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Radical tendencies in the flagellant movement of the mid-fourteenth century

RICHARD KIECKHEFER, *University of Texas, Austin*

I

When the Black Death spread across northern Europe between 1348 and 1350, it inspired a penitential movement designed to ward off God's wrath and arrest the progress of the disease.¹ The chroniclers speak of thousands of men who joined in processions and went from town to town, flagellating themselves in public. Their purpose was unquestionably salutary, and the practice of flagellation had long been accepted by the Church as a mode of penance.² Yet virtually everywhere they went, the flagellants met some degree of resistance. By autumn of 1349 the matter had given rise to concern on more than a local level. The theological faculty of the University of Paris sent a preacher to give a sermon before Pope Clement VI regarding the penitents. On October 20 the pontiff issued a bull condemning the movement as a form of heresy and calling for its suppression by ecclesiastical and secular authorities. In some places the decree was almost immediately effective, while in others there was need for repeated prohibitions over the next few years. The most serious resistance occurred in and around Thuringia, where the movement apparently went underground and survived, at least marginally heretical,³ for more than a century.

As Herbert Grundmann remarked, one of the most significant questions about the flagellants is why contemporaries "hereticated"

1. There is no fully satisfactory description of the flagellant movement as a whole. The works cited below in notes 5 and 6 give systematic accounts, though one must use them with some caution. The early work of Ernst Günther Förstemann, *Die christlichen Geisslergesellschaften* (Halle, 1828), is still worth consulting, though it appeared before many of the sources were available in print. James Fearn, of the University of Constance, is presently preparing a history of flagellant movements.

2. *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, VI (Paris, 1947), cols. 12 f. To be sure, the flagellants of 1348-49 engaged in more conspicuously immoderate flagellation, and did so in public; for these and other differences between their practice and monastic flagellation, see Etienne Delarouelle, "Les grandes processions de pénitents de 1349 et 1399," in *Il movimento dei disciplinati nel settimo centenario dal suo inizio* (Perugia, 1960).

3. The sources for these later flagellants are not full enough to judge whether they became a consistently heretical sect (as the inquisitorial reports would have us believe) or the movement was simply a persistent form of popular piety, some adherents of which adopted heretical principles. See below, n. 55.

them as they did, within so brief a time.⁴ To account for the suppression, historians have usually maintained that the flagellants, while originally devout and orthodox, became radical in the later months of the movement. After an orthodox phase of sincere penitence, the flagellants are supposed to have entered a less highly motivated phase in which members were predominantly from the lower classes, discipline was relaxed, anticlerical sentiment led to confrontations with the clergy, and violence ensued, particularly in the form of attacks on the Jews.⁵ This thesis has recently been challenged by the East German historian Martin Erbstösser, who proposes that the differences within the flagellant movement were not chronological, but geographical.⁶ It was only in the areas of Thuringia and Franconia, Erbstösser argues, that the flagellants underwent significant radicalization. Why did these particular regions breed exceptionally radical flagellants? According to Erbstösser, when the movement passed through these areas it fell subject to the influence of a heresy especially prevalent there, the doctrine of the Free Spirit; this influence, together with that of popular millenarian beliefs, sufficed to make the movement radically and violently anticlerical.

Erbstösser has performed a valuable service in reopening a question that historians have long considered closed. There are problems, however, that he has left unresolved, and doubts may be raised concerning certain of his suggestions. In any case, there is ample reason to return to the sources and reconsider these essential questions: To what extent, and in what ways, did the flagellants in fact become radical? And what were the sources of their radical inclinations?

II

Although Erbstösser rejects the two-phase theory, his treatment of it is not fully systematic. A brief critique of its claims may thus be in order, to supplement and confirm Erbstösser's initial findings.

The immediately apparent difficulty with the two-phase theory is that its chronology is awry: some of the features that are supposed to

4. In Jacques LeGoff, ed., *Hérésies et sociétés dans l'Europe pré-industrielle* (Paris and The Hague, 1968), p. 240.

5. A classic presentation of the two-phase theory is that of Emil Werunsky, *Geschichte Kaiser Karls IV. und seiner Zeit*, II, Pt. 1 (Innsbruck, 1882), 283-304. The interpretation is repeated in most of the literature on the subject.

6. M. Erbstösser, *Sozialreligiöse Strömungen im späten Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1970), pp. 10-69.

indicate degeneration actually occurred relatively early, while the evidence for high discipline and morale frequently comes from later months. To be sure, it is difficult to establish the chronology of the movement with any precision. Some of the chroniclers report when the flagellants first arrived in particular cities, but only a few indicate how long the movement persisted; as Erbstösser has pointed out,⁷ it is usually impossible to tell whether an incident narrated in a chronicle occurred early or late in the year. We know, though, that the penitents were prevented from entering Lübeck in mid-April 1349,⁸ and it was probably in April that they were denied entry to Erfurt.⁹ Likewise, they were expelled after initial entry into the dioceses of Prague and Breslau,¹⁰ and while we do not know how long they remained before their expulsion, we do know that these were among the earliest areas to which the movement spread. The chronicler for Breslau states that the bishop there tolerated and even approved the flagellants until he recognized the danger that they posed to the souls of the faithful and to the Church's power. Conceivably the flagellants may have become radical after their arrival, but the chronicler suggests that the tardily recognized dangers had been present all along. The flagellants in Thuringia were radically anticlerical and assaulted the clergy verbally and physically;¹¹ the movement entered this region in April, and the assumption that it became radical only later in the year would be gratuitous. The flagellants in Strassburg, on the other hand, are supposed to be typical of the earlier, highly disciplined phase of the movement; yet they did not arrive in Strassburg until June, or possibly even July.¹² The penitents in the Low Countries, the last region to be affected by the movement, were in some ways its least radical

7. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

8. *Detmar-Chronik*, in CDS [*Chroniken der deutschen Städte*, ed. Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Leipzig, etc., 1862-)], XIX, 520 f.

