

## A HUTTERITE BOOK OF MEDIEVAL ORIGIN

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The question of a possible continuity among Christian nonconformists or sectarians through the ages is an old one, but it has never been possible to present positive proof of effective contacts between these groups. In the 1880's two German scholars independently of each other nevertheless claimed such contacts, simply because of close spiritual kinship and similarities among such groups. The one was Ludwig Keller,<sup>1</sup> who used the generic term "old evangelical brotherhoods" to include all "left-wing" sectarians from primitive Christianity to sixteenth-century Anabaptism, contending in a number of stimulating books and lectures that somehow an underground contact actually existed between all of these "old evangelicals." In particular he promoted the far older hypothesis that the early Anabaptists of the sixteenth century have some roots in the great medieval brotherhood of Waldensians which survived from the thirteenth century on into modern times in spite of heavy persecution.<sup>2</sup> Keller pointed in particular to the fact that at certain places in Germany where formerly strong Waldensian congregations had existed (though they disappeared in the early days of the Reformation) Anabaptist groups now sprang up, strong and well organized somewhat in the fashion of the former group. The discussion rested at this point without proof of concrete contacts.

The other scholar was Albrecht Ritschl, the author of the famous *Geschichte des Pietismus* (1880 ff.). In the first volume, called *Prolegomena*, he proposed a similar hypothesis concerning the origin of Anabaptism. He had observed a striking similarity between the Franciscan monastic order of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries on the one hand, and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists on the other. Of these Franciscans several subdivisions are known: the *Conventual* Franciscans (who soon after the death of the founder made their peace with the papacy and accepted some sort of property, in open disobedience to Saint Francis' last will), the *Spiritual* Franciscans (who tried to stay loyal to the last will of the Saint and continued as the "poor" of the country, by this always coming in tension with a

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1 Compare Neff's article on Keller in *Menn. Lexikon*, II, 480.

2 The claim of Waldensian origin of the Anabaptists goes at least as far back as the early 17th century. Van Brought advocates this theory in his *Martyrs' Mirror*.

worldly-minded papacy), and finally the *Fraticelli* (or Brethren, who had become so radical in their evangelical way of life that they no longer accepted the authority of the popes; thus they became true sectarians (non-Catholic) and suffered heavy persecution which during the fifteenth century brought the entire movement to its eventual collapse). There was finally also the Third Order of *Tertiaries*, composed of lay members who took secret vows but continued to live "in the world," yet as far as possible in obedience to the master. This last group, once very strong and approved by the popes, appeared to Ritschl as the very forerunner of Anabaptism (because of its "evangelical life in the world") both in life and teachings.<sup>3</sup> Ritschl's hypothesis never enjoyed any serious acceptance, while Keller's thesis has been quite appealing to the historians of sect movements and has never been fully refuted.

What would both Keller and Ritschl have given if they had known the document to be described in this short paper? It might have meant to them the very demonstration of such underground links, and they would have rejoiced that now the continuity hypothesis seems actually to be proved by the existence of a "left-wing" Franciscan book among the Hutterites. At closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this interesting book can hardly be used for any such theory even though it actually points to certain contacts hitherto unknown. After all, one swallow does not make a summer, and one book does not prove continuity and dependency. That books have a certain persistency (particularly if fitting to a present frame of reference) is true, but borrowing a book does not in itself mean concrete dependency. Nevertheless, it is a rare case and deserves our attention.

When I visited the Hutterite Brethren in western Canada in 1954, in one of their Bruderhofs I was shown a nineteenth-century manuscript copy of an old book, called *Auslegung der Offenbarung Johannis* (Exposition of the Book of Revelation) in 22 chapters. It is a beautifully written volume of 162 leaves of folio size. An inscription on the flyleaf says that Elias Walter<sup>4</sup> had copied this codex in 1883, and adds that this was the third time that he had copied it, apparently considering it so valuable that a wide circulation of the book was desirable. Nothing is said about the original from which it was

<sup>3</sup> Ritschl then goes on to speculate whether 150 years later Pietism might not be considered a next step in this process of transformation, thus assuming an underground historical chain: Franciscan Tertiaries—Anabaptists—Pietists. They all are nonecclesiastical, definitely loyal to the Gospel, and call for discipleship and brotherhood.

