madness of the Antichrist"¹⁴. This homogenizing category encouraged him to impute many "truths" to those who did not in fact hold them – as the Czech Jesuit Bohuslav Balbín later complained, Flacius "found his witnesses everywhere", even among the orthodox¹⁵. His successors are the modern heresiologists, who are usually more scrupulous but who take their "heretics" from the same pool he drew from, namely the class of "heretics" created by the Church's condemnations. It is no accident that the greatest modern history of medieval "heresy" was written in the context of a history of the Inquisition: its "heretics" "holding fast to all the essentials of Christianity" correspond in principle to Flacius's *testes veritatis*, and the identification of their "mainspring" as "antisacerdotalism" is more or less the way the Inquisition saw it too¹⁶.

¹³ Alexander Patschovsky, *Was sind Ketzer? Über den geschichtlichen Ort der Häresien im Mittelalter*, in: "... eine finstere und fast unglaubliche Geschichte"? Mediävistische Notizen zu Umberto Eco's Mönchsroman „Der Name der Rose“ (Darmstadt 1987) 169–90, here esp. 172–77; R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (Oxford 1987) 65, "For all imaginative purposes heretics, Jews and lepers were interchangeable. They had the same qualities, from the same source, and they presented the same threat: through them the Devil was at work to subvert the Christian order and bring the world to chaos."

¹⁴ *Catalogus testium veritatis*, finished 1553, published 1556 and reprinted thereafter (e.g., Frankfurt 1672); the quote comes from the preface. Luther had also valued the medieval "heretics" in this sense; see A. G. Dickens, *John Tonkin, The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P. 1985) 8 – "Luther ... believed that throughout the disastrous reign of papalism there persisted a true but hidden Church, personified by a series of so-called heretics like Wycliffe and Huss and culminating in those more recent movements, including his own, which sought to recover Gospel Christianity."

¹⁵ *Epitome historica rerum Bohemicarum* (Prague 1677) 406ff., 459.

¹⁶ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, 3 vols. (New York 1888); the quotes from 1:61.

There is also another factor in play. The bourgeois-liberal mentality still common to most historians, whether Protestant, Catholic, or secular, has its own disposition to what Ernst Huber called *Trennungsdenken*, disjunctive thinking, which organizes its field of cognition according to oppositions, contradictions, and conflicts¹⁷. The ready-made oppositional class offered by the Inquisition is ideal for this purpose. But it is obviously inappropriate when something other than disjunction is needed. For even though the “heresies” so conceived can be and have been usefully studied in terms of their particular beliefs in each case, it has most often been within a skewed *Problemstellung* that tends to equivocation, confusing the substance of the “heresies” as religious movements in their respective sociocultural contexts with their various aspects as “heterodoxies” vis-à-vis the Church’s orthodoxy. This in turn leads to an emphasis on problems of causation or “origins”, external influences, and oppositional motivation, none of which are central to the understanding of a religious movement as such¹⁸. It also determines the way historians think about the “social” dimension of “heresy”. What sort of people constituted or joined such a group? Why did they do so? What was their relationship to those among whom they lived? To the society at large? But such questions cannot be properly focussed because their premise is misconceived: one asks about the origins, motivations, and affinities of groups perceived not in terms of their own intentions and practices but in terms of the Church’s judgement that they were centrifugal or oppositional. This encourages rather easy, superficial, and usually reductionist solutions to the social-historical problematic.

The classic case is the straightforward Marxist interpretation offered by Friedrich Engels almost a century and a half ago¹⁹. He began with the postulate that the church was “the most general force coordinating and sanctioning the existing feudal domination”. Therefore, he argued, all opposition to the feudal order had to take a religious form. Hence heresy, opposing the church, was essentially the repudiation of feudalism, it was the ideology of class struggle²⁰. But the

¹⁷ This notion is discussed in a context appropriate to the present argument by *Otto Brunner*, *Land und Herrschaft. Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter* (Wien, Wiesbaden 1959) 115ff.; see the English translation by *Howard Kaminsky*, *James Van Horn Melton*, *Land and Lordship. Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Philadelphia 1992), “Translators’ Introduction”, *passim*, esp. n. 32.

¹⁸ So for example the very useful comprehensive survey by *Jeffrey Russell*, *Interpretations of the Origins of Medieval Heresy*, in: *Mediaeval Studies* 25 (1963) 26–53, touches the religious experience of the “heretics” only insofar as Grundmann and one or two other scholars have seen this as the origin of “dissent”; for the rest we see a spectrum of possible conjectures, about the origins not of certain specific forms of piety but of the opposition to Roman orthodoxy imputed to these forms by the Church. Every conceivable premise of religion, sociology, and psychology has found a place in this gallery.

¹⁹ For what follows see his: *The Peasant War in Germany*, trans. *M. Olgin* (New York 1926) 51f.; I modify the translation according to the original, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (1850).

²⁰ Cf. *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels*, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), trans. *Samuel Moore*, ed. *F. Engels* (New York 1948) 9 – “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” On this premise heresy could hardly have been anything else.

"heresy" thus decoded was nothing more than the inquisitor's construction of the heretic as *essentially* an opponent of the Church's authority, rather than someone cultivating a certain mode of religious experience; it was precisely the religious emptiness of this construction that allowed Engels to fill it with the dialectic of class struggle, anti-feudal opposition, whether "peasant-plebeian" or "*bürgerlich*". The Marxism of our own century, whether "bourgeois" or Communist, has in general been less simple, recognizing that neither classes nor class consciousness, crystallized to the point set by the original ideal types, can be found in the Middle Ages²¹; it is rather the sociocultural order as a whole that must be taken as the primal context of meaningfulness, not reduced to a mere amphitheater in which classes contended²². Hence the relation between "the social" and "the religious" is recognized as problematical – if not quite a matter of hermeneutical choice²³, then at least a variable determined by conditions in each case²⁴. The social dimension of "heresy", while still characterized pro forma in terms of class and class struggle, is more apt to be laid out in fact as play within a set of tensions

²¹ So e.g. *Josef Macek*, O trídím boji za feudalismu, in: *Československý časopis historický* 5 (1957) 297: "We presuppose the *immanent* [my emphasis, HK] existence of class hatred and rebellion in the thinking of the exploited under feudalism." We see on the one hand an insistence on preserving the Marxist doctrine of class-conflict, on the other hand a recognition that evidence for it as the motor of medieval "heresies" is scanty or dubious.

