

Toward a Definition of “Radical Reformation” The Case of Theophrastus Paracelsus

KIRK ROSS

The classical Reformations of the sixteenth century are inherently well-defined historical movements. The Magisterial Reformations and the Counter Reformation are self-defining because they are confessional. One is a Lutheran if one subscribes to the Augsburg Confession; one is Anglican if one subscribes to the Book of Common Prayer, and so on. Members of these movements are relatively easy to categorize because they explicitly identify themselves with one movement or another. But the Radical Reformation is a different story. Is the Radical Reformation an intellectual, i.e. confessional, movement? Is it a social movement espousing a utopian proto-socialism? Or does it simply consist of all the religious figures of the sixteenth century who do not fit into any of the other Reformations?

Those who argue for an intellectual interpretation of the Radical Reformation normally organize the movement into a paradigm of ideas and doctrines. One of the earliest attempts to organize this movement historically was made by Heinhold Fast.¹ He divided the Radicals into Anabaptists, Anti-trinitarians, Enthusiasts, and Spiritualists. G.H. Williams leads the discussion with his well-known division of the Radicals into Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Evangelical Rationalists.² These paradigms, based on intellectual confessions, have great appeal for understanding the relationships and commonalities of many different groups. Most of these groups are

¹ Heinhold Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*. Bremen: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1962

² G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992.

fairly simple to include in the Radical Reformation. Any individual who subscribes to an explicit statement of faith other than one of those of the classical Reformations mentioned above can immediately be included in one of these classifications and thus fits the definition of a Radical Reformer. But this approach also has its problems. Under confessional paradigms such as these, groups and individuals who feel compelled to abandon the very concept of confessionality may be excluded. Most obviously, this is a problem with many of the Spiritualists. Many of them explicitly rejected membership in any sort of organized body, claiming that the true church is beyond human conventions. Many saw themselves purely as individuals, having no institutional relationship to other Christians. Such an explicit rejection of association makes their inclusion as members of an historical movement based on doctrinal affiliation difficult to establish. Nonetheless, their deep involvement with the religious life of the time period tends to justify their inclusion among the movement.

There are also social interpretations of the Reformation Age. This type of interpretation emphasizes the social origins of many of the Radicals and their social concerns. Under such a paradigm, explicit religious affiliations are primarily avenues by which individuals express their dissatisfaction with the existing social order. This approach highlights the emphasis that many Radicals put upon such ideas as social justice, the plight of the poor, or in more extreme cases, community of property. It also gives serious consideration to the social origins of the Radicals. This explanation can even be expanded to describe the Radical Reformation as a proto-socialist movement.³ This interpretation does a fine job of explaining the actions of many Radicals — as opposed to merely categorizing their ideas like an intellectual paradigm does. One of the great commonalities of several divergent strands of the Radical Reformation is their emphasis on ethical living. Such behavioral norms can be explained as a response to the abuses of the church. But such an interpretation also has its problems. Most obviously, not all Radicals come from the lower classes of society or had a historically significant reason to be dissatisfied with their social situation. Many Radicals were successful professionals, e.g. Servetus, or clergy with secure job prospects,

³ Adolf Laube, "Radicalism as a Research Problem in the History of Early Reformation," in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand. Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988.

e.g. Blaurock. This approach also tends to look askance at explicit statements made by religious figures. For example, many of the Radical movements had detailed theological treatises defending their positions on intellectual grounds. A social interpretation tends to discount such defenses and puts more emphases on underlying causes such as social origin or previous experience as explanations for their ardent confessions of faith.

There is one last way to look at the Radical Reformation. Perhaps it merely consists of everyone left over once the classical Reformations are accounted for. While such an interpretation certainly manages to include the great diversity in the Radical Reformation, it leaves rather something to be desired in the way of historical analysis. And it ignores the great number of commonalities which characterizes the entire movement. It also fails to establish any internal coherence for an age that was very dynamic and growing. All three of these attempts at defining the term Radical Reformation serve two overarching purposes. The first, and most significant, is to work toward an historical understanding of this very important element of sixteenth century European history. By organizing and analyzing the Radical Reformation, we can gain a greater understanding of the historical causes and forces that contributed to its growth and development. But the second purpose, perhaps a bit more banal but nonetheless important, is simply to determine who belongs in the category of Radical Reformers. Who was a radical and who was not? This second question is the one which will be looked at here.

