The Swedish Menocchio

or
How Can One Explain the Appearance, in Two Places Separated in Time and Culture, of Similar and Parallel Cultural Forms without the Diffusion of Ideas and Historical Contacts?

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Abstract

Separated by a century in time, the landmass of a continent and differing confessional communities, the religious attitudes and views of Italian miller Menocchio (1532–1599) and Swedish farmer and former soldier Nils Olofsson Bååt (1637–1696) still share numerous parallels and similarities. Both were brought to trial for impious and heretic utterances and in court both presented highly unorthodox statements about the nature of Christ, God and the sacraments. While the focus and themes in their accounts differ, there is a striking similarity in the tendency to question and bring down official abstract religious doctrines to a kind of pragmatic understanding based on everyday practical experiences. Are these similarities and parallels only a coincidence or were Menocchio and Nils Olofsson Bååt both representatives of an oral peasant culture proposed by Ginzburg? Or alternatively, did they share a similar way of reading marked by oral culture? Menocchio had read at least eleven identified books – Nils Olofsson Bååt none as far as is known. In this article it will be proposed that the similarities and parallels can be related to a kind of "practical rationality" and common-sense logic that was neither exclusively popular nor learned but a universal mode of thinking brought to the fore by their respective lived experiences as well as by inspiration from a cultural repertoire of common-sense-based doubts and statements circulating between high and low culture. Finally, Menocchio's and Nils Olofsson Bååt's personal strategies will be analysed and compared based on differences in themes, focuses and personal living circumstances.

Keywords: doubts, unbelief, common sense, practical rationality, non-contradiction, universal mode of thinking

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 Scandella, known as Menocchio (1532–1599) and the Swedish farmer and former soldier Nils Olofsson Bååt (1637–1696) still

share numerous parallels and similarities.[1] 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 in their accounts differ, 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. Was this only a coincidence or were Menocchio and Nils Bååt representatives of what Carlo Ginzburg calls an oral peasant tradition of "religious materialism"?

Nils Olofsson Bååt was brought before the district court of Umeå parish in 1687 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 district court.[2] The statements and opinions of Nils caused consternation not only among the local clergy and bureaucracy but also in the capital, where he was transported for further interrogation. After eighteen hard months in the penitentiary intended to make him see the error of his ways, Nils 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 north-eastern 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 born just over a century later and was in his fifties at the time of his trial with a wife and four small children to provide for. Both described themselves to the court as "very poor". Both were also literate, although while Menocchio often referred to what he had read, Nils 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 seventeenth-century Lutheran peasant society in the sparsely populated northern 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 and parallels in their unorthodox statements. How could this be explained? That is the main theme of this investigation.

Some Similarities and Parallels – a First Inventory

Menocchio's most famous statement deals with the Creation. "In my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed: 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" (Ginzburg 2013:5). The analogy 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 "down-to earth" reasoning concerning the official religious doctrine lay at the basis of other statements by Menocchio. "What do you think," he said to his neighbours according to witnesses, "that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary? It's impossible that she gave birth to him and remained a virgin" (Ginzburg 2013:4). 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" (Ginzburg 2013:5; Del Col 1996:26).

The statements made by Nils Olofsson Bååt are very similar. "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 of God."[3] For Nils, the voice in the barn was a practical and thus decisive sign of the presence of God. "My God is he with whom I speak; this is my God; show me anyone better."[4]

On the whole, Nils 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."[5] "What he [Nils] talks and speaks, however, is revealed by God himself … and more certain to stick to than a dead letter".[6] Once again Nils's own practical experience is set up against the priests' teaching. Menocchio expressed a 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" (Ginzburg 2013:1). 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?" (Ginzburg 2013:10). Nils too found Holy Communion hard to credit. He himself attended "just like others" to "have a little bread and wine" and "taste a little sweetness".[7] He had never chosen nor been capable of believing in Christ, let alone that he had suffered and died for our sins, since God already punishes man in this world "with constant affliction".[8] If Christ had indeed suffered on the cross, it must have been for his own sins,

according to Nils's thinking. If he was a God, how could they arrest him? That is incomprehensible to him.[9] Menocchio stated similarly: "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…" (Ginzburg 2013:60).

One might say that Nils Bååt and Menocchio both boiled religion down to a few straightforward principles of moral and practical 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.[10] 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."[11] 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" (Ginzburg 2013:72). "When the body dies, the soul dies too" (Ginzburg 2013:72). 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" (Ginzburg 2013:45).

