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Abstract

The Swedish Menocchio: Lived experience and religious belief across time and culture

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Separated by a century in time, the landmass of a continent and differing confessional communities, the religious attitudes and views of Italian miller Menocchio (1532-15) and Swedish soldier-farmer Nils Olofsson Bååt (1637-96) still share numerous parallels and similarities. Both were repeatedly brought to trial for impious and heretic utterances and in court both presented and insisted on highly original understandings of the Creation and God’s nature. While focus and themes differ in their accounts, there is a striking similarity in the tendency to bring down official abstract religious doctrines to a kind of pragmatic understanding based on everyday practical experiences. Is this only a coincidence or were Menocchio and Bååt representatives of what Carlo Ginzburg calls an oral peasant tradition of “religious materialism”? Or could this “materiality” be seen as a universal mode of thinking governed by a kind of “practical rationality” brought to the fore by their respective lived experiences? The latter requires a comparative approach, which is indeed the aim of this contribution. By comparing the specific cultural, social and personal situations under which Menocchio and Bååt lived, the manner in which subjective experience might have influenced their idiosyncratic thoughts and arguments will be discussed.

Introduction

Separated by a century in time, the landmass of a continent and differing confessional communities, the religious attitudes and views of the Italian miller Domenico Scandello, known as Menocchio (1532-1599) and the Swedish soldier-farmer Nils Olofsson Bååt (1637-1696) still share numerous parallels and similarities. Both were repeatedly brought to trial for impious and heretic utterances and in court both presented and insisted on highly original understandings of the Creation and God’s nature. While focus and themes differ in their accounts, there is a striking similarity in the tendency to bring down official abstract religious doctrines to a kind of pragmatic understanding based on everyday practical experiences. Is this only a coincidence or were Menocchio and Bååt representatives of what Carlo Ginzburg calls an oral peasant tradition of “religious materialism”? Or could this “materiality” be seen as a universal mode of thinking governed by a kind of “practical rationality” brought to the fore by their respective lived experiences? The latter is the topic of this presentation.

Nils Bååt was brought before the district court of Umeå parish accused of “religious aberrancy” and was sentenced a year later to death as a “blatant blasphemer, the brazen scorner of the Word of God and our Christian religion,” to quote the minutes of the court.¹ The statements and opinions of Bååt not only caused consternation among the local clergy and bureaucracy but also in the capital, whence he was transported for further interrogation. The death sentence against him was never carried out. After eighteen hard months in the penitentiary intended to make him see the error of his ways, Bååt finally apologized. A few months later, he was released and allowed to return to his home in Nybyn, where he lived out the remainder of his days, passing away in 1696. Almost exactly one hundred years earlier and some 2,500 kilometres away as the crow flies, Ginzburg’s Menocchio had been put on trial in northeastern Italy.

Menocchio was born in the village of Montereale in 1532 and was father to eleven children by the time he was put on trial for the first time in 1584. Nils Olofsson Bååt was also fifty-something, with a wife and three small children for whom to provide. Both described themselves to the court as “very poor.” Both were also literate, although while Menocchio often referred to what he had read, Bååt instead referred to conversations with what he called his God in “the barn in the big field.” The difference between proximity to the metropolises of Renaissance culture on the one hand and 17th-century Lutheran peasant society in a northern sparsely populated countryside was of course enormous. At best, residents of the latter had access to hymnals, catechisms and the prayer book, while Menocchio himself had read the Bible, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and possibly even an Italian translation of the Koran. Nonetheless, there are remarkable similarities in the concepts expressed in Menocchio’s reading and Bååt’s conversations with his God.

The Principle of Practical Reason

Menocchio’s most famous remark deals with Creation. “In my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together: and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among the number of angels, there was also God, he too having been created out of that mass at the same time.”² Pressed to explain what “the most holy majesty” was, Menocchio claimed it was “the spirit of