<sup>4</sup> Elias Walter was an Elder of the so-called "Darius people" among the Hutterites, and preacher of the Standoff Colony near Macleod, Alberta. He died in 1939. Due to his intense interest in preserving the old Hutterite heritage we now have printed both the old Chronicle and the hymnal of the brethren.

copied. Since in all Hutterite thinking and writing, and in Anabaptist thinking generally, the Book of Revelation is seldom referred to (in fact the Brethren are very non-apocalyptically minded), such attention is most remarkable. In all the Hutterite doctrinal and homiletic literature no reference to this book and its Scriptural background can be found. And yet, here is a strange codex being read (most likely not always well understood) and being promoted among the more interested brethren. After some search in my own papers I discovered that once, in 1929, I had had another copy of the same book in my hands when I examined the beautiful library of the Archbishop of Esztergom (Gran), Hungary, for its holdings of Anabaptistica. There was the same *Auslegung der Offenbarung Johannis* in a codex of 1593 (two signatures of 243 and 249 leaves in quarto) confiscated from the Brethren in the days of persecution two centuries ago. Apparently a codex of this kind must also have served Elias Walter as the model for his own copy.

The first page of the book contains an interesting Introduction, reading somewhat like this: "Anno 1350, under Pope Clementus VI, there arose a man by the name of *Peter Johannes* who expounded the Revelation of the Apostle John by virtue of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He said that the Roman Church was the very Babylon and the Pope the very Antichrist (Rev. 18:22). His followers were not tolerated and he himself, upon the order of Clementus, was excavated and his bones were burned to powder."

When I mentioned this strange reference to another Hutterite brother he called my attention to a passage in the big Hutterite Chronicle, the *Geschicht-Buch*, which heretofore had completely escaped my attention. Caspar Braitmichel (d. 1573), the first writer of the Chronicle and the official annalist of the Brethren during their earlier period, begins his story with an elaborate historical introduction from the creation of man to the coming of the Protestant Reformation, which was partly borrowed from Sebastian Franck. Here we read again the same story of Peter Johannes.<sup>5</sup> Braitmichel expressly declares that he had been "a member of the *Fratricelli* around the year 1340, and that his bones were excavated and burned to powder by order of Clemens VI." This remark in the chronicle proves that Braitmichel was acquainted with our book and knew at least something about its background. It must have been known to the Hutterites at a rather early date, since Braitmichel's story does not continue beyond 1542.

<sup>5</sup> *Geschicht-Buch der Hutterischen Brüder*, ed. R. Wolkan (Vienna, 1929) 29.

A book of this character among the Anabaptists is certainly something unique, and the question arises: who is the author and what do we know about the origin and place of his work? It was not too difficult to discover that the author was Petrus Johannes Olivî (1248-98), a Franciscan monk, born in Southern France, who had come under the influence of Joachim de Floris (the apocalyptic visionary of the twelfth century), and who became the uncontested leader of the Spiritual Franciscans (not Fraticelli!), the followers of Saint Francis who enthusiastically espoused the principle of apostolic poverty. The radical position of Olivî and his followers led inevitably to a conflict with the worldly papacy, characterized by bitter attacks from either side.<sup>6</sup>

