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The Spiritual Awakenings That Influenced the Protestant Reformation

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Abstract: Throughout the centuries, as the Church—united with the state—strayed further and further from the truth of the Holy Scriptures, various groups of Christians strove to remain faithful to the pure teachings of the New Testament. Thus, God never remained without His people, people who confessed Him both by their lives and with their mouths, even at the risk of their lives. Among these groups, the Donatists, Waldensians, and Anabaptists are particularly noteworthy. Subjected to savage persecution by the Western Church, harassed everywhere, tortured, slaughtered, and largely massacred, these people "did not love their lives, even unto death." As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: "...some, in order to obtain a better resurrection, did not want to receive the deliverance that was offered to them and were tortured. Others suffered mockery, beatings, chains, and imprisonment; they were stoned, sawed in two, tortured; they died by the sword; they went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:35-38). This study aims to explore these spiritual awakenings and the courageous communities and individuals behind them, showing how their convictions and sacrifices helped pave the way for the Protestant Reformation.

Keywords: spiritual awakenings, Protestants, religious reforms, Waldensians, mystics, Wycliffe, Hus

1. Introduction

All these spiritual awakenings, which we will discuss in this article, attest to a deep spiritual interest rooted in the Word of God and a constant intensification of the strength and depth of religious feelings around the time of the Reformation (Timothy, 2017, p. 31). It is worth noting that, in addition to the general groups mentioned in abstract terms—those that sparked spiritual awakenings across Europe—we should also mention the important contribution made by certain figures in church history to the spiritual awakenings that preceded the Protestant Reformation. Among these, I would mention William Ockham, the Scholastic Mystics, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and Savonarola, who made a considerable contribution to the preparation of the Reformation. Many of their ideas were taken up and preached by the reformers (Eliade, 1988, p. 206).

2. Spiritual Awakenings

Several spiritual awakenings played a significant role in preparing the way for the Reformation. These include the Waldensians, William Ockham, the medieval mystics, the Brotherhood of the Common Life, John Wycliffe, and Jan Hus. We cannot talk about all of them, as the space of this article does not allow it. That is why I have chosen those who had a stronger resonance in terms of the biblical basis of their faith as well as their influence on the figures of the Reformation, especially Luther (Rotaru, 2014, pp. 45-126).

2.1. Valdenzii

The oldest pre-Reformation Christian group, which existed and still exists today, is the Waldensians. They took their name from a wealthy merchant from Lyon named Petro Valdes (Peter Waldo), who around 1175-1176 distributed his wealth to the poor and decided to follow Christ's example, living a life of poverty and preaching the Gospel. He had a translation of the New Testament from Latin into the language spoken by the people, a translation that formed the basis of his evangelism. Consecrated men and women joined him, and this ideal of a life of

poverty and simplicity was approved by Pope Alexander III in 1179, but he forbade them to preach without the authorization of the local clergy (Eliade 1988, p. 209).

For this reason, it is important to discuss them. Elizabeth Livingstone describes their beginnings as follows: "This small Christian community, which survives in Piedmont, has its origins in the group organized in the 12th century by Petro Valdes, from whom they took their name... Valdes was a wealthy merchant from Lyon who died between 1205 and 1218. In 1173 or shortly thereafter, he distributed his wealth to the poor and became an itinerant preacher; He soon attracted a crowd of followers, men, women, and... Alexander III approved Valdes' vow of poverty, but forbade him and his companions from preaching without the invitation of the clergy. Valdes soon began to disobey the prohibition imposed on him... Valdes and his followers organized themselves separately from the Church, ignored its decrees and sanctions, and appointed their own ministers. Above all, they insisted on their right and duty to preach" (Eliade 1988, p. 110).

After a while, they fled Lyon and organized their movement as a church, electing bishops, priests, and deacons. Eventually, they declared themselves the true Church and spread everywhere: in southern France and Spain, then in Germany, Piedmont, and Lombardy, but predominantly in Lombardy (northern Italy) and Provence (southern France), where Hussite and Waldensian tendencies intertwined in an interesting way. Because they had renounced all material possessions in order to imitate Christ, the Waldensians were sometimes called *nudi nudum Christum sequentes*, meaning "the naked ones who followed the naked Christ" (Timothy, 2017, p. 48). The powerful Pope Innocent III could not tolerate this situation.