²² *Ernst Werner*, *Pauperes Christi: Studien zu sozial-religiösen Bewegungen im Zeitalter des Reformpapsttums* (Leipzig 1956) 10: "The religiously colored views, theories, and forms of life represented by both rural and urban groups can, with the help of the theory of reflections and the doctrine of basis and superstructure, be explained in respect to their social relationships, the forms of class struggle, and the structural changes of feudal society." Cf. *Bernhard Töpfer*, *Das kommende Reich des Friedens: Zur Entwicklung chiliastischer Zukunftshoffnungen im Hochmittelalter* (Berlin 1964), who, writing about one species of religious movement, repeats part of Engels's thesis (p. 21), but also transcends the simplifications of class-conflict in favor of a scheme of the whole – e.g., 13, "wenn das bestehende Gesellschaftsgefüge beträchtliche Spannungen aufweist, wenn neue Gesellschaftsschichten emporsteigen", etc.

²³ *Werner*, *Pauperes Christi*, 8f., "The question is simply whether purely religious import is assigned to ... [the religio-social agitation stimulated by the Gregorian reform], which is to make the religious factor the prime mover of historical development, ... or whether one tries to get behind the forms of thought and consciousness, in order to strip the 'zeal of faith' ... of its religious clothing and to lay bare its social essence [Kern]." He of course regards the latter alone as ultimately satisfactory.

²⁴ E.g. *Martin Erbstößer*, *Sozialreligiöse Strömungen im späten Mittelalter: Geißler, Freigeister und Waldenser im 14. Jahrhundert* (Berlin 1970) 7, referring to the formulation by Engels: "Problematischer ist ... die Einordnung der einzelnen Ideologien in den Rahmen des Gesamtprozesses. Im Vordergrund steht die Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen den Versuchen, 'den Heiligenschein abzustreifen', und den Bestrebungen, 'die gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse anzutasten'." He recognizes that the latter were not manifest most of the time, in periods of "relativ normaler Klassenwidersprüche". Cf. *ibid.* 67, n. 263: "Es ist geradezu charakteristisch für unentwickelte Formen der Opposition, daß der soziale Gehalt verloren geht und sich die Auseinandersetzungen fast ausschließlich innerhalb der Ideologie abspielen."

generated by an alleged "crisis of feudal society" at one or another degree of intensity²⁵.

All of which need only be noted here, to make the point that even the most sophisticated versions of the Marxist thesis proceed from the mutinous image implicit in the inquisitorial concept of "heresy"²⁶. In doing so they suffer from the prevarication of the inquisitors, who imputed opposition to religious movements whose own intention was rather *disengagement*. In Grundmann's terms: "the gospel ... found its new confessors precisely among those who themselves were involved in the temptations of secular civilization"; voluntary poverty implies property to begin with, and the new movements were "a religious reaction in the ranks of the upper levels against the social, economic, and cultural developments of the time"²⁷. Once in existence, to be sure, a movement naturally attracted men and women of the lower classes as well, proportionally more of them, perhaps, once it had been hereticated²⁸; but the origins of the religious movements lay before the rise of early capitalism, they were directed against the worldly *clergy*, and only later did economic developments, bringing wealth, luxury, and materialism, reinforce the basic "contradiction" and give it a societal dimension²⁹.

Modern heresiologists who decrystallize the Marxist categories by decoding the inquisitor's "heresy" not into class war but the more *salonfähig* and indeed anodyne "dissent" do not thereby make the sociological problem go away. For one thing the idea of dissent is even emptier than the inquisitorial idea of heresy, which at least evokes the religious substance that it does not define³⁰. One does not know more when one is told that "heresy" was really the dissent that arises from a spirit of defiance³¹ or from a natural human propensity to ask questions³². Nor

²⁵ E.g. in: *Robert Kalivoda*, *Revolution und Ideologie: Der Hussitismus* (Cologne 1976); cf. my review in *Speculum* 53 (1978) 386–89.

²⁶ So e.g. *Erbstösser*, *Strömungen*, 67, discussing the Flagellants of 1349, grants that they cannot be understood as an "organisierte sozialpolitische Bewegung" or a "radikale Umsturzpartei", but also rejects such cognitive constructs as "religiöse Bewegung" and "laikale Frömmigkeitsbewegung". In a footnote thereto he praises Gordon Leff's idea of heresy as "die Ablehnung der traditionellen Autorität der Kirche", but rejects his endeavor, "die daraus resultierenden Bewegungen als Suche nach neuen Formen des religiösen Lebens zu interpretieren".

²⁷ *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 168f.; cf. *Grundmann*, *Neue Beiträge zur Geschichte der religiösen Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (orig. 1955), reprinted as "Anhang" in: *Religiöse Bewegungen* (repr. Darmstadt 1961); *Russell*, *Interpretations of the Origins*, 33.

²⁸ *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 163; cf. 31–34 for the significance of "weavers" as a characterization of the "heretics" of the religious movements. *Gordon Leff*, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c. 1250–c. 1450*, 2 vols. (Manchester, New York 1967) 1:12 – "It is no accident ... that a sect in decline – or driven underground – tended to be drawn from the lower social groups."

²⁹ *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 196–198.

³⁰ Insofar as "dissent" does carry some resonance of religious deviance along with social dissidence, this is probably due to the use of the term in the contexts of the English Reformation and Civil War, certainly not to its ordinary modern usage.

³¹ *R. I. Moore*, *The Origins of European Dissent* (London 1977) ix–x, distinguishes between heresy, which he takes in the Roman church's sense as "an opinion ... contrary to the teach-

can anything definite be elicited from Gordon Leff's generalization, in any case excessive, that "medieval heresy ... was an extreme ... expression of the problems confronting medieval society"; it was "endemic in medieval society, as the form which all sustained dissent must ultimately take"³³.

Then too, this merely verbal strategy suffers from the same defects inhering in Engels's Marxism, namely an abstract reductionism that omits precisely the primary moment, the desire of so many religious laity for an experience of spiritual redemption, as well as the particular circumstances and mediating mentalities that constitute the historically interesting features of each case. The men and women of the religious movements can no more be imagined as saying "I want to dissent" than as saying "I want to be a heretic"; what they did say (to stick to this figure) is what has to be established, and this obviously cannot be done by simply analyzing the implications of the Church's category of heresy. What is required is a kind of holistic sociological attack deriving from an idea of "society as an inclusive system of human relationships and organisation within which religion constitutes a major component"³⁴.

