THE RADICAL REFORMERS

If coroners' reports had existed in the sixteenth century, those of the Radical Reformers would have made interesting reading. "King" Jan Beukels, the insane leader of Münster, had his tongue ripped out with red hot tongs and was then suspended in an iron cage from the church tower until his corpse fell apart. Jakob Hutter was dipped in freezing water, his skin was sliced open, brandy was rubbed into the open wounds and then he was ignited.

These sorts of sentences – brutal even by sixteenth century standards - were not meted out by the Papal Inquisition or other Catholic zealots. Rather, they were imposed by fellow Protestants – or, even worse, by fellow Protestants acting in cahoots with the Papal Inquisition. Bewilderingly, at a time when mainstream Catholics and Protestants would rather see the Ottoman Empire swamp Europe than contemplate uniting in its defence, they considered it imperative to work together in ensuring the complete annihilation of the Radicals; they generated suspicion and bloodthirsty ferocity out of all proportion to their numbers.

1. Why was the Radical Movement persecuted so mercilessly?

The degree to which the Radicals were persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike is, at face value, hard to fathom. The "Radical Movement" was actually not particularly Radical, and certainly never constituted anything vaguely approaching an organised movement. And yet those facts in themselves ironically provide us with an explanation for the level of persecution that the Radicals faced.

(a) Weak Organisation

Firstly, by not constituting a proper "movement", they lacked the unity to resist their persecutors effectively. In reality a hotchpotch of sects and wandering bands who had very little in common, the names of these groups in themselves wonderfully reflect the general confusion: Huttites and Hutterites, Műnsterites and Műntzerites, Mennonites and Melchiorites. As Dickens puts it, "The [Radicals] had no great spiritual leader, no generally accepted epitome of doctrine, no central directive organs".

The Radicals were particularly unfortunate to make their views known at a time when the states of Europe were not only more jittery, but also more powerful, than they ever had been before. This process had been initiated by the Papacy, whose territorial ambitions may have been defensive but had the effect of turning it into a separate state. Luther's protest resulted from the implications of this development and had led to a parallel change in the German Protestant States. Europe was dividing itself into two armed camps, with the battle-lines being drawn on the issue of religious belief: faith was no longer a private matter but one of state security. Radical sects were therefore prime targets for persecution – not strictly because they were radical, but simply because they did not fit in.

(b) Controversial Beliefs

Secondly, the Radicals were not particularly outlandish in their religious views, but merely resurrected medieval religious heresies and followed the ideas of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin through to their most logical conclusions. This,

however, meant that they were regarded as being altogether more dangerous than a bunch of free-thinking crackpots ever would have been. On the one hand, the secular rulers newly empowered by the moderate impulses of the "Magisterial Reformers" regarded the Radicals as being dangerously subversive - theological loose cannons who jeopardised the new status quo. On the other hand, the Magisterial Reformers themselves were keen to distance themselves from their 'misguided' disciples by sanctioning their utter destruction by the secular authorities. This process can be seen at work both in Zwingli's Zurich and in Luther's Germany.

(i) Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren.

Geographically, the Radicals can be traced to Switzerland, where Zwingli's simplification of worship, view of the Eucharist as a merely commemorative service and willingness to debate the scriptural validity of infant baptism fired imaginations and whetted appetites for more radical reforms. In 1523, the Swiss Brethren - Balthasar Hubmaier, Felix Mantz and Conrad Grebel – used Luther's ideas of Sola Scriptura to shockingly argue that as baptism for infants had no Biblical basis, it should be restricted to informed adults. Moreover, this baptism should not be a passive matter of having some water splashed over the head, but be an active, threefold process – inward repentance, baptism by water, and (crucially) the acceptance of persecution. To us today this does not seem particularly threatening, but to sixteenth century minds this proposal was a blow to the very foundations of society. The act of baptism transformed people not only into Christians, but also into members of the state. Suggesting that people should be encouraged to make an informed, adult choice about whether to become members of the state suggested that the Brethren were anarchists – a fear confirmed when they renounced the concept of military service and the swearing of oaths of loyalty. In contrast, Luther and Zwingli, as leaders of the "Magisterial Reformation" had implicitly accepted the role of the state (Princes, City Councils, Magistrates) in organising religious activity if the Church was to be reformed constructively and safely. In this, they did not differ fundamentally from the Catholics, who also recognised the importance of "top down" leadership in the Church.

