

Spiritual Disciplines and Mystical Experiences:

The Context of Reformation Spirituality as a

“Break” with Roman Catholicism

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What did the Protestants Protest Against?

In many Protestant churches there is concern with a growing interest in “spiritual disciplines,” and “mysticism.” Catholic writers are being lauded by Protestants, and there is concern among some that many Protestants are leaving the firm ground of the Word for experiences and practices that were left behind at the Reformation. In order to gain clarity on these issues, I think it might be helpful to return to the reformers to catch a glimpse of their approach to the break with Roman Catholic thought. By understanding the development of the nature of the Protestant’s “protest” we may be better equipped to sense the strengths and weaknesses of the variety of spiritual options being raised today.

These reflections grew out of, and summarizes my early study of the roots and development of Protestant spirituality. As I read the reformers, and tried to sort out what is similar and different between the various Protestant writers on the one hand, and their differences with Roman Catholicism on the other, I found there to be a few primary “breaks” which characterized the spirituality of the Protestant reformation as it opposed the Catholicism which preceded it. I have a suspicion that an understanding of reformation spirituality, in all its variety cannot be gained apart from a grasp of the struggle to make these fundamental breaks with the Roman institution. Different segments of the Reformation addressed each individual break slightly differently. The importance, however, of these matters was clear to

all.

In these reflections I will simply outline these breaks and briefly indicate the significance of these developments for the development of spirituality in Protestant circles today.

Protestant Reformation spirituality was an intentional break from:

A. The mechanics of Late Medieval *popular* spirituality

pilgrimages, alms, works, indulgences, etc. performed in a spirit of anxiety to oblige or insure God's favor masses, Scriptures, confession, as performances by elite (or worse, as re-sacrifices) in foreign setting/language. Act magically apart from the hearing of the Gospel with Faith (hearing of the Gospel in Faith becomes a new "means of grace" or mechanism of Protestant spirituality, often in later years seen as acting powerfully in itself, apart from any real relationship between God and the hearer).

devotions to icons, saints and such which separate or substitute for, rather than promote real relationship with God through the Scriptures (Bible reading becomes a chief discipline of Protestant spirituality - *lectio divina protestanta*)

The general break of the Protestant spirituality with the institutional and popular spirituality of the day was in major part a break with the sacramental system. This sacramental system was dominated (and disintegrated) by the control of these sacraments by the clerical elite. The entire spiritual life of the laity was seen

as derived from the dispensations available from the controlling clergy. From birth/baptism to confirmation to penance and Eucharist, to marriage or ordination, and finally to extreme unction, the means of grace, the effective agency by which a person's relationship with God both for the present and for eternity was cultivated and maintained was controlled and dispensed by the clergy. Needless to say, in a period where the clergy were obviously lacking in spiritual sensitivity the gravity of this control over spirituality becomes obvious. I think it is because of this sacramental focus of spirituality prior to the reformation, and due to the reduction of sacraments from seven to two, that there was such a great dispute among the early Protestants concerning the practice of the sacraments. By their sacramental reductions and reformulations, the reformers were re-forging the framework of popular spirituality. And they were very well aware of the implications of the changes here. For many German Catholics whose residences fell within the districts of Lutheran dominion (perhaps even more so for Zwingli or others), these changes must have felt catastrophic and very uncomfortable.

B1. The *corruption* of Late Medieval *monastic* spirituality

The vow of poverty shamed through the wealth and corrupt use of wealth by the orders (lavish cloisters, greedy mendicants . . .). Note: poverty not an ideal state in itself for many Protestants

The vow of chastity scandled by the lifestyles of many monks

The vow of obedience defined by the rigid caste system presented by the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy which ranked "religious" higher than "lay." Further scandled by the oppressive and senseless abuse of power exhibited by those in authority.