In 1214, he called the Waldensians heretics and schismatics, and in 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Innocent III repeated the general designation of heretics, including the Waldensians. However, the Waldensians spread so widely geographically, numerically, and doctrinally that in 1218 they convened a general council in Bergamo (Italy) where they discussed the doctrinal differences between the Waldensians of Lombardy and those of France. Later, they were persecuted by the Inquisition, which was unable to destroy them. Their teaching, which the Pope rejected, was the unauthorized preaching of the Bible and the rejection of the intermediary role of the clergy, the two fundamental issues that earned them the label of heretics.

One of the most convenient sources of Waldensian teaching is a treatise written around 1320 by Bernard Gui, a famous French inquisitor at a time when the Waldensians were still one of the most powerful dissident movements. He describes them as rejecting ecclesiastical authority, especially by disobeying the Pope or his decrees of excommunication, and by reinterpreting all Roman Catholic sacraments except confession and absolution and communion (David, 1998, p. 233). In theory, all Waldensians, men and women, could administer these sacraments, and the Eucharist was celebrated once a year. It seems that a Waldensian baptism was also practiced. Roman Catholic holidays and prayers were rejected by the Waldensians. Gui accused them of setting themselves up as an alternative church in which the "priest" was simply a good man, rather than someone ordained by the Church. This seemed to him to be much more difficult than another important distinctive feature of the Waldensians, missionary preaching in the local language, with a strong emphasis on the New Testament. They refused to take oaths, saying that the Bible forbade it. The Waldensians denied purgatory because they found no basis for it in the New Testament, thus denying the Roman Catholic belief in prayers and almsgiving for the dead. For the Waldensians, if the dead were in hell, there was no hope for them, and if they were in heaven, they did not need prayer (David, 1998, p. 234).

Regarding the organization of the Church, Gui says that the Waldensians had superiors and believers. The superiors had to live more austere lives, being obliged to evangelize and wander around preaching incessantly like the apostles (David, 1998, p. 235). The points noted

by the inquisitor Gui were again revealed by subsequent inquisitors in the 15th and 16th centuries, with certain features that seem to have become more radical. They were accused of rejecting church buildings, cemeteries, altars, holy water, liturgies, pilgrimages, and indulgences, all of which were considered unnecessary. The Waldensian "clergy" continued to devote themselves exclusively to preaching in the local dialect. The areas where they were strongest were in Central Europe and the Roman Catholic countries of Eastern Europe. The French Waldensians continued to be harassed until the end of the Middle Ages. This culminated in a crusade against them in 1488 in Dauphine (Dofine). In Italy, they continued to resist the Inquisition successfully, finding refuge mainly in Piedmont, where they were attacked in 1488. The work of those in Central Europe and the Roman Catholic part of Eastern Europe would later influence the course of the Protestant Reformation (Tillich, 1952, p. 34).

In the 15th century, despite repeated campaigns against them, the Waldensians traveled extensively throughout Central Europe and exchanged ideas with the Czech Hussites and English Wycliffites present in the region. The life of these believers in the mountains was not easy as long as they were sought for execution. However, after a while, the people living at the foot of the mountains offered them help, and later the "brothers of Bohemia" were a help to them, attempting to unify with the Waldensians. Later, they made contact with the reformers, being strongly influenced by Calvin's theology and identifying largely with the Reformers (Tillich, 1952, p. 35). Despite all the persecution they have suffered over time, they have remained and still exist today, as Gunar Westin writes: "They still live in Italy today and are unique in their own way, a free Protestant church from the 12th century, which is full of vitality" (Andreiescu, 1998, p. 26).