(ii) Luther and Thomas Müntzer.

Whilst Grebel was causing a headache for Zwingli by "re-baptising" George Blaurock, Thomas Müntzer was driving Martin Luther into a frenzy in Germany. Müntzer had become converted to Lutheranism as a parish priest, and was possessed of an awesome knowledge of the Bible. Despite this, he had rapidly moved way beyond Luther's position until he was an outright spiritualist - in other words, he argued that God communicated directly with the believer and that the Bible was a downright hindrance in understanding God's message. Through this hotline to the Almighty, Müntzer had received the message (or so he thought) that the apocalypse was at hand and the thousand-year-kingdom of Christ about to begin. Fired with this "Millenarian" message, he wandered through Southern Germany gathering followers, eventually settling in Mühlhausen in 1524. Here, he announced that the Elect - who he equated with the urban artisans - should wage war on the ungodly. He saw the Peasants' War which broke out soon afterwards as the fulfilment of his prophecies and, taking up the "Sword of Gideon", made a flag out of

thirty yards of white silk, emblazoned with a rainbow, and assembled his troops with an instruction to fight the “fat cats” (*grossen Hansen*) whose greed and egotism blinded them to the truth of his vision.

As with the Swiss brethren, the frightening thing about Müntzer for the Magistrates was the way in which he was unprepared to see any fundamental distinction between religion, society and politics. Whereas Luther professed himself keen to keep the religious sphere separate from the secular (referring to them as “The Two Kingdoms”), Müntzer saw that this was utterly impossible. Luther’s belief in a “Priesthood of All Believers”, for Müntzer, meant that all men were equal. In that case, he reasoned, there could be no justification for the Peasants to be downtrodden by their exploitative masters, and no justification for the Princes to dictate the faith of their subjects, be it Catholicism or otherwise. Luther - never one to mince his words – could hardly be expected to let this pass without comment, especially when Müntzer denounced him as “Doctor Liar”.

2. How were they persecuted?

(a) The Swiss Brethren

Zurich acted swiftly and decisively against the Swiss Brethren. In 1525 Grebel, Mantz and Blaurock were imprisoned; Hubmaier was subjected to torture, recantation and banishment. The following year Zurich Council declared that the Brethren should be executed “without mercy”; considerately, they stipulated that the Brethren’s commitment to baptism meant that the method to be used should be drowning. Grebel had already died of natural causes by this point, but Mantz swiftly plunged into a watery grave whilst Blaurock - a non-citizen - was beaten through the streets and expelled. In 1528 Hubmaier was hunted down and arrested by the Imperial Government. It was decided to burn him at the stake, although his wife was thrown into the Danube with a boulder round her neck. As Dickens puts it, “The alacrity with which Zwingli accepted the rule of the godly magistrate was prompted almost as much by the need to contain radicalism as by the need to dislodge Catholicism”.

(b) The Müntzerites

Whilst travelling through Thuringia on his way back to Wittenberg in May 1525, Luther was booed and spat on by groups of peasants. It was therefore with considerable relish that he then wrote the notorious pamphlet, "Against the Murderous, Thievish Hordes of Peasants”. In it, he encouraged the Princes to “Smite, stab and strangle” the rebels, whose souls belonged to the devil “For all eternity”. Müntzer hastily gathered a force of 8,000 men at Frankenhausen, where he awaited the armies of several princes marching against the city. Prior to the battle, Müntzer was inspired by the appearance of a glorious rainbow in the sky and delivered an impassioned speech to his followers claiming that God would enable them to catch the bullets of their opponents in their sleeves. Müntzer’s hot-line to heaven appears to have been faulty, however, since five thousand peasants were ultimately slaughtered in the ensuing conflict. Müntzer himself was captured, brutally tortured, and then beheaded after being forced to make a humiliating apology

for his misguided actions. The princes had retaken both Frankenhausen and Mühlhausen by the end of the month. The Peasants' War was over.

