

Origins of the Radical Reformation

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The Radical Reformation was an integral part of the religious upheaval that occurred in Europe throughout the sixteenth century. An understanding of the nature and source of this radical movement, consisting of the Anabaptists, the Spiritualizers, and the Evangelical Rationalists, is central to a complete understanding of the entire intellectual and cultural picture of that period.¹ There have been two fundamental ways to interpret the Radical Reformation: It was either a social movement or it was a religious, intellectual one. The social interpretation which saw the Radical Reformation as merely a violent reaction to deteriorating social conditions was the accepted view for centuries. Only in this century have scholars begun to seriously question it. Scholars who subscribe to an intellectual interpretation have used three different paradigms for interpreting the Radical Reformation: the Radicals were ahistorical primitivists, the Radical movement was a spin-off of the Magisterial Reformation, or the Radicals were the intellectual descendants of medieval sectarian groups. However, upon examination of each of these different perspectives, it becomes possible to unify the evidence into a single, more inclusive interpretation. The Radical Reformation was, in fact, a movement originating in intellectual change, not social unrest. Even though some of its members were unaware of the fact, and so were effectively ahistorical, the Radicals received their inheritance

¹ For a more complete description of the three branches of the Radical Reformation, see *The Radical Reformation* by George Hunston Williams, 3rd ed., Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992.

from certain heresies of the Middle Ages. However, without the opportunity offered by the Magisterial Reformation, the various groups of unorthodoxy would never have been able to constitute a separate historical category.

Ever since the seventeenth century, scholars have described the Radical Reformation as an extremist, anarchist movement that was fanatical in its commitment to social egalitarianism. The Radicals were all seen as apocalyptic militants who wanted to prepare the world for the imminent return of Christ. In short, all Radicals were like the Münsterites.² There are several reasons why this view has been perpetuated for so long. The few Anabaptists of the Münsterite type generated far more publicity than did the majority of Radicals who wanted to live privately and were very often pacifists.³ When the contemporary public thought of Anabaptism, it thought of the militants. So in the public eye, Anabaptism was equated with apocalyptic militarism. The Magisterial Reformers and the Catholic Church shared that fear of the Radicals. Here it is important to keep in mind that Luther and Calvin as well as the Catholic Church had inherited a medieval theory of society. They adhered to the medieval notion of *Christendom* which combined the modern concepts of church and state. So for the Catholic Church and, ironically, the Magisterial Reformers, the Radical Reformers presented a double threat. Their violent threat was obvious. But more insidiously, and perhaps more dangerously, a major deviation from religious orthodoxy represented a major tear in the fabric of society. The orthodox groups viewed heresy as something that had to be stamped out at all costs in order to preserve the unity and stability of society.

Another reason that history has viewed the Radicals as violent marauders is that the first histories of the Radicals were written by Reformers and orthodox Catholics who feared and hated them. Calvin was particularly vociferous in his condemnation of the Radicals. "These vermin differ from all other heretical sects in that they not only err in

² For a brief description of the events in Münster, see Jonathan Zophy, *A Short History of the Reformation: Dances over Fire and Water*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997, 105-107.

³ Until the 20th century, Anabaptism was incorrectly equated with the entire Radical Reformation. So research on the topic often uses slightly incorrect terminology. The inexactness of this situation is acknowledged but occasionally will be overlooked in order to stay focused.

certain points, but they give rise to a whole sea of insane views.”⁴ While Calvin and others were condemning the Radicals as heretics, writings by the Radicals themselves were suppressed or destroyed. So for several centuries, the only historical record about the Radicals was that which had been written by those who hated them. That fact is the single greatest reason for the misinterpretation of the entire movement. The scholars who studied the Reformation after the seventeenth century had, as their primary sources, only the writings of those who persecuted the Radicals.

The view of the Radicals as apocalyptic war-mongers was held by many even in the first part of this century. Preserved Smith, in his *Age of the Reformation*, said of Mary of Hungary, “[she] was not far wrong when she wrote that they planned to plunder all churches, nobles, and wealthy merchants, in short, all who had property, and from the spoil to distribute to every individual according to his need.”⁵ However, with the discovery, in this century, of a great many primary sources written by the Radicals themselves, this view of the Radical Reformation has become untenable. There was great variety among the different groups of Radicals. To generalize and say that they were all like the Münsterites is simply a misreading of the evidence. The evidence left by the Radicals themselves as well as by a small number of less vociferous contemporaries shows the Radical Reformation as an intellectual movement whose goals were primarily religious, not societal — although the movement, of course, affected society. “Whatever the interplay between religious commitment and socioeconomic factors — and it differed from heresy to heresy — the fundamental driving force appears to have been religious.”⁶ Within that intellectual perspective, the historical record suggests three different paradigms for interpreting the Radical Reformation.