How unique were the religious doubts and statements of Nils Bååt and Menocchio the Miller? Is it possible to find parallels across the European continent indicating that the similarities in statements and reasoning were products of cultural transmission? Or did these similarities and parallels arise independently of each other due to a common mode of thinking? These are the two alternative hypotheses that will structure this article. In the first section Ginzburg's original thesis of an age-old oral peasant tradition will be recaptured in the light of later modifications and criticism, followed by a detailed comparison between Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's religious world views and practices. The latter reveals that behind the similarities and parallels there were profound differences. The hypothesis of a cultural transmission of a set of unorthodox ideas can now be dismissed. Accordingly, the focus is shifted in the following section from content to form, that is, the argumentative style and logic that characterizes the apparently similar statements. A hypothesis is proposed that the similarities and parallels can be related to a kind of "practical rationality" and common-sense logic to be found across time and culture that was neither exclusively popular nor learned but a universal mode of thinking brought to the fore in daily life as well as in certain contexts and for specific reasons. Examples will be given in the following sections of how such common-sense doubts and objections were used and circulated among lay people as well as in theological and learned disputes and in between. Thus, cultural transmission is brought back into the analysis but not as a transmission of ideas but of a repertoire of common-sense idioms and exempla circulating between high

and low culture. A more extensive mapping of this repertoire might constitute a fruitful field of investigation. With this analytical turn, Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's individual motives for publicly expressing and asserting common-sense objections and unorthodox arguments based on practical reasoning come into focus, which is the theme of the final section. Two very different personalities emerge, similar in their use of common-sense arguments to question religious doctrine but contrasting in personal style and social motivations shaped by different cultural contexts and personal experiences. Thus, while starting by comparing likeness the analysis ends up comparing differences.

The Thesis of an Age-old Oral Peasant Tradition

In the first edition of *The Cheese and the Worms* Carlo Ginzburg sees Menocchio as a representative of an oral peasant tradition with ancient roots that the church still hadn't suppressed. This is modified in the foreword to the English edition into a much more complex circular relationship between high and low culture composed of reciprocal influences (Ginzburg 2013: xix–xx). Menocchio's specific manner of reading marked by oral culture is hence given a greater importance. It was not the books as such, but the encounter between the printed page and oral culture that formed an explosive mixture in Menocchio's head (Ginzburg 2013:49). The same could not be said about Nils. Menocchio had read at least eleven identified books, Nils none as far as is known. When asked by the court he could read prayers and the creed by heart and explain the official meaning of the holy communion. He was literate but no books are mentioned. Thus, the clash between oral culture and the reading of religious and learned texts could not have been a common denominator for Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's unorthodox statements.

The importance that Ginzburg attaches to Menocchio's reading has furthermore been questioned by the Italian historian and editor of the English translation of the trial records, Andrea Del Col. Citing books was part of a defence strategy to avoid the disclosure of "accomplices" and at the same time lessen his own responsibility. Del Col gives example of statements and doctrines that are either virtually impossible to extract from the referred book or completely missing. Some of these quotations seem to have been made up in the prison cell or on the spot during questioning (Del Col 1996: lvi–lvii). A more profound source of inspiration seems instead to have been ideas from a surviving corpus of Cathar doctrines, especially when it comes to Menocchio's cosmology and concepts of man and salvation. Such influences must have been transmitted by oral tradition – very few texts by Cathars exist and all are in Latin: still the similarities are obvious according to Del Col. But Menocchio was not a Cathar. Del Col points to influences

from dissident evangelical groups, anabaptists and antitrinitarian doctrines as well (Del Col 1996: lxxv). Ginzburg and Del Col have in their turn been criticized for ignoring what seems to be obvious analogies and influences from the Koran (Levine & Vahed 2001).

While influences from Catharism and Islam seem highly unlikely in the case of Nils Olofsson Bååt, oral dissemination of radical and antitrinitarian ideas is still a possibility. Several trials from Northern Sweden in the 1650s and 1670s reveal the presence of such ideas but their possible influence on Nils's statements will be considered in the last section.