There are numerous groups and individuals who hover at the fringes of the Radical Reformation. The English Puritans are a good example. They clearly do not fall within the parameters of the classical Reformations. They arise later than, they are not national in scope like, and they are much more congregational in governance than the Magisterial Reformation. However, they certainly attempt to control the political life of the community. In that sense, they are indeed magisterial. The *Unitas Fratrum* in Bohemia is another example. This group was in constant conflict with the medieval Catholic Church and lived a life separate from it for centuries. On the other hand, this group existed well before the Radical Reformation. It is generally more militant than and is more national in character than most of the Radical movements. It maintains its individuality in the face of the Radical movement in the sixteenth century. Groups such as these stretch the definition of "Radical Reformation" and prove difficult to place definitively among the Radicals.

The cases of these fringe groups beg a sharper examination of the term "Radical Reformation." Who belongs to such a movement and who does not? Throughout the various interpretations of this movement, there are three characteristics of the Radical Reformation which are common to all. These three traits will form the basis of this discussion. The first common trait is the fact of unorthodox doctrine. The second is the case of unorthodox ecclesiology. The third is the common concern with some version of social justice. Regardless of how one chooses to explain the origin of these characteristics, they still serve to describe and perhaps define the movement. A closer examination of one particular case can perhaps help to illuminate more clearly where the ambiguities at the extremes of these definitions of Radical Reformation are. Such a demonstration can also remind us of the great diversity in this historical movement and also remind us that historical categorization is a retroactive attempt to understand the past which should not hinder our appreciation of the full spectrum of reality. This paper will not attempt to produce an inflexible, absolute definition of the term Radical Reformation. Instead, it will try to show where the fuzzy areas between categories are and what they may mean to an understanding of this movement.

This study will focus on the case of one man — Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, known as Paracelsus. Paracelsus is best remembered in history as a doctor and scientist. His influence is claimed by numerous scientific sub-disciplines, most of which adopted some part of his teachings without reference to his entire corpus of thought. Most of the schools of thought pointed to his emphasis on empirical observation, discussed below. In this sense, he is seen as one of the key figures in alchemy's transformation into modern chemistry.

Paracelsus was born in the city of St. Gallen in Switzerland around 1493. As a child, he moved with his family to Villach, Carinthia in Austria where his father was the town doctor. He received his childhood education in local church and monastery schools. After he earned his medical degree at Ferrara early in the sixteenth century, Paracelsus spent the next several years traveling the length and breadth of Europe. From his father, Paracelsus had learned the value of folk medicine and so spent these wandering years searching for medical knowledge wherever he could find it — from local healers, gypsies, or old women.

During these travels, he developed the basic premises that would guide the rest of his career. First, he realized his calling from God to be a doctor to the poor — a calling that eventually evolved into a self-proclaimed

apostleship. Second, Paracelsus became increasingly opposed to the value of traditional medical learning. He developed the opinion that most doctors spent their time discussing theory and seldom actually examined patients with real problems in order to help them. And third, perhaps most important to this discussion, Paracelsus became convinced of the absolute need for empirical observation in order to learn true medicine. Such an approach initially makes Paracelsus sound like a fore-runner of the Enlightenment — a man well ahead of his time. Indeed, this tenet of his philosophy is what makes him such an appealing progenitor for several scientific schools. But Paracelsus demanded empirical observation in a very medieval sense.⁴ For instance, he accepted it as a given that people were subject to curses from others, that there were elves and fairies in the forests, that there were sprites in rivers and lakes, etc. So his *Weltanschauung* had to explain those types of observations as opposed to what we might consider empirical facts.

In order to truly understand the human body and to be able to heal it, Paracelsus felt it necessary to understand the entire cosmos and man's place in it. That approach leads to his investigations of theology which concern this topic. In order to understand the cosmos or man's place in it, it is obviously necessary to understand the creator and most important figure in that cosmos. His investigations resulted in some unorthodox views that make him difficult to classify as a religious thinker. The question of Paracelsus' place in the spectrum of the Radical Reformation has been raised by several eminent scholars in the field. For example, G.H. Williams can say no more than that Paracelsus "seems to belong to our narrative."⁵ And Hartmuth Rudolph, in a collection of biographical sketches of several prominent Radicals, admits that "it is more difficult to justify the inclusion of Paracelsus in this series of radical Reformers than any of the others."⁶ There are several aspects of Paracelsus' life and works which make him difficult to place. Most explicitly, at his death, Paracelsus was still a member of the Catholic Church. He received the full rites of the church and was buried in a Catholic cemetery. And in his writings, he explicitly denied any association with various Anabaptist groups. On the other hand, his involvement with the three characteristics of the Radical Reformation that were mentioned above was

⁴ Alexandre Koyré, "Paracelsus," in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*. ed. Steven E. Ozment. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.