9. Continuations of *Cronica S. Petri Erfordensis*, in MGH, SS rer. Germ. [*Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum* (Stuttgart, etc., 1871-)], XLII, 180 and 395.

10. For Prague, see Johann Loserth, ed., *Die Königsaealer Geschichts-Quellen* (Vienna, 1875), p. 599. For Breslau, *Chronica Principum Poloniae*, in Gustav Adolf Stenzel, ed., *Scriptores rerum Silesiacarum*, I (Breslau, 1835), 166 f. (the more recent edition by Zygmunt Weclowski has not been accessible to me). There is a much later account for Breslau, in Albert Kaffler, ed., "*Annalista Silesiacus und Series Episcoporum Wratislaven-sium vom J. 1382*," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Geschichte und Alterthum Schlesiens*, I (1855), 221.

11. See the sources cited below, nn. 25 and 26.

12. Mathias of Neuenburg, in MGH SS NS [*Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, nova series* (Berlin, etc., 1922-)], IV, 270, indicates that they

representatives, more willing than those elsewhere to conform to disciplinary regulations.¹³

These chronological problems would by themselves be enough to call the two-phase theory into serious question. But four specific claims of this interpretation call for special consideration: (i) that the social composition of the movement changed; (ii) that the flagellants took violent action against the clergy; (iii) that they were responsible for violence against the Jews; and (iv) that they adopted heretical doctrines.

Even if it could be shown that the flagellants underwent some sort of fundamental change, it would be difficult to show that this was caused by a wholesale shift in their social composition. It is true that some of the chroniclers speak of vagabonds, thieves, and other disreputable elements as entering into the movement;¹⁴ others complain that women and even children began flagellating themselves.¹⁵ But more commonly the sources give merely conventional lists of the various participants in the movement: Hugo of Reutlingen, for instance, says that "priest and count, soldier and arms-bearer joined with them, as well as master of the school, monks, burghers, peasants, and scholars,"¹⁶ while the *Gesta archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensium* states that the flagellants included "some priests and clergy, some noble laymen, and many others in great numbers."¹⁷ In neither case does the chronicler differentiate between an earlier and a later phase. The *Breve chronicon Flandriae* describes the movement during its last few months, yet it still indicates that "there were, it is said, sons of dukes and princes among them, [and] priests and clerics."¹⁸ To be sure, it would be a

arrived in mid-June; Fritsche Closener, in CDS, VIII, 105, says that they arrived in early July.

13. The sources for the Low Countries are assembled in Paul Fredericq, ed., *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis neerlandicae*, I (Ghent and The Hague, 1899), 190-203; II (Ghent and The Hague, 1896), 96-141; and III (Ghent and The Hague, 1906), 13-38.

14. Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 196, 199; *ibid.*, II, 132 f., 136; CDS, VIII, 118; MGH SS [*Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores in folio*, 32 vols., (Stuttgart and Hanover, 1826-1934)], XXIII, 128.

15. Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 195; CDS, VIII, 119; MGH SS, XIV, 487; Johann Friedrich Böhmer, ed., *Fontes rerum Germanicarum*, IV (Stuttgart, 1868), 561.

16. In Paul Runge, *Die Lieder und Melodien der Geissler des Jahres 1349* (Leipzig, 1900), p. 24.

17. MGH SS, XIV, 487; see also MGH SS, IX, 513; MGH SS, X, 432; CDS, XVIII, 158.

18. Fredericq, *Corpus*, II, 120; there are statements to similar effect, *ibid.*, I, 194 f., 197; II, 135; III, 20 f.

mistake to take these accounts entirely at face value, but for most regions they are the best sources we have, and they hardly serve to support the traditional two-phase theory. At most, one might suggest that the social composition of the movement may have altered in certain localities; the evidence does not suggest that this change was thoroughgoing.

Likewise, there is only meager evidence for physical violence against the clergy. To be sure, the movement seems always to have had anti-clerical leanings. It was essentially a lay movement—not only in the sense that its members were mostly lay, but in the more important sense that it was outside clerical supervision.¹⁹ Even in the Low Countries, where the flagellants received support from the clergy, they do not seem to have relinquished their principle of lay leadership.²⁰ Hence, churchmen clearly recognized the movement as a challenge to their authority in religious matters, and chroniclers frequently protested that the movement was formed without proper authority.²¹ Matters were bad enough when the flagellants contented themselves with their penitential devotions. The flames of conflict were fanned all the higher, however, when they assumed authority to preach and hear each other's confessions,²² when they attempted to perform miracles,²³ and when they vaunted their superiority to the clergy.²⁴ It was perhaps inevitable that the repudiation of clerical control led to confrontations with the clergy, and that these confrontations in turn produced bitter sentiments. What is surprising, though, is how seldom these confrontations led to violence. As Erbstösser rightly points out, the reports of such action derive mainly from the region around Thuringia.²⁵ And even in this area, the sources generally speak only in vague

19. The *locus classicus* is Fritsche Closener, CDS, VIII, 106: "Sü hettent ouch eine gesetzede, daz sü pfaffen möhtent under in han, aber ir keinre solte meister under in sine noch an iren heimelichen rot gon."

20. Historians commonly interpret the support rendered by civil and ecclesiastical authorities as entailing some form of control over the flagellants. But I do not believe there is evidence that the flagellants in the Low Countries abandoned the principle of lay leadership, and the chroniclers for this region are just as concerned as those elsewhere with the flagellants' lack of proper authority (see esp. the sources cited in the following note).

21. Fredericq, *Corpus*, II, 120, 123, 125 f., 129, 132, 134; MGH SS, XXIII, 128; Gottlieb Studer, ed., *Die Berner-Chronik des Conrad Jostinger* (Bern, 1871), pp. 111 f.

22. CDS, VIII, 106; *Chronica principum Poloniae* (as above, n. 10), pp. 166 f. See also the references to preaching, esp. MGH SS rer. Germ., XLII, 380.

23. Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 194, 199; *ibid.*, II, 132; *ibid.*, III, 15, 20; CDS, VII, 119; MGH SS NS, VI, 87; Jo. Nederhoff, *Cronica Tremoniensium*, ed. Eduard Roese (Dortmund, 1880), p. 52.

24. E.g., Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 194.

25. Continuations of *Cronica S. Petri Erfordensis*, in MGH SS rer. Germ., XLII, 44,

terms of violence that the flagellants planned to carry out, such as stoning the clergy to death. We have reliable testimony to only one concrete incident, in which one Dominican was killed, while another fled from his assailants.²⁶

The flagellants have also been charged with responsibility for the persecution of the Jews in 1349, but the role they played in these pogroms is difficult to discern. Contemporary chroniclers seldom link them with these incidents; one verse chronicle from Brabant states that flagellants killed the Jews, though it gives no specific details.²⁷ A chronicle written in Lübeck speaks of the flagellants in Cologne as slaying the Jews,²⁸ though the records from Cologne make no such suggestion.²⁹ A fifteenth-century chronicle indicated that the flagellants at Frankfurt took part in a pogrom there,³⁰ but the claim is not borne out in contemporary sources.³¹ In the last-mentioned case, the fifteenth-century chronicler evidently made a common error: reading in an earlier source that the flagellants appeared in 1349 and that the Jews were attacked in the same year, he presupposed a connection between the events. What seems to have been the case is that the flagellants, by arousing fear of the plague, stirred the people in various communities to mob action against the Jews.³² There are some indications that the Jews were apprehensive of the flagellants' arrival, and in one town the Jews seem to have taken the offensive against the flagellants.³³ One can only conjecture, however, whether these Jews feared the flagellants

180 f., 395 f.; also Johann Rothe, *Düringische Chronik*, ed. Rochus von Liliencron (Jena, 1859), p. 395, though this is a late and partly fanciful work. For a report of violence outside this region, see A. Bernoulli, ed., "Die Basler Handschrift der Reggauischen Chronik," *Anzeiger für schweizerische Geschichte*, NS, IV (1882-85), 52.

26. Heinrich von Herford, *Liber de rebus memorabilioribus*, ed. August Potthast (Göttingen, 1859), p. 282.

27. Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 194 f.

28. CDS, XIX, 521.

29. See Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, pp. 56 f.; see also MGH SS NS, VI, 87: "Tunc vero omnes Iudei in Colonia interfecti sunt sub occasione predicta," i.e., the entry of the flagellants, which is spoken of in the sentences immediately preceding; or perhaps the plague, which is mentioned just before the flagellants?

30. Caspar Camentz, *Acta aliquot Francofurtana*, in Böhmer, *Fontes*, IV, 434 f.

31. *Annales Francofurtani*, in *ibid.*, IV, 394 f.

32. This interpretation is suggested, for instance, by Jean le Bel, in Fredericq, *Corpus*, II, 123.

33. A wealthy Jew, as the story has it, asked the duke of Brabant to prohibit the movement, pleading that he and the rest of the Jews would be destroyed if the flagellants entered. Li Muisis, in Fredericq, *Corpus*, III, 19. From another chronicler we learn that in the diocese of Bamberg the Jews attacked the flagellants, killing approximately fourteen of them and some of their defenders as well. Böhmer, *Fontes*, IV, 561.

as the cause of potential conflict or merely as its occasion. On the other hand, when the preacher from Paris went to Avignon, he attributed direct responsibility for the pogroms to the flagellants, presumably in an attempt to appeal to Pope Clement's well-known sympathy for the Jews.³⁴ This preacher was probably not an eyewitness to the violence and did not cite any specific instances in which he knew of flagellants' participation. Again, we are left with no sure way of deciding how much credence to place in his report. Even if we assume that the flagellants did at times take violent measures against the Jews, one might question whether this is evidence for radicalization or degeneration of the movement. For after all, pogroms had been carried out on other occasions by otherwise respectable townsmen, and the rumor that Jews had poisoned the wells had resulted in violence in 1348, even before the flagellant movement got under way.

The charge that the flagellants became heretical will occupy us at length in the next section of this article; for now, a few general comments may suffice. Chroniclers commonly referred to the flagellants as a "sect" or as "heretical,"³⁵ and when Clement VI condemned the movement he referred to it as a "sect,"³⁶ but the specific meaning of these terms remains obscure. With only a few exceptions (discussed below), the flagellants' critics failed to indicate specific doctrines attributable to the penitents. Perhaps they knew of such teachings, but did not care to relate them. Yet this negligence would be peculiar, especially in those sources that went to great pains to discredit the movement. When the preacher from Paris delivered his sermon at Avignon, he showed in great detail the dangers of the movement, but said nothing about specific doctrinal errors.³⁷

Certain practices of the flagellants might be interpreted as implying heretical belief. Particularly upsetting to the clergy, for instance, was

34. Fredericq, *Corpus*, III, 36 f.

35. MGH SS, XIV, 487; MGH SS, XXIII, 128; Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 194-96; *ibid.*, II, 114, 116 f., 124-26, 132 f., 135 f.; Nederhoff, *Cronica*, pp. 52 f. Some chronicles are only slightly more specific in their use of terms, such as one that states that "secta eorum erat non modicum corrupta, in se continens varios errores." Loserth, *Königsaalder Geschichts-Quellen*, p. 599. Perhaps the most bizarre suggestion in this vein is that of the *Gesta abbatum Trudonensium*, which refers to "ipsorum presumpta religio, quam excogitabant quidam apostate religionis hospitati occulte in domo unius mulieris trans Renum." MGH SS, X, 432.

36. Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 201; on the preceding page, Clement speaks of the flagellants as "se per societates et conventicula (licet caudas invicem colligatas habeant) dividentes," thus applying to them the bound-tail metaphor which had long been used in reference to heretics.