Menocchio's and Bååt's Religious Worldviews Compared

The American medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum warns of the pitfalls of interrogating likeness based on a superficial morphology (Walker Bynum 2020). How profound are the similarities behind the somewhat disconnected phrases and statements listed in the introduction above? A more in-depth comparison between Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's religious worldviews is necessary, but first some words about the source material. The trial records are in both cases products of an inquisitorial legal procedure, which means that they are strictly structured by the inquisitors' and interrogators' selective questions and cannot be expected to give a comprehensive and authentic account of the interrogated person's religious worldview. There is in a corresponding way a possibility that ideas were modified, elaborated and twisted in response to the questions, as remarked by Del Col. Sometimes valuable side information is revealed in passing or added on the initiative of the interrogated. In the case of Menocchio there are also witnesses' accounts which make it possible to compare his answers before the court with what people had heard him say. The latter is of great importance. As Ginzburg remarks there is sometimes a striking contrast between the testimonies of the inhabitants in Montereale and the trial records (Ginzburg 2013:69). Many of Menocchio's most controversial statements referred to in the introduction are reported by witnesses. A few of them are denied before the inquisition, others are elaborated and modified, sometimes in a fundamental way. Nils's answers and explanations in contrast remain straightforward and simple throughout the questioning, without any confrontations with witnesses' accounts.

With these remarks in mind, a first start at a comparison would be the controversial statements about Christ's nature. Christ's divine nature is denied by both Menocchio and Nils in almost identical wording. The argument goes like this: If he was an almighty God, he should not have let himself be arrested and crucified. That is, Christ could not be a human being and God at the same time. The fact that he let himself be arrested and crucified was taken as the decisive proof of his humanity. Christ's status as God's

son is denied in a corresponding way since "we are all God's children" (Menocchio), "God does not have a son we are the sons of God" (Nils). The idea that Christ had died for our sins is rejected in a similar manner. "If a person has sins, he himself must do penance" (Menocchio), "Man has never angered God to earn condemnation but what we have otherwise transgressed against him he punishes with earthly torments" (Nils).[12]

The Nature of Christ

A closer look, however, reveals substantial differences. While Nils's denials are categorical and even sardonic, Menocchio's are more qualified, at times ambiguous, and follow a different kind of logic. Far from being dismissed, Christ is still recognized by Menocchio as a sacred person. When asked if it is true that he had said that God had "sent his Son, who let himself be hung up like a beast", he replies that when God saw that people did not follow his commandments "he sent his son, whom the Jews seized, and he was crucified", adding "I never said that he let himself be hung up like a beast. Indeed, I really said that he let himself be crucified, and 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 he who was crucified was born of St Joseph and Mary".[13] This stands in sharp contrast to Nils's categorical denial: "If someone had suffered [on the cross] it must have been a devil or one of the devil's followers who permits humans to do evil and sin, commit adultery, murder, theft and other such vices, over which the one and only God who has life and spirit which he believes in, becomes wrathful and punishes humans in this world."[14] This likening to the devil should however not be taken literally. Nils not only denies the existence of Christ but the devil as well. When asked if he believes that an evil spirit or the devil exists, he answers "man is the devil and no one else".[15] In Nils Bååt's religious world view, God's sovereignty is here and now on earth. There is no original sin, no hell, and no devil but only mean people tormenting the godly.[16] Offences against God are punished in this world. Thus, if the crucified Christ had ever existed, he must have been a great sinner and a most evil man – "devil" is a paraphrase uttered by Nils before the court judges with an ironic smile.[17]

The Sovereignty of God

While God's sovereignty is absolute and indivisible, according to Nils, divinity and sacredness is a question of degrees in Menocchio's religious worldview. This is illustrated most explicitly in how the presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist is rejected. At first sight they both seem to argue that

material objects are nothing more than what they are perceived to be by our senses – "I only see a piece of dough" (Menocchio), "he only attended the Lord's supper to have a little bread and wine" and "taste a little sweetness" (Nils). Before the inquisition, however, Menocchio modifies his words. "I have said that the wafer is a piece of dough, but the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven in it, and this I really believe." And this is because "I believe that the Holy Spirit is greater than Christ who was a man, and the Holy Spirit came from the hand of God."[18] The Holy Spirit is greater than Christ and Christ has more dignity than an ordinary man, but greatest of all is God.

In the outlines of their religious worldviews Menocchio and Nils Bååt follow different kinds of logic. In Nils's absolutist worldview there is no room for a plurality and degrees of divinity. God is one and only. That God consists of three persons he could not believe. That would mean that there are too many gods.[19] Christ, if he had ever existed could not be God and human at the same time. Nils's argumentation reminds of the law of non-contradiction formulated by Aristotle and commented upon by Aquinas: "It is impossible for the same thing [attribute] to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing [subject] and in the same respect".[20] Christ cannot be divine and not divine at the same time. This is in its turn not far from an early scientific conception of categories as mutually exclusive so that nothing can be two things at once and one thing cannot be in two places at the same time (Mousalimas 1990:35). Or, transferred into an everyday crude empiricism: things are nothing more than what we perceive them to be by our senses.