Some historians argue that the members of the Radical Reformation were ahistorical primitivists. For them, the preceding thousand years of church history contained nothing worth salvaging. “What characterised [the Radicals] was that they had little sense of historical continuity, cared nothing for it, and so broke with the past completely; that they despaired of seeing any good in the historical Church, and believed that it must be

⁴ John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, Benjamin Wirt Farley, ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982, 39.

⁵ Preserved Smith, *Age of the Reformation*, New York: H. Holt and Company, 1920, 244.

⁶ Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Late Middle Ages*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, 204.

ended, as it was impossible to mend it.”⁷ This argument contends that there are no continuities between the pre-Reformation church and the Radical Reformation. The Radicals wanted to jettison the entire structure of the medieval church and rebuild an apostolic one based on the church organization presented in the New Testament. “Their objective was not to introduce something new but to restore something old.”⁸

The evidence for this view is a negative proof. The early Radical writers made little or no reference to connections with medieval heresies. “One of the most striking features about the early writings of the Swiss Brethren is their almost total lack of concern with history . . . [E]arly south German and Austrian Anabaptists showed only slightly greater interest in history and no clearer attempts to identify itself [themselves, *sic*] with medieval sectarian heresies.”⁹ This view argues that because the Radicals did not make explicit reference to earlier groups, no connections exist. Another line of reasoning is based on the fact that most of the Radicals tried to separate themselves from the majority of society as much as possible. Instead of trying to reform the present church, they wanted to form their own church communities separate from those they considered unrighteous. If they viewed themselves as a continuation of the church history preceding them, they would have wanted to reform the church rather than abandon it.

A second paradigm for interpreting the Radical Reformation is that it was a spin-off of the Magisterial Reformation. This view seems the most obvious because of the timing and the religious nature of both movements. Several pieces of evidence seem to suggest this interpretation. Many of the Radical Reformers were Lutherans or Calvinists before they moved to the Radical camp. In fact, most of the Radical intellectuals had their first Protestant experience in the Magisterial Reformation. One argument points out that very few of the leaders of the Radical Reformation had ever been part of any medieval sects. If the Radicals were the descendants of medieval heresies, then there should have been a substantial number of sectarians who became Radicals.

⁷ Thomas M. Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1925-1926, 422.

⁸ F.H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, Boston: Starr King Press, 1958, 47.

⁹ Bruce Gordon, ed., *Protestant History and Identity in 16th-century Europe*, Brookfield, VT: Scholar Press, 1996, 127.

Some proponents of this view argue that orthodox Protestants who became disillusioned with the compromises made by the Magisterial Reformation formed an intellectual opposition to it which became the basis for the Radical Reformation. This view claims that the Radical Reformation was a direct result of the Magisterial Reformation. Ernst Troeltsch was an early advocate of this perspective. "The Anabaptists deliberately opposed the results of this compromise, and in doing so they also opposed the whole idea of the Church, and of an ecclesiastical civilization. This violent opposition, however, proves that in reality it had been caused by the Reformation itself."¹⁰ If Troeltsch is right, then the Radical Reformation should be understood in the context of standard Reformation paradigms, not distinct interpretations.

Troeltsch specifically argues against the theory that the Radicals were reemergent sectarians. "We can understand why some thinkers have even suggested that perhaps these Baptist sects were merely a sign of the reappearance of the medieval, Waldensian sect, made possible by the Reformation. To that we must reply: (1) that we have no conclusive proof of the continued existence of any sect of this kind as a uniform international organization, and (2) that there is no evidence that the Baptist leaders came from these sectarian circles. They were all the product of the religious movements of the time."¹¹ By his own reasoning, Troeltsch's opposition to the medieval theory demonstrates the existence of that third possible paradigm for interpreting the Radical Reformation.

