Jacob Boehme and the Thirty Years' War

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THE Thirty Years' War, which lasted from 1618 to 1648, was occasioned, if not caused, by complex disputes over religion. Fought mainly in Germany, it was a European war, involving powers from Spain to Poland. The three decades of merciless warfare in the heart of Europe undermined the old awareness of a universal Christendom, shattered the authority of the Holy Roman Empire, and contributed to the consolidation of the territorial entity or nation state. The war ended with Germany weakened and divided, and with the once proud Kingdom of Bohemia bereft of its former national and confessional identity.

Because of the significance of this war over Central Europe, German intellectuals from Friedrich Schiller to Günter Grass have interpreted the conflict with reference to their own times. The Thirty Years' War indeed featured much that proved fateful in centuries to come. By seventeenth-century standards, it was a total war, mercilessly striking at civilian populations (though mainly for reasons of plunder). It was an ideological war, justified with doctrines and pressed by means of a printed war propaganda which stimulated the circulation of newspapers. The unfolding disasters of war engendered an unhappily "modernist" perspective: entire populaces appeared to be overshadowed by cataclysmic and intangible forces, by the runaway inflation of the early war years, by the unforeseen spiraling of military engagement, or by the phalanx of disease, hunger, and chaos that swept along after the battles.[1]

There is a gap in our knowledge of the Thirty Years' War. We know surprisingly little about what it meant to the common people who experienced it outside the spheres of power and patronage. We possess literary reflections on the war in the early work of Martin Opitz or in the much later productions of Andreas Gryphius or Hans Jakob Christoph von Grimmelshausen. There are gripping blow-by-blow accounts of campaigns, lurid graphic images of horrors and atrocities, and extensive

1. For a beautifully illustrated account of the war, emphasizing its innovations and impact on the people, see Herbert Langer, *Thirty Years' War* (New York, 1980), 235–36 (the spread of newspapers).

documentations of war propaganda.[2] But hardly anything in the literary anthologies or documentary collections indicates how the typical German, doomed by the campaigns or targeted by the propaganda, registered the causes and conduct of the hostilities.

An important witness who has been generally neglected is the shoemaker and luminary, Jacob Boehme (1575–1624). Boehme was a dissenter of the spiritualist type, as was the later female protest poet of the Thirty Years' War, Anna Ovena Hoyers (1584–1655). Because Boehme is known chiefly as a mystic, and because his comments on the war are dispersed in his voluminous writings, his testimony has been largely ignored by scholars.

Since Boehme was one of the most influential figures of his time, his remarks merit consideration. His theosophical writings cast a long shadow in Germany and beyond. In an age of dissent, his speculative mysticism helped to legitimate nonconformity by virtue of what Ernst Bloch has called "a purely qualitative view of nature,"[3] that is, by virtue of an understanding of the world in which qualities possess metaphysical primacy over quantity or matter; and in which the power of renewal ("rebirth") is central, as the life-giving spirit concealed within elemental nature, or the spirit of truth beneath the "dead outer letter" of Scripture. Though now largely forgotten, Boehme was once a figure of international fame. An enduring tradition of "Boehmenism" took root in England during the turmoils of the seventeenth century. Translated into English, the works of the "Teutonic philosopher" became part of a popular religious culture which subsequently stimulated the fertile imagination of William Blake.[4]

Here, I will outline Boehme's views of the war and compare them to some of the scattered voices of popular antiwar protest which have come down to us. The common pattern should provide a tentative glimpse of a German opposition which, compared to the English counterpart de-

2. For the available collected documents of responses to the events in the period of religious war, see Julius Opel and Adolf Cohn, eds., *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg. Eine Sammlung von historischen Gedichten und Prosadarstellungen* (Halle, 1862); Ilse Hofmann, ed., *Deutschland im Zeitalter des 30-jährigen Krieges. Nach Berichten und Urteilen englischer Augenzeugen* (Greifswald, 1927); Hans Jessen, ed., *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg in Augenzeugenberichten* (Düsseldorf, 1963); Marianne Beyer-Fröhlich, ed., *Selbstzeugnisse aus dem Dreissigjährigen Krieg und dem Barock* (*Deutsche Literatur in Entwicklungsreihen. Reihe Deutsche Selbstzeugnisse*), vol. 6 (Leipzig, 1930).