37. Fredericq, *Corpus*, III, 28-38.

the flagellants' practice of absolving one another from sin.³⁸ Lay confession was not defined as heretical in the Middle Ages, though its sacramental character was a question of dispute.³⁹ The regular exercise of such confession, however, was clearly incompatible with respect for the clergy, and relations between the flagellants and the ecclesiastical establishment no doubt suffered greatly because of this usurpation of sacerdotal function. It is difficult to ascertain how extensively the practice occurred; there is no reason to think that it arose merely during a later period of supposed radicalization.⁴⁰ Most important, there is no evidence that the flagellants concerned themselves with the subtleties of ecclesiology. Their challenge was not so much doctrinal as practical; the mere fact that they conducted their devotions without clerical supervision was enough for clerics to brand them as "heretical," in the loose sense of that term which became common in the late Middle Ages.⁴¹ Likewise, certain chroniclers branded as "heretical" the flagellants' refusal to pay tokens of respect when a priest elevated the host or read the gospel.⁴² But once again, it would be rash to conclude that the penitents held explicit Donatist principles. Many members of the movement were no doubt bitterly anticlerical, but there is no reason to envision them as tampering with doctrine.

Perhaps the cardinal error of the two-phase theory is its supposition that the flagellant movement was cohesive and could succumb uniformly to radical influences. Given the loose organization of the movement, the autonomy of each band of penitents, and the lack of routine communication among the various processions, such a supposition seems wholly unwarranted. From the evidence at our disposal we may perhaps conclude that flagellants in some communities were responsible for violence, and that in some locations the social composition of the processions was altered. But to generalize from such instances would be hazardous, and to superimpose such generalizations on a simple chronological schema would be dangerous in the extreme. It is entirely possible that the social level represented by the movement was rising in one place at the same time that it was declining elsewhere.

38. See the references above, n. 22.

39. J. A. Spitzig, "Lay Confession," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII (New York, 1967), 576 f.

40. This is assuming, once again, that the offense at Breslau occurred within a short time of the movement's arrival there—a matter on which the sources provide all too little information.

41. I intend to elaborate at greater length on this point in a different context.

42. MGH SS, XIV, 487; Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 196; *ibid.*, II, 132 f., 136.

The potential diversity within such a movement cannot be over-emphasized. Unfortunately we have all too little specific information, but the information we do have runs counter to the notion of a simple shift from sincere penitence to radical action.

III

Rather than distinguishing an earlier and a later phase, Erbstösser proposes that the movement should be studied region by region, since the peculiarities of the flagellants seem to have been distinctive to the various territories in which they appeared. He claims to have isolated four regions which formed centers of the movement: Austria, Thuringia and Franconia, south and southwest Germany, and the Low Countries. In each of these areas the flagellants took on a distinctive character. Chronicles for cities outside these territories refer to the processions only briefly, if at all; this fact indicates (according to Erbstösser) that these other regions were transitional areas, through which the flagellants merely passed without making a substantial impression.⁴³

In Austria, where the movement developed in the later months of 1348, the sources speak of the participants as flagellating themselves, but they say little about the organization and liturgy of the groups, and nothing about the preaching or the "heavenly letter" that were spoken of in other places.⁴⁴ These omissions, Erbstösser argues, were surely not accidental, for such practices would have been conspicuous enough to merit the chroniclers' attention. When the flagellants proceeded to Thuringia and Franconia around April and May 1349, they became decidedly more radical.⁴⁵ They assumed authority to preach; they subjected the clergy to verbal and physical abuse and tended (on Erbstösser's account) toward heretical beliefs. Although similar developments occurred elsewhere, the reports of radical developments in Thuringia and Franconia are more frequent than for other territories and indicate a more advanced stage of radicalization. In the German South and Southwest, where the processions appeared in May and June, they were moderate and disciplined.⁴⁶ Before admission to the movement, a man had to confess his sins, make peace with any enemies

43. Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, pp. 18 f.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-23.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-39.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-59.

he might have, assure the master of the group that he had a requisite sum of money to support himself during the procession, and obtain the permission of his wife. During the period of $33\frac{1}{2}$ days, members were not to shave or speak with women. They were not to ask for food or lodging, but they accepted whatever the townsmen freely offered them, staying only one night in any one place. Instead of preaching, they read the "heavenly letter" that God had sent them—a document that was severe in its criticism of the clergy, but not heretical, and conducive mainly to the observance of the Lord's Day and of penitential devotions. In July and August the movement began in the Low Countries.⁴⁷ In Tournai there was friction between the flagellants and certain members of the clergy, yet on the whole the Church was able to subject the penitents to its control, hence keeping it from developing into a radical movement such as that in Thuringia and Franconia.

There are many possible objections to the details of this description. Most importantly, Erbstösser does not take into account the fact that chronicles at this time were in different stages of development in different cities. In some places there were men writing special chronicles devoted to the affairs of their towns, though in most places these municipal chronicles did not begin until later in the fourteenth century. If our knowledge of the flagellants in Strassburg is particularly full, this is mainly because the chronicle of Fritsche Closener, representing an early instance of this historiographic species, furnished a medium for the discussion of the penitents and was furthermore supplemented by the chronicle of Matthias of Neuenburg, from an earlier chronicle tradition. Information for the initial stage of the movement is especially meager, because the sources for Austria are actually late specimens of monastic annals, rather than chronicles, and they naturally discuss the movement in a customarily brief fashion. For this reason, one cannot accept the conclusions that Erbstösser draws from the silence of these sources. It is quite possible that Austrian flagellants neither preached nor read the heavenly letter. But even if they had done so, it is not altogether clear that the annalists would have mentioned such details. For the same reason, one must reject Erbstösser's premise that certain areas were isolated centers of the movement, whereas other territories were merely areas of transition. All that we know of the flagellants in Augsburg, for example, is that supposedly 400 of them appeared there.⁴⁸

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–67.