Some scholars in recent years have argued that the sects of the Radical Reformation were spawned by a legacy from certain medieval sects. Certain characteristics and theological components of the Radical Reformation had their roots in medieval sectarian groups. Although many variations on this theory exist because of the great many medieval sects, there are a number of suggestions common to many of those variations. Two primary emphases of the majority of the Radical Reformation were personal piety based on the model of Christ and lay, vernacular preaching. These two characteristics came to the Radicals from the Waldensians of northern Italy and southern France. Mysticism, in its Latin and German varieties, contributed the notion of a personal relationship with God rather than dependence for spiritual guidance on the intercession of a church. A strict monastic tradition like that of the Franciscan Tertiaries

¹⁰ Ernst Troeltsch, *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, New York: Harper, 1960, 698.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 696.

gave the Radicals their own tradition of asceticism and simple living. The most nearly contemporary phenomenon that directly contributed to the Radical Reformation was Renaissance humanism. Humanism impacted almost every facet of medieval society including the church. It impacted both Catholics and Protestants, including the Radicals. For them, it suggested that a reasonable examination of Scripture was more valid for understanding God than the supposedly inspired interpretation of the church.

There is evidence in the historical record to support all three of these paradigms. Each of them, taken in its pure form, is mutually exclusive of the other two. There are two possibilities at this point: one paradigm is the correct interpretation, to the exclusion of the other two, or a synthesis of the three provides a more complete understanding of the Radical Reformation. A synthesis of the three paradigms is the most compelling option for two reasons. First, a synthesis most completely includes the entire body of historical evidence. The evidence that supports each of the paradigms individually must also support whatever interpretation most correctly explains the Radical Reformation. So the aspects of each paradigm that are supported by the evidence must also be part of a more complete interpretation. Second, proper historical analysis is seldom as simple as one all-inclusive explanation. Combining compelling aspects of several single-faceted explanations often leads to a more complete multi-faceted one. The Radical Reformation is one such phenomenon.

In the case of the Radical Reformation, the corpus of historical evidence suggests an interpretation that includes aspects of each of the paradigms above. The intellectual origins of the Radical Reformation are found in several medieval sectarian groups and Renaissance humanism. The religious ideas of the Radical Reformation can be traced from various heretical groups of the Middle Ages. However, the scattered pockets of unorthodoxy scattered around Europe at the beginning of the 16th century could never have grown to constitute a distinct movement without the opportunity afforded by the Magisterial Reformation. The fracturing of medieval Christendom and the experiences of the Reformation provided a precedent for the growth of the Radical movement. And like any widespread movement, many members of the Radical Reformation were not aware of the movement's origins. Many Radicals were not aware of the precedents they were following, but that does not negate the fact that the historical influences and origins existed.

Several different medieval sects contributed different pieces of the Radical puzzle. The first step in understanding this connection is to describe the characteristics shared by the Radical Reformation and its medieval predecessors. After those are described for each of the contributing sects, the process of continuity can be examined.

An early medieval heresy that contributed to the Radical Reformation was that of the Waldensians. They were founded by Peter Waldo in the twelfth century in the French and Italian Alps. The Waldensians stressed the necessity for Christians to live lives based on the model of Christ as they themselves understood it from the Scriptures. “Basic to that [common Waldensian] disposition was the stubborn insistence on living the life of the Gospel as they themselves directly apprehended it, a life of rigor, simplicity and poverty, at the heart of which lay the struggle to maintain the exacting moral ideal that Jesus himself had taught.”¹² They also insisted on practicing lay preaching in the vernacular. The movement was pronounced heretical in 1184 because of its stance on lay preaching and because of its insistence on members interpreting Scripture for themselves. The church dogmatically reserved these prerogatives for itself. These practices of the Waldensians were based on a literal interpretation of Scripture which was their greatest contribution to the Radical movement. Some of these defining characteristics of the Waldensians — pious living, lay preaching, and personal interpretation — were some of the great unifying elements of the Radical Reformation.

Another medieval heresy that contributed to the rise of the Radical Reformation, particularly in eastern Europe, was that of Hussitism. “A glance back at the Hussite Schism and related sects is necessary for any complete coverage of the Radical Reformation.”¹³ Long before the Reformation period, Bohemia and Moravia were hotbeds of religious heterodoxy. Catholic authority was constantly called into question by groups like the *Unitas Fratrum* and the Taborites, both descendants of Hus. The Catholic Church was already under suspicion so when new Radical ideas began penetrating that area, they found fertile soil among the population.

The receptivity of the Bohemians to Radical ideas underscores the most significant contribution to the Radical Reformation of medieval heresies in general. In some cases, the particular theologies or practices

¹² Oakley, 181.