3. Ernst Bloch, *Christliche Philosophie des Mittelalters, Philosophie der Renaissance, Leipziger Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a. M., 1985), 183.

4. See Walter H. G. Armytage, "Behmenists: A History of the Followers of Jacob Boehme in England, 1644–1740," *Church Quarterly Review* 160 (April-June 1959): 200–209; Bryan Aubrey, *Watchmen for Eternity: Blake's Debt to Jacob Boehme* (Lanham, MD, 1986); Serge Hutin, *Les Disciples anglais de Jacob Boehme aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1960).

scribed by Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, was anti-authoritarian and anticlerical rather than political or revolutionary, an imaginative protest but one lacking a clear program.

Jacob Boehme lived at center stage in the great theater of war. His home was Upper Lusatia (*Oberlausitz*). Lusatia and Silesia to the east were the two northern crown lands of the Habsburg-ruled Kingdom of Bohemia. Boehme was in Prague during the ceremonial arrival of Frederick V of the Palatinate, the "Winter King" of the short-lived Bohemian Confederation. Upper Lusatia fell victim to the imperial counterassault on the Confederation: the nearby chief Lusatian city of Bautzen was destroyed by the invading Saxon ally of the emperor in the month before the Battle of White Mountain. Boehme reported in letters to friends on the siege and fall of Bautzen and on the wartime confusions, perils, and hopes following the early demise of the confederation.

Not only the letters but also his major works react to the events of the time. Boehme never wrote any chapter specifically on the war, but he reflected in scattered references on the events and developments to the preconditions and the outbreak of the conflict. His prewar treatise of 1612, *Morgenröthe im Aufgang* or *Aurora*, can be read as an attempt at envisaging a resolution of the longstanding regional conflicts over the eucharistic doctrine and the problem of scriptural authority.[5] But where *Aurora* could still foresee a convergence of all truths in an age of spiritual enlightenment, his subsequent works would become more apocalyptic in tone.

The second and most productive phase of Boehme's writing coincided with the crisis over the Bohemian succession and with the outbreak of rebellion and war. During this phase, the mystic initially clung to his neutralist stance, expressed in the last lines of his *Three Principles of Divine Being* in 1619.[6] However, when Lutheran Lusatia formally joined the Calvinist-led Bohemian Confederation, the author guardedly lent his support to the new and nominally more tolerant rebel state. Ironically, Lusatia was now threatened with invasion by a coreligionist, Elector Prince Johann Georg of Saxony, who, despite his orthodox Lutheran-

5. See Charles Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth Century Philosopher and Mystic* (Albany, 1991), 80–81. (Until now, no attention has been accorded to the fact that the composition of Boehme's fragmentary first work coincided with both the efforts of the Upper Lusatian estates to secure a Letter of Majesty guaranteeing their religious freedom and with the confusing and contested transfer of power from Rudolf II to his brother Matthias. The composition was broken off in June 1612, the month of Matthias's election to the office of Holy Roman Emperor, an event which put an end to the hope of making the secession conditional on concessions to Protestant subjects.)

6. Unless otherwise indicated, references are translated into English from Jacob Böhme, *Von den Drey Principien Göttliches Wesens*, vol. 2 of *Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. Will-Erich Peuckert and August Faust (Stuttgart, 1955–61).

ism, allied himself with the imperial legitimacy of the Habsburgs. After 1620, Boehme's writings again envisioned a reconciliation of doctrines and confessions in the age of spiritual enlightenment which he and his followers heralded as the "Age of the Lily." In the year before Boehme's death in November 1624, he pursued the elusive hope of a "new reformation." This vague hope of reform—more a slogan or prayer than a program—conceived of an end to the longstanding religious disputes, persecutions, and military conflicts.

Though few responses to Boehme's letters have survived, the remarkably rapid spread of his readership during the early war years suggests that his views struck a responsive chord among the lawyers, customs officials, physicians, and small landowners who constituted his following which spread west from Lusatia, Silesia, and Saxony, through northern Germany to Holland and England.

