

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Freedom of the Spirit

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Lately, I've found myself thinking a lot about the third person of the Trinity. I have to say that I'm not entirely happy about this state of affairs. As a student of history, and especially of the history of Christianity, I am well aware that undue focus on the work of the Spirit, particularly without the restraining influence of a more solid anchor like the institutional church or the text of scripture, can have dire consequences. A classic example from my primary area of study, the history of the Reformation, is that of Thomas Müntzer. Müntzer began his reforming career loosely identified with the activities of the Christian humanists and the reformers associated with Martin Luther. Gradually, though, he distanced himself from both groups, in part at least, because of their failure to worship a speaking God – that is because they were not open to the voice of the Spirit through dreams, visions, and other extra-scriptural manifestations. As he became more and more disaffected from his fellow reformers, and from the political authorities of the age, Müntzer descended further into social radicalism and, I suspect, madness. He ended up as chaplain of the peasant bands at the battle of Frankenhausen during the German Peasants' War of 1525, where he promised to catch the bullets and canon balls of the princes' troops in the sleeves of his coat. After the defeat of the peasants, Müntzer was paraded around the countryside as an object lesson in the consequences of rebellion, brutally tortured, executed, and his head stuck on the end of a pike.

However, in the years I've spent studying the Reformation, I've discovered as well that the reformers who identified themselves with the activities of the Spirit were also those who came up with the most irenic and tolerant visions of reform. People like Caspar von Schwenkfeld, Sebastian Franck, Obbe Philips, and Sebastian Castellio stand out among their contemporaries, especially in their unwillingness to sanction the use of coercion to maintain religious uniformity. It seems almost as if an appeal to the Spirit was a necessary prelude to overcoming the dogmatism and sectarianism of the various confessional groups that came out of Luther's challenge to the church's authority. And, as such, these reformers appear as beacons amidst the carnage and religious violence of the Confessional Age.

As is likely evident by now, my interest in the activities of the Holy Spirit stems more from intellectual questions than any sense that the Spirit has been speaking to me. Much of my recent research has been focused on a group of reformers often referred to as Spiritualist Anabaptists. These were people who, in the early sixteenth century, were drawn to the Anabaptist movement, with its emphasis on religious voluntarism and commitment to a changed life in the believer. Slowly, however, they became disillusioned with what they regarded as the narrow sectarianism and strict dogmatism of the Anabaptists, which in their view rent the seamless tunic of Christ. And they sought to establish a religion of the Spirit, devoid of the ceremonial, institutional, and dogmatic concerns which they identified as the cause of the divisions and rancor around them.

Next year I plan to spend much of my sabbatical focusing on the activities and writings of two of these individuals: Ludwig Häzzer and Hans Denck. Denck I find especially interesting. He was trained as a Renaissance humanist and was a master of the

three “biblical languages” – Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Before he died of the plague in his late twenties, he wrote and published a number of reforming treatises and laid important cornerstones for subsequent developments in both Anabaptism and Reformation Spiritualism. One of the first people he baptized, Hans Hut, went on to become the “apostle of South German Anabaptism”. But eventually Denck came to regret this activity. In a letter written towards the end of his life to the Reformer of Basel, Johannes Oecolampadius, Denck stated:

I disagree greatly with those, whoever they might be, who excessively bind the Kingdom of God with ceremonies and elements of this world, although I cannot deny that I adhered to things of this kind for some time.

Denck envisioned instead a church of the Spirit, scattered among all peoples. While we have no concise statement of this vision from Denck himself, one of the other Spiritualist reformers of the age, Sebastian Franck, summed up this thought nicely. After referring to three newly-arisen beliefs – the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Anabaptist – Franck claimed:

[a] fourth is on the way, which will clear out of the way all outward preaching, ceremonies, sacraments, the ban and callings as unnecessary, and simply assemble an invisible, spiritual church in the unity of the Spirit and belief among all people, and will establish through the eternal, invisible word alone, [a church] ruled directly by God without external means, from which the apostolic church departed shortly after [the time] of the apostles.