⁵ G.H. Williams, 306.

⁶ Hartmuth Rudolph, "Theophrastus von Hohenheim (Paracelsus): Physician and Apostle of the New Creation," in *Profiles of Radical Reformers*. ed. Hans-Jürgen Goertz. Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1982.

extensive. It is the goal of this study that a brief examination of Paracelsus' relationship to the Radical Reformation will help to identify more exactly the boundaries and commonalities of the Radical Reformation.

Three aspects of Paracelsus' thought will be briefly discussed — his unorthodox doctrinal stances, his ecclesiology, and his social concerns. One of the most explicit, perhaps definitional, features of the Radical Reformation was its unorthodox doctrinal stances. As a general description, Paracelsus fits this definition without argument. His theology was without question extremely unorthodox. The problem is that his theology was unlike that of any other recognizable group in Christendom. It was extremely individual. His Christology is one of his most identifying marks. He remained, in the broadest sense, a trinitarian. But Paracelsus had a very complex but detailed view of cosmology that ended up excluding the possibility for him that Christ could have had human flesh or even had anything to do with human flesh. So he subscribed to a celestial flesh theory reminiscent of Servetus.⁷ He rejected the two natures formulation of Christ, arguing that human flesh suffering on the cross would not be sufficient for the salvation of human flesh.⁸ Thus Christ must have suffered in celestial flesh on the cross. "Alone must divine flesh and divine blood have suffered, and not mortal flesh and blood."⁹ Paracelsus also claimed that Christ and the Holy Spirit were subjected to the Father in a subordinationist trinitarianism.¹⁰ Obviously such a formulation fell outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

But even more distinctive is Paracelsus' Mariology which is inseparable from his Christology. Paracelsus considered it unthinkable that Christ's celestial flesh was ever in any sort of association with human flesh. Thus Mary could not have been human. But Paracelsus takes it one step further. Christ's celestial flesh could only be in union in the womb with similar flesh. Thus Mary must have had the same celestial flesh as Christ and God, i.e. she was divine. In Paracelsus' formulation, Mary was also part of God.¹¹ This theology was totally unheard of even among the most devout Marianists. According to Paracelsus, Mary was the feminine aspect of God that completed the process of creation, "a characteristic without which God is

⁷G.H. Williams, 499-500.

⁸Ute Gause, *Paracelsus: Genese und Entfaltung seiner frühen Theologie*, 17-21. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993.

⁹Paracelsus, quoted by Ute Gause, 17. "allein das göttlich fleisch und das göttlich blut und kein tödlichs fleisch und blut hat darumb müessen leiden."

¹⁰Ute Gause, 13.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 26.

unthinkable for Paracelsus.”¹² The Father was the creator, but every masculine entity needs a feminine equivalent in order to be productive. Thus Christ proceeds from the union of God’s masculine aspect and his feminine aspect. Paracelsus walks a very fine line between a trinity and a quaternity. He argues that Mary is subsumed in God, but he also argues that she can intercede with God for humans.

Paracelsus’ ecclesiology is another area that places him in the gray area between the several Reformations. In this regard, Paracelsus was “spiritually closer to Schwenkfeld and to such spiritualizing Anabaptists as Entfelder and Bänderlin.”¹³ For him, the church is a totally internal affair that should have no external trappings. “Christ has washed everything away. Thus there is no more external sign of justification.”¹⁴ He refers to the institutional church as a *Mauerkirche*, or a church built simply of walls. Paracelsus heaps vitriolic attacks on the abuses practiced by the church hierarchy. “Paracelsus’ polemic against the old Roman Catholic Church is in many points more extreme than that of the Reformers.”¹⁵ He argues that they have no idea what true Christianity means, and they use their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. Nor does he reserve his abuse for the Catholic Church. While feeling initial sympathy with Lutheran reforms, he quickly turns against the new movement since it began to perpetrate the same crimes as the older church. For Paracelsus, Christianity is a personal affair that draws a Christian into fellowship with God on a mystical level. “His entire anthropology shows that, for him, faith is a matter for the individual.”¹⁶ He rejects all the trappings of the Church except for communion, and even that he redefines.¹⁷ Such mystical views of the Christian Church very nearly parallel several elements of the Radical Reformation.