We can begin with the ceremonial arrival of the newly elected king of rebel Bohemia in October, 1619: Frederick arrives in Prague, accompanied by a long procession ending with detachments in Hussite regalia. Frances A. Yates's book on *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* has documented the fervor of German Protestants for this Calvinistic leader of the Protestant Union, the son-in-law of King James I of England. With characteristic caution, Boehme wrote on 14 November 1619 to a friend in Lusatia, warning against the widespread Protestant hope that the young king from Heidelberg was destined to become "the true German Emperor" of the German nationalists. Boehme accurately predicted that before anything of the sort could come to pass, a great and devastating war would take place, laying waste to the lands and cities of the Holy Roman Empire.[7]

By the time that Lusatia had entered the Confederation and come under threat from the Saxon ally of the emperor in 1620, the early caution had been replaced by a new sense that self-defense was now necessary. The devout cobbler reckoned: "For whose house is on fire should put it out; He [God] after all allowed Israel to defend itself."[8] In September 1620, the Saxon Elector Johann Georg invaded Lusatia at the behest of the emperor, besieging and laying waste to Bautzen. Boehme's accounts of the Bohemian-Saxon phase of the war are intermittent, but realistic and compelling. In a letter to a friend, Boehme pieced together a detailed report of the siege and conquest of Bautzen, recounting the sequence of assaults and negotiations, the bombardment with burning

7. See *Theosophische Sendbriefe*, ep. 4 (Letter to Christian Bernhard of 14 November 1619), in Böhme, vol. 9, *Schriften*.

8. Boehme, *Vom Dreyfachen Leben des Menschen*, vol. 3, *Schriften*, 249–50.

pitch that destroyed the walled city almost completely, the negotiations between the Saxon conqueror and the defeated Confederation forces, including attempts to buy off the Confederates, and the terrible sufferings of the non-combatant population.[9] Confronted with aggression against his homeland, it is not surprising that Boehme's letter concluded with expressions of loyalty to his king (*unserem könige*) and his native Lusatia (*unsers landes lauslitz*), nor surprising that his wrath was now directed against the Saxon *Curfürsten*.

While the fighting was still in progress, Boehme visited the nearby Bohemian theater of war, reporting on its devastation and conveying news of the Battle of White Mountain, which he seems to have regarded as an inconclusive encounter.[10] Further letters of the 1620s give news of marauding soldiers and military skirmishes, of seizures of the peasants' harvests, of wicked soldiers quartered in Görlitz, of foraying "Cossacks" (who were presumably Polish cavalrymen), and of the threat—and perhaps hope—that the Transylvanian ally of the Turk, Gabriel Bethlen, might yet strike his blow to smash the Holy Roman Empire.[11]

But by 1624, he aspires to a newly reconciled status under Saxon rule. This readjustment and acceptance of the conqueror of Bautzen may well have been conditioned by the lesson of nearby Bohemia: there were worse fates for Protestants than being ruled by an opportunistic Saxon coreligionist. However, the letters of 1624 leave no doubt that another, much more extravagant dream was stirring the breasts of Boehme and his supporters: the hope that, after six years of war, the night was darkest because of an approaching dawn. From Dresden, he wrote forlornly that, "We behold the time when Babylon burns in the entire world, and woe is upon all streets."[12] He reported rumors circulating of English and Swedish military recruitments in Saxony, and he sadly discounted prospects of a peace between Gabriel Bethlen and the emperor, auguring pessimistically about a "destroyer" (*Einreisser*), now approaching from the northerly direction of "midnight."[13]

Yet Boehme's expectation of a "new reformation" to end the causes of religious war was so firm that these dismal signs only augmented the fervor of his hopes. Thus, he could remark that if the Saxon prince were ready to initiate a new reformation, one "reformer" stood in waiting in the newly acquired territory; and if only the reformation were to

9. Jacob Böhme, *Ungedruckte Sendbriefe* 1 (previously unpublished letters), in *Urschriften* 2, ed. Werner Buddecke (Stuttgart, 1966), 399–402.
10. Böhme, *Sendbriefe*, ep. 67 (to Christian Bernhard on November 1620).
11. Böhme, *Sendbriefe*, epp. 31.2, 41, 34.23, and 36.3.
12. Böhme, *Sendbriefe*, ep. 64.7
13. Böhme, *Sendbriefe*, epp. 62.10 and 64.4.

triumph in Electoral Saxony, then at least, "the war would have a hole" (*so hätte der Krieg ein Loch*).[14] The letters of 1624 document his visit to Dresden and his meetings with the officials of the Saxon court in an attempt to win them to the cause of the new reformation. The Saxons were well disposed toward his person—though they remained noncommittal with respect to his reforming plans. Fortunately for Boehme, his death from illness in November 1624 overtook him while he was still hopeful.

