

**John S. Whale, “The Heretics of the Church and  
Recurring Heresies: Montanus,” *Expository Times* 45  
(1934): 496-500.**

[p.496]

τὸ ἐλεεινὸν ἀνθρωπάριον Μοντανὸς  
(Eph. Panarion, 48. II.)

‘One of the holiest men of the second century.’  
John Wesley.

Mark Pattison said of satire that to be real it must exaggerate, but that it is always an exaggeration of known and recognized facts. Satire never creates the sentiment to which it appeals.

Many classic heresies in Christian history are patient of a like interpretation. Appealing to truth held in common by all the faithful they place disproportionate emphasis on a part, and so distort the whole; heresy is exaggeration rather than innovation. The menace of Marcion, *ipso Paulo paulinior*, lay in his exaggerated Paulinism; the confident moralism of Pelagius threatened the very genius of Christianity as the religion of redemption; and Arianism itself is mainly the illegitimate *reductio ad absurdum* of the legitimate subordinationism of Origen and the East.

Indeed, such distortions repeatedly take their rise as reactions against dreaded error. Marcion feared the threatened eclipse of Paulinism; Arianism dreaded Sabellianism and the pantheism which expresses its implicit logic; Pelagius rightly feared the loss to the faith of the Hebraic emphasis on the will and on moral realities.

I. *The Sect Type*. - Montanism, or, more accurately, ‘the heresy of the Phrygians,’ who ‘crawled over Asia and Phrygia like venomous reptiles boasting of the Paraclete Montanus and of the women in his train, Prisca and Maximilla, inasmuch as they had been his prophetesses,’<sup>1</sup> provides an early and dramatic example of just such an exaggerated reaction. Its historical importance may easily be over-estimated (Gnosticism constituted a far more dangerous crisis in the Early Church), and, as Labriolle<sup>2</sup> complains, it has been over-dramatized by many historians; yet this is natural enough, and for two related reasons.

First of all Montanism is the classic example of the sect-type destined to reappear constantly in the history of the Church from that day to this, From I Corinthians onwards emphasis on the charismatic gifts, though a sign of life and power, opens the door with notorious ease to an unbalanced subjectivity; and Montanism is rightly regarded as the prototype of those many religious revivals which have become separatist movements thanks to their disapproval of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Eus., *H.E.* v. 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Sources de l’histoire du Montanisme* (1913), a collection and translation of all the passages in early writers which refer to the movement.

*La Crise Montaniste* (1913), the fullest and most authoritative work on the subject.

Church as established, and their restless sense of the contrast between empirical and ideal Christianity.

Starting with the promises and apocalyptic visions of Scripture, nourished on the great word

[p.497]

Joel 2, and dreaming of the lost Pentecostal springtime of the Church, visionary imaginations in all ages have gone the way of Montanists with their extravagant belief in the presence and activity of the Spirit, to whose action they have abandoned themselves in complete passivity like the violin vibrating under the bow, so emphasizing the continuance of prophecy with its spasmodic ecstasies, glossolalia, and kindred manifestations. We remember Gibbon's dry remark about the whirling dervishes of the East who 'mistook the giddiness of the head for the illumination of the spirit,' and note that the phenomenon there caricatured recurs constantly in spite of divergences of race, environment, and culture: 'Le phénomène phrygien a eu, à travers l'histoire, de fréquentes récurrences, qui se sont déroulées elles-mêmes selon un cours presque typique.... Le Montanisme a revécu dans tous les mouvements religieux dont les promoteurs, s'inspirant de révélations privées et d'un commerce immédiat avec l'Hôte divin, ont conçu l'ambition de tonifier les âmes et de régénérer le Christianisme.'<sup>3</sup>

Thus Montanism is the classic type of *Schwärmerei*, the first term in that long series made up of Novatians, Donatists, Cathari, Priscillianists, the followers of Joachim of Fiore, Fraticelli, Homines Intelligentiæ, Flagellants, Anabaptists, Vaudois, Quakers, Quietists, Herrnhuters, Swedenborgians, Mormons, Irvingites, Seventh Day Adventists, and other modern revivalists. From Montanus to James Nayler, from Muggleton to Evan Roberts, the list could be extended almost indefinitely. That this sect-type has always criticised, irritated, and menaced the official Church is understandable enough. Chronologically considered, the head and front of the offence is Montanism.