While there are several statements by Menocchio based on a similar logic, especially among those reported by witnesses, his religious worldview is much more complex and follows what Del Col calls "the concept of the indispensability of intermediary cause in the operation of things", which in turn is reminiscent of the medieval philosophical concept of instrumental cause (Del Col 1996: lxxix; lxxx note 150). When asked if this God makes, creates, or produces any creature Menocchio replies: "He made the design and gave the will through which all things were made."[21] That is, the creation of all things was caused by a cause that acted only insofar as it was moved by another cause (God). This kind of logic is further illustrated by Menocchio's metaphors from daily life and his own working experience. Like a carpenter building a house, God needed material, tools, and assistants. Spirits were created to help him build the world.[22] He could have done it all by himself but that would have taken a much longer time.[23] When it was done God bestowed on the noblest of spirits all his will, knowledge, and power to run the creation like a steward.[24] Lastly, the Holy Spirit and his ministers created man through the will of God with Christ, as a moral example to all the others.[25] What is described is a hierarchal world with God as the mightiest and most perfect followed by the Holy Spirit, Christ, and man in a declining scale. The chain of instrumental causes is set in

motion through the infusion of God's will, knowledge, and power with the Holy Spirit in an intermediate position as God's steward. However, Christ although still human, is co-opted into what appears as a new kind of holy trinity. Menocchio's motivation for this is most intriguing and at the same time a break with the aspects of subordination inherent in the logic of instrumental causality, so it seems: "Things cannot be done well if they are not three," he explains, "and thus God, since he had given knowledge, will and power in the Holy Spirit, thus gave it to Christ so that they could console each other" adding that "when there are two who cannot agree in judgement, when there is a third, if two agree then the third joins in, and thus the Father has given will and knowledge and power to Christ, because it has to be a judgement".[26] A kind of trinity consisting of three members of equal status (at least in decision making) is established for practical reasons, so it seems. This stands in stark contrast to Nils Bååt's rejection of the Trinity as not only contradictory but unreasonable as well – "if there are many Gods, they will just start arguing with each other."[27]

The Sacrament of the Eucharist, Spirits, and Souls

The divine hierarchy becomes even more ambiguous in Menocchio's further statements about the Eucharist. When asked who he thinks the Holy Spirit is that comes into the host he replies, "I believe he is God."[28] And some weeks later, when asked "What do you think God is?" he replies: "Light, happiness, consolation and this signifies the Trinity. The Trinity resembles a candle: the wax is the Father, the wick is the Son, and the light is the Holy Spirit. I believe there is the Trinity in the sacrament of the Eucharist because there is happiness, consolation, and light, and what makes me believe this is that when I go to this sacrament of communion repenting for my sins and having done my penance, I feel happiness, consolation, and light."[29] Paradoxically, the meaning and experiences of the Eucharist turns out to be the most fundamental difference between Menocchio and Nils Bååt. Both enjoyed attending it but for diametrically different reasons – Menocchio to experience divinely inspired sensations of happiness, consolation, and light, Nils to taste the sweetness of wine. In an ontological perspective, however, Menocchio's experiences of the Eucharist could be compared to Nils's intimate talk with God in his barn. While denying the transubstantiation of the consecrated bread and wine, attending the Eucharist still seems to have been the focal point in Menocchio's religious practice. Nils's conversation with God in the barn filled a corresponding function. There were emotional aspects in his conversation as well. The relationship with God is described as "a deep friendship" sealed by mutual testimonies of fidelity.[30]

When Menocchio describes the emotional experiences of receiving the Holy Spirit, he uses the words "one's spirit is joyful".[31] Talking about spirits

and souls, Menocchio entangles himself in what Ginzburg characterizes as a muddle of words (Ginzburg 2013:71–72). Several witnesses reported that he had said that when the body dies the soul dies as well but the spirit remains. The distinction between an eternal spirit and a mortal soul was according to Del Col characteristic of Cathar beliefs, but Menocchio's comments on this are far from consistent (Del Col 1996: lxxi). At one moment he claims that soul and spirit both return to God, at another that there are two spirits in man, one good and one evil, while the soul is nothing more than various faculties of mind, likened to the tools of a carpenter, that will perish when the body dies. And what will happen with the good and evil spirits on Judgement Day "the three will judge".[32]

This stands in sharp contrast to Nils Bååt, who claims that the soul is God himself who is in every man. "Therefore, there cannot be any hell etc." – the complete sentence is unfortunately not taken down in the notes, but according to Nils's kind of causal logic it would be a contradiction and logical impossibility to believe that souls, that is, God himself, could be damned.[33] This also explains his repeated statements that "God is in him, and he is in God" as well as "we are the sons of God." In these statements there is an obvious possibility of influence from radical reformers that will be dealt with in detail in the last section. Thus, Nils's rejections of the official doctrine are in all respects, apart from Menocchio's version of the creation as a process of spontaneous generation, more radical and categorical than Menocchio's.

