I. A Precarious Thesis

Four centuries of polemical and apologetical use of the term Forerunner, or "precursor," of the Reformation has left in its wake a deep-rooted sense of aversion to the whole concept. After a prolonged death the graves could finally be closed over a host of Forerunners, their memorial stones reminding the present generation of the fortunate termination of an era of transhistorical or dogmatic writing of history.

However, the Forerunners still linger on along the margins of the academic life where history continues to be regarded not as an art but as an arsenal, not as a science but as a scene on which one parades one's troops in the strongest possible formation. Just once we encounter the idea in an excellent modern history of the period, but then it turns out that the term Forerunner has been replaced by its more respectable synonym "prodrome," which in Greek may indeed mean "scout," or "runner," but in modern medical language stands for the first warnings of a hidden illness.[1]

Obviously, then, the burden of defense is on anyone who ventures to resuscitate these ghosts which had been, it was firmly believed and hoped, permanently buried. The following discussion is intended to show that there are compelling reasons for taking a fresh look at the concept of the Forerunners of the Reformation, and for re-evaluating the risks involved in a continued disregard for such a concept. We will present the case of the Forerunners by discussing the two most formidable and basic objections, namely, that (1) the idea of the Forerunner is fundamentally an ahistorical one, since it throws over any given period in intellectual thought a veil of interpretation which is alien to the period itself, rather than allowing the interpretation of the period from within and in the context of its own presuppositions; and that (2) the concept of the Forerunner is a product of a typically

Protestant effort to ward off the charge of innovation with its connotation of heresy. Employment of the concept of the Forerunner displays, it is assumed, the absence of a dispassionate approach indispensable to a truly historical analysis of the antecedents of the sixteenth-century schism in Western Christianity.

As will be made clear in the following sections, it is our conviction, to the contrary, that a careful reading of the sources not only indicates a historical justification for the idea of the Forerunner of the Reformation, but suggests, further, that a definite and geographically extensive continuity exists between the Middle Ages and the sixteenth-century Reformation in the shape and context of the ongoing intellectual quest. Only against the backdrop of this continuity can we hope to grasp the characteristics of both Reformation and Counter Reformation.

II. The Highway in the Wilderness

When one attempts to sum up the views of late medieval spirituality which have been current during our century a very black picture emerges.[2] To be sure, there are some redeeming features, but these are usually either described as "the dawning of a new age" and, therefore, dissociated from the "real" state of affairs, or limited to stubbornly persisting traces of the flowering high Middle Ages. By way of contrast, we may mention the truly exceptional conclusions of Johannes Janssen in his still impressive history of the German people. In the first of his eight large volumes, dedicated to the later Middle Ages, he says: "In all German territories life and thought were marked by such a vitality as never before or ever after occurred." When Ludwig von Pastor published a new edition fourteen years later we notice that Janssen's enthusiasm had been toned down: "Throughout Germany, life and thought were marked by an extraordinary degree of vitality."[3] Half a century later Joseph Lortz comes to an assessment of "Religious Life before the Reformation," which no longer shows a trace of Janssen's optimism but emphasizes the disintegration of medieval spirituality. It should be noted, however, that Lortz is initially willing to grant that there is not only ample evidence for secularization in public life but there is also—and to the same extent—a well-documented

spiritual depth in private devotions. Nevertheless, in view of the great impact and astonishing echo of Luther's criticism, the conclusion is drawn that, practically seen, the exterior secularization must have been the greater force.[4]

There seems to be a basic catalog of four criticisms of the period which tend to occur over and over again in all modern studies: (1) the amorality of the laity and especially of the lower and higher clergy; (2) the frequency of absenteeism often due to multiplication of prebends; (3) the poor training of the clergy. These three criticisms are seen against the general backdrop of (4) laicizing religiosity which is at once anticlerical and superstitious.

There can be no question as to the reliability of the facts themselves. But since the interpretation of these facts is by no means obvious, we must turn now to a short discussion of each of these indictments.