3. Why was this persecution so effective?

(a) The reaction of the moderates

Historically, persecution has often resulted in driving movements underground in the short term, only to see them resurge later on with the greater resolve and unity that comes from adversity. With the Radicals, however, this did not happen. They went so far as to call a summit in 1527, but this "Martyr's Synod" was more concerned with celebrating their persecution as proof of their divine mission rather than formulating means of avoiding it in the future. More constructively, the "Schleitheim Articles" (1527) presented a united front by clearly stating that the Radicals felt that the state was fundamentally irrelevant. Drawn up under the auspices of Michael Sattler, the Articles rejected participation in public affairs, the swearing of oaths and the use of "Unchristian, devilish weapons of force". Unfortunately, the only reason that so many Radicals were willing to subscribe to this was because all of the controversial issues over which they disagreed were left out – such things as Melchiorite Christology, Communitarianism, Polygamy and psychopannychism (the supposed sleep of soul between death and day of Judgement). As such, they were easily divided by their foes.

(b) The reaction of the extremists

If the moderates reacted too tepidly to the assault of their enemies, the same could not be said of the extremists. As the centre of Radicalism drifted northwards to Belgium and Holland, leadership was assumed by Melchior Hoffman. This "evil genius" (Dickens) shockingly argued that Christ had not taken flesh from his mother and therefore was wholly divine, with no link to the sinful Adam. Moreover, he gleefully announced that Strassburg had been chosen as the "New Jerusalem" mentioned in Revelations, from which 144,000 heralds would go forth and spread the good news through the world. Martin Bucer, the magisterial reformer in Strassburg, did not agree with this interpretation of events and swiftly threw Hoffman in prison, where he died in 1533. His prophecy was unfulfilled.

Yet although Melchior himself was no more, the Melchiorite movement he had spawned went from strength to strength. Led by Jan Matthys, they gravitated towards Münster, which was being pushed into Radical waters by Bernard Rothmann. With the support of the wealthy cloth-merchant Knipperdolling, they had gained control of the city by 1535 and eagerly set about turning it into a Radical utopia. Detested by Catholics and Protestants alike, they found themselves besieged by their opponents almost immediately.

When, in April 1535, Matthys was killed in a skirmish, leadership was assumed by Jan Beukels of Leyden, a former tailor who abolished the City Council and created a harsh theocracy run by Twelve Elders. They held out until June of 1536, when the city capitulated to its enemies and its leaders were gruesomely executed.

Some historians have sought to diminish the insanity of the Münster experiment. True, they admit, sins such as complaining became punishable by death – but this is just an expression of martial law being used in a war

zone, not religious extremism. It is true too, they would concede, that polygamy was encouraged, but this was a practical reaction to the fact that women outnumbered men four to one – as Rothmann had pointed out, the purpose of a marriage was to be fruitful, and women “who everywhere have been getting the upper hand” would be kept in their place if their husbands could turn elsewhere for sexual favours. These arguments, however, overlook the minor fact that Jan Beukels was downright bonkers. This is a man who beheaded one of his sixteen wives for impertinence and then furiously trampled on the corpse; a leader who, with enemy forces battering the city into submission, devoted his energies to a sumptuous coronation in which he crowned himself “King Jan” in full regalia before his kneeling subjects.

4. What was their legacy?

The convenient answer is to say that on the one hand the Radicals in Europe were ultimately a freaky sideshow of no real significance, whilst on the other hand they ultimately drifted to and flourished in the New World. However, this is a rather simplistic interpretation.

It is true that in the USA there are, to this day, flourishing communities of Mennonites. These peace-loving people are the spiritual heirs of the reformer Menno Simons, who had rallied the remaining Radicals after Münster with his sublime "Foundation of Christian Doctrine”. Nevertheless, to argue that the Radicals were the spiritual heirs of the Founding Fathers, as some historians have argued, would be pushing things a little too far.

