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**Radikalität und Dissent
im 16. Jahrhundert**

**Radicalism and Dissent
in the Sixteenth Century**



Duncker & Humblot · Berlin

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im 16. Jahrhundert

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR HISTORISCHE FORSCHUNG

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Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger

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Vorwort

„Dissent im 16. Jahrhundert/Dissent in the Sixteenth Century“: Unter diesem Titel fand vom 23. bis 25. August 1999 ein wissenschaftliches Symposium in Wittenberg statt, zu dem der *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte* und die nordamerikanische *Society for Reformation Research* eingeladen hatten. Der Begriff „Dissent“, für deutsche Ohren ungewöhnlich, wurde vorerst in einer ungeklärten Weise verwendet. Was war gemeint: Abweichung, Nonkonformismus, Preisgabe eines kirchlichen, politischen und gesellschaftlichen Einvernehmens oder radikale Zerstörung der bestehenden Ordnung? Dieses ungeklärte Begriffsspektrum brachte es mit sich, daß die Beiträge dieser Tagung nicht immer zueinander paßten und die Diskussionsziele undeutlich blieben. Aus diesem Grunde haben die Veranstalter beschlossen, von der sonst üblichen Veröffentlichung der Vorträge und Protokolle abzusehen. So verständlich diese Entscheidung ist, wurde sie doch besonders von denjenigen bedauert, die bereits jahrzehntelang auf diesem Gebiet gearbeitet und sich von einer Zwischenbilanz der Diskussionen neue Forschungsimpulse erhofft haben.

Wir sind den Veranstaltern, besonders Frau Prof. Dr. Lee Palmer Wandel und Frau Prof. Dr. Luise Schorn-Schütte, dankbar dafür, daß sie uns erlaubt haben, diejenigen Beiträge auszuwählen und zu veröffentlichen, die sich im engeren Sinne um den Begriff der Radikalität bzw. des Dissents gruppiert und das Thema der „radikalen Reformation“ in den Kontext der gegenwärtigen Erörterungen um den Durchsetzungsprozeß der Reformation und um die Konfessionalisierung bzw. Sozialdisziplinierung in nachreformatorischer Zeit gestellt haben.

Es wurde allerdings nicht nur eine Auswahl getroffen, es mußten auch Ergänzungen vorgenommen werden. Jahrzehntlang hatte die marxistisch-leninistische Geschichtswissenschaft mit ihrer „Theorie der frühbürgerlichen Revolution“ die Diskussionen um die Radikalität der Reformation auf anregende Weise mitgeprägt und vorangetrieben. Da kein Vertreter dieser Theorie mit einem Vortrag an der Wittenberger Tagung beteiligt war, haben wir Günter Vogler, einst Historiker an der Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, gebeten, das Tagungsthema noch einmal aufzugreifen und nachträglich auf Thomas Müntzer, der gemeinhin als Prototyp reformatorischer Radikalität gilt, zu beziehen. Zur zweiten Ergänzung hat sich James M. Stayer bereiterklärt. Seine Einleitung zu diesem Sam-

melband stellt so etwas wie die erwartete Zwischenbilanz zur Erforschung von Radikalität und Dissent dar.

Besonders dankbar sind wir Prof. Dr. Heinz Schilling, der uns mit klugem Rat den Weg geebnet hat, diese Sammlung als Beiheft zur *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* veröffentlichen zu können.

Hamburg und Kingston, Ont.,
im März 2001

Hans-Jürgen Goertz und James M. Stayer

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Introduction

Radicalism and Dissent – a provisional Assessment

By James M. Stayer, Kingston, Ontario

1. The refinement of the theme of radicalism in the Reformation

This collection is intended as a contribution to a continuing discussion of “living texts,” written by scholars both living and deceased. No scholar has had a stronger investment in the conception of sixteenth-century radicalism than George Huntston Williams (1914–2000), who coined the notion of *The Radical Reformation* in his monumental book of that title in 1962 – and reasserted it in massively revised second (1983) and third (1993) editions.¹ The persuasiveness of Williams’ conception in the Anglo-American world grew out of the historic strength of the dissenter or nonconformist tradition in England, which became the dominant strain of Protestantism in the United States of America, with its constitutional prohibition of religious establishments. It is appropriate that we bring the theme of “dissent” into sharper focus in this volume by drawing upon the scholarly discussion of religious radicalism, which is certainly its conceptual descendant.

At the same time the notion of sixteenth-century radicalism illustrates the murky waters in which the organizing conceptions of the history and theology of the German Reformation germinated – or, as the post-Marxist French intellectuals put it, the *bricolage* (roughly: “improvisatorial”) character of conceptualization in the “human sciences.” In his later years, although Williams continued to lovingly polish the notion of a Radical Reformation, to be compared on equal terms to the Magisterial Reformation (his collective term for the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican established churches) and the Counter Reformation, he became less insistent on the internal coherence of the various persons and groups that were despised and rejected by established Protestantism, acknowledging that his term was a *Sammelbegriff*. Possibly more important, Wil-

¹ *George Huntston Williams*, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia, PA, 1962; *La Reforma Radical* (Fondo de Cultura Económica), 2. ed., Mexico 1983; 3. ed. (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, Vol. 15), Kirksville, MO, 1992.