Alongside these Christian groups (Rotaru, 2023b, pp. 62-79) within the official church, there were also prominent men, scholars of the Holy Scriptures, remarkable theologians, who understood from their personal study, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the truths of the Bible and the errors of Catholic doctrine. The most notable representatives we will discuss in this chapter are John Wycliffe and Jan Huss.

2.2. The Brotherhood of Life in Common (Devotio Moderna)

This was a community of men, both lay and clerical, who gathered at Radewijns' house in Deventer. They were mainly his friends who shared the same way of thinking and were followers of Groote Geert—a native of Deventer (Netherlands) who had studied in Paris and been a professor in Cologne (Köln). He repented in 1374, later gathered pious women who lived without taking any monastic vows in his house, and then associated himself with Florens Radewijns. The latter was a priest who had studied in Prague, was a good organiser and lived between 1350 and 1400. (Recordon, 1993, p. 123).

Those who gathered at Radewijns's house became known as the Brethren of the Common Life. They were a semi-monastic group who observed the simple rules of poverty, chastity, and obedience but were not bound by any formal vows. Thus, any member was free to leave the brotherhood and return to secular life if they so desired. The brothers did not beg for alms, as the "begging brothers" did, but instead maintained silence, attended to their tasks, and worked with their own hands, following the teaching of the Apostle Paul.

When Graote died of the plague, Radewijns took over the leadership of the Devotio Moderna movement, and in 1387, the Brethren of the Common Life became Augustinian canons, their status being approved by Pope Boniface IX in 1395. A few years later, they joined forces with other houses in the Netherlands to form the Congregation of Windesheim. They devoted themselves not only to spiritual life and renunciation of the world, but also to the entire process of education. They taught in local schools and established their own schools. To support their community, they were involved in all aspects of book production: writing, copying manuscripts, binding and selling volumes, and with the advent of printing, they

printed their books in their own printing press. Over time, the movement started by Grapte gained momentum and spread. In the 15th century, the Canons of Windesheim established communities in Germany and Switzerland (Recordon, 1993, p. 125).

Many of the brothers who lived in community and were among the most educated left their mark on the Christian world through their personalities. The most notable of these were Nicolaus of Cusa (Kues) and Erasmus himself. Gabriel Biel (1420-1495), a philosopher known as "the last German scholastic," and the humanist Rudolf Agricola (1444-1485) were members of this community, as the most brilliant elements of scholasticism and humanism coexisted in *Devotio Moderna.* This community was important because of its emphasis on study. It is particularly important to know these things because they will help us to better understand Luther, who studied at such a school, and it is clear that this influenced his later ideas and theology.

2.3. William Ockham (1280-1394)

William Ockham was a Christian thinker of the highest order. He was born between 1280 and 1290, probably in the village of Ockham in Surrey, England, and died in Munich, Germany, around 1349. After joining the Franciscan order, he began his theological studies at Oxford around 1309 and fulfilled the requirements to receive the university degree of *Magister* with his lectures on Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences* between approximately 1318 and 1320. Apparently, the former chancellor of the university denounced him as a heretic to Pope John XXII, and Ockham was summoned to Avignon in 1324. When he arrived there, he became involved in a controversy over apostolic poverty that made him more critical of the papacy; he demanded that the church be ruled by a college of popes and asserted that Christ was the sole head of the church, teachings that foreshadowed the conciliar movement. Ockham also completely rejected papal authority in secular matters (Rotaru, 2005, p. 304). In 1328, he entered the service of the Roman-German Emperor, Louis of Bavaria, supporting him in his struggle against the papacy.

In his many writings, Gulielmus Occamus (his Latinized name) skillfully debated major themes of philosophy and theology with logical mastery. His principle, known as *Ockham's razor,* states: a conclusion that can be formulated based on fewer assumptions should not be formulated based on more assumptions—"what can be done with less should not be done with more." The mind should not multiply things unnecessarily. Occamus offered an elaborate critique of the proofs of God’s existence, although he himself formulated a strong positive theology (*kataphatica*), which defined God through affirmations, as opposed to negative theology (*apophatica*), according to which one can only say what God is not, not what He is (Recordon, 1993, p. 127).