¹³ Williams, 316.

of medieval sects were abandoned in favor of new ones as the Radical movement grew. But the presence of heterodoxy in certain areas made the populations in those areas more receptive to Radical ideas since they were more accustomed to entertaining unorthodox opinions. “The contribution of the surviving heresies was rather that of having promoted, in the regions in which they were prevalent, a certain receptivity toward the newer Protestant ideas or of having provided fertile soil for reforming evangelization.”¹⁴ So while some heresies like the Waldensians contributed heavily to the theology and practice of the Radicals, other sects simply contributed their legacies of heterodoxy to the larger movement.

The mystic traditions of the Middle Ages also contributed to different branches of Radical theology in a very important way. There were two branches of medieval mysticism. German mysticism stressed an intellectual understanding of God. “The Germanic tradition has been classified as ‘essentialistic, transformational, and theocentric,’ concerned with the intellectual contemplation of God (*visio Dei*) who in turn was defined as ‘truth.’”¹⁵ For these mystics, a proper understanding of the theological doctrines concerning God was the highest goal that man could achieve. This view of theology resurfaces among the Evangelical Rationalists who stressed correct doctrine. The Latin mystics approached God from a different angle. They pursued an understanding of God’s will and the ability to conform to it. “The Latin mystics . . . have been described as ‘affective, penitential, and Christocentric,’ concerned with volitional conformity to the will of God, while God was defined as ‘good.’”¹⁶ For them, total conformity to God’s will and moral code was the highest goal for humanity. This view of theology resurfaces among the Anabaptists and the Spiritualizers. “Another line of recent scholarship has traced the intellectual origins of South German Anabaptism to late medieval mystical, spiritual, and apocalyptic movements.”¹⁷

But mysticism’s greatest contribution to the Radical Reformation was not its different views on the proper goal for humanity. The most important contribution was its emphasis on a direct relationship with

¹⁴ Oakley, 211.

¹⁵ Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement, 1525-1531*, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform (1250-1550): An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, 347.

God. The mystics emphasized a connection with God on a personal level. That notion, taken to its logical conclusion, removes the need for an intercessor like the church. The Radicals took that step. They claimed that they could commune with God without the mediation of the church. Thus they did not need to rely on church interpretations of Scripture, priestly administration of the sacraments, or even a separate priesthood at all, as well as a myriad of other ecclesiastical practices. In short, a theology based on a direct relationship with God undermines almost all of the medieval church's spiritual authority. The mystical tradition of the Middle Ages was an early step toward these Radical conclusions.

Another important step on the road to the Radical Reformation was the development of Renaissance humanism. By the late Middle Ages, the church had declared that ecclesiastical inspiration was a source of theological truth equal to that of the Scriptures.¹⁸ The humanism of the fifteenth century contradicted that view. The humanists developed the opinion that scriptural texts should be subjected to the same critical analysis as other classical documents. "These particular Italian devotees of reform were philological realists, and considered themselves broadly in the humanistic tradition of Lorenzo Valla, who had treated the New Testament text as a classical text with critical respect for the original reading."¹⁹ They stressed reasonable exegesis over inspired interpretation.

Humanism made its most compelling appearance on the Radical stage in northern Italy among the Evangelical Rationalists. "The Italian Evangelical Rationalists . . . were commonly classical humanists."²⁰ After an evolution over many years, the theology of the Evangelical Rationalists rejected many of the doctrines that were central to church teachings, e.g. the doctrine of the Trinity and the immortality of the soul. As their theology spread throughout eastern Europe, culminating in Socinianism in Poland, humanistic thinking was spread among the other branches of the Radical Reformation. Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Catholic who immediately preceded the Reformation, was a classical humanist who spread humanistic thinking throughout many of the parts of Europe that had limited contact with the intellectual currents of Italy. "Humanism, especially of the Erasmian variety" was a factor in the emergence of

¹⁸ For a further discussion of the development of this doctrine see the Oakley text.

¹⁹ Williams, 803.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 804.

Protestant radicalism.²¹ Erasmus' advocacy of critical thinking had its adherents in both movements. But the Radical Reformation pursued those ideas to a more logically consistent conclusion.