In 1295-96 Olivî wrote a *Postil on the Apocalypse*,<sup>7</sup> which remained unpublished during his lifetime. One year after his death, that is in 1299, the book became known to the clerics of the time, and due to its violent attacks upon the papacy, in which he called the Roman Church "a Church of Satan, Babylon, Synagogue of the Devil, Woman on the Beast, etc.," it was denounced with equal passion. Pope John XXII ordered a trial by the Inquisition, which lasted from 1318 to 1326 and ended with the official condemnation of the book and its author. In the meantime, however, the book had gained a high reputation among the Beguines of Southern France,<sup>8</sup> who with their own eyes were observing the deterioration of the papacy in Avignon, thus furnishing even stronger arguments in support of Olivî's charges. During the papal reign of John XXII (1316-34) in Avignon when the Spiritual Franciscans of Narbonne asked for the canonization of Olivî, the petition aroused violent opposition on the part of the Conventual Franciscans, the pro-papacy faction. Somehow John XXII connived an attack upon the grave of the man whom others venerated like a saint; his bones were excavated and burned, and all the devotional gifts which had been placed in the tomb were destroyed. This event occurred in 1318, not in 1340 as Braitmichel claimed.

The struggle of the Spiritual Franciscans and the Fraticelli

6 Ernst Benz, *Ecclesia Spiritualis* (Stuttgart, 1934). The life of Olivî is found on pages 256-64, his book 265-331, the characterization of the Roman Church as Antichrist, 307-14. See also the extensive article on "Olivî" in Herzog-Hauck, *Protestantische Real Enzyklopedie*, 3rd ed. and (condensed) in Schaff-Herzog's *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Further literature on Olivî: D. Douie, *The nature and effect of the heresy of the Fraticelli*, Manchester, 1932, 81-119; L. Jarraux, "Pierre Jean Olivî, sa vie, as doctrine," in *Etudes Franciscaines*, XLV, 1933, 129-53, 227-98, 513-29.

7 *Postil* (from Latin "post illa verba," after these words) meant originally simply a commentary on certain Scriptural passages, but very soon received the meaning of homiletic exposition of such passages, and still later that of a sermon collection.

8 On the Beguines compare the recent work by Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1954).

against the feudalized Catholic Church continued throughout the fourteenth century. In this struggle the monks calmly accepted martyrdom. Poverty and suffering rather than wealth and political power were deemed the true expression of discipleship and evangelical life. It was an uneven fight, however, and during the fifteenth century both non-conforming groups eventually disappeared. Thus any direct contact between these "left-wing" Franciscans and the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century is out of question.

At this point our positive knowledge ends. We do not know how the Anabaptists obtained Olivi's book on the Apocalypse, and we do not know who translated it from Latin into German. All sources of information fail at this point; no German translation seems to be known,<sup>9</sup> and yet it must have existed "underground." Thus we must rely upon conjectures: some indirect contacts between the Spirituals and the Anabaptists must have existed. Naturally, our thoughts turn at once to certain Waldensian groups (most likely in Upper Austria in the 1520's whose existence is known) who might have possessed and handed down this precious "anti-Roman" book. Since the Waldensians had been contemporaries with the Franciscan Spirituals, and like them were persecuted, mutual contacts between these two groups are most probable. Perhaps the German translation even originated with these German Waldensian circles who had received the Olivi *Postil* from some fugitive Franciscans during the fifteenth century. It is clear that the book had been popular with medieval sects both for its attacks upon a secularized papacy and for its apocalyptic orientation. It is therefore not unlikely that the book was given to some early Anabaptists (in Upper Austria, say in Steyr) by Waldensians (now about to pass from the scene), together with the little story concerning its author.<sup>10</sup> In this way an early acquaintance by the Anabaptists with the book and its tradition would be intelligible. No direct influence of any sort need be assumed.

There remains, however, one more question. What was the attraction of the book and with what kind of eyes was it read in the sixteenth century? If we follow the analysis of Ernst Benz,<sup>11</sup> the main theme of the book (officially a commentary on the Book of Revelation) was the struggle between the "church of the clerics" (belonging according to the vision of Joachim de Floris to the second period

<sup>9</sup> The first Latin print of Olivi's Commentary on the Apocalypse appeared in Amsterdam in 1700.