The last aspect of Paracelsus’ work to be discussed is his concern with social justice, very common among the Radicals. Paracelsus considered it

¹² *Ibid.*, 14, “Sie ist eine Eigenschaft, ohne die Gott für Paracelsus undenkbar ist.”

¹³ G.H. Williams, 1238.

¹⁴ Heinz Dopsch, *Paracelsus (1493-1541): keines andern Knecht*. 376 - “Christus hat alles abgewaschen. So gibt es keine Außensicht von Gerechtigkeit mehr.”

¹⁵ Heinz Dopsch, *Paracelsus und Salzburg: Vorträge bei den internationalen Kongressen in Salzburg und Badgastein anlässlich des Paracelsus-Jahres 1993*, 373. Salzburg: Gesellschaft für Salzburger Landeskunde, 1994. — “Paracelsus Polemik gegen die alte römisch-katholische Kirche ist in vielen Punkten extremer als die der Reformatoren.”

¹⁶ Ute Gause, 119 — “Seine gesamte Anthropologie zeigt, daß für ihn der Glaube eine Sache des Individuums ist.”

¹⁷ G.H. Williams, 494ff.

to be his calling from God to serve as a doctor to the poorest and neediest of the world. So it is natural that his views should be concerned with them and their condition. His recorded affiliation with peasant concerns begins in Salzburg, Austria where he lived from 1524 to 1525, immediately after his travels throughout Europe. This was the time of the Great Peasants' War, so well-known as a part of the Reformation story. While not explicitly condoning the military actions of the peasants, Paracelsus sympathized with their grievances and was involved with them enough to get exiled from Salzburg after the city was regained for the local prince-bishop. During this time, we find the first records of Paracelsus' common habits of preaching in public, teaching and preaching in the vernacular instead of in Latin, and speaking out against the abuses of the Church. Such reaching out to and sympathizing with the lowest classes of public society was to become Paracelsus' signature.¹⁸ All of these practices are consistent with some of the characteristic views of many Radicals.

Numerous other examples of unorthodox Paracelsian theology could be cited. His soteriology, his anthropology, his cosmology, etc. were all unorthodox, but they were in some respects similar to recognized Radical theologies. But the examples provided are sufficient to note some results. First, it is very difficult to consider Paracelsus a Catholic, based on his doctrinal stances. He never formally left the institutional Church, but he left it in spirit early in his career. His positions demonstrate how varied the course of the Reformation Age was. He is a figure that can not truly be fit into any traditional group, but he can help to define exactly who does and does not fit into these historical categories. On the other hand, although he died a Catholic, he was not a very orthodox Catholic. In fact, he stretches the very definition of what it might mean to belong even to that group. By looking at a figure who hovers beyond the pale of the clearly definable, it becomes easier to understand the issues that determine our historical understanding. It also reminds us of the vast variation that defies our attempts to classify it. Paracelsus' Christology/Mariology demonstrate the great variety that exists between orthodox trinitarianism and Socinian unitarianism. How do we categorize all the positions in between? The same is true of his ecclesiology. He did not look for a reorganizing of the church structure. Instead, he wanted to simply tear the entire structure down. He explicitly denies membership in any of the organized churches, traditional or reformed. And his social

¹⁸ Hartmuth Rudolph, 259.

concerns portray a new focus that turns away from the primacy of the church hierarchy and stresses a common humanity that is beyond confessions.

So whether Paracelsus is a Radical or not, he helps us understand the issues that define the sixteenth century. The Reformation Age can not be chopped up into simple, neat pieces. The categories that are formulated are at best generalizations that fit most figures of the period. But these fringe figures remind us how rich the spectrum of the sixteenth century was. Paracelsus both epitomizes the medieval currents that helped form so much of his thinking, and also demonstrates the willingness to chart a new, individual course that is the greatest feature of the Reformation Age. His willingness to maintain his own opinions in the light of fierce opposition, including imprisonment, exile, and starvation illustrate the most powerful currents of the Reformations that continue to define religious history into the present day.