4. A Sociology of Fractional Religiosity: Opposition or Subculture?

The facticity of "heresy" as something created by heretication has recently been noted by a few historians whose interest has lain not in the religious substance of "heresy" but in the presuppositions and implications of heretication. Although

ing of the church, publicly avowed and obstinately defended", and dissent, which is "the spirit which not only declines to accept as a matter of course the opinions prescribed by established authority, but holds that it is entitled, and even obliged, not to do so". This is not, evidently, a contrast between coordinates but only between an alleged habitus and its alleged effect; in any case, as Moore notes, it concerns (notionally) "the fact of deviation from Catholic teaching rather than its nature".

³² So, e.g., *Jeffrey Burton Russell*, *Dissent and Reform in the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley 1965) 2 – "A chief reason for the existence of heresy lies in the nature of Christianity itself ... It has always been concerned with right belief as well as with right conduct. The Christians' interest in abstract truth led them to define it in a system of orthodoxy, and since no definition of truth ever goes unchallenged, the inevitable companion of orthodoxy is dissent." "Orthodoxy generates dissent." On p. 3 he defines dissent as including both heresy proper and "all explicit and many implicit deviations from the religious norms of medieval Catholicism".

³³ Heresy in the Later Middle Ages 1, "Prologue", 3, 5, 10. Leff's consequent insight, that later-medieval action against "heresy" was not primarily the repression of this or that "dissent" but the self-preservation of a whole sociocultural order, was not developed by him into a structural principle in the sense enunciated by Moore and Patschovsky, discussed just below.

³⁴ *Janet Nelson*, *Society, Theodicy and the Origins of Heresy: Towards a Reassessment of the Medieval Evidence*, in: *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest*, ed. by *Derek Baker* (Studies in Church History 9, Cambridge 1972) 65–77, here 65.

their work therefore lies outside the present problematic, it can be usefully noticed at this point because it makes the issues raised here stand out more clearly. A politology of heretication has been proposed by Robert Moore in his thesis of "the formation of a persecuting society". Heretication, he argues, is best understood not as response to any religious threat posed by "heterodox" sects, but rather as an instrument by which a new class of clerical *litterati* consolidated both the central governments they served and their own position as political managers therein. For similar reasons, according to Moore, the same class, from the twelfth century on, defined still other groups, which had previously been undefined or treated with neglectful tolerance, as objects of persecution: the Jews, homosexuals, lepers, prostitutes³⁵.

A sociological approach parallel to Moore's politological construction has been proposed by Alexander Patschovsky. Inasmuch as "heresy kat'exochen had become disobedience instead of disbelief", he has argued, "the dogmatic religious aspect of heresy lost its weight", so that the extended range of charges of heresy must be understood as characteristic of "a society which expressed its endemic tensions in religious terms". Hence his conclusion: "heresiology, properly understood, should be applied sociology."³⁶ Like Leff, Patschovsky construes "heresies" as expressions of societal disharmonies; like Moore he understands the Church's imputation of "heresy" as due rather to the needs of the Church than to the intrinsic heterodoxy of the "heretics".

Both of these lines of attack, Moore's and Patschovsky's, have the virtue of separating "heresy" as religious movement from the action of heretication, which is precisely what is advocated by our present argument. Their focus on the hitherto all but untouched field of heretication opens this up as a medieval phenomenon in its own right. But neither, in consequence, can thematize the religious substance of the religious movements. Moore, who regards this substance as dissent, minimizes its intrinsic importance as such³⁷. Patschovsky's notion of societal disharmony has the same tendency, even though he has elsewhere made uniquely important contributions to the study of "heretical" religiosity. The problem put in the present discussion remains outstanding. Indeed the approach to "heresy" by way of heretication suppresses the religious issue much as the inquisitors did.

For one thing, inquisitorial "heresy" covered both "popular" and learned or eccentric religious groupings, so that historians interested in the social dimensions of the religious phenomena in question have to supply their own discriminatory specifications, which are not elicited from the idea of "heresy" but only from the historian's own sense of what is socially interesting³⁸. And here too they are not

³⁵ R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (Oxford 1987) 27–58, 102–12, 138f., 144ff.

³⁶ I cite from his unpublished essay of 1992: *Heresy in Medieval Society*.

³⁷ Moore, *Formation*, 151, holds that the power of heresies was in fact slight; it was greatly exaggerated by the persecutors.

³⁸ E.g., Carl T. Berkhout, Jeffrey B. Russell, *Medieval Heresies: A Bibliography 1960–1979*

well served by the construct of "heresy", for many religious movements similar in all substantial respects to those condemned as heresies (most notably many groups of Beguines), were not so designated, not only because some happened to be disobedient and others obedient, but also because in many cases, for merely circumstantial reasons, this issue was not imposed³⁹.

For another thing, still more disturbing, "heresy" as contumacy tended to extend its semantic field almost endlessly, covering not only "formal" or "metaphorical" heresy, such as simony⁴⁰ and schism⁴¹ (most notably in connection with the solution of the Great Schism by the deposition as schismatic "heretics" of both Benedict XIII and Gregory XII⁴²), but also a vast domain of contumacy that may be called "secular heresy". Secular powers who disobeyed papal or episcopal commands, laity of all ranks who infringed ecclesiastical property rights, the very numerous prelates who were remiss in their payments to the papal collectors – all of these and others as well were often excommunicated by the ecclesiastical judiciaries, and if they remained excommunicated for more than a year, they were ipso facto "heretics"⁴³. Modern scholars who use inquisitorial "heresy" as a cognitive construct to cover medieval religious movements cannot of course follow the inquisitors all the way here and if they do not simply ignore political and other secu-

(Subsidia Mediaevalia 11, Toronto 1981) x, "We cover only the popular, social heresies as opposed to intellectual and doctrinal disputes." Cf. *Lambert*, *Medieval Heresy*, xii.

³⁹ *Tadeusz Manteuffel*, Naissance d'une hérésie: Les adeptes de la pauvreté volontaire au moyen âge, trans. *Anna Posner* (Civilisations et sociétés 6, Paris, The Hague 1970) 100: heresy is not born but made, "par des circonstances extérieures". As for the Beguines, compare e.g. *Lambert*, *Medieval Heresy*, 173–81, where – in consequence of his book's project – the Beguines are discussed only insofar as they were objects of suspicion or heretication, with *Ernest W. McDonnell*, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene (New Brunswick, NJ 1954), which studies the movement in its own right and therefore deals with its heretication only ad hoc, when this raised problems.