¹ Karl Fahlgren *Hädare och kättare i Norrland under vår stormaktstid*, p.57

² Carlo Ginzburg *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, p. 5

God,” which has always existed, even before the existence of chaos. But the inquisitors were unconvinced, and in a later cross-examination, Menocchio referred to “the spirit of God who was from eternity” and “the Holy Spirit,” respectively – “I believe that the eternal God, out of that chaos that I mentioned before, removed the most perfect light in the way that is done with cheese, where the most perfect is taken, and from that light he made those spirits that we call angels, then he chose the noblest among them and bestowed on him all his knowledge, all his will, and all his power, and this one is he whom we call the Holy Spirit, and God placed him over the creation of the whole world.”³ This account hardly makes a consistent impression and Ginzburg has been criticized for apprehending Menocchio’s notions as far-too carefully thought-out and consistent, when in fact his responses seem to have been developed and tweaked under the strain of the questions of the inquisitors. However what Ginzburg primarily holds is that despite his literariness, Menocchio represented a popular cultural tradition, where abstract religious concepts inevitably lead back to everyday, practical experiences. The recurring comparison of the cheese and the worms can be traced back to learned theories of abiogenesis, but also practical experience of what happens or can happen when manufacturing and storing cheeses.

The same sort of practical reasoning lay at the basis of other statements by Menocchio. “What do you think,” he according to witnesses had said to his neighbours “that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary? It’s impossible that she gave birth to him and remained a virgin. It might very well have been this, that he was a good man, or the son of a good man”.⁴ And to the inquisitors, he explained that “he who was crucified was one of the children of God, because we are all God’s children, and of the same nature as the one who was crucified and he was a man like the rest of us, but with more dignity just as the pope is a man like us, but of greater rank, because he has power, and the man who was crucified was born of St Joseph and Mary the Virgin”.⁵

The statements made by Nils Olofsson Bååt are steeped in similarly practical reasoning. “As far as Jesus Christ is concerned, that he is God, this he cannot understand, for that means there are too many gods.” Nor can he accept that Jesus is the Son of God, because “we are the sons

³ Ginzburg p. 51

⁴ Ginzburg p. 4

⁵ Ginzburg p.5

of God.”⁶ For Bååt, the voice in the barn was a practical and therefore decisive sign of the presence of God. “My God is he with whom I speak; this is my God; show me anyone better.”⁷ In the face of the objections and challenges of the court and the clergy, he demanded palpable, practical proof. He refused to believe in original sin unless someone informed him as to “where it happened.” Nor did Jesus suffer for our sins, and after being told that it occurred in Jerusalem, he replied, “Which of you were there?”⁸ On the whole, Bååt was highly sceptical of the stories of the Bible. “The book” was “discovered” and assembled by “human cleverness” in order to sell more copies, “but no one should be fooled by its certitude.”

Sceptical toward Scripture

Menocchio has expressed similar scepticism: “I believe that sacred Scripture was given by God, but was afterward added to by men; only four words would suffice ... but it is like the books about battles that grew and grew”. He went further on another occasion and claimed “Holy Scripture has been invented to deceive men.”⁹ He considered the Holy Sacraments “human inventions” and “merchandise”. And of the communion wafer, he stated, “I do not see anything there but a piece of dough, how can this be our Lord God?”¹⁰ Bååt too found Holy Communion hard to credit. He himself attended only to “have a little bread and wine” and “taste a little sweetness.”¹¹ As implausible as the communion wafer and wine being transformed into the body and blood of Christ was the idea of the Holy Trinity, and that Jesus Christ died for the sins of mankind. That God should be comprised of several different people was “not necessary to believe...though the priests teach it so.” For him, the voice in the barn is enough: “They may well come up to six Gods, but there is no more than one, to whom I pledge my troth.” Allowing himself a little sarcasm, Bååt said “it is no wonder that I am poor, who has no more than one God. Ye who have so many must be far wealthier.”¹² He had never chosen nor been capable of believing in Jesus, let alone that he had suffered and died for our sins, since God already punishes man in this world “with constant affliction.”¹³ If Jesus had indeed suffered, then it was for his own sin, according to Bååt’s thinking. Menocchio stated

⁶ Fahlgren, p.73

⁷ Fahlgren, p.58

⁸ Fahlgren, p. 58

⁹ Ginzburg, p.1.

¹⁰ Ginzburg, p.10.

¹¹ Fahlgren, p.60.