In the second place, Montanism is of abiding interest because the issues which it represents are not dead. They are still with a modern Church required to take account of, say, a Group Movement with its 'absolute' standards and its confident appeal to the direct guidance of the individual and the group by the Holy Spirit. Again, the ministry of women, so far from being a dead issue, is likely to become a very live one in the present century. And again, with many movements for reunion abroad among the divided churches of Protestantism, the history of the sect-type provides an eloquent comment on the fact that men do not necessarily become separatists out of obstinacy or Caprice, but because conscience and high principle compel them; and that until modern Protestantism has worked out anew its theology of the Church (as it shows signs of beginning to do), and rediscovers in its own way the classic Protestant high churchmanship of Calvin, Owen, Chalmers, and Dale (to name only these), it has no convincing answer to earnest, if fanatic, spirits who stand for 'reformation without tarrying for anie.' Cromwell was not greatly distressed at the sects of his time, Ranters, Diggers, Quakers, and the like,<sup>4</sup> for 'he saw that the confusion of sects was a sign of life';<sup>5</sup> and for a living Church men will pay the price even of sectarianism.

---

<sup>3</sup> Labriolle, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Weingarten, *Die Revolutionkirchen Englands*, chs. 3-5; Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*.

<sup>5</sup> G. N. Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*.

The long story of the successive *ecclesiolæ* of history may well make men ask whether separatism is not nearly always too big a price to pay. 'The effect on themselves was what usually follows in such circumstances,' says Harnack.<sup>6</sup> 'After their separation from the Church they became narrower and pettier in their conception of Christianity. Their asceticism degenerated into legalism, their claim to a monopoly of pure Christianity made them arrogant.' This easy generalization comes naturally from a German with little sympathy for the sects; his contemporary, Troeltsch, would hardly have endorsed it; but the evolution of Montanism has been repeated too often since the second century for modern revival movements and groups to disregard it as easily. For more than two hundred years Muggletonians have sung:

I do believe in God alone,  
Likewise in Reeve and Muggleton,  
This is the Muggletonians' faith,  
This is the God which we believe;

None salvation-knowledge hath  
But those of Muggleton and Reeve.  
Christ is the Muggletonians' King  
With whom eternally they'll sing.

According to Mr. Lytton Strachey,<sup>7</sup> one would be sorry if the time ever came when there were no more Muggletonians. But their tragedy, like that of the Montanists, is that they were such an unconscionable time a-dying after they had ceased really to live. Virtually dead in the fifth century, Montanism lingered on at Pepuza till John of Damascus' day<sup>8</sup> and later. Ramsay believes that

[p.498]

they ceased to be only with the coming of the Turks. So tenacious of life can moribund religious enthusiasms be.

II. *The Movement* - Thanks to the full and authoritative work of Labriolle and to Lawlor's important studies,<sup>9</sup> the main lines of the story can be drawn with some certainty. The movement originated with Montanus - perhaps a priest of Cybele before his conversion - who appeared in the village of Ardabau in Mysia probably in the year 156, claiming for his ecstatic prophesyings a direct, new, and final outpouring of the Spirit. His frenzied oracular utterances, like those of the two prophetesses associated with him, were the *ipsissima verba* of the Paraclete; the prophet was the lyre played upon by the divine plectrum, his role being one of complete passivity. Moreover, Montanus was the mouthpiece of the Paraclete in a unique sense. Though he and his followers stood consciously in the classic succession (διεδέξαντο)<sup>10</sup> of Agabus, Judas, Silas, Philip's daughters, Quadratus, and Ammia, his prophecy was *nova prophetia* in that it fulfilled Christ's promise of the Paraclete (Jn 14<sup>16-18</sup>). What had hitherto

---

<sup>6</sup> Art. 'Montanism,' in *E.Br.*<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> *Portraits in Miniature*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *His De Haeresibus*, ch. 49, speaks of the Pepuziani who glorified Pepuza, which lay between Galatia and Cappadocia, and believed it to be Jerusalem.