⁴⁰ See *Simon de Cramaud*: De substraccione obediencie, ed. *Howard Kaminsky* (Cambridge, MA 1984) 48f., for opinions about this, including Pierre de la Palu's objection to the thesis that "contumacia est heresis, et contumax dicitur infidelis": "hoc est non proprie sed solum metaphorice, sicut et simonia dicitur heresis." On this last point see *J. Leclercq*, *Simoniaca haeresis*, in: *Studi Gregoriani* 1 (Rome 1947) 523–30; *Paul de Vooght*, La "simoniaca haeresis" de Saint Thomas à Jean Huss, in: *Hussiana* (Louvain 1960) 378–99.

⁴¹ St. Jerome had written that schism and heresy were ultimately convertible, inasmuch as a schismatic would not fail to invent a new doctrine to justify his schism – Decretum, 24. q. 3, c.26: "Quod quidem in principio aliqua ex parte intelligi potest [scisma] diversum [sc. ab heresi]; ceterum nullum scisma nisi heresim aliquam sibi confingit, ut recte ab ecclesia videatur recedisse." Elaborate constructions were elicited therefrom in the later Middle Ages; cf. *H. Kaminsky*, *Simon de Cramaud and the Great Schism* (New Brunswick, NJ 1983) index, s. v. "Schism as formal heresy".

⁴² Ibid. 281–83; *Simon de Cramaud*, De substraccione, Introduction, 46ff., and the treatise, lines, 697–700.

⁴³ *Hageneder*, *Häresiebegriff*, 72–79. While some canonists restricted this consequence to those whose excommunication had been originally imposed on account of "heresy", others held that it applied to excommunication for any reason – Hostiensis had argued both ways and the Council of Trent would accept the wide application.

lar “heresy”, they denature it into, say, “pseudoheresy”⁴⁴, a question-begging term of small utility.

In sum, when “heresy” is approached by way of society’s action against it, it is seen accordingly from the inquisitor’s point of view as diabolical subversion of the Church. But the men and women thus targeted did not think they represented any such thing. How to understand these men and women remains a problem, which obviously *cannot* be addressed by thinking of them as heretics, even when the inquisitorial intention is replaced by a modern politological or sociological interest; for that mode of understanding, as we have seen, can at worst lead to an equation of heresy with subversion, at best to a study of heretication. We return perforce to the holistic interpretation implied by “religious movement”, in the sense given this term in Herbert Grundmann’s *Religiöse Bewegungen*. Indeed it is hardly an exaggeration to say that if the problems just noted are still outstanding, it is because Grundmann’s projected solution of them has not been followed up by others (or indeed by himself). As he stated, what in the first place interested the men and women of the religious movements – whether or not they were condemned as heretics – was neither peculiar doctrine nor opposition to the Church⁴⁵; what they wanted was rather a personal, redemptive experience of the common religion. The core of the religious movements lay in “religious views that no longer saw the essence of Christianity as fulfilled and realized in the church as a salvatory order and in church doctrine as dogma and tradition, but rather sought to implement Christianity as a religious way of life [*Lebensform*] that would be directly binding on each individual true Christian, and would be more essential to the salvation of his soul than his position in the hierarchical order of the church or his belief in the doctrines of the church fathers and theologians”.

Hence it was that certain men and women “began to ask whether ecclesiastical ordination of the priest was the only and sufficient entitlement for implementing the Christian work of salvation, whether it was only the church that was called and instituted to implement the divine plan of salvation through her representatives alone; whether, rather, every individual Christian was not called upon to reshape his life directly according to the evangelical and apostolic norms.” These norms, specifically evangelical poverty and the apostolic way of life – itinerant teaching and preaching – thus “became the focal points of a new conception of the essence of Christianity”⁴⁶. While this way of life, conceived according to the evan-

⁴⁴ So e.g. *Stefano Brufani*, *Eresia di un ribelle al tempo di Giovanni XXII: Il caso di Muzio di Francesco d’Assisi* (Quaderni del Centro per il collegamento degli studi medievali e umanistici nell’Università di Perugia 19, Perugia, Florence 1989) – according to the review by *Raymond Mentzer*, *Speculum* 67 (1992) 940f., where the relevant passages are cited.

⁴⁵ *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 50f.: The “heresy” of the twelfth century was not a “sect” with a particular founder, a definite organization, and a proper name; “above all it lacked the clear-cut mark of earlier heresies, a definite heretical doctrine that would have constituted the proper nature of the heresy.”

⁴⁶ *Grundmann*, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, pp. 14f., 28. Cf. *Leff’s* explanatory scheme in his *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* 1, “Prologue”, e.g., p. 2: “initially, at least, heresy was a deviation from accepted beliefs rather than something alien to them: it sprang from believing

gelical and apostolic norms of voluntary poverty and itinerant preaching, could also be a standard by which priests and prelates of the church were measured and found wanting⁴⁷, this did not at first imply a challenge to the ecclesiastical structures and sacramental system as such⁴⁸.

More exactly, the religious movements' challenge to the establishment was only the potential challenge posed by what would today be called a subculture or an "alternative" culture⁴⁹, in which some objective, societal forms of a cultural system are selectively subjectivized into modalities of individual experience⁵⁰. The peaceful coexistence of an established culture and any number of autonomic subcultures is today seen as normal, under the heading of pluralism, to the point indeed that the established culture itself is vulnerable to relativizing degradation. In the twelfth century such pluralism was neither normal nor even thinkable, except for the insulated "subcultures" of the monastic orders, but an inchoate cultural diversity was already a fact. "The Church", which is to say its episcopal or papal authorities, could only take it as a challenge: they could either try to manage an emergent religious subculture or liquidate it, they could not ignore it. The potential challenge became actual opposition only when church authorities opted for liquidation by calling it "heresy", which they did in some cases but not in others,

differently about the same things as opposed to holding a different belief." And 10: "Later medieval heresy was thus more than mere protest or revolt, ... in its totality it constituted an alternative to the prevailing outlook."

⁴⁷ *Grundmann*, 28: The thrust of the religious movement in the twelfth century was on the one hand to revivify Christian life by imitating the apostolic model in voluntary poverty and wandering preaching, "but at the same time thereby to expose the illegitimacy of the claim to Apostolic succession of the hierarchical church and the Catholic clergy insofar as these did not live in a truly Christian way, that is, apostolically and evangelically".

⁴⁸ *Grundmann*, *Neue Beiträge*, 516, referring to denunciations of the sinful clergy: "Dabei wird man freilich nicht von einem grundsätzlichen 'antisacerdotalismo' sprechen dürfen; wenigstens steht er nicht am Anfang. Nicht gegen das Priestertum als solches, nur gegen die unwürdigen Priester richtet sich zunächst die häretische Polemik."