¹² Fahlgren p.60

¹³ Fahlgren p. 66

similarly, that “If a person has sinned, it is he who must do penance”.¹⁴ Suffering for the sins of others seems a preposterous idea. Furthermore, Jesus was but a man. Had he been “God eternal,” according to Menocchio, he would never have allowed himself to be arrested and crucified. “I said that if Jesus Christ was God eternal he should not have allowed himself to be taken and crucified...and so I suspected that since he was crucified he was not God...”.¹⁵

It is not necessary to believe

You might say that Nils Bååt and Menocchio both boiled down religion to a few straightforward principles of moral character. “It is not necessary to believe” is a recurring phrase, with which both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are dismissed, along with original sin and Hell and Paradise in the afterlife. Nor are the devil and the angels necessary. The voice of God in the barn had said, “if mankind did not live in hate, enmity, bickering and quarrels, then they would already be living in a paradise.”¹⁶ In other words, Hell and Paradise already exist, in this life. Over the course of his many interrogations, Menocchio comes to a similar conclusion. “Preaching that men should live in peace pleases me but in preaching about hell, Paul says one thing, Peter another, so that I think it is business, an invention of men”.¹⁷ “[W]hen the body dies, the soul dies too.”¹⁸ Menocchio speaks often about paradise and a “new world,” but one that could be realized without absurdities like doomsday and the resurrection of the flesh. Ginzburg summarizes Menocchio’s opinion: “the hereafter doesn’t exist, future punishments and rewards don’t exist, heaven and hell are on earth, the soul is mortal”¹⁹

The Ungodly Life of Nils Bååt

His borderline materialistic attitude does not mean that Nils Bååt does not have a vision. The voice of God was to have told him, the ex-soldier that “If you and I had not existed, then there would be no peace, and if you and I did not exist, war would have broken out a long time ago – thus Nils Olofsson cannot die yet, but live on”.²⁰ This vision of a peaceful world stood in sharp contrast to Bååt’s own experiences as a soldier and his constant wrangling and squabbling with his wife and neighbours back at home. It was precisely his “great insolence” peppered with “oaths and curses” and violence, not the least aimed at his wife when she tried

¹⁴ Ginzburg p 11.

¹⁵ Ginzburg, p. 60

¹⁶ Fahlgren, p 60.

¹⁷ Ginzburg, p 72.

¹⁸ Ginzburg, p. 72

¹⁹ Ginzburg, p. 45

²⁰ Fahlgren p. 60

to make him abandon his "ungodly life" that was the foundation of his denouncement to the authorities.²¹ Indeed, Bååt long persisted in riling up the court with a stream of curses, sarcastic remarks and sneers.

Menocchio displayed an entirely different demeanour. According to numerous witnesses, he had said that he wished for nothing more than to express his perception before the ecclesiastical and secular authorities. His views seem to have long been well known in the village without leading to anyone alarming the authorities. He also seems to have enjoyed a solid social reputation, at least intermittently. He had served as mayor and administered parish finances. A miller by trade, he came in contact with many individuals who listened to him. Above all, Menocchio's message was *tolerance*. Living in the transitional period between Reformation and Counter-Reformation, in a region of Europe where Christianity and Islam met, it was the very diversity of faiths and creeds that exercised him the most. How could this variety be understood? He explained to his inquisitors that "since I was born a Christian I want to remain a Christian, and if I had been born a Turk I would want to live like a Turk," and when asked if he did not think one could conclude which faith was the true one, he answered, "I do believe that every person considers his faith to be right, and we do not know which is the right one: but because my grandfather, my father and my people have been Christians, I want to remain a Christian, and believe that this is the right one."²² From this radical relativism, the step to a kind of common core to all religions, regardless of doctrinal differences, was not long. "The majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to heretics, to Turks, and to Jews; and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner".²³ Similar relativism and tolerance can be discerned in Bååt when he stubbornly insists that "priests and other Christians have the same faith as he, though they teach and discuss differently, asking that he may be allowed to maintain his beliefs, while another may hold to those he believe to be better..."

The Sacrament is Merchandise

Menocchio and Nils Bååt have something else in common – social criticism. The former consistently referred to the sacrament of the church as *merchandise*. "I believe that the law and commandments of the Church are all matters of business, and they make their living from

