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CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

The Christian religion is the presence of the Incarnate Word in the world. Jesus Christ preached the Kingdom values and in the establishment of this new Kingdom he had challenged and questioned the existing social order and religious structures. This radicality, novelty and spontaneity of the Christian religion are partially lost in the course of time when the Church got established and got institutionalized. Although there are exceptions, many of the movements in the Church throughout the history of her existence are responses to the challenges of going back to the original spirit of the Gospel. New expressions and new modes of living of Christian life in the Church are generally viewed as the active and vibrant presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church aiming to improve the quality of her inner life. The individuals who are inspired by the Holy Spirit or who claim to be specially gifted by the Holy Spirit, are the exponents of the movements and it is the duty of the ecclesiastical authorities to assess the movements and approve or disapprove them. Some of the exponents of these movements, although sincere in their intentions,

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either were not properly understood or were condemned as heretics in the light of their teachings.

The new movements in the Church which are dealt with by other authors surely re-assert the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The movements in the Church were responses to the needs of the Church. However, wherever there was no proper direction, the movements took strange paths and instead of building up the Church, led to the divisions in the Church. While allowing the free flow of the working of the Holy Spirit, the Church authorities and the leaders of the movements should have in their minds the great responsibility of building up the Church, not dividing the Church.

The scope of the present paper is to present before the readers some of the Christian movements in the history of the Church. It is not a comprehensive study nor is it all inclusive. The author made a choice in selecting the movements or devotional expressions. The nature and character of these movements vary from time to time and from movements to movement. The origin and scope of these movements vary from time to time and from place to place. While some of these movements resulted from the self-criticism of the existing functioning of the Church and eventually led to the positive building up and purification of the Church, some other movements remained as rebel groups and got estranged from the communion of the Church. Although the general tendency of the movements is the renewal of the Church aiming to strengthen her inner life and to focus on her original mission, there are other movements which are the result of the doctrinal differences which eventually led to the division and split in the Church and condemnation from the part of the Church.

1. Judaizers

Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, accepting the invitation of Barnabas, went to Antioch, where he officially began his apostolate. Antioch was the metropolis of the pagan converts.

Although Judaizers cannot be treated as a movement, it is the first known dispute in the Church. Judaizers were those Christians who were converted from the Palestinian Jewish background and who believed that the Christians who were converted from the gentile background should become first Jews and observe the Mosaic Law so that they may experience the fullness of Christianity. The whole problem began at Antioch where the local Palestinian Jewish Christians demanded circumcision of the Gentile Christians. They also demanded the enforcement of all Jewish ritual practices on the

Gentile Christians. According to them, circumcision was an essential condition for attaining salvation (Acts 15:1-5). On the other hand, Paul as the Apostle of the Gentile Christians, was convinced of the fact that belief in Christ implied the end of obligations under the Mosaic Law. This led to a dispute in the Antiochian Church and it was decided to send a delegation to the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem and Paul and Barnabas were the members of the delegation. The consultative character of the primitive Church is clear from the Jerusalem Council which was held in 49 A.D. in which the theoretical solution of the problem was reached. The Council was indicative of two things: the consultative character of Christian Church, and the universality of the mission of Jesus Christ or the translatability of the Gospel to all cultures and peoples without boundaries. The strong and determined position of Paul widened the horizons of the Gospel. However, later developments show that it was not easy to put into practice the decision of the Jerusalem Council (Gal 2:14; 2:16).¹

A small group of the Judaizers remained as a heretical group and disappeared from the scene not later than the second century.

2. Montanism

It is another puritan movement in the primitive Church. The followers of this group demanded an austerity of life so great as to amount to complete renunciation of the world. "This tendency reached its culmination of Monatanism, a strange admixture of eschatological ideas, unbridled religious enthusiasm and rigorism."² The author of this puritan movement was Montanus, a priest of the second half of the century. Claiming himself to be a prophet he asserted that the age of the Holy Spirit had begun. Maximilla and Priscilla were his female companions. He exhorted strict morality as he preached the speedy approach of Christ's kingdom. According to his teaching, second marriages were forbidden and he introduced strict fast. He encouraged his followers to embrace martyrdom and held the view that capital sins could not be pardoned. This puritan group spread rapidly in Asia Minor and the Church authorities were forced to exclude them from the communion of the Catholic Church. This new teaching reached North Africa and around 205 Tertullian

¹For details on this topic, Cfr. Hubert Jedin, ed., *History of the Church*, Vol.1, New York: Cross Road, 1965, 101-102; Karl Bihlmeyer and Herman Tuechle, ed., *Church History*, Vol. I, Westminster: The Newman Press, 1968, 56; Christopher Mahony, *Church History*, Vol. 1, Aluva, 1986, 48-49.