<sup>10</sup> It can immediately be observed that certain inaccuracies slipped into this tradition. John XXII (1316-34) is changed into Clemens VI (1342-52); the year 1318 into 1340 or even 1350; the Spiritual Franciscans are identified as Fraticelli. But otherwise the story of the profanation of the tomb is correct.

<sup>11</sup> See above note 6.

of God's revelation) and the "church of the Spirit" (the representative of the third and final period of the sacred history, as Joachim saw it). The decline of the church of the popes was to Olivi at the same time an indication that sacred history (history of redemption, *Heilsgeschichte*) was progressing. Only by persecution and martyrdom in complete apostolic poverty can true evangelical life prosper. Under such conditions an increased inwardness (*Verinnerlichung*) will usher in the third age (or aeon) of the world, the "age of the Spirit." In this Joachimitic picture the Roman Church assumes more and more the character of the Antichrist. Rome is Babylon, the Synagogue of the Devil, etc. Benz<sup>12</sup> calls this vision a typical "theology of the sects," and he says that the Spiritual Franciscans with their theology of history denied to Rome (actually then Avignon) any justification for existence in the ongoing drama of sacred history.<sup>13</sup> Thus Olivi's *Postil* became perhaps the strongest expression of the Franciscan spiritualism and gave cause to the rise of a church of purely "spiritual" character. This explains also how and why the book gained almost canonical character with these sectarian groups of the later Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup>

But Anabaptism was in no way medieval, and only in a very small way was it apocalyptic. Truly enough, the Anabaptists often speak "of these last and dangerous times," and somehow expect the imminence of the kingdom of God. They also emphasized strongly the idea of the "two kingdoms," namely, that of God (to which one belongs after baptism) and that of Satan (to which belongs all the unregenerated world). But apocalyptic speculations almost never entered Anabaptist thinking, except perhaps for the brief period of Melchior Hofmann's activities in the 1530's. What then was the appeal of the book which enabled it to persist through four centuries? Was it its call to a life of poverty and suffering, as befitting true disciples? Perhaps; but it does not seem the major emphasis of the book. The only answer available then is the fact that the book stigmatized the Roman Church as the incarnation of the Antichrist. In other words, it was the anti-Roman tendencies, presented not by Luther or by Zwingli but by suffering brethren in the Spirit, which seem to have made this book a favorite reader among the Brethren.

In this conjecture we are supported by the following observation. Around 1536 the well-known Hutterite brother, Ulrich Stadler

<sup>12</sup> Benz, *op. cit.*, 308.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I. c., 405.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Dante (d. 1321) was also strongly influenced in his philosophy of history and in his outlook on church politics by Olivi's book on the Apocalypse. Of course Dante was always anti-papal, a genuine "Ghibelline" of his time.

(a Tirolean by birth), wrote a popular tract concerning the community of the Saints (*Von der Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*), found in many Hutterite codices. Here we find strong reminiscences of the book of Olivi; or should we rather say that in some passages we recognize such reminiscences? In his tract Stadler calls the pope "the Babylonian whore who sits on the dragon with the seven heads, the synagogue of the living devil, etc."<sup>15</sup> Of course, this brief quotation need not prove anything, but since expressions of this kind are otherwise extremely rare in Hutterite writings, it appears at least possible that Stadler remembered Olivi's book and outlook while writing his own tract. We are not likely to go far astray if we assume that around 1530 this book was known to many Anabaptists, at least in the Austrian area. No more than this, however, can rightfully be claimed at this stage of Anabaptist research. There is very little basis for further speculation as to other contacts with earlier groups and influences by them; also as to whether the book was known to Anabaptist groups outside Austria. Enticing though it appears we yet have no sufficient basis for fully accepting the continuity thesis of either Keller or Ritschl. One swallow does not make a summer.

<sup>15</sup> L. Müller, *Glaubenszeugnisse Oberdeutscher Taufgesinnter* (Leipzig, 1938) 225; Rudolf Wolkan, *Die Hutterer* (Vienna, 1918) 159 f.



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