

The Spiritual Traditions

The Imitation of Christ and the Theologia Germanica

It is difficult to determine precise influences on a writer as bent on claiming inspiration from the Spirit as Hendrik Niclaes. The possible effect of the works of Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Suso and of other mystical tracts wrongly attributed to them must be kept in mind in any study of Northern European spirituality in the sixteenth century,¹ but to suggest, particularly in the case of Hendrik Niclaes, which these works were is, at best, a speculative undertaking. Nevertheless there were two books which were so outstandingly popular in Familist circles that we can safely assume that Hendrik Niclaes read them, assimilated them and made an eclectic use of them – the *Imitation of Christ*, probably written by Thomas à Kempis some time before

1. See C.C. De Bruin, 'Radicaal spiritualisme te Leiden', *Rondom het Woord*, 17 (1975), pp. 66-81. Cf. also J. Lindeboom, *Stiefkinderen van het Christendom* (Arnhem 1973), pp. 112-217; Nicolette Mout, 'Spiritualisten in de Nederlandse reformatie van de zestiende eeuw', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 111 (1996), pp. 297-313, esp. pp. 297-304; André Séguenny, *Les Spirituels: Philosophie et religion chez les jeunes humanistes allemands au seizième siècle* (Baden-Baden 2000), pp. 32-237.

1424,² and the *Theologia Germanica*, written, in all likelihood, in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century by a guardian in the Teutonic Order at Frankfurt.³

In the *Imitation of Christ* we find one of the ideals which made of the Devotio Moderna, the Dutch reformatory movement founded by Geert Groote in 1379, a movement of such importance and complexity – an anti-intellectual ideal leading to an effortless abandonment to the will of God. Contempt for a certain type of scholastic learning was, of course, no novelty. Moreover, that supremely influential figure Jean Charlier de Gerson, to whom the *Imitation of Christ* had at one time been attributed, insisted repeatedly in the course of his work that theological speculation was one of many ways to God and that the unlettered stood just as good a chance of salvation as the learned. Like Gerson, à Kempis had a specific sort of learning in mind when he attacked erudition with such violence in the *Imitation* – the dry learning of the scholastic theologian, the man accustomed to academic interpretations of Aristotle, and who read the scriptures as though they were a dead letter, twisting them into a philosophical scheme far removed from the original intention of the text. The reaction against this tendency found ample justification in the scriptures themselves, and particularly in the Epistles to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:18-20): ‘If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.’ It was St Paul, too, who provided the alternative to this worldly wisdom – spiritual wisdom. ‘He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. (1 Cor 2:11, 15).

2. For the *Imitation of Christ* and the Devotio Moderna see R.R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden 1968), pp. 521-50.

3. For the dating of the *Theologia Germanica* see E. Teufel, ‘Die Deutsche Theologie und Sebastian Franck im Lichte der neueren Forschung’, *Theologische Rundschau*, 11 (1939), pp. 304-15. Teufel dates the work in the first 30 years of the fifteenth century. On the text see Karl Müller, ‘Zur Text der Deutsche Theologie’, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 49 (1930), pp. 307-35. For more general surveys see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* (New York 2005), pp. 55-431.

The *Imitation of Christ* covered a broad enough field of topics for it to appeal to those with the most divergent convictions, from the strictly orthodox to the more or less heretical. But an eclectic use of it could lead – and almost certainly did lead in the case of Hendrik Niclaes – to an emphasis on the spiritual following of Christ which threatened to destroy external observances. It fomented the conviction that the spiritual formed a group apart in which human learning was of no account but in which divine wisdom was very much present. On this level of spiritual enlightenment, where anyone, however ignorant, could speak with the voice of the spirit, the greatest scholars were prepared to bow before the humblest visionary. Contempt for learning became a rhetorical commonplace and ears developed a special sensibility for the voice of God speaking from the lowliest receptacle – hence the attraction of the former weaver Hendrik Jansen van Barrefelt.

Belief in the privileges of the spiritual man was further strengthened by the influence throughout Europe of Joachim of Fiore's tripartite division of history into the ages of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Joachim's eschatology, developed in the twelfth century, passed through many hands⁴ before it affected the mystical writers in Germany and the Low Countries, but the conviction that the age of the Spirit was at hand, that observances which had previously taken an external form should now be interiorised and that the key had at last been provided for the true understanding of the scriptures, was adopted by Hendrik Niclaes and many of his contemporaries with the utmost eagerness.

The brief treatise entitled the *Theologia Germanica* also had an exceptionally wide appeal during the Reformation.⁵ Luther edited it. Sébastien Castellion translated it into Latin and French. The Anabaptist Ludwig Hetzer expurgated it, while Hans Denck, another Anabaptist, wrote a commentary to it. Sebastian Franck, whom I shall be discussing later, wrote a paraphrase of it. It was deeply admired in all those circles which desired religious toleration and political concord.

4. Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford 1969), pp. 3-132.