(note: we see on this account that the Protestant Reformation was not against the vows in themselves or in their value. Indeed, I think that the movement may be seen as an attempt to recover and to spread these values amongst a broader segment of the populous. Hence I think that the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were looked at by many Reformers as at least cousins, though not perhaps formally influencing the Reformation.)

In my first reading of the literature of this period, I was struggling with what I believed were the enduring values of monastic spirituality, which I had seen in my reading of the history of spirituality up to the Reformation. I concluded that the profound rejection of monastic spirituality by many Protestant reformers must be due to issues of corruption and such (note the clerical concubinage and Bainton's notes on the 15th century). But something still nagged me, largely because I felt that the Protestant rejection of monasticism was too thorough and too intense to be simply a reform of abuses. There was the sense that the *system* had to go. But what was it that was formally wrong with the system? What did the Protestants protest?

B2. The *system* of Late Medieval *monastic* spirituality

I now believe that I understand at least a little piece of the situation. And indeed, what appears is a critique of the foundations of the distinctiveness of monastic life. I will outline these, and then comment upon the significance of this shift for the history of the practice of spiritual disciplines in Protestant churches.

1. Separation - From the time of Antony of Egypt, monastic life has been a life of separation [EH note 2003 - recent research in Palestinian and Syrian mon-

astic practice indicates a wider variety of expression that was later narrowed to the Egyptian model of separation]. The injunction to separate from the world has inspired many a monastic flowering. However, the Protestant Reformation saw the development of the spiritual life in an entirely different manner. The working out of one's spiritual life, the cultivation of relationship with God, was not normally to be carried out in the context of perpetuated isolation *from* the world, but rather in the context of ordinary life *in* the world. Not only was the creation of a hierarchy between religious and lay a problem for the Reformers, a problem which the notion of separation accentuated, but the very notion of separation itself as basic to Christian spirituality was called into question. Needless to say, this was more true of the Magisterial reformers than of many Anabaptists, who indeed were making attempts to recover intentional separated communities of the faithful. The efforts of many Anabaptist communities shares the same spirit with the origins of Augustine's RULE itself, as an effort not to imitate other monasteries, but to recover the ideal of the early church. On this cf. *Anabaptism and Asceticism*.

2. The Abbot/Abbess - Also central to many monasteries was the role of the Abbot/Abbess. This role varied from spiritual director to governing official over the community. There was a variety of formulations of leadership in the history of monasticism, with some of them being quite collegial. yet as the stages of medieval history moved from dissemination, to domination and disintegration (for these stages cf. Bainton, *Reformation*, 50), the authoritative role of these leaders became more pronounced. The issue of control was a strong one for the Reformation. The very stuff of salvation was seen in the control of a few elite and corrupt individuals who would dispense it upon the masses arbitrarily. This would have disastrous effects upon the populous and their understanding of real relationship with God. It was even true of the spiritual direction found in the monastery.

Luther's own experience shows this, for though he had found sympathetic and helpful counsel from some, he was still not led toward the Scriptures and the assurance of faith in the Gospel. I need to do more research into Luther's experience of spiritual direction. For the Protestant, one's spiritual life was seen not as being directed by an Abbess or Abbot, but by personal encounter with the Word. This concept has its individualistic implications, yet the Medieval devotional understanding of the sacraments (esp. the mass) could exhibit these same tendencies. The Anabaptists sought to overcome this difficulty in their understanding of mutual guidance. Later, Pietists, Puritans, and Quakers would all add to the Protestant spirituality of guidance, each from their own perspective.

3. The RULE - The intentionality of the monastic life was expressed in the Regula or RULE. Vows were taken to keep this Rule. This would be seen in the Reformation as the commitment of one's self, not to God through the Scriptures in faith, but rather to human institutions through irrational obedience. This was especially true considering the young age of many oblates entering the orders. Often times the degree of intensity of obedience to the Rule was seen as works which merited Christ's favor, either for the present or for eternity. This was clearly exposed by the reformers as works-righteousness. Yet once again, many Anabaptist communities were able to pursue the recovery of intentionality in their common pursuit of the Christian life, under the heading of *covenant* rather than *rule*. This shift from imposition of Rule to mutual decision-making as contract expresses general trends within the Renaissance in general and reveals the Anabaptist communities as attempts at genuine expression of monastic spirituality in Renaissance culture.

