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# Fanaticism as a Theological Category in the Lutheran Confessions

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In view of the widespread activity of various “Spirit” movements in contemporary Christianity, a topic such as this seems more than timely. By “fanaticism as a confessional category” *Schwärmerei* is intended, of course, but apparently this familiar term was deemed too informal for use in the Confessions, and it does not appear.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the adjective “fanatical” is employed in the Apology to describe the views of the Anabaptists (“contra impias et fanaticas opiniones Anabaptistarum”; IX, 53), as well as other “fanatical spirits” (“fanatici spiritus”; XXI, 43). Alternative names for such people include *Rottengeister* (“rabble-spirits”), *sectarii* (Smalcald Articles, III, 3), and especially *Enthusiastae* (III, 8, *et passim*). Both Luther and the formulators of the Book of Concord, however, tended to make the enthusiast category even more elastic and comprehensive than was perhaps useful. Luther could easily daub as *Schwärmer* not merely such obvious sorts as the Zwickau prophets, Müntzer, Carlstadt, or the Anabaptists, but, later on, even such Sacramentarians as Zwingli — in effect, nearly any of the Protestants outside the Lutheran Reformation. Similarly, the Formula of Concord uses the term “fanatics” even for such Swiss reformers as Theodore Beza (Solid Declaration, VII, 67).

This essay, however, will not incorporate so broad a definition. Instead, “fanaticism” or “enthusiasm” will be limited strictly to the Formula of Concord’s own brilliantly concise definition: “Enthusiasts we call those who expect the heavenly illumination of the Spirit [“coelestes revelationes” = “celestial revelations”] without the preaching of God’s Word” (Epitome, II, 13).

## Historical Background

A brief survey of the historical roots of sixteenth-century enthusiasm is most necessary to an understanding of the Lutheran encounter with it. Both critical minds and critical times helped set the stage for the “Spirit” movements in the Reformation Era. The minds included those of the late Medieval mystics, like Meister Eckhardt, John Tauler, and others, who, in pressing for direct contact, if not “union,” with God, blazed the theological trail which could bypass both priests and sacraments in an interior spirituality. The implications of this flight from externals were helpful in preparing an antihierarchical climate which assisted the later Reformation. But the mystics would also be

hailed as spiritual forbears by the enthusiasts who would challenge the Lutheran Reformation.

Even more important, however, were the *times*. The tumultuous political changes attending the early sixteenth century are familiar enough from the opening chapters of any text on the Reformation Era and need not be discussed here. But when this unrest was coupled with the realization that exactly one millenium and a half had elapsed since the birth of Christ, the Hal Lindseys of that day were already vociferously at work, making apocalyptic predictions of the end, much as today — in approaching the bimillennial milestone — similar prognostications are heard. With Christ's imminent return expected, how did Christians behave? The stolid, unflappable Luthers, of course, merely planted their apple trees, while the more skittish Melanchthons hauled out their astrology charts. But commoners, peasants, sensitive sorts, marginal minds, theological and religious upheavals — were obvious tinder for the enthusiasts and their message. And a history of "Spirit" movements shows a very convincing pattern, namely, that times of extreme crisis and stress have always proven fertile breeding grounds for enthusiasm and such manifestations as glossolalia, particularly when the societal upheavals are also associated with suspected "end times."

Against this background, that Luther and the reformers should have had problems with enthusiasts was quite predictable, especially also in view of Wittenberg's own successful challenge to Rome, which "opened the floodgates for private and new interpretations of Christianity," as the papists claimed and some of the enthusiasts echoed. It was late in 1521, while Luther was in hiding as Junker Georg at the Wartburg, that the three Zwickau Prophets made their debut in Wittenburg. On intimate terms with the Almighty, they jettisoned the Bible and relied instead on the "Spirit." Infant baptism was false, they insisted, and it was time for a millennial erection of the kingdom of God on earth through the slaughter of the ungodly. So the "Spirit" told them. It was Wittenberg's first brush with this sort of pure enthusiasm. Zwilling and Carlstadt, of course, were already hard at work in their iconoclastic crusade, but this was hardly done on the basis of such *direct pipeline* information from God, as the Zwickau prophets boasted. Melanchthon almost played Tertullian to their Montanus. He was very nearly taken in by them, his jaw sagging open and wondering if indeed the age of prophecy was *not* past. "I can hardly tell you how deeply I am moved," he wrote to Elector Frederick the Wise, and he meant this in a positive sense. Fortunately, his wits had not forsaken him entirely, for he added,