A Shift of Focus – from Content to Form

According to Ginzburg most of Menocchio's controversial statements reported by witnesses did not do justice to his true beliefs. They were a simplified, exoteric version of his ideas uttered somewhat hastily in discussions with the ignorant villagers. Still, we have to explain, writes Ginzburg, how Menocchio managed to say things [in the trials] that contradicted his statements to the people of Montereale (Ginzburg 2013:49). From the point of comparison with Nils Bååt I would turn this around and ask how Menocchio managed to say things to the people of Montereale that seem to have been contradictory to his true belief. One possible answer would be that these statements were not just simplifications but starting points for more complex ideas that could be fully elaborated only in his confrontation with the inquisitors. Thus, the enigma of the similarities and parallels remains but needs to be qualified. A shift of focus is needed from content to form. The statements that bring Menocchio and Nils Bååt together are formulated as rejections, negations, and doubts with reference to everyday experience grounded in a narrow empiricism and conclusions based on a simple logic of cause and effect. Such statements by Menocchio were not only reported

by witnesses but expressed in the trials as well. In the case of Mary's virginity, he had based his doubts on "the fact that so many men have come into the world, and none is born of a virgin".[34] And when asked about the resurrection he replies: "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."[35] Nils Bååt's scepticism draws on the same kernel of everyday experience but is not spelt out in the same way but more as insinuations about the impossibility, pointlessness, or unnecessity of a specific doctrinal thesis. The existence of guardian angels is dismissed by Nils for practical reasons: "there is no need for it, God is almighty enough to protect us."[36] The resurrection of the flesh is denied as a preposterous idea: "What should God do with all these rotten bones?"[37] And Christ's arrestment and crucifixion is turned into absurdity: "Were not people as wise and sensible then as nowadays?" he asks, [if so] "why do people not take hold of God and crucify him in our time [if the story is true]?"[38] The doctrinal issue is brought down to a question of practical (im)possibility here and now. In the face of the objections and challenges of the court and the clergy, he demands palpable, practical proof. He could not believe that Christ suffered on the cross unless someone informed him where it happened, and after being told that it occurred in Jerusalem, he replied "Who was there then?"[39] Nor could he believe in Paradise since no one could tell where it is located.[40] Menocchio's doubts are sometimes echoed almost verbatim. The denial of Christ's divine nature is one example, the disbelief in the biblical paradise another: Questioned in the second trial, he explains "I did not believe in paradise because I did not know where it was".[41] Menocchio and Nils Bååt appear both to be anchored in the empirical world of everyday life. This should of course not be mistaken for a rationalist doubt of the supernatural. What is denied by Menocchio is the transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, not the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit/Trinity unseen but experienced as blissful emotions and light. Nils's rejection of the Bible as God's words is in a similar way founded on what may be called a sensualist epistemology.[42] "By my five senses I have learnt the existence of God," Nils declares – not by written words, one may add, "because a letter cannot create or contain him [God]".[43] The letters are "dead" and written by humans. The words come true only in God's own voice as they sound in his barn. Menocchio takes his rejection of the Bible even further. According to witnesses he had said when talking about the host being just a piece of dough: "It is a fraud on the part of Scripture to deceive people and if there were a God, he would let himself be seen."[44] And before that: "What do you imagine God to be? God is nothing else than a bit of air and whatever man imagines him to be."[45] Del Col takes these statements to be a true measure of Menocchio's pantheistic thoughts that had brought him to question the actual existence of God – if

God is in all things and all things are God then God only exists in man's imagination (Del Col 1996: lxxx). These statements are however neither confirmed ("I did not say that I do not believe in a God I cannot see") nor elaborated ("I was only referring to the things of this world, which I do not believe, if I cannot see.") in the trials.[46] A more accurate characterization of Menocchio's rejection of the Holy Scripture would be that God only exists in man's emotional and sensual experiences, not in the words of sacred texts written by humans. The detailed comparison of Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's religious worldviews can thus be summarized as similarities and parallels in form and profound differences in content.