For an unrepentant old liberal like myself, one of the most appealing aspects of this vision is the implicit toleration of its adherents. Some of the Spiritualist reformers – Franck among them – allowed that true members of Christ’s body could exist even among the Turks. One of the particular focuses of my upcoming research is on the activities of Denck and Hätzer as Christian Hebraists. In 1527 they published the so-called *Wormser Propheten*, the first translation of the prophetic books of the Old

Testament directly from Hebrew into German. Initially, Luther was quite excited by this work, praising the accuracy of the translation and the scholarly acumen of the translators. Over time, though, he became more critical of the work, suggesting that “the Rabbis” were likely behind it. Recent scholarship has tended to confirm Luther’s suspicion. Indications are that Denck and Hätzer sought help in their translating efforts from the Jewish community in Worms, and that they thought this work could serve as a bridge to bring Jews and Christians together.

I would like to say that in the visions of people like Denck and Hätzer I’ve found a viable model of Spiritual Christianity devoid of the dogmatic and institutional basis for the chauvinism that organized religion is so often accused of. Certainly, the Spiritualist reformers were not wild-eyed Müntzers willing to catch the princes’ bullets in their coat sleeves. But as a student of history, I’m skeptical about this vision as well. As a matter of interest, how many of you had heard of Ludwig Hätzer or Hans Denck before this morning? (The obvious conclusion to be drawn here is that you should by my book when I finally finish it). Without the clearly defined confessional stances and institutional structures such reformers identified as the source of corruption in early Christianity, the best these men could bequeath to their followers and to posterity was an exhortation to remain open to the Spirit. But this was insufficient to turn their reforming visions into reforming movements.

In Denck’s letter I cited above, he was requesting that Oecolampadius intervene on his behalf so that he could settle in Basel, after being harried out of numerous other cities and towns for his religious beliefs. Oecolampadius agreed, on the condition that Denck write a confession of his beliefs. When Denck died shortly afterward,

Oecolampadius had the confession published under the title *Hans Dencks Widerruf*, ie. Hans Denck's Retraction. (File this one under tricks you can play on your friends after they're dead). Two years later Hätzer was executed in the city of Constance, ostensibly for adultery, although his real crime was likely the books he wrote denying the orthodox doctrine of the trinity. This leads me to wonder whether the freedom of the Spirit is too much for us.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRISON WORSHIP - If you like to attend the worship at the South Dakota State Penitentiary on **Thurs., Feb. 10th**, please see Carol for a clearance form. Deadline for forms is Jan. 22nd.

SPRING SEMESTER SERVICE LEARNING - Student participants and leaders are sought for these service learning trips next spring. Costs are reduced for leaders willing to help with recruitment and planning. See Pr. Paul or Carol if you are interested.

March 18-21 - Pine Ridge - volunteer in soup kitchens and children's programs. Neighbors of the retreat center help interpret Native American life and culture. Cost \$100

March 25-26 - Joy Ranch, Watertown. Lutherans Outdoors is building a new, fully accessible camp near Watertown. Students will assist in light construction [siding, caulking, painting.] The only cost is a contribution for gas to the students who drive!

May 22-26 - New York City. A study in contrasts: serve the soup kitchens of Trinity Lutheran on the Lower Eastside of Manhattan during the day. Late afternoons and evenings are free to explore the museums, architecture and culture of New York City. Cost is \$800 including flight, housing, most food and Broadway play ticket.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Friday (14th) Worship, 10 am - John Hokanson, Sr. Spkr.

Sunday (16th) Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul

Monday (17th) Martin Luther King Celebration, 10 am - Robin Duncan

Wednesday (19th) Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul

Friday (21st) Worship, 10 am - Brady Maciver, Sr. Spkr.