“We must beware lest we resist the Spirit of God . . . but also lest we be possessed of the devil.” Luther would have to decide. And, sight unseen, and merely from Melanchthon’s letters, the great Reformer drew the accurate conclusion that they must be false prophets: “When these men speak of sweetness and of being transported to the third heaven, do not believe them. Divine majesty does not speak directly to men.”

But this and the other Wittenberg disorders in Luther’s absence necessitated his famous return from the Wartburg. Effectively, it was the beginning of the second front, the battle he had to wage for the rest of his life against the left wing of the Reformation, the radical approach which set the Spirit in opposition to Scripture or any other external means or aid, ranging from the Lord’s Supper and Baptism to music, art, and stained glass. The Spirit needed none of this, the enthusiasts insisted. They would now be led directly by God as Spirit-filled individuals, whether clergy or laity, to restore the primitive Christian church.

As if Zwickau had not done enough by bestowing its “Heavenly Prophets” on the Reformation Era, it now also launched Thomas Müntzer. While the “prophets” had rejected only infant baptism, Müntzer did away with the sacrament altogether, and the Bible too, for that matter, unless interpreted by the new Elijah of that era — himself. The motto for him as for so many enthusiasts was a misinterpreted II Corinthians 3:6: “The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” All externals had tertiary significance for him, since the internal experience of the Spirit was primary and normative, and the Spirit’s instructions called for the new kingdom of saints on earth — through slaughter of the ungodly, if necessary. This viewpoint was, of course, repugnant to Luther and his associates not only because of the sheer subjectivism in Müntzer’s claims (deniable even if “he had swallowed the Holy Ghost, feathers and all,” as Luther put it), but also because of Müntzer’s devastating application of this total enthusiasm at Alstedt, Mülhausen, and elsewhere. While Müntzer fell at Frankenhausen, his spirit would live on with the Anabaptist uprising at Münster in 1534, where another direct “revelation” from God told the saints to establish their New Jerusalem — with all its attendant bloodshed.

Not that all Anabaptists or, indeed, all enthusiasts or “spiritualists” were so bloody. A pleasant exception was the mild-mannered Christian gentleman named Caspar Schwenckfeld, the least radical theologian of the Radical Reformation, the furthest right of the left wing, the least enthusiastic of the enthusiasts. But his theology, too, posited a basic dualism between Word and

Spirit which diminished the importance of all externals, including church worship and the sacraments. And even though his works are studded with Scripture references, his claim for additional *direct revelation* placed him squarely among the enthusiasts, so far as Luther was concerned, and occasioned the Reformer's famous misspellings of his name as "Schweinsfeld," "Blindfeld," or "Stenkfeld."

From purely psychological considerations, the great wonder of it all is that Martin Luther himself never claimed special revelations of any kind. I say "wonder," because Luther seems to have had more than enough bouts with the devil, even to the point of conversing with him at bedtime. If such negative "revelation," why not an — at least imagined — positive counterpart? At many times in his life, he could have used a positive, personal encouragement from the Spirit in the manner of Paul's experience in Corinth. But from his monastery days on, whenever he was advised to seek such inner communion or cast about for such direct revelation, he found only utter darkness. And thank God for that! Because this situation prevented a hopeless subjectivization of the faith. Instead, it drove Luther back to *historic* revelation rather than an imagined contemporary counterpart, to the *objective, hard* evidence of the word. Scripture was all the revelation he would ever need — hence the quintessential objection of Luther and the other Lutheran reformers to enthusiasm. As Bainton has well observed, the menace of the enthusiasts, for Luther, was that they "destroyed the uniqueness of Christian revelation in the past by elevation of revelation in the present."<sup>2</sup>

### Confessional Strictures Against Enthusiasm

Already in the Augsburg Confession, and early on in that document in Article V, "Of the Ministry," comes one of the first condemnations:

They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparation and works.