Practical Reason and Common Sense

How can one explain the appearance, in two places separated in time and culture, of similar and parallel cultural forms without the diffusion of ideas and historical contacts? The question is not new. Caroline Walker Bynum gives examples from anthropology and art history. The answer provided by Panofsky and Lévi-Strauss refers to a common structure which on closer look turns out to contain radical differences in content (Walker Bynum 2020:32). What kind of common structure could be proposed in the case of Menocchio and Nils Bååt? A proposition may be provided by the late twentieth-century historic-anthropological debate on rationality and cultural relativism. One key question of special relevance for this study could be summarized as follows: Do certain "given" cognitive and perceptual mechanisms 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?[47] In his critique of the anthropologist Marshall Sahlin's analysis of the death of Captain Cook, the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere presented a modified version of Weber's concept of "practical rationality" as an elementary mode of thinking rooted in perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that are common to all humans. His definition of the concept includes reflection on goals and means and the implications of actions and problems in terms of empirical and practical criteria as the basis for decision-making, improvisation, and reasoned judgements about what is plausible or implausible, possible, or impossible in everyday practice (Obeyesekere 1992:15–22; 228–230. Obeyesekere 1995). Common sense is a further concept mentioned by Obeyesekere as easily blurred with practical rationality but less reflective and of a more taken-for-granted character. These concepts were of course far from new. The reference to Weber has already been mentioned but practical reason is used by Sahlins as well, although in quite another meaning with reference to an old-fashioned utilitarian kind of functionalism and Marxism that sees culture as a superstructure evolved from the problems

and practices of daily living (Sahlins 1976:55–125).[48] Common sense in its turn has a longer history (Melkonian 2020). The most relevant discussion of the concept is provided in an article by the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz underlines that common sense is not just the immediate deliverance of experience but includes deliberate reflections as well, guided by a few "quasi-qualities" – naturalness (of-courseness), practicalness (sense, foresight), thinness (simpleness, literalness), immethodicalness (ad hoc) and accessibleness (possible to grasp for any person with faculties intact) (Geertz 1975). While Geertz demonstrates how common sense can be used to support prevailing cultural beliefs, Obeyesekere asks what happens when common-sense assumptions are violated. People may start to behave irrationally but they could just as well practise reflective reasoning and argumentation – that is where practical reason comes in. Whereas assumptions of a primitive and pre-logic mentality have become outdated, the problem according to Obeyesekere is that cultural systems are increasingly described by anthropologists as homogeneous and all-encompassing with little room for reflective reasoning. Natives have become slaves of their own cultural concepts (Obeyesekere 1992:228–229). This is what Obeyesekere tries to break up with the assumption of practical reason as a kind of elementary mode of thinking tied to basic cognitive mechanisms common to all humans.

What immediately comes to mind is the common-sense character of Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's statements. If common-sense notions can be seen as taken-for-granted assumptions derived from reasoned judgements and practical decision-making in everyday life (practical reason), then they can also be used as a means to question and reject official doctrines that seem to violate them. This is what has been proposed by the French historian Jean-Pierre Albert in his studies of cases of unbelief in the medieval inquisitorial register of Jacques Fournier. According to Albert, common sense fuelled both alternative explanations based on everyday experiences and outright objections to official doctrines. The main resource of religious contestation (and thus of the production of statements held heretical) was in fact based on common sense (Albert 2003:81,89; Albert 2005:91–106).[49] This is also perfectly in line with what British historian John H. Arnold calls "materialist expressions of unbelief". The material production of religious objects like the bread of the host or wooden statutes of saints prompted sceptical reflections on the supernatural claims of religion (Arnold 2010: 65–95). Thus, practical reason and common sense as an elementary mode of thinking across time and culture, not the dissemination of a mode of thought, could provide the common structure that brings the similarities and parallels found in Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's statements together. A practical rationality and common-sense perspective open up a broader study of doubt and unbelief. Doubt has been a controversial issue in medieval and

early modern historical research. Was it even possible? According to the long-influential view of the French historian Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) European society up to at least the sixteenth century was totally dominated by Christian religion to the degree that unbelief and atheism were literally unthinkable (Febvre 1982:455–464).[50] Similar notions of a homogeneous culture have guided the history of mentalities (Arnold 2010:67). Ginzburg's study represents in fact an early break with this tradition. Or at least an attempt. According to a critical remark by Peter Burke, Ginzburg has made Menocchio a spokesman for an agelong "common peasant culture" only vaguely described as oral and materialistic with roots in ancient myths, "so that mentalities, thrown out of the door, came back in again through the window" (Burke 2012). The perspective of practical reason and common sense may provide a new fresh approach.