Although Renaissance humanism seemed to spawn a new pattern of thinking, the theological claims of many humanists were medieval in origin. The doctrine of the Trinity and the immortality of the soul, among other doctrines, had been quietly debated throughout the Middle Ages:

“The Arianizing tendency of the Florentine Academy” was a deep concern for many church leaders.²²

“The dogma of the Trinity was the subject of much debate in the Middle Ages among Catholic theologians.”²³

“Psychopannychism . . . was the position of [the] New Testament and of several Apostolic and Ante-Nicene Fathers from Clement of Rome through Irenaeus of Lyons.”²⁴

“The discussion of the problem of immortality and the relationship of the soul to the body in the Fifth Lateran Council was symptomatic of the same kind of unrest in the Romance lands that broke out in Germany in connection with the indulgence system.”²⁵

“In the Venetian university of Padua, . . . the demonstrability of man's immortality was philosophically challenged.”²⁶

Many of the doctrines that came to characterize branches of the Radical Reformation actually had a long medieval history. The newly revived thinking of the Renaissance, when combined with doctrines that had been discussed for centuries, led to the creation of a movement that rejected

²¹ H.J. Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided: The Protestant Reformation*, London: Hutchinson and Company, 1971, 65.

²² *Ibid.*, 70.

²³ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, 12.

²⁴ Williams, 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

the majority of Catholic teaching, namely the Radical Reformation. The most complete synthesis occurred among the Evangelical Rationalists and their descendants, including Socinianism. "The result . . . seems to show that, while Socinianism did undoubtedly owe much to Humanism, and to the spirit of critical inquiry and keen sense of the value of the individual which it fostered, most of its distinguishing theological conceptions are medieval."²⁷

A consideration of the Waldensians, the Hussites, the mystics, the ascetics, and the humanists demonstrates that the defining characteristics of the Radical Reformation were not new ideas in the seventeenth century. They were ideas and theologies that had existed throughout the Middle Ages. Each of these groups contributed a part of the entire Radical movement. Socinianism, being one of the later, significant developments of the movement, is a good example of the culmination of all these influences of the Radical Reformation:

It may therefore be well to speak in advance of the elements out of which the [Socinian] movement was gradually composed. Earliest in point of time was the element of deep personal devotion in many choice spirits of the medieval Church . . . There is also, some think, a strain from late scholastic philosophy, inducing a skeptical attitude toward the dogmas of the church . . . But overshadowing all other elements that helped to shape Socinianism was the tendency to look directly to the word of Scripture itself as the sole pure source of religious truth, and to ignore as unimportant what ever could not be traced to this source.²⁸

The first part of a complete interpretation of the Radical Reformation is its medieval roots. The second vital component is the opportunity that arose because of the Magisterial Reformation. There can be no question that there is a connection between the two movements. The timing and the shared characteristics are just too coincidental. The question, then, is what the nature of that connection is. The Magisterial Reformation gave the scattered pockets of unorthodoxy throughout Europe a vital opportunity to grow and coalesce into a distinct movement. The chaos that the leadership of the Magisterial Reformation created for the Catholics who tried to maintain the status quo offered the Radicals the chance to expand

²⁷ Lindsay, 474.

²⁸ Wilbur, 6-7.

relatively unmolested for a short time. The Catholic powers never focused their energies wholly on suppressing the Radicals because they were just as occupied opposing the Lutherans and Calvinists. After a short time, the Radical Reformation was able to attract a large enough base of the religious intelligentsia to its ranks that the movement had sufficient momentum to maintain its existence beyond those initial years. But even with all the characteristics that the Radicals shared with the orthodox Protestants, the movement retained an identity of its own because of its medieval nature.

The first component of the connection between the Magisterial and Radical Reformations is related to the Magisterial Reformation's relationship with the Catholic Church. The Reformation irreversibly broke the European monolith of a catholic church. And for the first several decades of the Reformation period, the Catholic Church was primarily concerned with repairing that rupture. These ecclesiastical divisions gave the Radicals two important opportunities. First, as the medieval concept of Christendom began to fade into the reality of a new ecclesiastical arrangement, more people became receptive to Radical ideas that took them yet further from the church. Second, as the Lutherans and Calvinists began making substantial gains throughout northern and central Europe, the Catholic Church focused its efforts on containing those larger movements. For several decades, the church did not notice the widespread growth of more Radical heresy. This relative obscurity gave the Radicals a chance to proselytize successfully until they had enough critical mass to withstand strong persecution.