²Bihlmeyer and Tuechle, Vol. 1, 165.

got attracted to it. He became one of the strong exponents of Montanism. Many erroneous teachings were added to it and it survived till the 8th century, in different forms. The preaching of the imminent advent of the new Jerusalem, which was signaled by the new outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave an added attraction to this new puritan movement.³

Although it disappeared from the scene in the 8th century, we come across the influence of this puritan group even today in different ways among the Christians.

3. Novatianism

The primitive Church, the Church till the time of the Edict of Milan in 313, was considered to be the pure Church. The series of persecutions, the example of martyrs and the eschatological vision of the Christians of this period, i.e., the immediate second coming of the Lord, put the Christians in constant alert and eternal vigilance. The pagans or the gentiles looked at Christians as a special class of people, who had no fear of shedding blood and even embracing martyrdom. The austere way of life of the Christians and their other worldly attitude and deep sense of belongingness and Christian charity made them pilgrims on this earth. The persecutions really purified the early Church. However, laxity crept into the Church in the course of time and the membership started increasing. This increase in the number of members made the Christian life little more relaxed. Added to that, short break or the absence of persecutions made the Christian life more of this world. The unpreparedness from the part of the Christians in the event of the Decian persecution (249-251) made the situation still worse. Montanism and Novatianism, two rigourist or puritan movements in the early Church should be understood in this context. They were spontaneous reactions, though exaggerated, to the more worldly life style and functioning of the primitive Church.

Novatian, the founder of this group, was a learned Roman priest. The immediate background for this movement was the election of Cornelius as Pope (251-253). As an ambitious priest, Novatian too had an eye on the post. There arose a series of disputes between Novatian party and Cornelius party. The dispute was over the rebaptism of *lapsi*, i.e., the argument that one who had apostatized during the Decian persecution should not be welcomed back into the fellowship of the Church without being baptized again. Pope

³Ibid., 164-166.

Cornelius, after consulting a Roman Synod started accepting the apostates to penance and excommunicated Novatian for his extreme rigorist attitude. The puritan group elected Novatian as the antipope. It happened in the second part of the 3rd century. These puritans were theologically orthodox and they spread quickly. They set up small congregations, calling themselves Cathari (pure one) and they considered the others as polluted as a result of their lenient attitude towards sinners.

These Christians who had joined the Novatianist had to be baptized again because they were the members of the only true Church. They later took a very rigid stand, refusing to have communion with people who had been married more than once. They also rejected the possibility of penance for any major sin after baptism. Later in the course of time many of them came back to the communion of the Church. However, the influence of the Novatianist mentality continues in different degrees even today among the Church members.⁴

4. Pataria Movement

Another movement in the Medieval Church, which was undergoing an identity crisis, strengthened the hands of the reform popes. With the beginning of the Papal State in 754 and with the coronation of Charles the Great as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the papacy and the medieval European Christianity started assuming a new colour. The Pope as the religious leader slowly began to play the role also of a secular ruler, at least in the papal territory. Therefore, the Roman noble families had the added temptation to make their children popes. The undue interference of the feudal lords in the appointment and installation of the religious heads disturbed the minds of many devout Christians. The Pataria movement was a spontaneous, creative and critical reaction from the part of those Christians who were not feeling at home with the new functioning of the Church, in which the Church identified herself with the new European societal order, where the secular power had an upper hand.

The medieval Church was under the influence of feudalism and three major evils in the Church were simony, nicolism and lay investiture. The undue interference of the secular power in the Church appointment was criticized by the lay people. Besides, laxity in the practice of priestly celibacy was another point of heated discussion among the Church members. The secular authorities not only started

⁴Cfr. Jedin, vol.1, 334-338.

appointing, but even installing the ecclesiastical authorities in their office, and this was not acceptable to the orthodox Christians. Thus a new awareness among the lay people for the reformation of the Church emerged. This new enthusiasm from the part of the lay people was a strong support to the efforts of Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) who championed the freeing of the Church from the clutches of medieval feudalism.