In the Large Catechism, Luther shows the results of such Wordless spirituality in his discussion of the Second Commandment:

But the greatest abuse [of the Second Commandment] occurs in spiritual matters, which pertain to the conscience, when false preachers rise up and offer their lying vanities as God's word.<sup>3</sup>

One of the *negativa* in the Formula of Concord is most succinct in this connection:

Also, we reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts ["ancient and modern Enthusiasts" in SD, II, 4], who

imagine that God without means, without the hearing of God's Word, also without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them. (Enthusiasts we call those who expect the heavenly illumination of the Spirit without the preaching of God's Word.)<sup>4</sup>

But the *locus classicus*, in this respect, would be Luther's own words in the Smalcald Articles. With what clever breadth Luther applies the term "enthusiasts" to include Adam, Eve, the Pope, and even Mohammed:

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. For [indeed] the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.

All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. Just as also our enthusiasts [at the present day] condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but [first] through their writings and words he must come. Why [then] do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit Himself comes to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that He has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures? But of these matters there is not time to dispute at greater length; we have elsewhere sufficiently urged this subject.

For even those who believe before Baptism, or become believing in Baptism, believe through the preceding outward Word, as the adults, who have come to reason, must first

have heard: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, even though they are at first unbelieving, and receive the Spirit and Baptism ten years afterwards. Cornelius, Acts 10, 1 ff., had heard long before among the Jews of the coming Messiah, through whom he was righteous before God, and in such faith his prayers and alms were acceptable to God (as Luke calls him devout and God-fearing), and without such preceding Word and hearing could not have believed or been righteous . . .

In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments. For God wished to appear even to Moses through the burning bush and spoken Word; and no prophet, neither Elijah nor Elisha, received the Spirit without the Ten Commandments [or spoken Word]. Neither was John the Baptist conceived without the preceding word of Gabriel, nor did he leap in his mother's womb without the voice of Mary. And Peter says, 2 Ep. 1, 21: The prophecy came not by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Without the outward Word, however, they were not holy, much less would the Holy Ghost have moved them to speak when they still were unholy [or profane]; for they were holy, says he, since the Holy Ghost spake through them.<sup>5</sup>

### Confessional Affirmations

We can, indeed, rejoice — in this quadricentennial of the Book of Concord — that the Lutheran Confessions have so clear and sensible — and Scriptural — an approach to the problem of how divine revelation is identified, received, guaranteed, and appropriated, and where the Spirit can truly be found or finds us. In the final analysis, the enthusiast had — and has — only his *private* impressions, projections, imaginings, or whatever, as evidences of claimed divine revelation or the work of the Spirit. These claims, *totally subjective* in nature, cannot be tested by any external means, unless, of course, they run clearly contrary to Scripture, at which point they may at least be proven false. The Confessions, on the other hand, anchoring the work of the Spirit to the means of

grace — Word and Sacrament — present a *clear, objective* forum for the Spirit's activity to which all Christians can confidently relate. The famous cry, "The Holy Spirit needs no *vehiculum*," may indeed be true from the *divine* perspective in the sense that God requires nothing else than Himself. The point of the Lutheran confessions, however, is that while the Spirit may not need a *vehiculum*, human beings evidently do in the sense that their internal experience of the Spirit's work must be occasioned by the external channels of divine grace. We do have the handicap of being quite an external sort of being.