Ockham's originality and depth are lacking. God is absolutely free and omnipotent; He can do anything, including contradicting Himself. For example, He can save a wicked person and condemn a saint. This is what some historians say about Ockham, because he emphasizes that God is known only through faith, not through reason or enlightenment, and that God's will is absolutely sovereign, but this does not mean that He contradicts Himself (Ozment, 1980, p. 61). In these and other respects, Ockham paved the way for the theology of the 16th-century Reformers, especially Luther, who would be influenced by his nominalism, which he would study at the University of Erfurt.

2.4. The German Mystics

The study of these mystics is important because they had the greatest influence on Luther's thinking and work.

2.4.1. Johnn Eckhart (1260-1327)

The first great mystic who influenced Luther in his later work was John Eckhart. He was a German Dominican monk whose work is at the origin of the Rhineland mystical movement and

the conceptual tradition taken up by German idealism. After his death, his teachings were condemned by Pope John XXII (1316-1334). He is now recognized as the most important force in the religious life of Germany before the Reformation (Cairns, 1977, p. 132).

2.4.2. Johnn Tauler (1300-1361)

Eckhart's student, Johnn Tauler—also a German Dominican mystic—was a powerful preacher who emphasized the insignificance of man in the presence of God. His sermons helped shape Luther's thinking at a critical stage of his spiritual experience (Gerson, 1979, p. 89).

2.4.3. Johann von Wesel (1400-1481)

Johann von Wesel, from the Rhineland, foreshadowed the German reformers in much of his teaching. He rejected many of the specific doctrines and practices of the medieval Catholic Church and declared that only the Bible was the absolute authority in matters of faith. He wrote against indulgences in 1475, was tried by the Inquisition in 1479, and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Augustinian monastery in Mainz (Gerson, 1979, p. 90).

2.4.4. Wessel Gansfort (1419-1489)

Wessel Gansfort, a Dutch theologian educated by the Brethren of the Common Life, has been called one of the biblical humanists. He also wrote against indulgences and took much the same position as Luther in attacking the claims of the pope and denouncing the errors of the Church of his day (Cairns, 1977, p. 133).

2.4.5. John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384)

It is very interesting how this believer, considered a precursor of the Reformation, appears on the scene. King John of England's submission to Pope Innocent III and his humiliation by the latter led to a hostile attitude toward the papacy in this country. The entire English nation felt humiliated by this act. The exaggerated claims of the popes and their interference in the appointment of English bishops repeatedly led to open disputes between the Church and the secular leadership, contributing to the widening of the existing gap. It was under these circumstances that Wycliffe appeared on the scene of the English Church (Cairns, 1977, p. 136).

Here is how Andrew Miller describes him: "Just when the people's patience with the abuses of the papacy seemed to have run out, God saw fit to raise up a powerful opponent of the entire hierarchical system, the first man to shake the foundations of papal domination in England, and above all, a man who sincerely loved the truth and proclaimed it to both the learned and the common people. This was John Wycliffe. He is rightly called the precursor, or the morning star of the dawn of the Reformation" (Miller, 1976, p. 397).

He spent much of his life studying and then teaching at Oxford. At first, his desire was not to fight against the authority of the Roman Catholic Church but to reform it from within. Thus, until 1378, his intention was to reform the Church by eliminating the clergy and dispossessing them of properties which, he believed, were the cause of corruption. In 1376, he wrote the work *Of Civil Dominio (On Civil Dominion),* in which he argued that there is a moral basis that ecclesiastical leadership must have. However, he could not tolerate the way in which the clergy dispossessed ordinary believers of the Church of their money. Most of the land was owned by the Church, so when he requested that its properties be confiscated, he enjoyed considerable support from the English nobility, who were very keen on this (Erwin, 2017, p. 27). If at first he attempted to reform the Church from within, later, "disgusted by schism, Wycliffe was no longer satisfied with this rather negative approach, and after 1378 he began to oppose Church dogma with revolutionary ideas" (Cairns, 1977, pp. 137–138).

