Heinrich Corrodi’s

Critical History of Chiliasm

[1781-1783]

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Introduction

We dreamt of nothing but enlightenment [. . .] and believed to have bright­ened the environment by the light of reason in such measure that enthusi­asm (Schwärmerei) certainly would not show up again. However, as we see, from the other side of the horizon the night with all its ghosts already rises again. With horror one sees that the evil is so efficacious and penetrating that enthusiasm (Schwärmerei) always works, while reason only talks. Lord Shaftesbury was wrong to think that wit and humor were the strongest remedies against the progress of harmful superstition. . . .

With this statement, Johann Georg Zimmermann expressed the anxieties of the late German Enlightenment that saw itself confronted by a new wave of enthusiasts. By that time the terms “Schwärmerei,” enthusiasm, and fanaticism, often conflated, were no longer restricted to denoting re­ligious enthusiasts such as the mystics and Pietists who were of great concern to Protestant orthodoxy in the early Enlightenment. The terms were also being applied to a wider range of irrational phenomena. En­thusiasm can be found in religion, politics, philosophy, and the sciences. Because of the Enlightenment’s endeavor to combat emerging irra­tionalisms, “Schwärmerei” has been called the Enlightenment’s battle cry (Kampfbegriff).
In his study *Melancholy and Enlightenment*, Schings demonstrated how the rationalist critique of enthusiasm was linked both with anthropological and medical studies of the same phenomenon in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and with the orthodox critique of the “heresy” of Pietism in the early Enlightenment. In the late Enlightenment, literature and anthropology were the disciplines that took the lead in analyzing and criticizing enthusiasm. As anthropologists took the lives of enthusiasts as the object of their studies, they were especially interested in the experiences of radical Pietists and their predecessors. They saw the Pietists as paradigm cases of religious fanaticism. For this reason Schings concludes that histories of enthusiasts, such as J. Ch. Adelung’s *History of Human Folly* or Ch. F. Duttenhofer’s *History of Religious Enthusiasms in the Christian Church*, “replaced” the histories of true believers that the Pietists had earlier composed to advocate their cause against the established Churches. The best known among the Pietist histories is Gottfried Arnold’s *Impartial History of Church and Heresy*. Since Arnold tried to “revert” the concept of heresy as it was applied by the orthodox, his work provides the key to understanding the transformation of the notion of heresy during the Enlightenment.

Like other histories of enthusiasm, Heinrich Corrodi’s *Critical History of Chiliasm* of 1781–83 must be evaluated in the context of the growing interest in anthropology. In his preface, Corrodi considers the study of man to be the great topic of the times, the topic to which all fields of research should contribute. In his view, important contributions to the knowledge of man’s soul were expected to emerge from the history of the illnesses of the soul that are classified as “fanaticism”: “A history in which the aberrations of human reason and the disorders and extravagancies of its imagination are presented in a faithful picture, in which their sources and causes are revealed, should be of great interest to the lover of the study of man.”

Like many of his contemporaries, Corrodi does not distinguish sharply among fanaticism, enthusiasm, and “Schwärmerei.” He uses the terms interchangeably, although he does acknowledge that there exist different kinds of fanaticism or enthusiasm. Besides religious enthusiasm, he views romantic and alchemist enthusiasm, akin to the imagination of ghosts and devils, as variations of the same illness. However, he restricts his own investigation to religious fanaticism. Because a complete history of religious fanaticism alone would still be too great a task, Corrodi concentrates on just one branch of religious fanaticism, namely chiliasm. Corrodi describes chiliasm as “a system of fanatical expectations of near pleasures and lusts that originate in equally enthusiastic ideas of the other objects of religion” (vol. 1, p. vi).

However, there is a second and more important reason why Corrodi is interested in the history of chiliasm. He remarks that the illnesses of the