<sup>9</sup> In his *Eusebiana*, his art. 'Montanism' in the *E.R.E.*, and in Lawlor and Oulton's valuable Notes, vol. ii., to their translation of Eusebius.

<sup>10</sup> Eus., *H.E.* v. 17. 4.

been partial and imperfect now came to its full and final expression in the oracles of Montanus, Prisca, Maximilla, and Theodotus; their adherents were the true πνευματικοί.

Prophecy was no isolated phenomenon at that time. It was closely bound up with expectation of the Parousia and Chiliastic dreams. This prophecy was new, however, in that Chiliasm here took a new form. Convinced of the imminent coming of the Lord, Montanus migrated with his followers across the Phrygian border to the two villages of Pepuza and Tymion, which became the holy city of the movement. In this new Jerusalem he organized and consolidated his new and growing community and expected that the faithful everywhere would assemble here rather than in the real Jerusalem for the Parousia. The new prophecy and the new Chiliasm were complementary; since Montanus and his companions were the channels of the ultimate revelation, they were the last of the prophetic succession. After me no prophet more, said Maximilla, but the End.

Doubtless the new prophecy had all the urgency and rigour of an *Interims-Ethik* and involved new and exacting standards of moral obligation. Yet, as Lawlor has argued, it may be doubted whether Montanism in this its earliest and most distinctive phase was as severely ascetic as has been alleged. With regard to marriage, fastings, and martyrdom these self-styled πνευματικοί seem to have been no more self-denying than the Catholic majority whom they stigmatized as ψυχικοί (thus perverting a Pauline antithesis in a fashion made notorious by the Gnostics, with their caste-like division of men into pneumatic, psychic, and hylic).<sup>11</sup>

The truth seems to be that Montanism proper was at once conservative and radical, an old and a new thing. In its antiquarian idealism, its exaltation of the function and the authority of prophets, its charismatic ministry of women, its dissolution of already existing marriages in the name of asceticism, it was in one sense a reaction. According to a well-accredited modern view, made familiar by Sir William Ramsay's brilliant researches, Montanism is a protest against that ecclesiastical organization which was the answer of 'the great Church' to Gnosticism, and of which Irenæus is the typical representative in the late second century. In opposing primitive spontaneity to regimentation in terms of creed, canon, and episcopate (the Church's triple bulwark against Gnostic heresy), and in its vindication of the New Testament liberty of prophesying, Montanism is essentially conservative and backward-looking. 'To the prophetic type of mind, system, whether in thought or organization, is normally uncongenial,'<sup>12</sup> and in Montanism such primitive Christian enthusiasm surges up again, either as a revival or a survival, in protest against the naturalization: of the Church in the World.<sup>13</sup> Thus the Church of

---

<sup>11</sup> The rigorist Montanism of Tertullian in Carthage with its protest against the *frivola et frigida fides* of the Church, presents so many contrasts to the original and authentic Phrygian movement as to be a different phenomenon, falling outside the scope of this article. Tertullian adapted what he had adopted. The very term 'Montanism' is late and misleading, suggesting a homogeneity which the movement never had. In its Western phase Montanism evolves into something else, a fact which Tertullian, with all the inconsistency of the unscrupulous barrister, conveniently ignores. Only in a strictly limited sense may he be called, den bedeutendsten theologischen Repräsentanten des Montanismus' (Hilgenfeld: quoted by Labriolle), and it is not without significance that the Montanists of Carthage were known in the end as Tertullianists!

<sup>12</sup> Streeter, *The Primitive Church*.

<sup>13</sup> Ramsay and others have stressed the influence here of the Phrygian environment and its pre-Christian traditions. Is there, as is often contended, a direct relation between ancient Phrygian paganism, especially the cult of Cybele (Φρυγία θεός μεγάλη and Montanist enthusiasm? Montanus may have been predisposed to his παρέκστασις (Eus., *H.E.* v. 16 and 17) by the orgiastic rites of the priesthood of Cybele. A. D. Nock (*Conversion*, p. 24 f.) speaks of 'the passionate temper of the Thraco-Phrygian stock which flames up later in Montanism' and sees affinities with the cult of Dionysus.