Following, then, are some of the prime confessional affirmations on this theme, beginning with a very familiar phrase from the Small Catechism:

. . . I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. [That is another way of saying, "Climbing the mystic ladder for special theophanies and revelations is a dubious enterprise, at best!"] But the Holy Ghost has called me *by the Gospel*, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith . . .<sup>6</sup>

The phrase, "by the Gospel," of course, is determinative. The Word — not the vagaries of human experience or sensation — is the guarantee of divine revelation and all subsequent activity of the Spirit. We note that emphasis in the fuller explanation of the Third Article in the Large Catechism. "Durch das Wort," "per Verbum" ("through the Word"), becomes almost a refrain:

This, now, is the article which must ever be and remain in operation. For creation we have received; redemption, too, is finished. But the Holy Ghost carries on His work without ceasing to the last day. And for that reason He has appointed a congregation upon earth by which He speaks and does everything . . . Therefore we believe in Him who *through the Word* daily brings us into the fellowship of this Christian church, and *through the same Word* and the forgiveness of sins bestows, increases and strengthens faith, in order that when He has accomplished it all, and we abide therein, and die to the world and to all evil, He may finally make us perfectly and forever holy; which now we expect in faith *through the Word*.<sup>7</sup>

So powerful is the Word, in the Lutheran Confessions, that it actually effectuates the sacraments themselves, or makes the sacraments sacraments. Take Baptism, for example:

. . . If the Word is separated from it [the water], the water is



the same as that with which the servant cooks, and may indeed be called a bather's baptism.<sup>8</sup>

Luther had a strong appreciation for the fact that any inner spiritual experience must arrive through the quite *external* threshold of *sense experience*. He would have sympathized with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and the *tabula rasa* school, not with Descartes and the Continental rationalists of the Enlightenment. Accordingly, the church need not wonder that God *does* resort to external means to contact us:

... Now, they [enthusiasts, *et al.*] are so mad as to separate faith and that to which faith clings and is bound, though it be something external. Yea, it shall and *must be something external, that it may be apprehended by the senses, and understood and thereby be brought into the heart*, as indeed the entire Gospel is an external, verbal preaching. In short, what God does and works in us He proposes to work through such external ordinances.<sup>9</sup>

While this is a very realistic view of man, is it also Scriptural? Unquestionably. In the article on free will in the Formula of Concord, we read the following:

... God the Holy Ghost, however, does not effect conversion without means, but uses for this purpose the preaching and hearing of God's Word, as it is written, Rom. 1, 16: *The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes*. Also Rom. 10, 17: *Faith comes by hearing the Word of God*, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, once the Spirit has used His means to cross over the external threshold into our hearts, do we then finally *sense* His activity directly or sustain some special spiritual experience? Both Scripture and the Confessions uphold, of course, the presence of such fruits of the Spirit in our hearts as faith, hope, love, and the other Christian virtues, even as their presence there is also reflected in the Christian life. But even here we need not seek any extraordinary or overpowering experiences of being touched by the Spirit:

... When the Word of God is preached purely and truly . . . and men listen attentively and earnestly and meditate upon it, God is certainly present with His grace, and grants . . . what otherwise man can neither accept nor give from his own powers. For concerning the presence, operation, and gifts of the Holy Ghost we should not and cannot always judge *ex sensu* [from feeling] as to how and when they are experienced in the heart . . . because they are often covered and occur in great weakness . . . .<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is how the Lutheran confessions deal with enthusiasm as a theological category. While Luther and the other reformers might have been surprised, if not shocked, by the unanticipated challenge from the Radical Reformation once the fracture with Rome had yawned open, they met this challenge with a theological response that was Scriptural, solid, credible, extremely objective, and a masterpiece of psychology to boot. Thank God for the means of grace!

#### Footnotes

1. A single reference to *Schwärmerei* surfaces at FC-SD VII, 33 and two references to *Schwärmergeister* at Ap. XXI, 43 and LC IV, 61; *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), pp. 983, 357, 747. All references to the Lutheran Confessions are from this edition.
2. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), p. 261.
3. LC I, 54.
4. FC-Ep. II, 13.
5. SA III, 8, 3-13.
6. SC II, 6.
7. LC II, 61 f.; italics mine.
8. LC IV, 22.
9. LC IV, 30; italics mine.
10. FC-Ep. II, 4 f.
11. FC-SD II, 55 f.