4. The Stages (Purgation, Illumination, Union) - It had become almost

standard procedure, among spiritual writers of the Middle Ages, to describe the development of one's life in God by a set of three primary stages. The first of these is the stage of *purgation*, whereby one cleanses oneself of sinful habits and character traits, and where one is brought by God through the fires of testing and purification. Having moved through this stage, there is *illumination*. As the eyes have been cleared to see, there is the sight of God and the understanding of the essential features of Christianity (with various emphases given by different writers). From this stage, one moves into the final stage of *union*. Here God is experienced both truly and profoundly. Yet from the Protestant, and especially Lutheran, perspective, the schema needs to be reversed. Luther entered into the monastery in obedience to a vow made in fear. This anxious fear, combined with the sincere desire to please God and obtain assurance of God's favor was characteristic of the monastic spirituality of the fifteenth century. Needless to say, Luther's efforts at purgation brought him no illumination, no assurance of God's favor, and no union. Furthermore, there was no way to deal with all of one's sins on an individual basis. No matter how many sins one confessed, or addressed through self-mortifying disciplines, many more would still reveal themselves. And God was still left unsatisfied. It was his surrender in faith to Christ's meritorious work on the cross which ushered Luther into union with God (not also Calvin's emphasis upon the mystical union of the body with Christ). This sense of acceptance, justification and union with God then led Luther to illumination: illumination concerning his nature as *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously just and a sinner), and the place of law and gospel in his life. He was now free from the burden of the works of purgation undertaken to achieve God's favor, yet free to express faith in love, as the Spirit leads through the Word. Thus, in Luther, and I think in Calvin as well, the traditional schema of the stages of growth in monastic spirituality is effectively reversed. Now this may not be the case in some of the other reformers. The case

of Karlstadt is a bit more complex, and I have a feeling that Denck and Schwenkfeld may be a bit more Medieval on this issue still.

Now there is a branch of “monasticism” that is not, for the most part, guilty of any of the above critiques of the system of Medieval monasticism. That is the Order of Preachers, the Dominicans. On each of the issues mentioned above, one finds that the Dominican order anticipates many of the Protestant concerns and was, I believe, in reality an attempt to address many of these concerns. Without giving a detailed history of the relationship between the Dominican order and the development of Protestantism, I will simply point out the common interests on the above issues:

1. Separation - Dominicans were formed out of the need, not to be separate from the world, but to minister apostolically in the world. Dominicans have always been a model of active service in a variety of “worldly” activities, broader even than the Franciscans.

2. Abbot/Abbess - The Dominicans are not run by an Abbot, but by provincial directors. They are not as “friar-ish” as the Franciscans, yet the sense of organization has most often been a matter of practical necessity rather than spiritual authority.

3. Rule - The Dominicans adopted the Rule of Augustine, and of all the orders, they take the greatest liberties in interpreting the demands of the Rule for each individual. This was in part to allow for the possibility of ministry in the world (note the Reformation understanding of “calling”). However, I think there was a sense of the value of flexibility in itself here.

4. Stages - The Dominicans have never been much for the stages of spiritual life, and have tended to think in terms of one single life lived out as a be-

liever. On this see Tugwell's "Dominican Theology of Prayer." Indeed their approach to prayer as asking is in harmony with the Magisterial Protestant emphasis.

Furthermore, the warm Augustinianism of the Dominicans, the emphasis upon preaching, and their practical spirit all commend the Dominicans to the Protestant inclinations. I think it is no surprise that Luther found himself interested in the works of Johannes Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica*, both stemming from Dominican influence.