Aviricius Marcellus had to deal with Montanus just as Basil had to deal with Glycerius the Deacon and Luther with the Zwickau prophets. Such reactions against the current externalizing of religion, with their appeal to primitive simplicity, spontaneity, and purity, naturally evoke both sympathy and fierce opposition; and Phrygia itself seems to have been temperamentally ready *for* a protest against the fact that ‘apostles and prophets raised up by God were now giving place to Bishops and Elders appointed by men ... that the laity were putting off the royal dignity of the universal priesthood on officials.’<sup>14</sup>

‘Montanus,’ says Ramsay,<sup>15</sup> ‘represented the old school of Phrygian Christianity as opposed to the organized and regulated hierarchical church which was making Christianity a power in the world ... the bishops, however, won the day; Phrygian custom and the individuality of the Phrygian church were sacrificed to the uniformity of the Church Catholic.’ Yet Ramsay stresses the weakness and narrowness of the Montanist reaction; its provincialism, its blindness to the œcumenical ideals of unity and intercommunication, its return to the early idea of a local centre for the Church.<sup>16</sup>

But in another sense Montanism was radical and new rather than reactionary; indeed, it regarded itself as a great forward movement which hoped to capture the whole Church for its ideals. It was more than a sudden indignant regression towards primitive Christian mentality, for this mentality had never died out in the Church and was familiar to all Christians of that time. Montanism expressed old facts in a new, revolutionary, and frightening way. From the beginning of the movement Montanists had themselves used the phrase *νέα προφηεία*. To argue that they merely looked backward is to leave unexplained the violent opposition which they evoked throughout Asia, and their ultimate defeat after their first astonishing successes.

Montanus was consciously inaugurating a new era. He preached not the Kingdom of Christ, but the reign of the Paraclete, to which the gospel had been an imperfect prologue.<sup>17</sup> ‘Entendu au sens strict, le Montanisme n’était pas seulement une tendance, un esprit, une simple direction morale. C’était la foi en la mission du Paraclet, incarné dans la personne de Montan, subsidiairement dans celle des prophétesses, et en la valeur absolue de ses ordonnances.’<sup>18</sup> And what Ritschl called ‘diese augenscheinliche Geringschätzung Christi’<sup>19</sup> was quickly apparent to the official Catholic Church which credited Montanus not with the true charisma of the spirit (ἔκστασις) but with *παρέκστασις*, which could only be interpreted as demoniacal possession.

It is important to notice that what brought about the repudiation and excommunication of Montanists was their unorthodoxy, not in belief, but in practice. Catholic opponents bear witness that Montanus did not deviate from received Church doctrine;<sup>20</sup> he was content to affirm the *regula fidei* and was no more given to doctrinal novelties than were the Catholics of his time. Tertullian vehemently asserts his orthodoxy, his respect for dogma, and his disdain for the abstractions and speculations of the detested Gnostics. Indeed, Montanus’ very

---

<sup>14</sup> Gwatkin.

<sup>15</sup> *Expositor*, 3rd ser., ix. 146.

<sup>16</sup> *The Church in the Roman Empire*.

<sup>17</sup> Bigg, *The Origins of Christianity*, ch. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Labriolle, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche* (1857)

<sup>20</sup> About Father, Son and Holy Spirit they think as does the Holy Catholic Church’ (Epiphanius).

conservatism, his sense of ecclesiastical tradition and order, caused him to retain Catholic forms and an official hierarchy. This hierarchy represents what the Church would have been had he been able to conquer it (and for a time his success was astonishing). The traditional edifice would have been respected and maintained, but embellished and crowned with an order of 'charismatics,' superimposed upon the official clergy.