5. See Steven Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn. 1973), pp. 14-60.

The *Theologia Germanica* opens with the quotation of 1 Corinthians 13:10 'But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away'. One of the constant themes of the book is the return to a Platonic 'oneness', a goal which was shared by many spiritual writers of the sixteenth century and which was fundamental to the thought of both Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt. It has been pointed out that the author of the *Theologia Germanica* draws for his conception of unity on two distinct traditions. On the one hand there is a specifically German tradition, represented by Tauler and Meister Eckhart, in which the object is to return to 'precreated oneness', to the divine essence of the soul before it was created. On the other hand there is the tradition which can be said to be more typical of the Cistercians and the Franciscans and in which the object is to attain an 'Adamic conformity of will with God', in other words 'perfect createdness'.⁶ For Hendrik Niclaes and Barrefelt the ideal 'oneness' seems to have been a created but prelapsarian state and what they share with the *Theologia Germanica* is the conviction that sin was a turning away from this oneness, an exercising of the individual will at the expense of the single divine will, of the individual understanding at the expense of the single universal understanding.⁷ Not for a moment does the author of the *Theologia Germanica* deny the freedom of will. The will, the one will which God created, was absolutely free and the first sin was the attempt to appropriate a part of it.⁸

With the termination of the Old Law, God descended into humanity in the figure of Christ and thereby 'deified' man.⁹ What was first symbolised by Christ, however, continued, according to Hendrik Niclaes and the *Theologia Germanica*, to take place thereafter. It is this descent of God into the individual that is understood by the word *Vergottung*.¹⁰ Hendrik Niclaes's constant reference to himself as a 'godded man' was taken, above all by his enemies, to mean that

6. Ibid., p. 23.

7. Cf. *Theologia Deutsch*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer (Gütersloh 1875), pp. 6-8.

8. Ibid., p. 212.

9. Ibid., pp. 10-12.

10. The question of *Vergottung* is discussed in Gottlob Siedel, *Theologia Deutsch: Mit einer Einleitung über die Lehre von der Vergottung in der dominikanische Mystik* (Gotha 1929). See also Jean Orcibal, *La rencontre du Carmel thérésien avec les mystiques du Nord* (Paris, 1959), pp. 71-74.

he put himself on the same level as God, or, at the very least, that he put himself on a level with Christ and consequently regarded Christ simply as the symbol of a process which could occur in anybody. Yet the idea of *Vergottung* was not necessarily blasphemous, nor even unorthodox. We shall see that many of Hendrik Niclaes's supporters took it to mean 'divinely inspired' – and there was nothing heretical about that. Moreover, both in the works of Hendrik Niclaes and in the *Theologia Germanica* the conditions of the process were rigorous. One could only be 'deified' if one renounced one's own will and imitated the life and sufferings of Christ. With the heresy of the Free Spirit in mind, the author of the *Theologia Germanica* warns repeatedly against the 'false light', against claims to perfection which are not attended by a virtuous existence, humility of spirit and, above all, by love.¹¹

These are the principal common points of the *Theologia Germanica* and the writings of Hendrik Niclaes. But there was another feature of the German treatise which had an important psychological effect in Germany and the Low Countries and whose significance was implied in Luther's preface and specified with the utmost clarity in the foreword to Sebastian Franck's paraphrase: the *Theologia Germanica* was written by a German in Germany. It was proof that God spoke wherever He chose, whenever He chose, and in whatever language He chose. Indeed, Franck went as far as to suggest that the Almighty spoke with particular effectiveness in German to the Germans, certainly just as well as He had ever spoken to 'any theologian from the ranks of the Hebrews, Latins or Greeks'.¹²

Franck had an unlimited contempt for theologians, for 'foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory', 'the apostles of Antichrist',¹³ so the fact that he should welcome the *Theologia Germanica* as the voice of the Spirit put the book on an entirely different level to that of the orthodox manuals which passed from hand to hand. It was, of course, a book intelligible only to the 'spiritual man' – Franck quoted

11. Cf. *Theologia Deutsch*, pp. 140-44.

12. Alfred Hegler, *Sebastian Francks lateinische Paraphrase der Deutschen Theologie und seine holländisch erhaltenen Traktate* (Tübingen 1901), p. 24.

13. 'A Letter to John Campanus by Sebastian Franck', in G.H. Williams (ed.), *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (London 1957), p. 151.

1 Corinthians 2:15 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 – but the spiritual man might be anywhere.

The *Theologia Germanica* was issued in German, Low German, Dutch, Latin and French throughout the sixteenth century.¹⁴ In the area where the Family of Love was to flourish it was widely read and widely praised, and, of course, it was also widely abhorred. At a first glance, Calvin conceded to the French community in Frankfurt in 1559, there were no notable errors in the book, merely *badinages forgés par l'astuce de Satan pour embrouiller toute la simplicité de l'Évangile*. Look closer, however, and you will find a poison so deadly that to spread it would be to poison the entire Church. He therefore exhorted his brothers in the name of God to avoid like the plague *tous ceuz qui tâcheront de vous infecter de telles ordures*.¹⁵ Critic after critic of the Family of Love stressed the influence of *telles ordures* on Nicolaes and his followers and on that degenerate doctrine according to which the individual could achieve a state of perfection on earth. Of the established churches only the Catholic Church failed, at first, to find anything wrong with the book.¹⁶ The Reformed Churches condemned it: it was a book for those individualists who were to become increasingly vociferous in the Netherlands, and it was in the *Theologia Germanica* that the great defenders of toleration, Dirck Coornhert and Sebastian Franck, could find the idea that the first thing the Christian had to know was what God planned not for the community, but for the individual.¹⁷

14. For the Dutch and Low German translations see Bruno Becker, 'De "Theologia Deutsch" in de Nederlanden der 16e eeuw', *NAK*, 21 (1928), pp. 161-90. The first Dutch translation with Luther's preface was printed in Antwerp in 1521, a second Dutch translation without Luther's preface was issued probably after 1557, and a third was printed by Plantin in 1590. The first Low German or Saxon translation was probably produced in 1538 and a further one was printed in Rostock in 1588.

15. Jean Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia* (Brunswick 1863-1900), vol. 44, col. 441.

16. Cf. J. Paquier, *L'orthodoxie de la théologie germanique* (Paris 1922).

17. Cf. *Theologia Deutsch*, pp. 28-33.