It is also true that in Europe the Radicals, if anything, became even more divided after the Münster debacle and unable to make a direct impact. Spiritualists such as Caspar Schwenkfeld, Hans Denck and Sebastian Franck muddied the waters even further by rejecting the Bible ("The Paper Pope") in favour of divine inspiration. This was fatal given the fact that the exploits of “King Jan” had hardened opinion against the Radicals: “God opened the eyes of the governments by the revolt of Münster, and thereafter no one would trust even those Anabaptists who claimed to be innocent” (Bullinger).

Nevertheless, to dismiss the Radicals as being of little significance on the basis that they were squashed is to miss the point. History is not just about “winners” – if that were the case, historians would hardly bother to study Adolf Hitler. The impact which the Radicals had on Europe was not that which they were hoping for, but that does not diminish the scale of their importance.

They clarified the battle lines between Protestant and Catholics.

In the short term, Catholics and Protestants were brought together by their loud and eloquent denunciation of the Radicals. In the long term, however, these denunciations served to clarify the divergent beliefs of each side and so harden the divisions between the two camps irrevocably. Once their common enemy was removed, they had about as much in common as Soviet Russia and the USA after the defeat of Germany in the Second World War.

They illustrated graphically how organisation was essential for survival.

The example of the Radicals was not lost on Calvin, the man commonly regarded as almost single-handedly ensuring that Protestantism had a long term future throughout Europe and beyond. Organisation and unity, thought

Calvin, were essential for survival, a matter he made clear through the Ecclesiastical Ordinances.

They show, crucially, that Protestants no more than Catholics could rightfully claim the moral high ground in the Reformation debate.

Dickens was of the view that the Radicals "blasted the infant shoots of liberalism which grew upon Lutheran and Zwinglian trees". In reality, however, Luther's supposed "liberalism" before the Peasants' War was really little more than woolly-mindedness; the Reformation was never "liberal" at all, merely ill-considered. Luther, far from being a tolerant visionary, was incapable of listening to anybody who dared to disagree with his views. This was proven beyond a shadow of a doubt by his handling of the Radicals. Rather than accept that their relationship with God was just as valid as his own, he instead promoted mass murder of those people who had dared to take his ideas further than he had intended. This was not particularly outrageous by 16th century standards, but it sharply illustrates the hypocrisy of the Protestant denunciation of Catholic "atrocities".

The Radicals did not kill off the supposed "liberalism" of the Reformation; they merely highlighted that it had never really been liberal in the first place. Johann von Dollinger said that "Historically nothing is more incorrect than the assertion that the Reformation was a movement in favour of intellectual freedom. The exact contrary is the truth. For themselves, it is true, Lutherans and Calvinists claimed liberty of conscience . . . but to grant it to others never occurred to them so long as they were the stronger side. The complete extirpation of…everything that stood in their way was regarded by the reformers as something entirely natural." The Protestants, no less than the Catholics, only preached toleration when it suited them, just as the Radicals were perfectly prepared to use violence when they felt it would be to their advantage. Sadly, it seems, toleration is almost always preached by the disenfranchised rather than the powerful, and out of necessity rather than genuine conviction.

Timeline

1523	• Switzerland: The Swiss Brethren argue against adult baptism in Zurich ("Anabaptism"). Condemned by Zwingli.
1524	• Germany: Thomas Muntzer settles in Mühlhausen, takes control of the Peasants' War and demands a community of goods ("Communitarianism"). Condemned by Luther.
1525	• Switzerland: Swiss Brethren members are imprisoned and tortured • Germany: Müntzerites crushed at Frankenhausen by an alliance of Protestant and Catholic forces; Muntzer executed
1527	• Remaining Radicals vainly attempt to unite forces in the Martyr's Synod and throught the Schleitheim Articles
1533	• Melchior Hoffman imprisoned by Bucer after claiming that Strassbourg was destined to be the "New Jerusalem"
1535	• Radical Melchiorites led by Jan Matthys and Jan of Leyden take control of Münster
1536	• Radicals crushed by an alliance of Protestant and Catholic forces.