⁴⁹ "Subculture" is a recent vogue-word with a usefully vague field of reference. I understand it as including not only highly crystallized sects (like the Amish) and crypto-religious groups (like Transcendental Meditation and astrology cults), but also variable lifestyle groups (like mountain climbers in Seattle, surfers in Southern California, motorcyclists and loose groups of drug addicts everywhere), and the vast number of groups, differing wildly in their specifics, that generate a mystique of self-consciousness through single-purpose dedication. The goal may clearly be a kind of salvation (the best-known example would be Alcoholics Anonymous) or it may be to have a redemptive (exalting, intense, etc.) experience by leading a certain kind of life (e.g. motorcycle gangs).

⁵⁰ This key point, reading the beliefs of the religious movements as fractional inflections of the common religious values of the societal order, is derived from thinking out Grundmann's theses in a more contemporary sociological framework. Present-day illustrations can be found in most of our "subcultures" as characterized just above: so for example motorcycle gangs or clubs share the common societal values of fetishistic commodity consumption as well as the masculine ideals of adventure and the cult of the open road and the internal combustion engine, etc.; but they contract these so-to-speak public cultural values into modalities of their respective individual experience, subjectivizing the objective *Kulturgut* of our sociocultural order.

for reasons determined not by the nature of the religious movement's aims but rather by extrinsic factors of politics and individual dispositions on both sides.

The most general sociological question here would concern not the societal groups from which men and women came into the subculture, nor the disjunctively "social" factors that might have stimulated their new way of thought, but the whole sociocultural situation in which some people felt alienated from the institutional embodiments of the common cultural ideals. Here the analogy to modern pluralism and subcultures suggests the parameters of an answer, centered of course on religious rather than secular cultural interests. But the difference is not essential, and a sound understanding of the medieval religious movements that would be sociological without being reductionist requires cognitive constructions that can comprise religious experience as a modality of man's participation in the culture of his society. The crux of the sociological problematic here lies in the movement of ideas from one system of integration to another, in our case from the Church's system of religion and its public, fundamentally political reform program to a subjectivized system centered in the existential needs of the individual and developed to provide him with the forms of his self-consciousness and the symbols of his identity, which is to say the meaning of his life. What we must understand, concretely, is the existential interest of pious men and women in defining the meaning of their lives by an active participation in the universally accepted Christian religion.

Calling them "heretics" obviously does not explain this intention. We must rather ask why, from the eleventh and twelfth centuries on, significant numbers of pious men and women appeared who could not realize this existential interest by integrating themselves into, and identifying themselves with, the institutional structures of Christian society – say by just being pious parishioners or becoming monks and nuns⁵¹. We know this, of course, not from any direct testimony to this effect, in comparable terms, but by logically necessary back-inference from the phenomena of the religious movements. These show that the reaction of some of those commoners, both in villages and in towns, both propertied and poor, both male and female, who for whatever reason – and these reasons could have been of many different sorts – felt alienated from the forms of societally established meaningfulness, was to create their own. The interest of the men and women of the religious movements was certainly not to create a "heresy" but rather to create an alternative culture within the whole: a new objective reality that would be meaningful to them, in distinction to – but also within – the objective reality of "the world" that belonged to the holders of lordship at all levels. Doctrinal deviation was normally absent or secondary: the movement's primary reference was to itself⁵².

⁵¹ The answer obviously lies in the societal changes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – more people, more movement, towns, new institutional forms of integration, and so on – but if such generalities are often proposed as such, they have rarely if ever been worked out in detail. For an extremely brief but systematic statement, see *Nelson, Society, Theodicy*, 71–75.

⁵² *Grundmann, Religiöse Bewegungen*, 9f.

5. Reform, "Reformation", and the Problem of Prematurity

Exactly how these phenomena can be understood in the context of the Later Middle Ages remains an open question, hardly answerable without a rethinking of the period itself. For in our traditional scheme that separates the Middle Ages from Modern or Early Modern Europe, and inaugurates the New Era with the Renaissance and Reformation, there is a certain logic in constructing medieval religious movements as heresies. The medieval is negated by the modern, in which it is *aufgehoben*; so the degeneracy of the Roman Catholic order of medieval Christianity was negated by the purification of Christianity in the Protestant Reformation, while within this degeneracy the "witnesses of the truth" kept the thread of Christian continuity alive. But this Protestant vision of history has no special claims on a modern mind. And once we stop thinking of heresies and start thinking of religious movements – as sects, subcultures, alternative cultures, or whatever – their relationship to the future Protestant Reformation becomes a rather factitious issue: those today who imagine such a relationship do not suggest real continuity but rather at best some uselessly vague, undemonstrable, and question-begging "preparation of the ground"⁵³.

The ground for what, we may ask? The Protestant Reformation as a historical epoch in the comprehensive Hegelian sense, an *Umbruch der Weltgeschichte*? Or the Protestant Reformation as a religious permutation – "unleashed and regulated by a theologian"⁵⁴? While historians of "The Reformation" often speak of it equivocally, as though it could be both of these at once, our purpose requires both a rigorous distinction between the two and a much less arbitrary conception of the *religious* substance of Protestantism. We obtain both by giving up the disjunctive scheme of a medieval-modern antithesis and turning instead to the alternative scheme of an extended "Old Europe" – Burckhardt's *Alteuropa* – beginning in the twelfth century and ending in the eighteenth. In such a context there would be no particular reason for a non-confessional historian to set up an antithesis between medieval Catholicism and other modalities of Christian religiosity. The medieval religious movements would figure as such; whether or not the Church hereticated them would be irrelevant. "The Protestant Reformation" could then be seen un-

⁵³ So e.g. René Bornert, *La réforme protestante du culte à Strasbourg au XVI^e siècle: Approche sociologique et interprétation théologique* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 28, Leiden 1981) 25ff. – "Dans la riche floraison d'idées et de réalisations de la pré-réforme, il est possible de discerner quatre séries de faits, d'ordres très différents, qui ont servi de sol nourricier à la réforme liturgique protestante." Cf. Bernd Moeller, *Probleme der Reformationsgeschichtsforschung*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 76 (1965) 246–57, here 253, a reference to "Die Feststellung, daß dem Sieg Luthers der Boden bereitet war".