“The Patari (Patrenes, Patarines, Pataria: forms of a nickname derived from the Milanese Patta – rags of pattari = peddler) were members of a popular movement which originated in the Lombard cities, especially in Milan after the middle of the 11th century.”⁵ This reform group questioned the luxurious life style of the higher clergy and wealthy nobility. They also insisted upon the observance of priestly celibacy. The movement was lead by clergymen from Milan under the leadership of Arialdo, Landulf and Anselm. Pope Stephen X, a reformist Pope, encouraged this group by sending Hildebrand, the future Pope Gregory VII. In the fight against the evils of feudalism Pope Gregory VII received full support from the Pataria movement.⁶

5. Devotio Moderna

The late middle ages in the history of the Church, i.e. from 1303 to 1517, had mainly the following features: Renaissance and Humanism, Avignon Papacy, Western Schism, Conciliarism, Mysticism, etc. This was a period where confusion prevailed in the functioning of the Church and the clearcut distinction of the State and the Church was slowly emerging. Besides, the spirit of nationalism in Europe was very strong to such an extent that the French influence in the Roman Curia caused the shift of papal residence from Rome to Avignon. The period preceded was the flowering of Scholasticism. Though Scholasticism was an intellectual movement and contributed substantially to the intellectual life of the Medieval Church, the inner life of the Church was not given due importance. Scholasticism by making use of Greek Philosophy interpreted and explained Christian Philosophy and Christian theology. As a reaction to this too speculative way of thinking, a new spirituality evolved in the medieval period, i.e., Deovtio Moderna or Modern Devotion, stressing a spirituality based on practical and daily concrete life situations.

⁵Bihlmeyer and Tuechle, ed., *Church History*, 147.

⁶Ibid, 147.

Gerard Groote (1343-1384) a medieval mystic was the exponent of this new form of spirituality. He started Brothers of Common Life and Sisters of Common Life. He laid stress on the imitation of Christ and a practical mysticism with regular and methodical meditation. They aimed only to overcome formalism in religion an abuse in Church life by inculcating a piety of "inward fervor." This piety, moreover, was meditative, not mystical. The devotionalists rarely embraced a full-fledged mysticism, and they largely ignored the writings of mystics."⁷ They questioned the low morals of the clergy and stressed the importance of inner life. They led a community life without vows and they remained unmarried. While stressing the dignity of lay people, they, through their life style tried to loosen the hold of scholasticism and sacerdotalism.

Devotio Moderna had its origin in Holland in the second part of the fourteenth century and spread throughout Europe, especially Germany, during the fifteenth century. It was a reaction against the fashionable spirituality of their time especially against its excesses. They questioned the current spirituality which had been a spirituality only of the learned. They questioned the meaningless way of living the vowed life and challenged the traditional monastic life. Luther and other Reformers later followed the suit. Though official Church recognized the followers of the Devotio Moderna, there were detractors. With the Protestant Reformation many houses of brothers and sisters fell in with the new movement.⁸

6. Jansenism

Jansenism and Quietism are two other schools of spiritualities which should be understood in the context of the teachings of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation. The spirit and the teachings of the Council of Trent were not correctly understood by many Catholics and this resulted in the emergence of many exaggerated devotions and pieties. In addition to this, the teachings of Luther on justification and the pre-eminence of the free will of the individual in the spiritual life and in the Church life, the exaggerated importance given to the inner freedom of the individual and the neglect of the role of any religious or ecclesiastical authority, were some of the immediate reasons for the emergence of Jansenism and Quietism.

⁷Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th Edition, New York: T & T Clark, Ltd, 1997, 363.

⁸Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol.VI, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989 (Reprint), 284.

Jansenism was caused by the wrong teachings of Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638), professor at the University of Louvian, Belgium, who developed a dislike towards the Jesuits. Later he became the bishop of Ypres, in Belgium. He taught the exaggerated version of Augustine's theology. He taught that the total corruption of the humanity was caused by the original sin. He stressed on the arbitrary acts of the divine pre-destination, thus on the distinction between the pre-destined ones and the non-pre-destined ones, and held that the latter were denied of grace. He was against confession and communion. He promoted a kind of elitist rigorism. Cistercian Convent at Port Royal became the centre of his theology. In 1713 Pope Clement XI condemned the teachings of Cornelius. This condemnation took a negative turn in the context of Gallicanism. The proponents of Gallicanism advocated a French national Church that wholeheartedly supported the Jansenists.