5. Mendicancy - There was, however, one aspect of the Dominican (and Franciscan) order which proved to be unacceptable. This was the practice of mendicancy. Karlstadt was the first of the Reformers to systematically argue against the practice of mendicancy. Begging was simply not biblical. This was especially true of the abuse of begging which had been transmitted through the mendicant orders, to the point where Dominicans would be supported by the Church for selling indulgences as appointees of the Bishop. The debates between cloistered and mendicant orders concerning support already had a long history. The development of groups like the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life saw the renewal of the value of work in the Renaissance culture. Tauler and the *Theologia Germanica* also give great praise for ordinary work, both as a means of support, as well as being spiritually equal to the contemplative life. In the eyes of the reformers, not only the abuses of the system, but the structure of the system of mendicancy had to go.

The monastic spirituality which had fostered relationship with God and had kept Christian culture alive in Europe for centuries was no longer an option for the Reformers. First, it had disintegrated below the level of recovery. The abuses

were beyond repair. In place of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, one found extravagance, concubinage, and power struggle. Spiritual directors had become institutional despots. The RULE and the disciplines of spirituality had become anxiety-ridden techniques for assuring (or insuring) one's salvation, rather than the loving pursuit of relationship with God. But even beyond the abuses, the very foundations of monastic spirituality themselves were called into question. Separation from the world, the place of the Rule, the role of leadership, the stages of spiritual growth, the practice of mendicancy, were all looked at with grace suspicion. Different streams of the Reformation responded to this suspicion differently. Many Anabaptist communities were more interested in recovery of sodality, whereas the Magisterial reformers focussed their attention on the reform of modality, and left sodality behind. The spiritual reformers sought to recover the monastic experience apart from monastic structure. The revolutionaries found necessary, for the recovery of Christian spirituality, the overthrow of the structure not only of the Church, but of society as well.

Protestant spirituality left some elements behind as it emptied monasteries of their members and their spiritual foundations. One thing missing in Protestant spirituality is the notion of separation. The disciplines of silence/solitude were for the most part left behind in Protestant churches. To Luther (and I think others), solitary spirituality would be looked at as arrogant presumption and irresponsible inactivity. Consequently, we Protestants have lost the sense of the value of prolonged silence and solitude. We *have* gained a profound sense of spirituality in the ordinary world. Unfortunately, even this is often reduced to a superficial "being in the world" spirituality which is in fact fed by the world and not by the Word. Fasts, vigils and such have, for the most part, been ignored by Protestants, save for periods of renewal among Pietist, Puritan, or Methodist groups. Left be-

hind as illustrations of “works righteousness” many spiritual disciplines were set aside, seldom seen as the genuine expressions of faith working itself out in love. Spiritual direction was often discouraged as its association with the sacrament of penance was eliminated and as the priesthood of all believers was exalted. The Pietist *collegia pietatis*, the Puritan “conference,” and the Quaker communal discernment practices (stemming from earlier Baptist/Congregational influences), all address in different ways this inherent weakness in the Protestant rejection of direction. Along with the elimination of the Rule, and the guidance of the director, Protestants would frequently lose a serious intentionality concerning the development of their faith. The doctrine of the mystical union of the believer could easily lead to the believer finding little need for serious purgation (a caricature of the Magisterial position, but one reflected in many of the “intellectually” converted, but intemperate princes of the reformation period).