The numerous and extensive collections of war propaganda with songs and illustrations make it possible to distinguish Boehme's views within a spectrum of partisan positions.[15] The propaganda was nationalistic (though of course the German nation was defined in very distinct ways, depending on one's allegiance), and it was also prophetic or chiliastic, with nearly every forecast being couched in terms drawn from the Book of Daniel or the Apocalypse. In addition to biblical sources, there were also references to an Emperor Frederick—resurrected as the legendary forerunner of the new Frederican king of Bohemia. The propaganda of either side was xenophobic, railing either against the Spaniards and the Jesuits, or against the Turks, Calvinists, Rosicrucians, and Czechs. The war propaganda saw string-pulling clergymen as the true instigators of the conflict: favorite villains were Abraham Scultetus, the strict Calvinistic court chaplain of Frederick, and Cardinal Khlesl of Vienna, infamous as the fabricator of the Counter Reformation measures that sparked the rebellion in Prague.

On all these points, Boehme's utterances employed the same rhetoric of denunciation, while altering and generalizing its thrust. Not specific clergymen, but rather the professional clergy as a whole was responsible for religious strife; not doctrinal heresy was pilloried, but rather the fratricidal conflict of a persecuting church of Cain against a persecuted church of Abel—the latter embracing "heretics" of every faith. This does not mean that the role of the warring princes is neglected: the mystic denounces the tyranny, greed, and militance of the rulers; but it is characteristic of his anticlerical views that the prince appears more open to rebirth as a true Christian, than are the clerical "belly servants of

14. Böhme, *Sendbriefe*, epp. 63.9 and 62.5.

15. See: Emil Weller, ed., *Die Lieder des Dreissigjährigen Krieges* (Basel, 1858); Franz Wilhelm Freiherr von Dithfurth, ed., *Die historisch-politischen Volkslieder des dreissigjährigen Krieges* (Heidelberg, 1882); and most impressive of all, Mirjam Bohatcová, *Irrgarten der Schicksale* (Prague, 1966). This impressive collection contains the engravings that accompanied many of the songs collected by Weller and Dithfurth, thereby showing what care and expense went into the songs of the war, which were hardly spontaneous effusions of popular sentiment. Herbert Langer's work, cited above, contains further valuable information on the utilization of propaganda.

Antichrist." The latter are excoriated as pastoral wolves and toadying warmongers, guilty of inciting brother against brother. Boehme's depiction of the war is also prophetic in tone. But not in the partisan sense of the war propagandists: his outlook foresees a universal conflagration of Babylon and a fervently longed-for "Age of the Lily." There are remarkably few militant declarations against the pope, and still fewer which can be identified with German nationalism: these few are counterbalanced by denunciations of a German "Antichrist."[16]

Characteristic of Boehme's understanding of nationalism is the stirring admonition to Balthasar Tilke, whom he suspected of Calvinistic-nationalistic militancy:

> Can you not assess what will soon follow upon this? Unless being equal in life and will, they [that is: the peoples] are also accounted as equal before God, and if one only fights and seeks nothing but quarrels, it will result in such a mixing up in conflict, that one people will swallow up the other. For God withdraws his hand from nations . . . thus, anger has seized its sword of desire, and powerfully compels the minds of men to the end that one people will ruin and consume the other: What our fathers have dished up with their scorn and contempt, their children will finish eating with swords and blows.[17]

This admonition was written after the fall of Bautzen, during a period in which German territories were being harassed by Spanish troops and Polish "Cossacks"—when the impulse to fight on under the banner of a revived German nationalism must have been strong.