(1) The richest source for our knowledge of late medieval morality is, without doubt, the collections of sermons—either sermon examples to be used by simple parish priests, or transcripts of sermons actually preached. Both kinds of sermons give us a wealth of information about aspects of life which are not elsewhere available. The transcripts are by their very nature more colorful and detailed, since they usually allow the preacher to apply his theme to a particular local situation in a way not possible in the more general prototype.

The basic understanding of the Church as guardian of morality results in an emphasis on the law, be it the Decalogue of Moses or Christ's Sermon on the Mount. In order to promote conversion, stimulate the thirst for eternal life, and thus highlight the importance of the sacraments as indispensable for salvation, there is a continuity of moral criticism throughout medieval sermon literature. It requires, therefore, a thorough knowledge of the traditional type of moral indictment to be able to use any given sermon as a source of knowledge for a particular "wickedness." Moreover, since it is the preacher's purpose to convince his listeners of the multitude and gravity of sins committed, we should realize that the dark coloration of this presentation may have more pedagogical than historical value. Thus our richest source can be tapped only for illustrating situations clearly attested elsewhere.

The increasing awareness of the great variety in political, economic,

and social conditions prevailing in such geographically distant areas as southern Spain and eastern Poland has curbed the enthusiasm for general statements about late medieval conditions and encouraged studies of more restricted sections. Accordingly, since the beginning of this century, visitation records and registers of fines and dispensations have been hailed as the appropriate sources for the description of the actual situation in such natural units as episcopal dioceses.[5] But even these more technically precise and factually reliable sources do not satisfy our modern standards for statistical evidence, since frequently we do not know, when two, six, or ten clergymen are fined for living in concubinage—a term covering a variety of sexual offenses —what percentage of the total number of clergy they represent. Indeed, the situation may have been far worse than the visitation records suggest, since the visitations were not always carried out with an equal amount of thoroughness, and the timely announcement of a coming visitation may have led, in some cases, to a temporary improvement of conditions. It might also be remembered that the monastic foundations and individual dioceses were subject to great fluctuations, both spiritually and economically, so that generalization is extremely difficult.[6]

Unless one takes the term "later Middle Ages" in such a wide sense that there is hardly room left for the high Middle Ages, it is difficult to argue that these abuses add up to a *decline* of morality. The increase in complaints about the alleged immorality of the clergy might well be construed as an emergent sense of moral integrity and sanctity on the part of the community. Monastic and lay reform movements point not only to the need of reform but also to the fact that this need was widely felt, expressed, and acted upon.

(2) We can be much more concise in our comments on the other three traditional indictments against late medieval spirituality. The problem of nonresidence and pluralism in the later Middle Ages presupposes the much earlier tendency to regard office in the Church as a benefice. Thomas Aquinas did not advance a new opinion when he stated that "if one is in need, one may lawfully seek for oneself an ecclesiastical benefice without the cure of souls."[7] There is no indication that the system, as such, necessarily interfered with the diocesan machinery. Due to this understanding of benefices, students without

sufficient means could be provided with scholarships, to profit from the establishment of a growing number of universities.

The rise of the Third Estate led in the later Middle Ages to the rapid multiplication of endowments requiring the usually part-time services of a priest in saying Masses for the deceased. Thus a tremendous and unprecedented burden was laid on the clergy concerned. There is therefore reason to suggest that pluralism was not only the natural consequence but also an indication of piety on the part of the laity.[8]

(3) In many satires of the period we encounter the figure of the parish priest, this time not so much as the incarnation of wickedness but of stupidity. The German poets exploit, naturally with great glee, the unique opportunity of their language which rhymes *Affen* (apes) with *Pfaffen* (clerics). Even the great Dutchman, Erasmus of Rotterdam, is—to say the least—less than respectful in his references to the learning of the clergy. In one often quoted story he tells how one day the great Bishop David of Utrecht (1457–1494) himself chairs the pre-ordination examinations of the candidates.[9] He poses a series of easy theological questions to the prospective subdeacons, more complex ones to the future deacons and candidates for the priesthood. Of the three hundred examined, Bishop David is willing to pass only three. When the other members of the examining board complain that it is a shame that so many are rejected, David answers that it would be a far greater shame for asses and those surpassing asses in stupidity to be admitted to these holy offices. His opponents argue that "these modern times" no longer produce a St. Paul or a St. Jerome, but David, before ultimately giving in, answers that he does not look for a Paul or a Jerome but that to ordain asses instead of human beings goes too far.