48. CDS, IV, 308.

But the reason for this paucity of information is clear: there were no genuine chroniclers writing in Augsburg at this time, and the fragmentary reference to the 400 flagellants derives ultimately from anonymous annals which discuss all subjects in a cursory manner. If there had been chroniclers in Augsburg as early as in Strassburg, we might find that Bavarian Swabia was as much a center of the movement as the Upper Rhine.

When all of this is said, however, Erbstösser's most important point remains: the differentiation that we need to make is geographical rather than chronological, and the area of greatest radicalization was Thuringia and its vicinity. The most crucial question, then, is why the flagellants in these territories of central Germany took on such radical features. Erbstösser suggests that the heresy of the Free Spirit and diverse millenarian and messianic traditions were especially prevalent in precisely these territories; thus, the distinctive character of the flagellants in central Germany is best explained by tracing the influence of these preexisting ideologies on the flagellant movement.

In viewing these regions as hotbeds of heretical sentiment, Erbstösser accurately reflects the opinion of late medieval churchmen, who commonly focused on Thuringia in their efforts to find heretics of the Free Spirit.⁴⁹ One may question whether the heretics they uncovered were in fact Free Spirits—but that is a matter that need not concern us now. The more important question for present purposes is whether the sources for the flagellant movement of 1348–49 show any doctrinal resemblance to millenarian groups and Free Spirits.

There are two contemporary accounts that historians sometimes cite as evidence for millenarian heresy among the flagellants of this period. First, the chronicle of Fritsche Closener reports that the movement was supposed to last for 33½ years.⁵⁰ It is tempting to dismiss this account as a garbled variation on the more common idea, that the 33½ days of flagellation symbolized the 33½ years of Christ's life. But even if the notion is accurately conveyed, and even if it was widespread among the flagellants, there is nothing explicitly millenarian about it. There is no reason to assume that the flagellants expected the fulfillment of the Apocalypse at the end of the 33½-year period. Presumably they expected the plague to have subsided by then, but that was per-

49. See especially the excellent work of Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972), pp. 134–41.

50. CDS, VIII, 120.

haps all they anticipated. The second piece of evidence is more explicit in its millenarian tone: a poem inserted in a chronicle from Erfurt speaks of the flagellants as “gens Antichristi.”⁵¹ But this idea is surely attributable not to the flagellants themselves—who would hardly have identified themselves as allies of the forces of iniquity⁵²—but to the poet. The text tells us what the poet felt about the flagellants, but has no obvious bearing on the flagellants’ own ideology. One should also note that the heavenly letter which the flagellants read in some cities contains forebodings of imminent doom, but makes no reference to the thousand-year kingdom that lay at the root of millenarian ideology.⁵³

The best evidence for millenarian beliefs, however, is not contemporary; it is an antihetical treatise from the fifteenth century, the so-called Breslau Manuscript.⁵⁴ Erbstösser is probably right in suggesting that this treatise, now in the Breslau University Library, originated in Erfurt and hence refers to the Thuringian flagellants rather than those in Silesia. He is unquestionably right in stating that the author of this treatise is referring to the flagellants of the mid-fourteenth century, and not to the flagellants of his own time, whose millenarian leanings are undeniable.⁵⁵ It is not so clear, however, that

51. MGH SS rer. Germ. XLII, 44.

52. It is conceivable that the flagellants used the vernacular *endekrist* with reference to themselves, since that term had a positive meaning; cf. Lerner, *Heresy of The Free Spirit*, p. 144 (esp. n. 45), for a discussion of this term. But it would be unwarranted to assume that the chronicler’s pejorative term was originally suggested by a similar (but favorable) expression current among the flagellants themselves.

53. CDS, VIII, esp. pp. 112–14.

54. The relevant sections of the MS are given in Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, p. 27, n. 82. The text of the MS, however, seems to be corrupt in several places; e.g., “multa animalia non tamen frivola quam insana garriebant” should surely be “multa alia non tam frivola”

55. I suspect, however, that the millenarian element even in the later flagellants has been greatly exaggerated in the literature. Millenarian themes are most strongly expressed in the articles of the Sangerhausen flagellants, tried in 1414; these articles are printed in Augustin Stumpf, “Historia flagellantium, praecipue in Thuringia,” *Neue Mittheilungen aus dem Gebiete historisch-antiquarischer Forschung*, II (1835), 26–32, and in Alexander Reifferscheid, ed., *Neue Texte der religiösen Aufklärung in Deutschland während des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts* (Greifswald, 1905), pp. 32–36. These themes also occur in the *Prophetica Conradi Smedis*, printed in Stumpf, “Historia flagellantium,” pp. 16–24, though they are more explicitly and more elaborately stated in the hostile Latin glosses than in the German text. If the Breslau MS applies to the later flagellants, it too suggests at least a vague millenarianism. But the remaining documents for these flagellants, including the articles from Sangerhausen, say nothing of such beliefs (cf. this and other relevant documents in Stumpf and Reifferscheid). When flagellants appeared before inquisitors later in the century, virtually no reference was made to millenarian principles: neither the flagellants at Nordhausen in 1446 (*Historische Nachrichten von der Käyserl. und des Heil. Röm. Reichs Freyen Stadt Nordhausen* [Leipzig and Nordhausen, 1740]; also in Förstemann, *Geisslergesellschaften*, pp. 278–91) nor the flagellant in the diocese of

the author succeeded in distinguishing the earlier flagellants from their successors.⁵⁶ As a theologian rather than a chronicler, he may have had little interest in maintaining this distinction. For lack of corroboration in earlier sources, we must read this fifteenth-century account with the utmost caution.

At the same time, it would be rash to draw a universal negative conclusion. It would be impossible to show that there were no cases in which individual flagellants held millenarian notions. What we can show is that the sources provide no convincing evidence of such beliefs, either for Thuringia or for other regions. Hence, even if individual penitents adopted such ideology, it probably did not become widespread or important in the movement.

