

The Reformation of Wolfshausen

The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

“Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;”- 43rd Thesis

In Vater Karl's small apartment, Brudder Ludwig lay on Karl's bed with his head against the headboard and his raised feet against the opposite wall. A bat hung outside the window, staring out at the alley that ran past the alehouse. Since Jeremiah began spending time around the building, other predators of rodents had noticeably grown more vigilant, active and precise. In response, fur-lined local insectivores increased their own alertness and activity. The right child can transform a small ecosystem.

Vater Karl stoked the fire and set a tea pot to hang above it. February had arrived content to follow January's lead. Outside the apartment, a thick and brittle mat of snow united all the populated parts of hilly Hessen. Within the apartment, however, there was controversy.

“You see,” said Ludwig, “as Münzer teaches us, the Princes elevate themselves on the backs of the people while Jesus was lifted by the princes.”

Vater Karl winced and crossed himself discreetly. The pair had been roommates for nearly a month and Vater Karl felt the roosters crowing at the arrival of every dawn and the bats that took wing at the departure of every dusk had much to learn from the consistency of men seeking to change the world. But a Priest's job is, first and foremost, to reply.

“I am curious, Münzer's theology...”

“Knowledge!”

“Knowledge, is based on universal principles and observed events, is it not so?”

“On the word of God, himself, and those of his true disciples.”

“So, I am curious why all the true disciples are my countrymen. Why is there Münzer in Prague, Luther until recently in Wittenburg and Zwyngli in Zurich, and yet no enlightened evangelical in Paris, Geneva or Florence. We all read universal truth in the universal language of Latin. So why should it be that the explanations in German are revolutionary while those in French and Italian remain orthodox? Is ‘Landgrav’ contrary to Latin in a way that ‘prince’ is not?”

Ludwig turned on the bed to face the old priest. “Alas, my friend, you are still Catholic. You look for the truth in its description. Look up from the page.”

Without removing his gaze from the flames, the priest answered. “What do you mean, Ludwig? Did Münzer not write a letter against the Princes? And send the letter to the princes? Does he mean to blot out the writings of old saints with letters from new ones?”

“Old priest, you have to understand the difference between theology and wisdom. Jesus, by his death, made men free. And yet we allow earthly princes to undo the gift of the Prince of Heaven. Does it really come from heaven that princes are empowered to nail the people onto the Church’s wooden cross, using the knives of their soldiers?”

Karl laughed, “I have to hand it to you, my friend. If you are going to blaspheme, leave nothing unblasphemed. What do politics have to do with religion?”

“Both are extraneous. The natural state of man is subservience to God and liberty among his neighbors.”

“But half the commandments instruct us how to treat our neighbors. When did God tell us to do unto others as you would do unto others? He must have known we would betray one another and him without instructions and why can’t the church remind us of the instructions? Why shouldn’t Landgrav Philip remind us? Aren’t the earthly institutions there so God’s word reaches new generations?”

“Ears are for hearing. Churches are for preaching. Castles are for declaring. Which of these did God give us himself to listen to him through? Which of these did God guarantee every man, woman and child?”

“If you ask that of a deaf man, he will point to the steeple, I suspect. And the prisoner will answer the castle before you’re done asking.”

“Very well, Karl. Then let the deaf have dogma and the prisoner a prince. But the rest of us, give us freedom and the lessons of Tomas Münzer.”

“Generous, to be sure. I chose to become a priest. What if I choose the same tomorrow?”

“You will not. You are a reasonable man.”

“No, I’m a priest. Should I start some soup?”

“Just some cider for me, thank you. Will you really not leave the church?”

“I left the church in Marburg. I wish to serve in Wolfshausen. I wonder how many times a spirit can migrate and still remain in the body.”

“And if Wolfshausen becomes Protestant, will you continue to claim priesthood under Catholic orders?”

“What better purpose than to heresy among heretics?”

“The revolution is coming, Karl.”

“Perhaps, but why only among the Germans? I still wonder.”

“It will be worldwide but for now, I think it begins with us.”

“But why with us? I have to say, while I remain a loyal Catholic, I have no personal complaint against those who complain against the Holy Mother Church. But I keep wondering about the language. Is it simply that I hear what is said in German and not in Czech or Italian? Or is there something about us? Wasn’t it our ancestors who sacked Rome? Is it something in our verbs?”

“Ha! To this son of Brno, your verbs do seem scandalous. And diabolically long. Why was it the Jews whom God first called to him? Why was it the Romans who first ran away? Why not the Germans to come first home? The Israelites were

poor, the Romans rich and the Germans are poor. Perhaps it is that. Probably the verbs, though. What is Hebrew grammar like, I wonder.”

“I have no idea. I read the words of Moses, Matthew and Paul in Latin, of course, so that heaven may share them.”

“You may joke, but the reformers will soon enlighten the German world and then the whole world.”

“Do you find the age so dark?”

“Yes, these are very dark times. But by following Münzer and my own conscience I hope soon to see a better world.”

“Then I wish you well. Your cider is warm. Enjoy.” The old priest carried a cup of warm cider to the evangelist stretched out on the bed. Münzer’s acolyte nodded and took the cup and sipped a little.

“Don’t worry, Karl. We won’t leave you behind. If I have to, I will pull you into the light. By the verbs, if necessary.”