Nevertheless, even as some disciplines have remained unwelcome in the Protestant community, to our loss, some spiritual disciplines were emphasized anew or even created as a result of the Protestant Reformation. Interesting to note, many of these are in keeping with the general shift in orientation of the period from the visual to the verbal. The practice of hearing the Word, especially as experienced in the proclamation of the Word in preaching, though present through all of Christian history, was virtually christened a spiritual discipline by the Protestant, and especially Lutheran reformation. A great deal of discussion was exercised in detailing just how this discipline was to be practiced in Protestant circles. The personal preparation, the architecture, the hearing and proclaiming itself, were all subjects of dispute and development during the early years of the reformation. They were so important, because the raising of this new means of cultivating relationship with God was, after the destruction of the frameworks of monastic and

popular spirituality, the central means of grace for spiritual development in the Protestant churches. And it has remained so since, with slight variation between diverse expressions. The place of song was raised up in the Protestant churches. The Psalter was early translated into the vernacular. The role of music in the church, both vocal and instrumental was transformed. The medium of popular culture was joined to the monastic practice of chant to create a decidedly fresh spiritual discipline/means of cultivating relationship with God. More research needs to be done on the place of song as spiritual discipline.

As I mentioned above, in many ways the reformation was not a critique of the monastic RULE of daily life as such. In fact, what one frequently finds is the modification and adaptation of the monastic ideal into the setting of ordinary family life of the Protestant household and parish. Any extremes have been weeded out, any elements which were beyond the capabilities of the ordinary working Christian, and the core of a religious life was encouraged for the Christian church and household. The value of manual labor in its relationship to prayer, present in the Benedictine stream of spirituality, but lost in the proliferation of mendicant spiritualities and the corruption of many cloisters, was regained in the Protestant spirituality of “vocation.” Family spirituality was emphasized and fostered, as Luther developed the catechism for children and as patterns of family worship were encouraged. Indeed, it is possible to look at the family as the replacement of the monastic community in Protestant spirituality. In place of the “office” of monastic life, we find the exhortation, in numerous Protestant writings, to regular family worship times, especially in the morning and evening. And in keeping with the Protestant verbal emphases, Bible reading was the central focus of these family times of worship. This is especially true of the Puritan expressions. Bible reading itself was exalted as a spiritual discipline by the Protestant reformation. It had been present and central as early as the *lectio divina* of the early monastic com-

munities. Yet in its Protestant expression, this spiritual discipline was transferred from the monastery to the home of the ordinary lay person.

I think we can see from this presentation of the distinctive contributions of the Protestant reformation to the history and practice of spiritual disciplines (ascetical spirituality), that while rejecting the very foundations of monastic formation as they had been known in the development of the Church up to the Reformation, the Protestant reformation itself functioned as a means of realizing the monastic ideal: that of the cultivation, maintenance, and spread of Christian values, life and spirituality to society as a whole.

C. The speculation of Late Medieval *scholastic* spirituality

The philosophical; minutiae had to go, and the return to the simple statements of the Scriptures, understandable or not, was the cry of the Protestant reformation. In this they were the sisters/daughters of the developing Renaissance Humanism. There was the willingness to break with some of the primary structures of intellectual development which had developed over time. One of these may have been the structure of purgation, illumination, and union, as I have mentioned above. The rejection of scholasticism was not a statement against the use of reason, but rather a re-Augustinization (or a re-Athanasianization) of scholarship. The relationship between speculation and Scripture in the spiritual life was re-oriented to the side of Scripture. There was greater willingness to let God be un-understood or at least un-philosophically explainable. What could not be understood from the clear texts of Scripture was best left alone. This fostered a great deal of effort amongst conservative Protestants to find (or at times force) clear texts of

Scripture for their points of view. This ultimately became a kind-of “proof text speculation” in later generations. But in its inception, the aim was a simply faith in the text of Scripture. The primary source of spirituality in the Protestant reformation was not speculation or even personal experience (though a variety exists between Luther, Denck, Karlstadt, and Muentzer, for example), but rather the texts of the Scripture themselves.