Common-Sense Arguments in Theological Discourse – the Real Presence of Christ's Body in the Eucharist

To assume that common-sense arguments were restricted to lay and ordinary people would however be premature. Such arguments and objections occurred in major theological controversies as well. A most telling example is the controversies about the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist. The leading opponent in the early disputes was the archdeacon Berengar of Tours (999–1088). His opinion has been summarized in the following way: "The historical body of Jesus must take up space and be seen, felt and tasted as a human body. This body can only exist in heaven. The presence on the altar is the spiritual body of Christ." The material substance of the consecrated bread and wine are not changed or diminished but remain since they are "symbols that point to the spiritual presence of Christ" (Macy 2013:23). What is interesting is the way Berengar grounds his arguments in the "reasons of all nature", asking questions about how a body could be present without being sensed or in more than one place at the same time (Macy 2013:24–25; Radding 2003:xvii). Berengar was preceded by the monk Ratramnus (died *c.* 868) who argued that Christ's body was only present figuratively in the Eucharist and not in reality.[51] Ratramnus and Berengar may be seen as forerunners in a break with the influences from a Platonic and Neoplatonic distrust of the senses as indicative of what is real, culminating with Thomas Aquinas's adoption and modification of Aristotelian metaphysics in the thirteenth century. The question of how Christ's body could be present at the same time in different places is taken up by Thomas. His answer is that Christ's body is not present in the same way as a body that fills up one place with its material dimensions, but in a uniquely "sacramental" way – an example of how Aristotelian rationalism eventually had to give way to miracle (Andrée 2008:39 footnotes 45–46). There is especially

one expression attributed to the more materialist objections of Berengar that circulated widely. According to the Cluny abbot Peter the Venerable (1092–1156), Berengar had once pronounced: "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" (Andrée 2008:36 & footnote 18; Fearns 1968:102). The expression immediately gained heretical status (Macy 1999). Two hundred years later it was iterated almost verbatim by Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373) in a revelation on the Real Presence in the Eucharist but now as a temptation of Satan. Bridget 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" (Lundén 1957:108). The phrase spread outside orthodox clerical and theologian circles as well. It is reported by both the author of *Historia Albigensis* Peter of Vaux-Cerney (1194–1218) and the inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261–1331) to be a standard argument among adherents of the Albigensian and Cathar movements.[52] Details vary but the narrative structure remains the same. In the late twelfth century, a dying man in Cologne is said to have declared to the priest that he did not believe in the Eucharist because "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" (Lesch 1927:67). Further examples are given from France and England without any connection to the Cathar and other heretical or unorthodox movements (Wakefield 1973; Rubin 1992:321; Arnold 2010:69–71). And in 1311 a man named Botolf from Gottröra parish outside Uppsala in Sweden was convicted of heresy after expressing his scepticism in similar wordings: "Were it truly the body of Christ", he said, "then the priest himself would have eaten it up long ago" (Ferm 1990:112–113). This is a version that comes very close to the words uttered by a woman in the village of Adalon near Montaillou in 1276: "even if it were as big as this mountain [showing a mountain called Domergali] it would have already been eaten up even by the priests alone (this is also probably how Botolf's utterance should be understood) (Rubin 1992:321). Examples like these testify to the pedagogical problem of convincing people of something that seemed contrary to common sense and everyday experience. Arnold gives examples of performative utterances in sermons and poetry inviting assent and faith in the God-made bread (Arnold 2010:77–78). Magister Mathias provides one further example: "Do not say in your heart: How can the body of Christ be present in two different places at the same time" (Andrée 2008:39). Ironically such performative utterances reveal at the same time the very arguments of doubt. As shown by Macy and others, the theological controversies did not end with the dogma of transubstantiation accepted by the Lateran Council 1215 (Macy 1994). The term had several coexisting

meanings, and arguments about the material and spatial limits of bodies continued to be an issue of controversy up to the time of the Reformation. In a colloquium between Luther and Zwingli at Marburg on 1–4 October 1529, Zwingli argued that since Jesus has bodily ascended into heaven, he cannot be bodily in the Sacrament too. "For one and the same body cannot be in several places at the same time" (Sasse 2001:248). Similar arguments circulated among lay people as well. In 1550 an Italian mason in Lucca was reported for having questioned the efficacy of sacramental confession and priestly absolution, "since Christ could not be in person at the side of two or three friars confessing in different places" (Berengi 1999:448).[53] Luther's principal answer to such objections was that it is not a question of reason but of faith: "It behoves us not to call in question that which the word of God says unless the literal understanding would lead to an absurdity that would contradict (not our reason, but) our faith" (Sasse 2001:243).