That the archives of the archbishopric of Utrecht suggest three hundred to be an unlikely number is not important. It is more relevant to bear in mind that throughout the Middle Ages "the stupid priest" had been a popular target for criticism. A careful comparison between the learning of the parish priest at the beginning of the sixteenth century and his counterpart before 1400 shows that there is good reason to believe that he is by and large considerably better trained than ever before. In that same period, however, the education of the laity shows such a sharp upward trend that the standards for the evaluation of the

local priest have risen considerably. The young lawyers, physicians, and secular clerks are no longer impressed by the sheer use of Latin but insist now that its grammar and idiom be respected. The mere reading from a book of sermons as an adjunct to the reading of masses is no longer satisfactory; the new intelligentsia expect a fresh and well-prepared sermon as an integral part of the cure of souls.

Especially in the North European countries the Church seems to be aware of the new challenge of the times. Bishop David's examinations may have been a failure, but his efforts to enforce the old canonical requirements for ordination are but a part of a more general tendency to reform this aspect of the Church's life. Even the invariably critical humanist Jacobus Wimpfeling has to admit that the discovery of printing has considerably increased the number of well-trained priests.[10] The justly famous and often reprinted manual for the parish priest by John Ulrich Surgant, written late in the period under consideration, although not without precedent, is the parent of an impressive family of textbooks for practical theology.[11]

(4) The ignorance of the clergy and the superstition of the laity are often mentioned in one breath. It cannot be our task to present here an exhaustive picture of late medieval lay religiosity. What we have said above may indicate that the results of such investigations can be valuable only in terms of particular areas. The present state of scholarship has sufficiently highlighted the multitude of contrasts within late medieval thought to make it far easier—indeed too easy—to unmask previous conclusions as untenable generalizations than it is to state positively how the resulting void is to be appropriately filled. Such phenomena as the popularity of pilgrimages replacing the earlier crusades; the multitude of new endowments, dedications of altars, chapels, and testamental Masses, which were at this time within reach of the *nouveau riche* burgher class; and, in times of economic depression, an upsurge of anticlericalism are well attested. As we have seen, anticlericalism may express itself in a sharp defamation of the public-supported, tax-exempt members of the clergy who are decried as wicked or stupid.

While there is ample evidence of a feverish religiosity that ranges from a new emphasis on private devotions to a marked preoccupation with death, standards alien to the Middle Ages are applied when

these expressions are typed as superstitious. And we are even a step further removed from the sources when these phenomena are taken to reveal an unsatisfied hunger on the part of the baptized masses as a result of the secularization of the Church, which is said to be no longer able to satisfy the spiritual demands of the faithful.

III. Apocalypticism and Despair

Having questioned, at this point in our discussion, some of the most frequently formulated charges against the late medieval Church, we may well have created the impression that we are committed to defending at all costs the quality and stability of Christian thought and institutions in this period. This can be neither our task nor our purpose. It is, however, important that the more balanced and restrained interpretations, as they have been formulated in the monographic literature of the last three decades, start to find their way into the general surveys and textbooks of medieval thought. Furthermore, there are two other aspects of the foregoing which we should like to bring into the discussion, since they have a direct bearing on our theme of the Forerunners of the Reformation.

In the first place it should be clear that to endow a medieval preacher or doctor with the title of Forerunner, on the grounds that he assailed ecclesiastical abuses or called for reform, violates both the medieval *and* the Reformation understanding of the word "reformation."[12] On the one hand the call for reform, originating as personal renewal but extending thence to the community ideal of the monastic movement, and eventually given institutional status within the Church, is one of the main themes running through the whole history of medieval spirituality. The history of advocates, or carriers, of this kind of reform leads us in one continuous movement to our own times without any particular reason to terminate our survey in the sixteenth century, or to regard this century as the point where medieval reform culminates or where lines of reform converge. On the other hand, if one thinks of the Forerunners of the Reformation in the traditional sense as precursors of the Lutheran Reformation, one should realize that Luther's understanding of reformation is explicitly and consciously *not* a protest against papal or general ecclesiastical abuses. One cannot even say

that abuses were, for Luther, the aftermath and concomitant result of perversions in doctrine. He was too much aware of the distinction between the militant Church on earth and the triumphant spotless Church in heaven not to realize that the Church "under the cross," hidden under the veil of sin, would always be plagued by abuses until the complete manifestation of the kingdom at the end of history.