The influence of the heresy of the Free Spirit is even more questionable. Again Erbstösser relies on the Breslau Manuscript, in which he finds certain traits common to the flagellants and the Free Spirits: the rejection of the Church's authority, of the Eucharist, and of the Church's penitential power (which both the flagellants and the Free Spirits claimed for their own leaders). Yet there is nothing distinctive about these beliefs. They were found in virtually all medieval heresies and were in fact emphasized more among the Waldensians than among heretics of the Free Spirit.⁵⁷ It is not surprising if such tendencies

Halberstadt in 1481 (Johann Erhard Kapp, ed., *Fortgesetzte Sammlung von alten und neuen theologischen Sachen* [Leipzig, 1747], pp. 475–83) betrayed the slightest trace of such beliefs; among a group at Göttingen, in 1453, millenarianism had been reduced to the belief “dass sie müsten helfen Gott dass Gerichte sitzen in novissimo die mit ihrem Glauben, et probarunt hoc dicto: multi vero electi.” *Zeit- und Geschichts-Beschreibung der Stadt Göttingen*, II (Hanover and Göttingen, 1736), pp. 256–61, esp. p. 257. Throughout the later fourteenth and the fifteenth century, the flagellants' attitude toward the sacraments seems to have been far more important to them and to the Church than their eschatology.

56. The passage most difficult to reconcile with this thesis is the following: “Item de quadam sua cantilena dicebant quod post 17 annos immediate presentem annum domini 1349 sequentes religiones et praecipue mendicantium ordines post multis [sic in Erbstösser] tribulationes deficient substituto quodam novo ordine.” It is unlikely that this neo-Joachimite notion was retrospective—i.e., that the hymn in question was composed after the new order had supposedly been instated, though even this is of course possible. The possibilities for confusion, however, are numerous: for instance, the author of the Breslau MS may have found a hymn that spoke of a new order as arising in seventeen years, and may simply have assumed that the hymn derived from 1349.

57. I am not suggesting here that the Waldensians exercised influence on the flagellants, though this would not have been a priori impossible: contrary to what Erbstösser suggests (*Strömungen*, pp. 32 and 76), there no doubt were Waldensians at least in Erfurt, though, like the Waldensian communities in virtually all parts of Germany, they did not come to light until the end of the fourteenth century. Cf. the text in Herman Haupt, *Der Walden-*

began to develop among the flagellants with anticlerical leanings; disdain for priests no doubt led naturally to an attitude (if not a doctrine) of disdain for orthodox sacerdotal functions.

Perhaps realizing that the Breslau Manuscript furnishes only a most tenuous link between the flagellants and the heretics of the Free Spirit, Erbstösser proceeds to a text that he considers his trump card, a passage from the chronicle of Heinrich of Herford:

One might say to [the flagellants], "Why do you preach, when you are not sent?" For as the Apostle says, "How shall they preach, if they are not sent?" And one might ask, "Why do you teach what you do not understand, illiterate as you are?" They would respond, turning the tables about, "And who has sent you, and how do you know that you consecrate the body of Christ, or that the gospel that you preach is true?" One might answer them, as a certain Preaching Brother did, that we receive these things from our Savior, who consecrated his body and ordered his disciples and their followers to consecrate it, establishing the form of consecration, by which it comes down to us; and that we are sent by the Church, which also teaches us that the gospel we preach is true, and which cannot err because it is ruled by the Holy Spirit. They then say that they are more immediately taught and sent by the Lord and the Spirit of God, according to Isaiah, chapter 48[:16]: "The Lord and his Spirit have sent me."⁵⁸

Although Heinrich of Herford wrote his chronicle in the Lower Saxon city of Minden, Erbstösser assumes that this formalized dialogue took place in the vicinity of Thuringia or Franconia, since the passage immediately before this quotation refers to an incident that occurred in that general vicinity.⁵⁹ What he fails to mention is that these two passages are separated by a transitional sentence: "And they did many similar things in many places." The ascription of this dialogue to central Germany is therefore possible, but by no means necessary. In any case, the inferences that Erbstösser makes raise serious questions. He first asks what the flagellants meant when they claimed more immediate divine teaching and more direct mission than the clergy had.

sische Ursprung des Codex Teplensis (Würzburg, 1886), p. 36, and in J. J. I. von Döllinger, ed., *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, II (Munich, 1890), p. 330, regarding the inquisition at Erfurt in 1391.

58. Heinrich von Herford, p. 282.

59. Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, p. 34.

He rules out the suggestion that these flagellants were referring to the heavenly letter, or to an inspiration derived from the act of flagellation. By process of elimination, then, he suggests that this passage shows the influence of the heresy of the Free Spirit; like the Free Spirits, the flagellants supposedly felt themselves superior to the clergy by virtue of their spiritual perfection. By this criterion, however, even the apostolic preachers of the twelfth century could be identified as heretics of the Free Spirit.⁶⁰ Placed in the position of having to defend their authority to preach, the apostolic preachers of the earlier period had appealed to the text of St. Matthew, "Go forth and preach to all nations." The flagellants, according to Heinrich of Herford, appealed instead to the similar line from Isaiah. After all, what else could they say? If they had no preaching authority from the Church, they had to claim it from God, and if they could support their claim with a scriptural text, so much the better. The proposal that the flagellants came under the influence of Free Spirits is thus a needlessly devious explanation for this passage.

It is true that some of the sources speak of the flagellants as associating with "beghards" or "lollards."⁶¹ But in the late Middle Ages these terms were commonly used as abusive terms for religious enthusiasts of all sorts; without specific evidence, it would be rash to assume that a "beghard" was in fact a heretic of the Free Spirit, though many historians tend to equate the terms.⁶² For the same reason it is difficult to fathom the precise meaning of a report from Michael de Leone that the flagellants preached "heretical errors, especially those of the beghards and the Waldensians."⁶³ If one feels compelled to take this report at all seriously, then one must accept the fact that the chronicler speaks of both beghard and Waldensian ideas. It is sheerly arbitrary to assume, as Erbstösser does in his comments on this passage, that there really were beghard influences but not Waldensian influences.⁶⁴ It would be most peculiar, however, for a sect to subscribe to the *distinctive* ideas of both the heretics of the Free Spirit and the Waldensians simultaneously. Their systems of thought were perhaps

60. Regarding the early apostolic movements, see especially Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, 2d ed. (Hildesheim, 1961), pp. 13-69, 503-13.