²¹ Fahlgren, p.53

²² Ginzburg, p.47

²³ Ginzburg, p.48

this”.²⁴ But this was just a small portion of a much greater exploitation in which the church played a central role. “And it seems to me that under our law, the pope, cardinals, and bishops are so great and rich that everything belongs to the church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor, who, if they work two rented fields, these will be fields that belong to the Church, to some bishop or cardinal”.²⁵ In Lutheran Sweden, where both church lands and the number of sacraments had been mightily reduced and the clergy transformed into government civil servants, Bååt aimed his wrath at the state itself, more specifically its tax burdens. Paying tax was not only a duty, but a divine commandment, as it is written in Luther small catechism: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. (Matthew 22:21) Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.” For Bååt, things were clear as a bell. His God told him that he was not required to pay King and Crown any taxes. He was poor and the Crown would be “in fine shape without his tribute.” He takes the opportunity to take a shot at the church, too; when the court admonished that the word of God was “food of the soul,” he replied, “Food of the soul is when you have something good to put in your mouth”.²⁶

Idea Dissemination or Practical Reason

How unique were Nils Bååt and Menocchio the Miller? Is it possible to find parallels across the European continent indicating that the similarities between them were more than mere coincidence? In Menocchio, Ginzburg sees an representative for an oral peasant tradition with ancient roots that the church still hadn’t suppressed. This tradition would thus have to have stretched into a future in Northern Sweden. In an article on the trial of Bååt, author Karl Fahlgren, emphasizing the significance of the dissemination of ideas, especially among soldiers, found similarities between Bååt and George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. But he also proposed a further possibility – that common prerequisite in the form of personal piety, crossed with rationalistic objections to the teachings of the Church, have rather than dissemination of ideas had a direct influence on Bååt and Fox, and created similar idea constructs.²⁷

²⁴ Ginzburg, p. 9

²⁵ Ginzburg, p. 8.

²⁶ Fahlgren p. 9

²⁷ Fahlgren, pp. 100-101.

This conclusion is reminiscent of the modern-day historic-anthropological debate on rationality and cultural relativism. Do certain "given" cognitive and perceptual mechanism structure common sense, independent of cultural differences? Or are cognition and perception entirely dependent upon the culture in which they exist, so that each and every culture has its own common sense and rationality? Obviously, there is no simple yes or no answer; rather, this is a question of different levels of rationality.²⁸ In his critique of Marshal Sahlin's analysis of the death of Captain Cook, anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere borrows Weber's concept "practical reason." The term is not very well defined but includes reflection on goal and means and the implications of actions and problems in terms of empirical and practical criteria as the basis for decision-making and improvisation.²⁹ From this it could be proposed that independent of one another and across time and space, both Bååt and Menocchio expressed a kind of unvarnished, practical rationality that takes the form of an elementary common-sense thinking based on daily experience, separate from or in opposition to abstract doctrine.

Other examples from history might support this conjecture. In 1311, some three hundred and sixty years before the trial of Bååt, a man named Botolf from Gottröra parish outside Uppsala was found guilty of heresy. The reason was that he had repeatedly expressed scepticism toward the transformation of the consecrated wafer into the body of Christ. "Were it truly the body of Christ," he said, "then the priest himself would have eaten it up long ago."³⁰ A century earlier, the actual transformation of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ was canonized as official church dogma on the basis of the words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper, as reproduced in the Gospels: As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, 'Take this and eat it, for this is my body'. And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said: 'Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people' (Matthew 26:26-29).

From a modern perspective of common sense and experience of the material limitations of the human body, Botolf's objection seems perfectly plausible. In 1047, three hundred years before this sentence was pronounced, transubstantiation was dismissed in almost identical

²⁸ Kei Yoshida *Rationality and Cultural Interpretivism*

²⁹ Gananath Obeyesekere 'Re-Weaving the Argument: A Response to Parker' *Oceania* 65:3 (1995), pp.268-273. Obeyesekere refers to Max Weber's *Zweckrationalität*.

³⁰ Hans Aili, Olle Ferm & Helmer Gustafsson (red) *Röster från svensk medeltid*, 113

terms by archdeacon Berengar of Tours, in present-day France. “Had the body of Christ been as large as the mighty tower that rises over there in our sight, it would have been eaten up long ago, so many men throughout the world would have partaken of it.”³¹ Furthermore, Finnish historian Bruno Lesch has noted another very similar example from the latter half of the 12th century, in which a dying man in Cologne declares that he did not believe in the Eucharist “If the body of Christ was as big as the Ehrenbreitstein [a nearby hill on the Rhine], it would have been eaten up long ago.”³² Menocchio delivered a similarly common-sense based objection to the resurrection of the body. “I do not believe that we can be resurrected with the body on Judgement Day. It seems impossible to me, because if we should be resurrected, bodies would fill up heaven and earth”.³³