⁵⁴ Moeller, *Probleme*, 254 – the "grundlegende Gegebenheit" is "Daß es ein Theologe war, der den Umbruch der Weltgeschichte auslöste und ihm sogar weithin sein Gesetz aufzwang". This "epochal" understanding is ubiquitous in the literature; for another example see Jean Delumeau, *Naissance et affirmation de la réforme* (1965) 275ff., the Reformation as a stage in the development of the "Weltgeist". Cf. Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford 1991) 418, quoted below.

equivocally as not an *Umbruch der Weltgeschichte* but rather as simply a new religious development within the continuity of Western European Christian civilization; its extensive secular resonances could be understood in terms of religious-secular interplay rather than as derivations of Martin Luther's novel doctrines⁵⁵. And in between the medieval religious movements and the Protestant reformation there would be two other actualizations of Christian potentiality, the attempted reformation of the Lollards and the consummated one of the Hussites. Calling the former "premature"⁵⁶ or the latter "anomalous"⁵⁷ is as distracting, in this Old-European context, as calling the Waldensians precursors.

But can or should the traditional sense of "The Reformation" be contracted in this sense? A non-specialist can only note the direction in which the newer modern scholarship points: there is in fact a substantial body of opinion rejecting or questioning every component included or implied by the epochal sense of "The Reformation" and the traditional emphasis on Martin Luther's invention of a new religious principle, justification by faith alone, taken as a fundamental negation of the Catholic system of sacramental justification. Generations of German Lutheran theologians and historians have developed this image, narcissistically exalting the subjective piety of Luther's German inwardness in contrast to Roman Catholic performative externality; that it seems unconvincing to a non-German, non-Lutheran, and indeed non-Christian is hardly surprising; more to the point, it is today widely ignored by historians of every persuasion.

We may take as the first point of scholarly criticism the traditional notion that Luther's new doctrines responded to urgent, widespread, popular needs and interests that were not satisfied by the late-medieval Church, which was decadent, degenerate, and full of abuses⁵⁸. What we are now told is that late-medieval Catholicism was not only healthy but also solidly rooted in the life of the common

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. *Steven Ozment*, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York 1992) 218f. – "a majority of scholars today view the Reformation as a very modest spiritual movement, both self-limiting and easily manipulated by secular political power, and, when compared with the social and political revolts of the century, a very minor event in its history. It did not, they believe, break radically with the past in any social or political sense."

⁵⁶ As in *Anne Hudson's*, *The Premature Reformation*.

⁵⁷ See *František Šmahel*, *La révolution hussite: Une anomalie historique* (Paris 1985); cf. my review in *Speculum* 61 (1986) 704–706 for criticism of the idea that anything could be "a historical anomaly".

⁵⁸ I cite for example the high-level, recent, and authoritatively Protestant synthesis by *Steven Ozment*, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, 40 – "A conviction of having made sacrifices in vain for a creed that had little biblical basis, and hence could provide one with only a false sense of security, if any security at all, fueled the Reformation at the grass-roots level." Cf. p. xiii, "Protestantism was born ... in reaction to failing spiritual leadership and church piety." And see *Bernd Moeller*, *Religious Life in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation*, in: *Gerald Strauss* (Ed.), *Pre-Reformation Germany* (New York 1972) 13–42, here 29 – "The church had reached the point where it was unable to do anything more than react to stimuli given by others. Its theology and its spiritual life lacked the genuine inner impulse to find its way out of the maze into which its own historical development had brought it. It produced no relevant, helpful response to the yearnings and explosive passions of men who submitted themselves to the church for guidance."

people. So, in the case of England, "The existence of long-term religious discontents can be disputed, the significance of Protestantism as a progressive ideological movement can be doubted, the continuing popularity and prestige of the Catholic Church can be stressed."⁵⁹ As for Germany, "The religious and intellectual situation in Germany on the eve of the Reformation was not at all, as earlier thought, like a powder-keg whose explosion was merely set off by Luther's appearance on the scene"; "the period before the Reformation was one neither of decadence, nor of transition, nor of crisis"⁶⁰. Hence the judgement of Euan Cameron, that "The Reformation was not a foreseeable explosion from a discontented lay society which had long since outgrown the religious forms which the Church purveyed. On the contrary, by 1500 Europe's peoples had learned how to choose, select, invest in, and indeed develop the forms of religious piety and reassurance which suited them best." In fact "the essential Reformation message was rather badly suited to the cultural needs and ambitions of most of the lay people who espoused it"⁶¹.

Others have put the point more stridently: "The Reformation ... [was] a conservative campaign on the part of elite Christian clergy to subdue a surrounding native culture that had always been and preferred to remain semipagan" (Delumeau); it was "an attempt to impose on uneducated and reluctant men and women a Christian way of life utterly foreign to their own cultural experience" (Gerald Strauss)⁶². We may note that something of the sort has also been said about what

⁵⁹ *Christopher Haigh* (Ed.), *The English Reformation Revised*, (Cambridge 1987) 2f. For a case in point see *Eric Acheson*, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century*, c.1422-c.1485 (Cambridge 1992) 193, "Leicestershire will leave a strong impression that the gentry's religion satisfied important psychological needs. They were familiar with the Church's doctrine on Purgatory and they relied completely on the clergy's role as mediator between man and God. They found comfort in the familiar. There is never any sign of those inner doubts and torments which later racked Luther and which were to rend western Christendom asunder. Nor is there ever any suggestion of anti-clericalism or any hint that the Church was not providing value for money."

⁶⁰ *Moeller*, *Probleme*, 253, for the first quote; for the rest see the recent summation of the scholarly consensus by *Hartmut Boockmann*, *Das 15. Jahrhundert und die Reformation*, in: *Hartmut Boockmann* (Ed.), *Kirche und Gesellschaft im Heiligen Römischen Reich des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 1994) 9–25, here 23f. – „Davon, daß die Mißstände das in solchen Fällen übliche Maß überschritten hätten, daß die Reformation der Pfründen wegen gekommen sei oder gar kommen mußte, kann die Rede nicht sein“ – and *Moeller*, *Die frühe Reformation als Kommunikationsprozeß*, *ibid.* 148, agreeing „daß das Zeitalter vor der Reformation weder eine Verfalls- noch eine Übergangs- noch eine Krisenzeit war“.

⁶¹ *Cameron*, *The European Reformation*, 417–22.

⁶² I take these from the review of diverse theories by *Steven Ozment*, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution*, "Appendix", 218f. These and similar characterizations of "popular religion" have recently been opposed by *Eamon Duffy*, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven CT 1992), who prefers to speak of a "traditional religion" shared by clergy and laity, nobles and commons, town and country, and who "persistently discards the explanatory functionalism once popularized by Keith Thomas or the acculturationist theories of John Bossy and Jean Delumeau"; I take this from the review by *Philip Soergel* in *Speculum* 69 (1994) 767f. Cf. *Keith Thomas*, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York 1971) chs. 1 & 2.

used to be called “The Counter-Reformation”, namely that it too was a modernizing imposition from above on a pre-modern popular culture⁶³. In both cases, moreover, popular acceptance had to be laboriously achieved, in the course of one or two generations⁶⁴.