Williams recognized that, in the state of scholarship of the time he authored *The Radical Reformation* in the 1950s and 1960s, it was destined to become an encyclopedic summa of the “Bender school,” the group of Mennonite and Mennonite-friendly scholars gathered around the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* from its establishment in 1927 by Harold S. Bender to the time of Bender’s death in 1962. The Bender school was dedicated in an exaggeratedly defensive manner to the rehabilitation of the reputation of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition of the sixteenth century. It developed a conception of “Evangelical Anabaptism” which presented all “real Anabaptists”² as peaceful and striving for personal holiness, thus completely separated from Thomas Müntzer and the Münster Kingdom. Williams certainly defined his Radical Reformation in broader terms than the Bender school’s conception of Evangelical Anabaptism; but Anabaptism, as Bender viewed it, nevertheless provided the inner core around which Williams constructed a more extensive entity, “topographically and topically complete from Spain to the Ukraine, from Anglia to Livonia.”

In the period around 1960 it seemed as though a valid Reformation, of whatever sort, must be articulated theologically; it was the only way to keep pace with the dominant fixation of the period since 1920 upon the close exegesis of the writings of Martin Luther. The Bender school and its fellow travelers had evaded this issue by asserting that there was no theological difference between the major Reformers and the Anabaptists; but that the Anabaptists had simply added to Luther’s recovery of original Christian doctrine their own restoration of the ecclesiology of the primitive church. Not so Williams. He focused on an apparent consensus on human free will in the Radical Reformation, as opposed to the predestinarianism of the major Reformers; and upon curious beliefs like the sleep of the soul, with which he bemused the conservative Mennonite scholars. His Radical Reformation was buttressed by ambitious slogans – his radicals allegedly went to the root of the Christian faith; they trumped a mere reformation of the church by a “restitution” of original Christianity, which “more radically” stripped Christianity of medieval tradition and pagan accretions. Its major substance, however, was non-

² Prominent works of the “Bender school” are: *Harold S. Bender*, Conrad Grebel, 1498-1526. The Founder of the Swiss Brethren, Goshen, IN, 1950; *Robert Friedmann*, Mennonite Piety through the Centuries. Its Genius and its Literature, Goshen, IN, 1949; *Friedmann*, Hutterite Studies, Goshen, IN, 1961; *Friedmann*, The Theology of Anabaptism, Scottsdale, PA, 1973; *John Howard Yoder*, Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz, 1: Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren, 1523-1538, Karlsruhe 1962; *Yoder*, Täuferium und Reformation im Gespräch, Zürich 1968. The Bender school is discussed at length below in my paper “The Significance of Anabaptism and Anabaptist Research.”

theological, as illustrated by the fundamental contrast between the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation; Williams' Radical Reformation, like Roland H. Bainton's "Left Wing of the Reformation,"³ was that part of the Reformation which anticipated the American constitutional principle of separation of church and state. It excluded the magistrate from the sphere of religion; in that sense "radical" took on the connotations of political radicalism, rather than going to the root of things theologically. Indeed, the students of Luther's theology could make a very strong case that Luther, not his critics within the Reformation, was the most innovative and creative, the most radical, theologian.⁴

Since he styled his Radical Reformation as a theological entity, Williams tried to categorize it theologically. His major divisions were between Anabaptism, Spiritualism and Evangelical Rationalism. The first two groupings, which still put their stamp on the papers in the Wittenberg symposium of 1999, were not original to Williams but were derived from the religious sociology which Ernst Troeltsch articulated in 1912. They were not primarily theological; and their historical validity is still open to question because of the constant interweaving of Anabaptism and Spiritualism in sixteenth-century Germany. In 1957 Williams ventured onto "a characterization and further classification of the subtypes of Anabaptism and of Spiritualism." Besides evangelical Anabaptism, there were revolutionary and contemplative Anabaptism; and Spiritualism was dissected into revolutionary, evangelical and rationalist varieties.⁵ At least until Emmet McLaughlin resumed the project of developing typologies of Spiritualism in his contribution to this volume, Williams' classifications proved entirely useless as an organizing principle for scholarship, including Williams' own work in *The Radical Reformation*, which appeared five years later. Equally problematic with Williams' attempt at a theological taxonomy of the dissenting groups of the Reformation was his insistence that there was a fundamental theological caesura between the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation. This was a notion made to order for the era of Lutherocentrism, in which "*Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr wird vergehen nimmermehr*" – when Luther's theology was the accepted norm of the (Magisterial) Reformation. However, 1962 was important not only for the publication of Williams' book and Bender's passing, it was also the year of the

³ Roland H. Bainton, *The Left Wing of the Reformation*, in: *The Journal of Religion* 21 (1941), 124–34.

⁴ Karl Gerhard Steck, *Luther und die Schwärmer*, Zollikon-Zürich, 1955.

⁵ *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers. Documents illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, ed. by George Huntston Williams/Angel M. Mergel, London 1957, 28–35.