Such practical objections are usually associated by modern historians with “layman musings,” “naïve stubbornness” and “horse sense,” or as Ginzburg puts it, ancient peasant materialism. But Berengar was a man of letters and Botolf, as Lesch indicates, might well have been a respected member of the community rather than a simple peasant. In fact, “common sense reason” seems to have known no social boundaries; as we see, it could be a feature of a theological discourse between Scholastics on *accidens* and *substans*. For example, Bridget of Sweden (1303-73) was well aware of Berengar’s dissenting opinion. In a revelation on the Real Presence in the Eucharist, she describes how “a monstrous creature appeared to the bride at the elevation of the body of Christ and said: “Do you really believe, silly woman, that this wafer of bread is God? Even if he had been the highest of mountains, he would have been consumed long ago.”³⁴ Berengar presented one more variant of his objection which caused consternation among Medieval theologians: “How can the body of Christ, which is limited in space be in Heaven, on a multitude of altars and in a plethora of communion wafers, all at the same time?”³⁵ Botolf also developed his common sense argument further, though in a social context. “If someone were to consume the body of another man, that man would seek vengeance, if he could. How much more would not all-powerful God?” Cannibalism as a logical consequence of the transformation of the bread into the body of Christ recurs in different variations. In the New Testament, it is expressed as an immediate reaction to the words of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum. “I am the living bread which came down

³¹ Robert E. Boenig "Andreas," the Eucharist, and Vercelli *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 79, No. 3. (1980)

³² Bruno Lesch “En svensk kätteriprocess i början av 1300-talet” *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 1927, p. 67

³³ Ginzburg, p. 39

³⁴ Tryggve Lundén(ed) *Den heliga Birgittas himmelska uppenbarelser* Vol II bok IV 61 kap, s.108.

³⁵

from heaven. If any man eats of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world. Then the people began arguing with each other about what he meant. ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ they asked” (John 6:51-52). Even from a modern perspective, this seems a logical reaction to something that appears implausible and irrational. That was why God, wrote an anonymous English poet in the 10th century, “transformed his body into bread and his blood into wine” – because he knew that humans are by their nature “not able to eat bleeding flesh” – a kind of reversed transubstantiation in accordance with a means-to-an-end rationality.³⁶

Conversely, learned theologians could also use lived experience in order to explain spiritual and mystical matters. Swedish historian Alexander André offers an example from *Homo conditus* by Magister Mathias (d. 1350s), Bridget’s first father confessor. “We thus see that our nature converts food and drink into flesh and blood. Would that which is possible for our very nature be impossible for God?”³⁷

Concluding Remarks

Besides the striking similarity between Menocchio and Bååt in the tendency to bring down official abstract religious doctrines to a kind of pragmatic understanding based on everyday practical experiences, there is no problem to find examples of similar refutations of the Christian doctrine in accordance with a modern common sense. Some of the examples mentioned were part of and spread via theological discourse. It is more difficult to determine how it spread outside these cloistered circles. Neither Menocchio nor Bååt can be seen as representative of heretical or religious movements. Presuming acceptance of the existence of a practical rationalism independent of the dissemination of ideas and cultural diversity, it is quite possible that Menocchio and Bååt each developed similar perspectives on religion as a morals and ethics based on reason and experience, rather than a mystical union with God.

Postscript – practical rationality and atheism?

Neither Bååt nor Menocchio denied the existence of God but is there a possibility that practical rationality could slip into atheism? Historically, atheism has usually been considered to have been a late phenomenon associated with philosophers from Spinoza to d’Holbach. But

³⁶ Boenig, 1980, p. 316.

³⁷ Alexander André ”Herr Anders dilemma: kätterer eller bara sunt förnuft” in *Förbistringar och förklaringar: festskrift till Anders Piltz*

what about the statements made by the peasant servant Johan Isaksson Antolis from Mäkipää village and Vörå in Ostrobothnia, in 1733:

“He doesn’t believe what he reads, there is no God, devil, heaven or hell, no redemption or justification. The Bible is composed by humans like all other texts and songs that are written by people. He reads the Athanasian Creed by heart but explains it to be a lie, he admits being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit but declares that these were wise men and mere humans. He says that nothing is created by God and that the world as it is now has always existed in eternity. The human soul is a spirit or air that disappears when we die and never returns. And all this he claims, he has thought out by himself.”

To be continued....