

## *Medieval Religious Dissent*

### I. Introduction

#### A. Why study dissent?

1. Trace another line of religious life
2. Note range of opinion in Middle Ages
3. Historic uses of study
  - a. Protestant search for “true church” → invalid
  - b. Perhaps a “trail of truth” → the remnant

#### B. Generalizations about medieval dissent

1. Very diverse in nature—not uniform
2. Not all connected
3. Information mostly from opponents

#### C. Use by Successionists

##### 1. Successionism

- a. Belief that a succession of true believers (or true churches) has existed continuously outside the institutional church
- b. Practiced by various Protestant writers (John Foxe, Landmarkists)

##### 2. Problems with Successionism

- a. Selectivity of sources (“pick and choose approach”)
- b. Chronological/geographical gaps
- c. Lack of original research (See, e.g., Beale, 2:186-93)
- d. Serious disagreements among the groups used
- e. Belief that historical continuity is a mark of the true church

#### D. Early Dissenters: Rigorists

1. Groups who called for tighter church discipline
2. Notable example: Donatists

### II. Dualistic Groups

#### A. General Characteristics

1. Dualistic view of nature
2. Generally rejected marriage
3. Denied that God became flesh
4. Opposed many superstitions such as the veneration of Mary, use of images & crosses, and transubstantiation
5. Had higher moral standards → Contrast to worldliness of contemporary church

#### B. Leading Groups

##### 1. Manichaeism

- a. Non-Christian root of dualism?
- b. Founded by Manes (or Mani) in Persia in 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. AD
- c. Mixture of Christian, Zoroastrian, & Gnostic elements
- d. Key idea: Dualism of material (bad) & spiritual (good)

##### 2. Paulicians

- a. Located in the Byzantine Empire, esp. Armenia (600s to 1100s)
- b. Named either for a founder named Paul or for Paul the apostle
- c. Origin: Manicheans who adopted/adapted Christianity?

##### 3. Bogomils

- a. Named for early leader, name meaning “beloved of God”

- b. Located in Byzantine Empire → Bulgaria (c. 1050-1200)
    - c. Not only religious but also expression of Bulgarian nationalism
  - 4. Albigensians or Cathari (“pure ones”)
    - a. From Albi in southern France (late 1110s)
    - b. Wiped out by a bloody crusade in the early 1200s
    - c. Two classes
      - 1) *Perfecti* (the perfect ones → rejected marriage; vegetarian)
      - 2) *Credentes* (believers → requirements not nearly so strict, e.g., could marry)
- III. Anti-Papal Groups in Western Europe
- A. General character
    - 1. Promoted poverty
    - 2. Attacked worldliness & wealth of the church
    - 3. Sharp critics of papacy → “antichrist”
    - 4. We know more what they opposed than what they advocated
  - B. Arnoldians (Arnold of Brescia)
    - 1. Student of Abelard
    - 2. “Political heresy”
      - a. Joined revolution in Rome
      - b. Urged separation of church and state
    - 3. Arrested & executed
  - C. Spiritual Franciscans
    - 1. Keys to ideology (Timothy George)
      - a. St. Francis’s ideal of poverty
      - b. Joachim of Fiore’s philosophy of history
    - 2. Rejected papal authority
  - D. The Waldensians
    - 1. Most important dissenting group
    - 2. Origins
      - a. Waldo of Lyons (d. c. 1218), a rich merchant who, moved by Christ’s commands to the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:21), sold all that he had and gave it to the poor.
      - b. Legends of earlier origin
    - 3. Nature
      - a. Started as a reform movement within the church (like St. Francis) but forced out by papal condemnation after initial approval
      - b. Rejected Constantinian settlement
    - 4. Teachings
      - a. Followed path of simplicity
        - 1) Promoted poverty
        - 2) “Live the Sermon on the Mount”
      - b. Practices
        - 1) Itinerant preaching
        - 2) Bible translation
      - c. Rejected elements of medieval Catholicism
        - 1) Tied sacraments to character of priest
        - 2) Rituals such as pilgrimages
        - 3) Doctrines such as relics, indulgences, purgatory

5. Later Fate
  - a. Hid out in the Alps
  - b. Survived to join the Reformation

#### IV. Evaluation

- A. What the dissenters give us
  1. Testimony against religious conformity
  2. Expressed religious/social protest
  3. Call for higher standard of morality
- B. Where the dissenters fail as forerunners
  1. Often differ from biblical orthodoxy
  2. They *diagnose* problems but often give wrong *prescription*
- C. Appreciating the dissenters
  1. Doctrinal witness
    - a. Rightly criticized many errors of the institutional medieval church
    - b. Not doctrinally Protestant
  2. Be judicious in accepting or rejecting them
  3. Concept of “trail of truth”?
    - a. Make the criteria the person and work of Christ and not adherence to or rejection of an institutional church.
    - b. Trace the “trail” inside & outside the institutional church