The elite class in France got attracted towards Jansenism and the condemnation did not produce the desired result. Those who disobeyed the decision of the Pope went ahead with their plan by establishing a Church of their own in Utrecht which exists even today.

The original intention of Cornelius Jansen was to restore the Church of Christ to its pristine severity through a certain rigorism. However, through his controversial teachings like "Christ died for some," and through the denial of the sacraments of confession and holy communion, he invited his own condemnation. Thus, instead of building up the Church of Christ he caused division in the Church.

7. Quietism

Another spiritual movement of the 17th and 18th century Europe, the main proponent of which was Michael Molinos (1628–1696), a Spanish priest. He spent some time in Rome also where he was well accepted as a retreat preacher and a spiritual guide. Quietism, a pseudomysticism, according to some, "was the result of the over emphasis or misunderstanding of the need to be wholly passive to God's action, to be free from all desires etc."⁹ "His teaching is found in his work entitled *Spiritual Guide* where he exaggerates the passivity and abnegation common to all mysticism. In this extreme position, the author denies the relevance of vocal prayer and any type of devotion and questions the traditional rituals and religious practices.

⁹Mahony, *Church History*, Vol. II, 238.

Other exponents of this new spirituality were Madame Guyon and Fr. Lacombe. Quietism spread very fast in France and the proponents took the heroic path of pure love, disinterested devotion to God and a deliberate renunciation of all hopes of reward. They taught that "the aim of spiritual life consists in such complete quiet and passivity of the soul that it no longer desires salvation, virtue or protection, but rests in God without any activity or volition of its own."¹⁰ They argued that in this stage the soul never sins and there is no need of any mortification or vocal prayer or struggle against temptations. They questioned the relevance of celibate life to attain communion with God. According to them the individual is directly guided by the Holy Spirit and thus challenged the very presence of the hierarchy in the Church or authority in the religious communities. They denied obedience to the Pope, bishops and other authorities. According to them, we need to annihilate all human thoughts and desires and, even the hope of heaven or the fear of hell.

Molinos and his companions had many followers and their new spirituality was misunderstood by many as true mysticism. In Spain we see the flowering of mysticism with St John of the Cross and St Theresa of Avila in the middle of the 16th century who are now Doctors of the Church. However, the pseudomystical teachings of Molinos caused lot of confusion among the seekers of true mysticism. Pope Innocent XI in 1687 condemned 68 of his propositions and condemned him to life imprisonment in a monastery and there he died in 1696.

Before I conclude, I would like to mention two of the religious Orders of the Medieval Church which contributed reasonably well in the building up of the Church. Religious orders or monastic movements are reflections of the inner life of the Church. Whenever the Church faces the problem of decadence of her life, the Holy Spirit sends men and women filled with new charisms and new enthusiasm which enhance the witnessing of the Church. There are different views regarding the origin of monastic life in the Church. The cradle of monasticism is Egypt and East. Beginning with the Desert Fathers in the East, monasticism got an organized form with St Basil the Great who gave the Rule to the Eastern monasticism. The Western Church had to wait one more century for an organized way of monastic life. St Benedict of Nursia (480-550), the father of Western monasticism, laid strong foundation to the Western monastic life style by supplying the Benedictine Rule. However, in the course of time, the

¹⁰Bihlmeyer and Tuechle, *Church History*, Vol. III, 244.

Benedictines also got involve din the feudal set up of Europe and a re-interpretation of the Benedictine Rule was required of and thus with the Cluny Movement a new face of the religious life was shown to the world. Franciscans, on the other hand, challenged the secularized way of life of the Popes and their involvement in the affairs of the secular rulers by a radical living of the evangelical poverty.