The natural question that any historian asks is how Wycliffe managed to spread his ideas without being excommunicated and killed. The answer is that God protected him through the English nobles and John de Graunt. Thus, the Church did not touch him. The strongest blow he dealt to the Church was in 1379, when, without fear of the dire

consequences that might ensue, he strongly asserted in writing that "Christ is the head of the Church, not the Pope." By this he denied that the Church had absolute power, saying: "The power it lost through mortal sins." Or in other words: "even if the Pope and all the clergy disappeared from the earth... faith would not be lost, because it has its foundation only in the Lord Jesus, our Master and God" (Erwin, 2017, p. 29).

Seeing the importance that the clergy gave to the Church itself, as well as the erroneous teachings regarding its authority, thus abusing the neglect of Holy Scripture, Wycliffe could no longer tolerate this, stating that: "The Bible, and not the Church, is the sole authority for the believer, and that the Church must take its model from the New Testament Church." His criticism of the Church did not stop there, as he attacked other irregularities in his sermons, such as the worship of icons, saints, relics, and sacraments, as well as the establishment of indulgences. Wycliffe's greatest achievement was to make the Bible available to the people in English. This enabled him to better support his beliefs about the Church, the Pope, and Scripture (Erwin, 2017, p. 28).

With regard to the Eucharist, he supported consubstantiation, but the extreme he reached with regard to the sacraments was that of not recognizing any sacrament, denying the sacred character of the Eucharist. After his death, however, those who continued his teachings were called *Lollards.* These were lay preachers who continued Wycliffe's ideas, and their movement became known as the Lollard movement (Cairns, 1977, p. 141). Elisabeth A. Livingstone said about them: "The Lollards were followers of Wycliffe, basing their teachings on personal faith, divine election, and, above all, the Bible." In general, they opposed priestly celibacy, transubstantiation, indulgences, and pilgrimages, while also arguing that the validity of priestly acts was determined by the moral character of the priest. They were simple people, peasants who chose to live modestly. After 1401, the statute *haereticis comburend* approved the condemnation of any peasant or tailor who denied the sanctity of the Eucharist or who participated in evening brotherhood meetings where the Word of the Bible was preached (Erwin, 2017, p. 30).

The translation of the Bible into English and the creation of the Lollard group of preachers had an influence on the English and paved the way for the Reformation. In addition, Wycliffe's ideas spread rapidly throughout Europe. Bohemian students studying in England played an important role in spreading these ideas. They brought his ideas back to Bohemia, where they became the basis for the teachings of Jan Hus.

In conclusion, regarding Wycliffe's ideas in history, I can say that they are nothing more than "a few beams" of a bridge that spans the transition from the dark Middle Ages to the modern era, this bridge taking shape with the onset of the Reformation.

2.5. Jan Hus (1373-1415)

To understand what happened in Central Europe in the 1400s, we must remember what happened in England and its links with Central Europe. In this regard, we must not forget the marriage of Richard III of England to Anne of Bohemia, which was of particular historical importance, resulting in something practical, namely: "the exchange of students between England and Bohemia" (Erwin, 2017, p. 32). It should be noted that, as in England, nationalist sentiments were running high. In both cases, they rose up against the foreign ruler who reigned in Rome and claimed to be Christ's representative on earth. In addition, there was discontent in Bohemia because Germans held many high positions in the Church to the detriment of the Czechs, and at the University of Prague they claimed to have a privileged position (Cairns, 1977, p. 145).

The conflict between the two factions led to the Germans withdrawing from Prague and the founding of the University of Leipzig in 1409. When Wycliffe’s theological and philosophical ideas merged with Czech nationalism, a powerful emancipation movement developed in Bohemia under the tutelage of Rome.

As previously mentioned, there were student exchanges between Oxford and Prague. Wycliffe's ideas spread very quickly and easily throughout Bohemia, thanks to students who had studied in England and encountered his ideas. Finding them good, they took them back to Bohemia (Thomson, 1956, p. 169). At that time, Wycliffe's ideas were being debated in Oxford, England. These students embraced them and introduced them in their homeland. Thus, a community of admirers of Wycliffe's teachings was formed among the students in Prague, led by Jan Hus. In addition to them, many intellectuals, clergy, and laypeople also embraced his ideas (Recordon, 1993, p. 143).