One need not elaborate these points to draw the logical inference from them, namely that if “The Reformation” was not generated by Luther’s new religion or by massive popular hatred of the Roman system, if indeed it can be plausibly seen as an elite imposition on the people at large, then it must be regarded as a political action that succeeded for secular reasons – political, social, and cultural, but not primarily religious ones⁶⁵. Another way to put it would be that what made it “*The Reformation*” was a set of factors propitious to the creation of territorial churches independent of Rome⁶⁶. That it also turned out to be the beginning of a New Era in other respects can be understood as nothing more than a function of historical development within the *longue durée* of *Alteuropa*. Its religious substance can then be most reasonably seen as, on the one hand, just one more manifestation of the same movement towards individual piety and religious experience that we find

⁶³ Ozment, *Protestants*, 35 – according to Delumeau, “It was the twin coercive movements of the Reformation and the Counterreformation that converted enough of Europe’s semipagan masses to create for the first time a ‘Christian’ Europe.” And Dickens, *Tonkin*, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, 313 – “Delumeau and Pierre Chaunu developed the thesis most relevant to historians of the Reformation, that both Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism were essentially efforts by ‘orthodox’ Christianity to suppress the primitive folk religion.”

⁶⁴ See e.g. Richard Rex, review of A. G. Dickens, *Late Monasticism and the Reformation* (London 1994), in: *TLS* (30 Dec. 94) 25 – “The most important of the articles collected here represent Dickens’s response to the revisionists (notably J. J. Scarisbrick and Christopher Haigh), who have argued that the late medieval Church enjoyed enormous popular support, that the notion of widespread anticlericalism is a myth, and that the English Reformation was a slow process, imposed by a powerful elite on a reluctant but impotent populace.” This last point is also made for the continental reformation, e.g. by Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 417–22 – “The Reformation moved from clericalism to clericalism within two generations”; in the interval it had to be fought for by power and argument.

⁶⁵ But cf. Moeller, *Probleme*, 255 – “Es gilt in der Forschung zu realisieren, daß das geschichtliche Phänomen ‘Luther’ und das geschichtliche Phänomen ‘Reformation’ nur zusammengedacht werden können.” This is the traditional Lutheran view, not obviously problematical in 1965 but contrary to the revisionist consensus today. For a contemporary vindication of it see e.g. Ozment, *Protestants*, 28f., a refutation of “much recent scholarship” that explains the Reformation’s success as “fortuitous and political”; Ozment argues that it was equally spiritual and political.

⁶⁶ This would e.g. be the import of Winfried Eberhard’s thesis that the Reformation won in Central Europe because of the power and interests of the Estates – in his Bohemia, Moravia and Austria, in: Andrew Pettegree (Ed.), *The Early Reformation in Europe* (Cambridge 1992) 23ff. That the territorial princes eventually directed the reformation in their own interests is something of a commonplace; it has however been argued that the original secular impulse of the reformation came from the towns, asserting their traditional autonomy against princely domination – see e.g. Ozment, *Protestants*, 24 – “Today growing numbers of historians portray the Reformation as a small part of a much larger and failed burgher revolt against revived feudal authority in the persons of the great German princes”; cf. 119ff. for a discussion of this thesis as developed by Peter Blickle.

among the medieval "heretics", and on the other hand as one more manifestation of the reformational ambitions to be found among the Lollards and the Hussites⁶⁷. The difference would be that these variants of common Christian religiosity now resonated with certain political and social potencies.

It is of course a commonplace of Reformation scholarship that the Protestant Reformation was not just one more manifestation of anything but was rather a unique religious breakthrough. But this thesis can be maintained in its strong sense only by ignoring or devaluing the Hussite reformation, in particular that of the Taborites. Luther himself began the tradition when he distinguished himself from such medieval reformers as John Hus who, he said, thought of reform within the papal system: "I", Luther said, "deny the very seat of the beast and I care not at all whether he who occupies it is good or evil."⁶⁸ That he was right about Hus or, say, the Waldensians is not at all obvious; in any case he overlooked the principled rejections of the Roman system by Wyclif, by the Lollards, and – explicitly and stridently – by the Taborites⁶⁹. Nor did these earlier reformers lack the idea of justification by faith alone in contrast to the Catholic economy of salvation. Exactly how clearly this focus on faith alone was realised in the thought of Wyclif and the Lollards remains to be established⁷⁰; in the doctrine of the Hussite Peter Chelčický, however, it is formulated quite explicitly: good works, however important

⁶⁷ Until quite recently Reformation scholarship was more interested in establishing the uniqueness of its subject than in imagining it as another reform movement within the church. Even today the latter approach, which would seem extraordinarily promising, remains marginal; see e.g. *Dorothea Wendebourg*, *Die Einheit der Reformation*, in: *H. Boockmann* (Ed.), *Kirche und Gesellschaft im Heiligen Römischen Reich*, 228 – "Das, was die Reformation zur 'Reformation' machte, war das Urteil der Gegenreformation. Erst durch diese Reaktion wurde daraus das Geschehen, welches zum Ende der Einheit der westlichen Christenheit führte, wurde aus dem innerkirchlichen Umkehrruf die Kirchenspaltung." This explanation, to be sure, merely raises another problem; I quote it for the sake of the distinction formulated in its last clause.

⁶⁸ *Scott H. Hendrix*, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia 1981) 119.

⁶⁹ See *H. Kaminsky*, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, CA 1967) 508–13 – At Klatovy in 1424 the Taborite clergy declared, "We disagree with the Roman church in substantial matters of the faith and we do not intend to esteem or keep her rites." In fact the Taborites regarded the papacy as an instrument of Antichrist – see e.g. *Nicholas of Pelbrimov's* *Postil on Apocalypse*, Vienna Nationalbibliothek ms. 4520, fol. 293r, on Apoc. 18:2, "cecidit Babylon magna": "quamvis hic agatur de toto numero dampnatorum, tamen principalis est intellectus litere de curia Anticristi residente in Roma, que dicitur Babilon." Cf. fol. 203v, "ministri Anticristi habentes spiritum pape et ecclesie Constantini."