61. E.g., Fredericq, *Corpus*, I, 198.

62. On the relation between beghards and heretics of the Free Spirit, see Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp. 35-60.

63. In Böhmer, *Fontes*, I (Stuttgart, 1843), 476.

64. Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, pp. 32 f.; cf. above, n. 57.

not wholly incompatible, but they were very different in their inclinations, and there is no report of anyone in the late Middle Ages who did in fact adhere to both heresies.⁶⁵ If we are to make any sense out of the chronicler's statement, then, we should probably conclude that the doctrines he is speaking of are those that were common to both these sects. But these are precisely those antiecclesiastical notions which, as we have already seen, would begin to develop spontaneously because of the flagellants' anticlerical stance. We need not assume, therefore, that there was any actual influence upon the flagellants from either of these sects. Evidently the "heretical" doctrines in question amounted simply to disrespect for the Church and all its works and pomps—an attitude that could be classified as "beghard" or "Waldensian" in a loose sense only to emphasize its dangers.

The last of the contemporary texts that bears on this matter is the *Chronicon minus* of Gilles Li Muisis, who tells of a Dominican who compared the blood of the flagellants with that of Christ and preached many other things "touching upon error."⁶⁶ Significantly, it was not the flagellants themselves who devised these notions, but a sympathetic preacher. The analogy with Christ's blood is reminiscent of mystical notions,⁶⁷ but has no specific resemblance to the doctrines of the Free Spirit. What is most crucial, it does not involve comparison of the flagellants with the deity per se, but emphasizes the correspondence between the suffering of the flagellants and the passion of Christ. Nor did the preacher say anything, so far as we know, to the effect that the flagellants could attain a state of divine perfection, in which any act would be sinless.

Apart from these contemporary texts, there is once again an item of

65. Waldensians were sometimes found who lived in beguinages, but there is no indication that they were radical beguines, or heretics of the Free Spirit; see Timotheus Wilhelm Röhrich, *Mittheilungen aus der Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche des Elsasses*, I (Strassburg and Paris, 1855), 26 f., 64 f.; Dietrich Kurze, "Zur Ketzergeschichte der Mark Brandenburg und Pommerns, vornehmlich im 14. Jahrhundert," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands*, XVI/XVII (1968), 88, n. 203; and Gottlieb Friedrich Ochsenbein, *Aus dem schweizerischen Volksleben des XV. Jahrhunderts: Der Inquisitionsprozess wider die Waldenser zu Freiburg i.U. im Jahre 1430* (Bern, 1881), pp. 221-25, 230, 241.

66. Fredericq, *Corpus*, II, 102.

67. Erbstösser (*Strömungen*, p. 61) dismisses all too hastily the most plausible interpretation: "Handelt es sich um eine masslose Übersteigerung des ursprünglichen Anliegens des Geisselns, durch ähnliches Blutvergiessen wie er die Leiden Christi nachzufühlen? Dass ein Dominikaner eine solche Interpretation beabsichtigte, ist ziemlich unglauwürdig." But it was precisely the Dominicans who had long been associated with the endeavor to establish a popular variety of mysticism; it is entirely possible that a Dominican might interpret the act of flagellation in this mystical fashion.

relevance from the early fifteenth century. A group of flagellants went before an inquisitor at Sangerhausen in 1414, after the movement had become explicitly sectarian; one of the heretical articles attributed to these later flagellants was "that Elijah, now dead, was a certain beghard who was burned in Erfurt 48 years ago for heresy."⁶⁸ Erbstösser identifies this beghard as Johann Hartmann, a heretic burned at Erfurt in 1367,⁶⁹ and marvels that the flagellants should recall the year of his death with such near precision. This identification is possible, but since a great many beghards underwent persecution in Erfurt in the late 1360's one can hardly draw any confident conclusions in this regard.⁷⁰ It would be rash even to assert that the term "beghard" was here being used in any strict sense. But even if we grant Erbstösser's notion that the beghard really was a heretic of the Free Spirit, this shows at most that at some time a personal affinity developed between certain of the later flagellants and certain heretics of the Free Spirit. It does not prove that there was doctrinal influence between the two groups. In the tenets of the flagellants condemned in 1414, one is struck by a singular absence of any beliefs distinctive to the heretics of the Free Spirit.⁷¹ And if even the later, more explicitly heretical flagellants remained unaffected by the specific doctrines of the Free Spirit, one can scarcely argue that their earlier counterparts were radicalized by contact with these doctrines.

IV

We are still confronted with the fact that the flagellants of central Germany were distinctively radical. Can we account for this development without subscribing to Erbstösser's thesis? Perhaps the question should rather be why we need to account for it at all. As Herbert

68. Reifferscheid, *Neue Texte*, p. 35; the corresponding text in Strumpf, "Historia flagellantium," p. 31, does not refer to the reborn Elias as having been a beghard.

69. Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, p. 79, n. 24.

70. The *Detmar-Chronik*, in CDS, XIX, 539, speaks of 200 heretics burned at Erfurt. Hermann Korner, in his *Chronica Novella*, ed. Jakob Schwalm (Göttingen, 1895), speaks in the early versions of "plus quam quadragente persone, que contra fidem senciebant" (p. 66), and in later versions speaks more specifically of two who were burned in 1369 as obdurate heretics (p. 285), though he does not indicate whether these were the only two to be burned during these years.