8. Cluny

The medieval Church was facing the problem of decline of spiritual life and community life as she was identifying herself with the feudal set up. There was an attempt to revive the Benedictine Rule. The foundation at Cluny, France in, 909, under the initiative of Duke William the Pious of Aquitaine, insisted its independence of jurisdictions, both civil and ecclesiastical, and the new foundation was put directly under the authority of the Pope. Abbot Berno of Baume was in charge of the new foundation. Special stress on the absolute obedience to the Abbot, solemn celebration of the liturgy and the common prayers, silence and seclusion from the world were the main features of the new foundation. Benedictine Rule with the supplement of Benedict of Aniane was introduced. Under the able leadership of able abbots together with the spread of Cluny foundation reform ideas of the Church were also spread under Abbot Odo (927-942) the expansion took a new momentum. By the end of the 12th century there were number of abbeys, which were centres of reform in the Church. The Cluny members could influence the lives of the secular clergy and collaborated with great reformers like Popes Gregory VII and Urban II. Ultimately the Cluny movement aimed at "the liberation of the Church from the power of the laity and the establishment of a canon Law that was truly ecclesiastic."¹¹ Thus the Cluny movement worked hand in hand with the Popes to liberate the Church from the clutches of feudalism.

9. St Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan Order

Francis of Assisi (1181-126) son of a well-to-do cloth merchant, revolutionized the medieval Church by founding a mendicant order. He was living in a time when Popes were exercising both civil and ecclesiastical powers and Popes were even threatening the secular powers with excommunication, Francis of Assisi found fulfillment of his Christian vocation in the radical living of the gospel values. When Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) reached the climax of Papal ascendancy,

¹¹Bihlmeyer and Tuechle, Vol. II, 132.

proclaiming himself as the Supreme power of the world, Francis of Assisi embraced poverty and called God as his father after abandoning everything. The foundation of the Franciscan order and later the offshoots and branches from this order revitalized the witnessing of the Christian values in the medieval period. Although Pope Innocent III gave an oral confirmation to his order in 1206, the official confirmation was given by Pope Honorius III in 1223. Clare's Order was founded in 1212. Even today St Francis of Assisi and St Clare remind the world, which is very much consumeristic, the gospel values of poverty and complete surrender to the will of God which were preached by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Christian Church in the history of her 2000 years encountered different cultures and different peoples. The first major encounter of the Church was with the Greek world and encounter resulted in the tension between Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Through the timely intervention of St Paul and through the exercise of the consultative character of the Church the problem was solved and the Church proclaimed its catholicity. However, some other movements led to splits and divisions.

From the exposition of the movements in the Church, one may get the impression that these movements did not contribute substantially to the building up of the Church. However, the truth is that excepting one, the Judaizers, all the other movements helped the Church every now and then to remind the fact that the Church needs to be reformed always. The proponents of these movements had in their minds the good of the Church, the renewal of the ecclesial community and the new understanding and interpretation of Christian doctrine. Thus, although sometimes errors and exaggerations have taken place, the movements in the Church are ultimately aiming at the building up of the Church.

The movements in the Church were also the result of the sensitivity of the Church to the needs of the time. Movements or new ideologies or new doctrines or new heresies can be understood as spontaneous response of a group of Church members to the needs of the time or an attempt to interpret certain doctrines in a more contextualized way or to go away from the official position of the Church. The new movements in the Church which are dealt with by other authors surely re-assert the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. As we have seen in the historical analysis the movements in the Church

were and are responses to the needs of the Church. However, wherever there was no proper direction, the movements took strange paths and instead of building up the Church, led to the divisions in the Church. The same danger we are experiencing also in the movements of the modern times. While allowing the free flow of the working of the Holy Spirit, the Church authorities and the leaders of the movements should have in their minds the great responsibility of building up the Church, not dividing the Church. The role of laity, the strong desire to reform the Church, to witness to the pure Gospel values, to be the conscience of the Church are some of the common features which we observe both in the old movements and in the modern movements.

The movements in the Church have positive and negative impacts in the inner life of the Church. Positively, each movement is an occasion for the introspection and self-criticism of the Church. The movements very often challenged the existing hierarchical, bureaucratic Church and reminded of the charismatic, spontaneous nature of the Church, a Church which is more of the Spirit, a Church which ought to be moved by the Holy Spirit. The movements in the Church very often were not properly evaluated and judged and thus, sometimes resulted in splits and divisions. The movements very often originated from the part of the lay people with an earnest desire to reform the Church. However, their good intention might not be properly understood and guided by the authorities. The positive impact of the movements surely has an upper hand in the life of the Church.

From the short analysis above the vibrancy of the Church is well expressed. From Judaizers to Quietism we notice the response of the followers of Christ to various questions and problems the Church had to face in the course of her 2000 years of existence.