⁷⁰ A negative judgement has been pronounced by *Margaret Aston*, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London 1984) 136, "The Lollards always lacked that central insight of Luther's which became the driving force of the Reformation: despair about salvation through works never led them into the strong light of justifying faith." *Hudson*, *Premature Reformation*, 383, citing this, comments that while it is "true that Lollardy never abandoned good works", "yet it is not correct to say that they had no conception of justification by faith. Wyclif himself wrote 'fides sit fundamentum iustificacionis hominis quoad Deum' ..." On the other hand, she writes, this thesis was never as central as with Luther; what was central was "the primary and validating force of scripture".

as sources of strength and consolation, and as witnesses to one's inner condition, do not earn eternal life: "It is the great richness of God alone that suffices to save us, along with those works, and we can have the richness even without the works."⁷¹

It is of course true that few people at the time read Chelčický and many people read Luther, also that justification by faith was explicitly central to Luther's religion but not to Chelčický's. But we may wonder how important this difference was. Euan Cameron, for example, who credits Protestant religiosity with Europe's passage into modernity, puts the matter so: "The ultimate effect of Reformation teaching was an overall cultural shift of fundamental importance for the emergence of the modern world. It abolished ritual purification through expiatory rituals, the natural source of spiritual comfort for any basically primitive society. In its place it erected a system by which ... moral faults and failings ... were ... gradually rectified through instruction and moral discipline."⁷² But none of this had justification by faith alone as necessary or sufficient cause, and in fact the Taborites *also* replaced ritual purification, etc. precisely with the rectification of moral faults by instruction and discipline. The sources indeed suggest that the Taborite clergy did little else.

Cameron himself moreover has rejected the traditional Protestant thesis that the individual liberty implicit in Luther's theology relieved the late-medieval believers from the burden of Roman Catholic legalism: the Reformation did not offer more spiritual comfort or emancipation from clerical dominion, but less comfort and reassurance, and a higher-level, more demanding clergy. "The Reformation moved from clericalism to clericalism within two generations."⁷³ And this movement had to be imposed on populations who had not demanded it, did not generally vibrate to the reformers' messages of predestination and justification by faith, and in fact resisted the new discipline over a long period. Inasmuch as this resistance was itself an important part of the reformational process it is worth noting that here too the Hussites came first. "Calixtine" Hussitism had continually to cope with recidivism and the Taborites' spiritual leader, Nicholas of Pelhřimov, devoted much of his preaching and writing to excoriating those who not only persisted in the old vices of greed, drunkenness, and *invidia* but openly regretted the destruction of Catholic felicity and resented the reformational discipline that had replaced it⁷⁴. And in fact the Taborite clergy collaborated with Taborite magis-

⁷¹ For the quote (from Chelčický's, "On Spiritual Warfare") see *Howard Kaminsky*, Peter Chelčický's Place on the Hussite Left, in: *Howard Kaminsky*, Peter Chelčický: Treatises on Christianity and the Social Order (Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History 1, Lincoln, Nebr. 1964) 121. For the Czech original see *Kamil Krofta*, ed. *Petr Chelčický, O boji duchovním a O trojím lidu* (Prague 1911) 118f.

⁷² *Euan Cameron*, *The European Reformation* (Oxford 1991) 418.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 422.

⁷⁴ In his *Postil on Apocalypse* of ca. 1430, Vienna Nationalbibliothek ms. 4520, fol. 278r, "Illi ... quorum nomina non sunt scripta in libro vite ... tristantur quod ... opera bestiarum cadunt et ruunt, dicentes, O quo deveniunt nostri anni, quo tempus nostrum letum, quo choree, quo fistulatores, et adhuc non agentes penitenciam de hiis que egerunt mala, optant illos

trates in a permanent struggle to educate the people by preaching and to reform them by criminalizing their vices⁷⁵. If this educative process had the modernizing effect that Cameron has claimed for the sixteenth-century reformation, it must have had it for the Taborite reformation a century earlier as well, albeit in a vastly smaller area and only for a short time. But these differences were due to circumstances, not to the religious impulses in play. The uniqueness of the Protestant Reformation, in other words, lay not in its peculiar religious doctrines but in what was made of it by historical forces and interests genetically unrelated to these.

6. Conclusions

What has been argued in the preceding pages is that we should not regard medieval religious movements as heresies if we wish to understand the religious experiences that they created or aimed at, and that we should not construe the religious and reformational elements of the Protestant Reformation as the antithesis to mediocrity that the traditional concept of "The Reformation" implies. To put it in a positive form, we can best understand both medieval religious movements, hereticated or not, and the religious substance of Protestantism as so many modalities of a Christian religious culture common to *Alteuropa* and including Catholic "orthodoxy" as one other modality⁷⁶. The implication is that we should think about these matters in an integrating and synthesizing manner rather than in the disjunctive mode that always imposes contradictions and oppositions.

It is of course easy to tell other people what to do and easy to speak generally of the benefits to be expected from this or that change in conceptual apparatus. Whether such programmatic assertions are useful to scholarship depends on whether actual scholarly work is done according to them and whether the results are valuable. The work recommended here will be done by others if at all. On the

annos et illam vitam eis reddi, et illos bonos annos dicunt fuisse. Hos vero pessimos reputant in quibus iuste pro peccatis affliguntur, in quibus verbum dei predicatur, et spiritualibus ac celestibus donis reficiuntur."

⁷⁵ See *Howard Kaminsky*, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, CA 1967) 484–94. See also *Howard Kaminsky*, *Nicholas of Pelhřimov's Tabor: an Adventure into the Eschaton*, in: *Eschatology und Hussitismus*, ed. *Alexander Patschovsky*, *František Šmahel* (Prague 1996) 139–67.

⁷⁶ This is more or less the same position as that of *Ernst Troeltsch*, as summarized in *Dickens, Tonkin*, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, 188 – "[Troeltsch] challenge[d] the widely held assumption that Protestantism represented the dawn of the modern era and that modern Protestantism was an authentic development of Reformation principles. To him, the Reformation was essentially a reshaping of the medieval idea and proposed new solutions to essentially medieval problems. In offering new solutions it was a genuine reshaping, yet it kept intact the basic features of the medieval system: the preoccupation with individual salvation, the ideal of a total Christian culture, the notion of the Church as a divine institution, and acknowledgment of an absolute authority. The result of the Reformation, therefore, was a second blossoming of medieval life for two centuries ..."

other hand it is always useful to subject our cognitive constructions to a critical examination in order to expose their built-in prejudices, trace out the consequences of these, and imagine what we might see if these prejudices were removed. This is what has been attempted here.