The formulations of Boehme are more visionary, and arguably more powerful, than the conventional and rhetorical patriotism of Martin Opitz. Events are condensed and vivified. The war evokes images of universal conflagration, of a "fire-world" or "flaming world." The Whore of Babylon careens astride the Beast of the Apocalypse, serving up drafts of her intoxicating poison to the nations.[18] A vision of "Jericho" foresees a great struggle of nations. The devil is fattening up unsuspecting souls for the slaughter.[19] The unsuspecting credulous are being hunted down, driven like game by the satanic "beater" (*Treiber*). The serene figure of the "Noble Virgin of Divine Wisdom," adapted

16. See Weeks, *Boehme*, 130–38.

17. Böhme, *Schutz-Schrift wider Balthasar Tilken*, (1621), vol. 5. sec. 5, in *Schriften*, 161–62.

18. Böhme, *Von den Drey Principien*, 350.

19. Ibid., 420 (24.10): "Truly, I tell you, and it is no joke; as I was at Jericho my dear companion opened my eyes that I might see, and behold! a great generation and horde of nations of men were mingled and a part of them were like animals and a part like human beings, and a struggle was among them . . ."

from the Book of Proverbs, guides the hunted honest seekers toward higher faith and understanding.[20]

Boehme's visionary protest is individualistic and, in the broadest sense, philosophical (or "theosophical"). The solution to the quandary of the age is the "rebirth" of all individuals, from prince to plebeian. The unregenerate clergymen should keep out of the affairs of state. The reborn prince should remember that he is a mere vassal of God. Religious and moral ideals thus dominated the outlook of the mystic.

In conclusion, the evidence which suggests that a rather common antiwar and anticlerical sentiment—a characteristic German response to the Thirty Years' War—was either anticipated or engendered by these articulated views of Boehme. His stance resembles the tendencies of later dissenting tracts which were influenced by, or attributed to, the doctrinal ideas of the sixteenth-century dissenter, Valentin Weigel (1533–1588). The partly chimerical image of a Weigelian or Rosicrucian opposition during the Thirty Years' War has been studied by the nineteenth-century scholar, Julius Otto Opel.[21] Examining the dissenting tracts, Opel commented on the apparent absence of a German "theocratic-democratic" opposition comparable to that of the dissenters in England. The Weigelian-Rosicrucian writings made use of the same kind of slogans, but without giving rise to a comparable "political" movement within the fragmented German territories.[22] The fiercest reaction to the dissenting writings came from a clergy which saw its authority impugned.[23]

Antiauthoritarian and anticlerical protest found a radical and eloquent spokeswoman in the vehement North German Protestant dissenter and poet, Anna Ovena Hoyers (1584–1655).[24] Classically educated and privately devout, Hoyers aimed her fiercest protests at a clergy that, as she saw it, curried favor with the mighty by preaching the cause of religious war. With admirable courage, Hoyers defended persecuted Anabaptists in her native Schleswig before seeking refuge in Sweden in 1630. All of the clerical "sects" loyal to Luther, Calvin, Flacius, or the pope are greedy exploiters who proclaim the letter of the Bible in ignorance of its inner meaning, she proclaimed.[25] When these false shepherds have been

20. Ibid., 367.

21. Julius Otto Opel, *Valentin Weigel. Ein Beitrag zur Literatur-und Culturgeschichte Deutschlands im 17. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1864), see esp. ch. 8, "Die theologische Kritik," 201–23, and ch. 13 "Der Weigelianismus während des dreissigjährigen Krieges," 298–329.

22. Ibid., 305–13.

23. Ibid., 201ff.

24. See Johanna Goedeking-Fries, "Anna Ovena Hoyers," in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1971).

25. Anna Ovena Hoyers, *Geistliche und weltliche Poemata* (Amsterdam, 1650), 29–30, 63, 64.

swept aside, the pious will rejoice and thank God.[26] However, for all her anticlerical radicalism, Hoyers could only react with horror and outrage upon hearing that her counterparts in England had taken the bold step of executing their king.[27]

To German opponents of the Thirty Years' War such as Boehme and Hoyers, it was a war of religion, or better, of irrelegion, but not a cause for political or revolutionary action of the sort described by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down.*

26. Ibid., 71–72. "Heran ihr Pfaffen all heran / Lasst euch zur Schulen führen / Von Herrn Tetinge und Lohmann . . ."—these were the heretical friends of Hoyers.

27. Ibid., 265ff. "Ein Schriben über Meer gesandt / An die Gemein in Engelandt / Aus einer alten Frawen Handt / Die ungenandt / Gott ist bekandt."