We are not here concerned with the astonishing initial successes of the movement, its wide extent and the alarms and excursions which it occasioned. Excommunicated by the Asian episcopate which was solidly against them, οἱ κατά Φρύγας turned to the West, hoping to achieve in Rome the complete success denied to them in the place of their origin. Just as the Irvingite Tongues spread from the West of Scotland into the heart of London, so the *nova prophetia* spread from Pepuza to Rome and Carthage but with no more lasting success. The Tongues did not find in a Chalmers or a Carlyle that powerful advocacy which the *nova prophetia* found in Tertullian, yet Montanism was as far from achieving its end as was the Catholic Apostolic Church of the Irvingites. 'Violemment refoulés de

[p.500]

toutes parts les fidèles ... se voyaient réduits à vivre en marge de la grande Église qu'ils avaient pensé subjuguier, et à se constituer en secte.'

III. *Some Results.* - Gwatkin's trenchant summary of the three great results of the Montanist controversy is well known. He argues:

(i) That the fall of Chiliasm into discredit was a distinct gain, but that with it went grievous loss. 'The failure of Montanism did much to fix on Western Christendom that deist conception of God as a King departed to a far country, which empties the world and common life of that which is divine and holy and restores it but in part through the mediation of the Church His representative and by the ministry of sacraments.'

(ii) That as a result of the Church's deep distrust of the prophetic and the charismatic in all its forms, the third century was an age of disillusion, like the eighteenth century in England. Enthusiasm was suspect, the priest exalted, prophesying despised and crushed, and the Spirit quenched. 'This failure of Prophecy barred every plea of inspiration' (as Priscillian was to discover when he essayed to reopen the era of prophecy), 'and helped to bar every plea of conscience not consistent with the actual order of the Church. Preaching was thrown into the background for a thousand years. The mediæval conception of the priest's duty was helped forward; that is, to say masses and to be a spiritual director but by no means to preach.'

We may add that just as the deism and rationalism of the eighteenth century was the price paid for the repudiation of Quakers, Ranters, Seekers, and Diggers of the seventeenth century with their direct experience of God's activity as Spirit, so the institutional and sacramental emphasis of the Mediæval Church externalized the interpretation of Christian experience and helped to obscure the abiding truth that the Spirit is alone primary, and all else, however important, secondary; the Bible, the Sacraments, the historical record of Jesus' life on earth are all a channel of the Spirit; primary is the experienced fellowship of man's spirit with the Lord the Spirit.

(iii) That a contrast began to be drawn between the Apostolic Age with its ministry of gifts (now ended! The Law *and the Prophets* were only until John - an almost incredible abuse of

Christ's word in Mt 11:13) and later times. 'The official ministry seemed the one mediator with an absent King.' First the minister is turned into a priest to offer sacrifices. Then a material sacrifice is invented for him to offer. Then the whole work of the Spirit is shut up into his ministrations. 'The entire mediæval system from the Papacy downward is no more than a natural development of the unbelief which knows no working of the Spirit but One transmitted by outward ordinances from a distant past. To this development the failure of Montanism gave a greater impulse than the defeat of the Gnostics or the conversion of Constantine.'

Perhaps it is hardly fair to compare this over-strong language with that of Tertullian whose deep conviction of the unceasing activity of the Holy Spirit was expressed with characteristic exaggeration and that command of sarcasm that has never been surpassed. Only *imbecillitas aut desperatio fidei* can pretend, he says, that the activity of the Spirit is shut up to the first age. Like Canute at the sea's edge he asks whether the Catholics will fix boundary stakes for the divine activity. 'Why not suppress God altogether? It is all that remains for you to do, such is your power!'

Montanism failed. The function of the prophet ceased partly because the logic of ecclesiastical development made it inevitable, but partly because the Phrygian prophecy defeated its own ends. Nevertheless its essential principle could never be permanently forgotten nor lost. In that *sæculum rationalisticum*, the eighteenth century, Novalis could witness to it and so inspire the great word in Faust:

Erst jetzt erkenn ich was der Weise spricht,  
Die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen.

---

Converted to pdf format by Robert I Bradshaw, August 2004.

<http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/>

---