It is because of this doctrine of the Church, intimately connected with his distinction between Law and Gospel, that Luther could criticize John Wyclif and Jan Hus, usually mentioned among the Forerunners of the Reformation: "Truth and quality of life are to be distinguished. Life is as wicked with us as with the papists. We do not criticize or condemn them for their life. This Wyclif and Hus, who attacked the life [of the papists], have not seen."[13] Luther's reformation is precisely *not* the intensification of individual or monastic reform but rather the radical criticism of this "man-made road to reformation."[14]

The second aspect of our presentation of the catalog of criticisms of late medieval spirituality is a truly important point which, due to the usual generalizations, is bound to be overlooked. Only when it is granted that the quest for reform—above all for moral reform—was part and parcel of medieval spirituality can we train our eyes on the particularities and characteristics of the quest for reform within a particular period. Thus we can mark in the transition to the fifteenth century a sharp upward curve and an exceptional radicality in the litigations and censures of public life, private devotions, and general stature of the Church.

From the moralistic commentary on the Books of Wisdom by Robert Holcot (†1349) in England, through the popular sermons by the French priest Michel Menot (†1518) and the publication of the *Ship of Fools* by the German jurist Sebastian Brant (†1521), we are presented with a vivid, at times colorful and humorous but invariably pessimistic, picture of late medieval piety. We remind ourselves of the fact that those who assume the responsibility for protecting the moral fiber of their times are seldom unbiased reporters. The history of preaching in England and on the Continent suggests that these lamentations are a timeless genre which reveal more about the moral standards of the author than about the actual situation of the period in

which they originate. Once it is acknowledged that moral criticism is the normal edge of most sermons, our ears can be attuned to pick up what we consider *new* developments of the same genre.

The moralizing exegete Holcot bewails "these modern times," not restricting his comments to members of the clergy. As compared with the early Church he sees a steep decline on all levels of life. Young men no longer respect seniority as they used to; the aristocracy like sermons against wickedness only so long as they themselves are not the target; in general a decrease in works of charity is noticeable.[15] So far we are on familiar ground; when he turns to the clergy, however, one discerns a new tone of urgency:

"Some of the modern priests are angels of Satan through discord, others fallen angels through pride . . . and again others angels of the abyss through greed."

"The modern prelates do not take action against sinners when they are rich or of noble birth but only when they are poor."

"The devil has infected the priests of the Church to such an extent that *all* the branches of the Church have been poisoned."[16]

A century and a half later Menot claims of his own time that "never could less devotion be found in the Church." When somebody asks him why he does not take some kind of initiative he answers: "Friend, we do not have the man [we need]" and again: "I have no great hopes for the Church unless it be planted anew."[17] The criticism of the *Ship of Fools* touches more systematically on all aspects of life though it does not have the same prophetical edge.[18] But it is John Geiler of Keisersberg (†1510), preacher of great renown and admirer of Brant, who, in his sermons on the *Ship of Fools*, sharpens Brant's ax to such an extent that it was widely believed that Geiler had announced to Emperor Maximilian the coming of the Reformation of the sixteenth century: "Our merciful bishop Jesus Christ is about to send other more incisive reformers—they are already on their way with their divine mandate. I shall not live to see it but many of you will. At that time you will wish me back and be glad to heed my voice; but it will be too late . . ."[19] These statements do not originate in circles of heretical sects criticizing the Church from the *outside*. There is no reason to suspect the orthodoxy of Holcot, Menot, Brant, or Geiler: theirs is the cry for reform from *within* the Church.