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EARLY PROTESTANTISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

VERONICA DU FEU

The idea of having a colloquium devoted to Early Protestantism in Eastern Europe was mooted in our Medieval Study Group a long time ago, and it was taken up by Anne Pennington who laid initial plans. Our organizing this meeting, therefore, was really the Group's own tribute to her memory.

That, as medievalists, we should be concerned with Protestantism, would seem a contradiction in Western European terms but the definition of 'medieval' in connection with Eastern Europe is different as we know. For Eastern Europe the reference of the term 'medieval' is at once elastic and precise, in that for any given region one can pinpoint a critical period or even date for the beginning of 'modern' times, but this date will vary wildly over the area as a whole; for some regions not much later than for parts of Western Europe, for others as late as the 18th century. Therefore our interests chronologically have a long span and all the important Protestant movements come within our purview.

As regards the definition of Protestantism, we had taken it in its widest sense as 'religion of protest' for this is what really seems to be the thread that unites early Protestants in Eastern Europe; or if not of protest, then a religion of a more or less tolerated minority except for a short time in Poland and Hungary.

The earliest religious protesters against official Christianity in Eastern Europe were the Bogomils of Bulgaria, who together with the Church of Bosnia (Bogomil or not) are all part of the great Cathar heresy, so infamously suppressed in 13th century Occitania. JEAN DUVERNOY in his work on the Cathars (1979) places Bulgarian Bogomilism firmly in the Manichean line as far as ascendants go; as for its descendants, he notes that there were double sects, i.e. with 'pures' and ordinary adherents, as early as the middle of the 12th century, in Cologne, a whole generation before the beginning of the Waldensian movement. From which we might conclude that the roots of early Protestantism in the West go back via the Bogomils to the Manicheans. Such deep roots are accepted by Smithson (1935); writing of the Anabaptists and their possible links with the

Paulicians he says: "When we come to the 12th century, the matter of direct connection assumes a different aspect for there is no lack of proof that for fully four centuries before the Reformation there were bodies of Christians under various names, stigmatized by the Roman Catholic Church as heretics, who quietly, yet persistently carried on their worship in the very centres where Anabaptism later flourished at its best." It is this thread that brings us to our immediate subject, because the Bohemian Brethren who followed the ideas of Peter Waldo of Lyons and of the Anabaptists and used the same Catechism as the latter, were in Bohemia and Moravia as a result of the Anabaptists having been chased out of the Tyrol. These Bohemian Brethren prepared the ground for the Hussites of the 14th and 15th centuries.

HUS, however, derived his immediate inspiration from the ideas of WYCLIFFE and this is the point at which our Colloquium began, chronologically speaking, with Dr. ANN HUDSON on 'The Transmission of Wycliffite Texts to Bohemia'. Despite the strength of early Protestantism in Bohemia, persecution effectively stopped its spread in Eastern Europe and we have to wait for another century and LUTHER before we find the Reform there. First of all in the Baltic States as Professor RAINER ECKERT describes in his paper on 'Martin Luther and Early Writings in the Baltic Languages' Albert of Brandenburg, the Grandmaster of the Teutonic Order with all the fervour of the newly converted, secularized the Order, called himself Duke of Prussia and, no less peremptorily, turned the whole country to Protestantism virtually overnight, in 1525. It is no surprise then to find that the Duke's printing presses in Königsberg were turning out Polish as well as German language pamphlets to add to the so-called 'Saxon books' which had been coming in to Danzig as early as 1518 (FOX, 1950). The importance of the Reform for the form and content of writing in Poland was the subject of the papers of Professors PELC, TAZBIR and SZYMCZAK; yet despite its enormous cultural impact, the Counter Reformation here ensured the final triumph of Catholicism, perhaps indeed because 'Protestantism was unable to make its political case' (Hillerbrand, 1970).

The role of Protestantism in Orthodox lands is more problematic. Professor SJOBERG talked of Karelia and Ingermanland where there was, in the 17th century, a complicated web of loyalties to Lutheran, Uniate and Orthodox by a Finnic and Belorussian population. In the extreme south of

the Orthodox region, on the frontiers with the Ottoman Empire, we find Bankoś of Moldavia, who, having seized the throne in 1561, succeeded in converting many of his subjects to Lutheranism (which he had adopted in Wittenberg) and in translating some religious works into Rumanian. By the beginning of the 17th century the majority of Hungarians were Protestants - whether Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist or Antitrinitarian, but the strength of the movement came from the large colonies of Saxons, as the German settlers were called, in Transylvania; they were allowed a freedom of practise and publication unique in South and South-East Europe thanks to the tolerance of their rulers, the Ottoman Turks. Once the Hapsburgs were in a position to weaken the hold of the Turks in that area the pressure on the Catholics amounted to persecution though it may well be that the social structure of the Protestant Churches was a factor in the nationalist risings in the 19th century. As far as Muscovy was concerned, Dr. HOWLETT defends the view that the close relation between Church and State left no room for the Reform. But it is nice to speculate what would have been the success of Protestantism there, had the liturgical language been as remote from Russian as Latin was from German. This was an important factor in Moldavia. Certainly the freedom of worship and liturgy allowed by Ivan the Terrible to Protestants as opposed to Catholics in the Baltic lands, the freedom of action of the Sloboda that we heard about from Professor KEIPERT and which are implicit in the writing of 'Abecedaria' such as the 'Bukvar' described by Dr. ROBERTS, would point to the conclusion that Protestantism might well have been tolerated had the need for change been widely felt in the 16th century. As it is when the modest reform did come, it was in the 17th century by which time attitudes had hardened and the fact that it was officially backed meant it was opposed by certain elements of the rank and file, the Old Believers, whom Professor LUR'E refers to in the paper that he sent as his contribution.

The religious results of Protestantism in Eastern Europe were, in the long run, limited; the cultural effects, that came up time and again in our discussions, especially in relation to the West Slavs and the Baltic States, as well as Hungary and Slovenia, were invaluable and enduring. And it is by this yardstick that we have to measure the importance of

4 Protestantism in Eastern Europe.

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NB. The contribution by Jana Howlett referred to on p. 4 above was not received in time to be included in this volume.