Jan Hus was born in Bohmernald (now Husinet) in 1373, according to some sources on July 6, 1369, into a modest family. Left without a father at an early age, he was raised by his mother, who was a devout woman. Working hard, she helped him get into the University of Prague. Being a diligent student, he quickly adapted to his new surroundings. Interested in learning the Scriptures, he became one of the best students at the university. After completing his studies, he became a preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, having a special gift for captivating his listeners with his sermons. He was familiar with Wycliffe's ideas, so in his sermons he reproduced not only his ideas, but even his language. He played an important role at the University, where he was initially a master. After the Germans left for Leipzig, he became rector of the university in 1409. In his sermons, he attacked certain dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church and the corruption of the high clergy. Like Wycliffe, he believed that the Bible was the only authority in life and in the Christian faith: "The Church is the community of the elect, and Christ is its only Head."

For a time, it seemed that Hus would succeed in winning over the entire Czech nation to his teachings through his sermons and writings; however, there were Catholic hierarchs in Bohemia who opposed him. Although Archbishop Sbinok of Prague initially encouraged him, he soon abandoned him and sided with Pope Alexander V. Hus was forbidden to preach, and in 1410 the pope issued a bull ordering the destruction of Wycliffe's books. To curb the influence of the Czech reformer, he also forbade him to preach in private chapels. In 1411, Pope John XXIII excommunicated Hus, who had to flee Prague. During his time in exile, he devoted himself to writing, producing his main work, *De Ecclesia*, in 1413, which was directly influenced by the works of Wycliffe (Recordon, 1993, p. 144).

Summoned to appear before the Council of the Church, which took place in Constance in 1414, Hus, relying on the emperor's promise that no harm would come to him, obeyed and traveled there. Unfortunately, the emperor did not keep his word. Moreover, both Wycliffe's ideas and his teachings were condemned as heretical. Refusing to recant his teachings, Hus was imprisoned and, in 1415, burned at the stake (Rotaru, 2019, pp. 132-134). Hus's teachings could not be destroyed, as they were carried on by his followers, who divided into two camps. One was the radical camp, *the Taborites,* named after Mount Tabor, their stronghold south of Prague. They rejected any teaching regarding the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church which, they said, had no scriptural basis (Recordon, 1993, p. 145).

The second branch that supported Hus's ideas and was more moderate was that of *the Utraquists.* They had their own position, arguing that only what the Bible forbids should be eliminated and that all believers, not just the clergy, should receive both bread and wine at communion (Recordon, 1993, p. 146). The radical group of the Taborites formed the group known as the "United Brethren" or "Bohemian Brethren." They appeared around 1540, thus forming the basis of a new church that can still be found today, called the "Moravian Church." This church developed greatly through its missionary spirit, so it is not surprising to say that Hus inspired Luther. Luther had the opportunity to learn about Hus's teachings (Recordon, 1993, p. 147).

3. Conclusions

The seriousness, dedication, and religious depth of the Donatists, Waldensians, Anabaptists, Wycliffe, and Hus deserve special admiration. The old thesis that the Reformation broke out, shattering the undisturbed unity of a monolithic Christianity, must be rejected in light of what one historian has called the "fruitful plurality" of the 14th and 15th centuries (Heiko, 1978, p. 80). Both Wyclife, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," and Hus are often called precursors of the Reformation. Indeed, Hus's treatise *De Ecclesia* played a significant role in the break between Luther and the papacy. At one point, Luther was forced to admit, "Now we are all Hussites." (Todd, 1982, p. 153). Therefore, they anticipated the spirit and work of the reformers, paving the way for them and thus facilitating the emergence of the Reformation, as well as the later spiritual revivals, which were in turn influenced by the Protestant Reformation (Rotaru, 2023a, pp. 205-221).

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