D. The institution of Late Medieval *ecclesial* spirituality

The Church institution as a whole had become too wieldy. It was corrupt, it was not subject to anything or anyone (including the Scriptures), and it was forcing itself upon all, directing the character of the spiritual life of everyone. The system as such was the problem. Early on, the energy was toward the *reformation* of the system, but it soon became obvious to the reformers that a renewed spirituality would only flourish in a recreated institution (the new wine would simply not survive in the old wineskins). The sacraments, the offices, the governmental structures were all in question, with various critiques offered from within the ranks of Protestants. Because of the variety of critiques, the Protestants were not able to form a common alternative institution, but rather propagated a variety of expressions of spirituality each with its own institution (each of which ultimately experienced its own corruption in a variety of forms). For the spiritual reformers, for example, the appeal was made to the individual heart apart from (or within any) institution.

E. The framework of Late Medieval *mystical* spirituality

This topic is too important, too broad, and too unstudied (or too poorly studied in my opinion) to be treated here. I hope someday to write a separate paper on this later. I have already mentioned the stages of purgation, illumination and union. One other issue, however, deserves mention. I think that the shift from Catholic (Universal and Defined) Church to concrete expressions with no central interpretive authority necessarily resulted in a host of complexities involved in the cultivation and interpretation of experience of God. These complexities plagued the reformers' understanding of earlier mystical texts and their understanding of one another. The same confusion currently plagues contemporary scholars of sixteenth century church history. For example, visionary experience, which was treated in the mystical literature under the dynamics of spiritual experience (seldom systematically, but still having its place), is seen in Protestant discussion as an issue of authority. It became an issue in the dialogue between Luther and Karlstadt, and it remains an issue in the interpreters of the reformation (cf. Sider's efforts to clear Karlstadt of "spiritualism"). Even a Catherine of Sienna or a Julian of Norwich would have understood their visions as sitting within the authority of the Church [EH note 2003 - yet note the literature on women's visionary literature and their critique of the authority from within the available structures within the system]. When, however, you release the church from its central interpretive authority and the application of a text to situation confronts, for example, a Thomas Muentzer, the issue becomes not simply an issue of spiritual direction, but rather an issue of corporate guidance. This is a very important issue indeed, one which will reassert itself in the Quaker movement, in the revivals in England and the US, and in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. But it is important to see how the contexts determine the questions one brings to the phenomena, and consequently, how the phenomena of mystical experience is to be interpreted. These issues must be sorted out before we can begin to understand how the Protestant re-

formation may have broke with or absorbed mystical influences.

Conclusion

So what have we inherited, as Protestants, from this break with Catholicism? Are renewed interests in Catholic mystical or monastic writers offering up dangerous directions for the Protestant Church? Upon what basis do we sort the various influences of our past and future? One thing we have seen in these reflections is that in the break with Roman Catholicism, some things were lost and some things were gained. In leaving behind the speculations of scholastic spirituality, the spirituality became less philosophically accessible. The frameworks of popular spirituality, indeed the means of salvation for the masses, were reduced from seven sacraments to the hearing of the Word with faith. The visual symbols of the faith were left behind for auditory symbols. Fasts and solitude were demoted; song and home were promoted. Emphasis upon grace and elective mystical union left some less inclined toward intentional pursuit of spiritual development. Spiritual direction was minimized, as the stress was shifted to “me and the Bible.” Rather than an unwieldy institution, the church was seen as a local community of believers. Unjust hierarchies of clergy, lay, and religious were torn down in favor of a priesthood of all believers (and an eventual corruption of all forms of organization). In all these things, something is lost and something is gained.

I believe it is time we recognize that there are deep and valuable concerns expressed in the history of *both* the Protestant and Catholic Church. Scripture speaks to the practices of separation from the world, solitude, work, guidance, intentionality of pursuit, and even “rule.” Even issues concerning stages of faith and personal financial support can be examined therein (Biblical spirituality is to be

addressed in other papers). I think that many, if not all of the disciplines of Protestant and Catholic spirituality can be welcomed, if carefully applied. It is the Word and the Spirit, in the context of the community of faith in action, which forms the center of guidance for the experience and action of believers. To recognize the strengths and weaknesses of a division in history is the first step toward healing it.