The second component of the relationship between the two Reformations is the intelligentsia who came to the Radicals through the Magisterial Reformation. Many Radical leaders, for example Michael Sattler or Andrew Bodenstein of Karlstadt, had their heretical beginnings as Magisterial Reformers. Many intellectuals who heard Lutherans preach about the right of people to seek their own salvation left the Catholic fold and joined the Magisterial Reformation. But some of these people then took Luther's claims of *sola scriptura* to their logical conclusions. These conclusions very often led to Radical theology. This collection of intelligentsia who formed the core of Radical leadership was vital to the movement's survival. Without the intellectual apologies and theological organization that these leaders offered, it would have been extremely difficult for any segments of the movement to maintain any sort of coherency. The most important contribution of these liberal intellectuals

was “the recognition of the importance of reason in religion which, when added to the fundamental principles of freedom and tolerance which the liberal Anabaptists had already fully adopted, furnished the principle still needed to make their system complete by assuring it sane guidance.”²⁹ These intellects gave Radical thinking enough momentum and guidance to propel it through the coming years. “[G.H. Williams’] final group, the Evangelical Rationalists, are the advocates of toleration and common sense, who formed the intellectual opposition to Calvinism . . . Here [he] finds the forerunners of the Enlightenment and the most ‘modern’ radical reformers.”³⁰

Yet even with these contributions from the Magisterial Reformation, the Radical Reformation maintained a distinct identity that separated it from orthodox Protestantism. “The Radicals are rather seen to have formed a positive movement in their own right, independent in origin and fundamentally in disagreement with the basic teachings of the major reformers.”³¹ Although the Radicals took their opportunity from the Reformers, the nature of the two movements was distinct. The Radicals were medieval in origin and outlook while the Magisterials were innovative and new. Albrecht Ritschl “came to understand the radical movements of the Reformation, despite some similarities with Luther and Zwingli, as essentially distinct and even opposite in character. Moreover, he identified some intriguing positive relationships between the radicals and the ascetic, ceremonial, and legal tendencies of medieval Catholicism.”³² Some of the heresies of the Middle Ages took the opportunity offered by the chaos of the Reformation period to spread their teachings until a separate movement evolved.

The first two components of a more complete understanding of the Radical Reformation are its medieval roots and the opportunity which arose out of the Magisterial Reformation. The third component deals with the evidence which suggests that the Radicals were ahistorical primitivists. There is a body of evidence which suggests that the Radicals claimed no connection to the past. The early Radical apologists of the “more Biblically centered groups, who rarely cited any non-Biblical

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁰ Ozment, 345.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

³² A.G. Dickens, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, 216.

authority” did not appeal to history to defend their views.³³ They appealed only to Scripture. It was not until the writing of Menno Simon that the Radicals developed a complete theory of historical apologetics.³⁴ According to this interpretation, the original Radicals found no value in the last thousand years of church history at all. They wanted to jettison the entire medieval church structure and rebuild an ecclesiology based solely on the example of Scripture.

But that view is at odds with these previously discussed claims. There must be a resolution to this seeming contradiction. The resolution is this. There were, undoubtedly, many members of the Radical Reformation who were not aware of their historical roots. They thought of themselves as a total break from the past. But that is true of many movements throughout history. Most rebels in the American Revolution could not have quoted the Lockian philosophy that inspired Jefferson. Or most Germans during World War II could not have expounded on the economic or political realities that made Nazism possible. However, the lack of knowledge of some of the membership does not negate the continuities of history. Hans J. Hillerbrand “balanced the common belief among sectarians that they were carrying the Reformation to its true conclusion against the recognition that the sects were medieval.”³⁵ The source of the Radical Reformation was heresy in the Middle Ages, but as it matured, it followed a path of its own that made it unrecognizable to some.

The historical understanding of the Radical Reformation has undergone a drastic change in this century. When this century opened, the radical fringes of the Reformation were seen as isolated individuals who were violent socialist undesirables, many of whom happened to practice adult baptism. Since that time, several alternative interpretations of the Radical portion of the Reformation have been proposed. It has become very apparent that the Radical Reformation was a movement that was intellectual and religious in nature rather than a social experiment. Some evidence suggests that the Radicals were extremists who wanted to rebuild an apostolic church from scratch. Some suggests that the Radicals were merely a spin-off of the Magisterial Reformation. Still other evidence suggests that the Radicals were the heirs of a medieval legacy. As has been discussed, the indications of the different pieces of evidence

³³ Littell, 50.

³⁴ Gordon, 132.

³⁵ Dickens, 225.

can be resolved into a single interpretation. The Radical Reformation was a movement that had its origins in several medieval heresies, primarily the Waldensians, the Hussites, and the mystics. The Magisterial Reformation gave these influences the opportunity to coalesce into a distinct and separate phenomenon. These influences hold true even though many of the Radicals were not aware of their existence. Once the Radical Reformation is more completely understood, it will complete the intellectual and cultural history of the Reformation era.