71. Erbstösser argues (*Strömungen*, esp. pp. 76 f.) that the sources for the later flagellants once again show influence of heretics of the Free Spirit. The arguments used are fundamentally analogous to those which Erbstösser employs earlier in his book and do not require special discussion, especially since they do not bear directly on the subject of this article.

Grundmann has made clear in his study of other religious movements, the attitude of the clergy was largely instrumental in determining whether a lay movement would become radical or whether it would enter under clerical supervision and become serviceable to the Church; if the clergy had not "hereticated" the Waldensians, for instance, they might not have become in fact heretical.⁷² The same principle applies to the flagellants. We need not hypothesize either corruption by lower-class and criminal elements or influence of preexisting ideologies. The possibilities for radicalization were inherent in the movement from its start. If the flagellants of Austria were not as vehemently anticlerical as those in Thuringia (and owing to the nature of the sources it would be difficult to substantiate this point), the relative tameness of the Austrian groups may derive from their relatively small numbers.⁷³ Central Germany was the first place in which large numbers of flagellants seem to have gathered, without any form of discipline or supervision. The threat to the Church's authority was obvious; confrontations were perhaps inevitable. The anomaly would seem to be the moderation of the movement when it spread from central Germany to the Southwest. Without coming under ecclesiastical or governmental control, the flagellants there are said to have imposed rigid discipline on themselves. To be sure, this self-control was not wholly effective in preventing friction between the penitents and the clergy, but so far as we know there was no radicalization such as developed in the central territories. One would like to know something about how this discipline was instigated and enforced, but on these matters the sources are silent. It is tempting, for example, to speculate that there may have been a split in the movement in Thuringia; that the radical members remained there and in the latter part of the century formed a sect, whereas the moderates moved south and west, developing their rigid discipline as a reaction against the radical outgrowth they left behind. In any case, the absence of radical developments among the flagellants in the Southwest is more of a mystery than the occurrence of such developments elsewhere.

One may perhaps shed a few rays of light on the matter by investigating the relationship between the flagellant movement and the

72. This is a fundamental theme of Grundmann's *Religiöse Bewegungen* (see above, n. 60).

73. Numerical assessment is admittedly based on slender evidence. The *Continuatio Zwetlensis quarta*, in MGH SS, IX, 685.

plague. The course of the plague can be traced with a fair degree of confidence: coming from southern Europe, it spread in a generally northward and northeastward direction.⁷⁴ The spread of the flagellant movement, on the other hand, is more difficult to discern and has given rise to disagreement, though if we abstract from minor splinter groups we may trace the spread of the movement with reasonable certainty: beginning in Austria and perhaps Hungary, the main current of the movement moved north and northwest into Thuringia, then down into Franconia, to the Upper Rhine, and then northward to the Low Countries.⁷⁵ Roughly speaking, then, the course was that of a sideways S. Thus, from autumn of 1348 to spring of 1349, when the flagellants moved from Austria to Thuringia and down into Franconia, they were several months in advance of the plague. Sometime in late spring or early summer 1349 the flagellants in their southwestern progression (from Thuringia toward the Southwest) met with the plague in its northeastern movement. From this point on, as the processions spread they entered territories that had already succumbed to the plague. For example, the penitents entered Magdeburg and Erfurt at least six months before the plague reached these cities, but in Strassburg, Cologne, and the Low Countries the movement arrived only after the onset of the plague.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the movement became overtly radical in regions where it preceded the plague, and took on moderate form in precisely those areas where the plague preceded it. Prior to the convergence of the movement and the disease, the flagellants had gone about as precursors of the plague, encouraging people to do penance so that God would spare them the disease. Subsequent to the meeting, though, the movement changed its fundamental purpose; the most it could expect was deliverance from a disease which had already arrived, or protection for the individual flagellant.⁷⁶ It is perhaps not unreasonable to conjecture that this change in purpose brought about a change in character. It seems entirely plausible that the anticipation of disaster provoked more volatile emotions than the disaster itself.

74. Both developments are clearly sketched by James Fearn, in Hubert Jedin et al., eds., *Atlas zur Kirchengeschichte* (Freiburg i.B., 1970), No. 65.

75. The analysis commonly cited is that of Karl Lechner, in "Die grosse Geisselfahrt des Jahres 1349," *Historisches Jahrbuch*, V (1884), 445-52. But see the criticism of Lechner in Erbstösser, *Strömungen*, pp. 14-18.

76. The theme of protection for the individual is stressed especially in the notion that those who participated in the processions were *eo ipso* immune from death by the plague; cf. Fredericq, *Corpus*, II, 132.

Before the convergence with the plague, the flagellants' movement served to excite anxieties regarding the plague, but because the tensions were based (for the majority of townsmen) only on imagination of the disease, and not on experience of it, they lacked all sense of realism. During the early months, when people had heard about the plague but had not witnessed it, there was no practical action that they could take and no need for the practical functions of attending to the sick and burying the dead. The only outlet for tension, and the sole means for acting on imagined fears, was perhaps violent action; before the plague actually arrived, this action could easily be diverted against victims who had no real connection with the plague, such as the clergy and the Jews. (It is worth noting in this connection that most of the pogroms of 1348–49 took place before the onset of the plague in each particular community.)⁷⁷ Under these circumstances, one might expect that the flagellants' inherent radical tendencies would be fostered and intensified. But when the flagellants entered a town where the plague had already arrived, one might expect that the penitential purpose of the movement would be stressed more clearly, and that radical developments would be less common.

Granted, this speculative explanation probably does not suffice by itself to account for the radicalization of the movement, but it may serve as a partial explanation. The essential point is that the inclination toward radical anticlericalism was an inherent tendency within the movement. The potential for radical developments was always present, and required only a favorable context to become manifest. Thus, one need not postulate that external forces, such as lower-class membership or preexisting heresies, brought about this radicalization; this supposition is unnecessary, and is not borne out by the sources.

77. See Robert Hoeniger, *Der schwarze Tod in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1882), esp. pp. 5 and 39.