The Consumption of Christ's Flesh and Blood

Botolf also developed his 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?" (Ferm 1990:112–113). The latter follows a common-sense logic – the mightier man, the greater the revenge. Cannibalism as a logical consequence of the transformation of the bread into the body of Christ already occurs in the New Testament, expressed as an immediate reaction to the words of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum: "I am the living bread which came down 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). "Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, this is a hard saying; who can hear it?" (John 6:60). The cannibalistic theme continued to provoke aversion. In the colloquium between Luther and Zwingli, the Zwingli camp argued that "it is impossible to understand the words of the Lord's Supper ['this is my body'] literally because God has forbidden us to eat his flesh bodily" (Sasse 2001:240). The latter should be seen in the light of Zwingli's understanding of a strict divide between earthly and divine – "he found it repugnant to believe that the Lord Christ could be chewed and torn apart by filthy human teeth" (Euler 2013:61).

Cannibalism could however be turned around and become a pedagogical example with the help of common-sense reasoning. In his treatise *Liber de Corpore et Sanguine Domini* the monk Paschasius Radbertus (785–865) talks about a sceptical old man who demands visible proof. The following Sunday during communion the participants have a vision of the Eucharist

as a small boy lying on the altar, his blood tapped, and his body cut in pieces by an angel of the Lord. The old man becomes very afraid when the piece of bloody flesh is handed over to him and exclaims, "I believe, Lord, that the bread which is placed on the altar is your body and the cup is your blood", and immediately the bleeding flesh is transformed into bread. The by now convinced old man says: "God knows human nature, that it is not able to eat bleeding flesh, and on account of this he transformed his body into bread and his blood into wine" – a kind of reverse transubstantiation which appeals to a means-to-an-end rationality (Boenig 1980:316. Cf. Walker Bynum 2015:142–143; Zamore 2020:607–608). First formulated by the church father Ambrose (339–397) in his *De sacramentis*, this kind of argument became widely disseminated as well (Zamore 2020:607, footnote 38). A further example of how learned theologians could use common-sense reasoning in order to explain spiritual and mystical matters is provided 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?" (Andrée 2008:40).

Radical Reformation – Socinianism and the Appeal to Right Reason

Common-sense arguments lingered on in the time of the Reformation. Zwingli's objections and arguments have already been mentioned. A more programmatic common-sense rationality is represented by the radical movement founded in Italy by Faustus Socinus (1539–1604). Socinianism developed its first stronghold in Poland (MacFarlane 2011:478). In 1604 a summary of the movement's doctrines was published in the form of a catechism with questions and answers followed by Latin, English and German editions. As with Nils Bååt, the story of man's fall and redemption by the suffering of Christ is rejected, but what is most interesting is the argumentative style in the unfolding of the doctrine. As to the question of Christ's nature it is framed in the following way (Smalcius & Sozzini 1652:28):

> Q. You said a little before that the Lord Jesus is a man by nature, hath he not also a divine Nature?
>
> A. At no hand; for that is repugnant not only to sound Reason, but also to the holy Scriptures.

Christ could not be both human and divine "since two substances with opposite properties cannot combine into one Person"…"two Natures, each whereof is apt to constitute a several [separate] person, cannot be huddled into one Person, for instead of one, there must of necessity arise two persons,

& consequently become two Christs, whom all men without controversy acknowledge to be one, and his Person one" (Smalcius & Sozzini 1652:28). According to the general guidelines for Socinian exegesis every interpretation of the Scripture, "which is repugnant to right reason, or involves a contradiction" should be rejected (Racovian Catechisme 1818:18).[54] "Right reason" is in a corresponding way assisted by eyewitness proof and common-sense logic in the argumentation for non-natural miracles and the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Smalcius & Sozzini 1652:5–6):

> That he was raised from the dead by God, is hence apparent; first because there were many presently after his death, who constantly affirmed that they had seen him raised from the dead, and for this very reason, because they affirmed him to have been raised from the dead, they suffered many calamities, and some lost their very lives. Again, an innumerable multitude of others receiving the same from those that went before, did upon the same ground endure very great calamities, and most exquisite deaths. From whence it followeth necessarily, either that Jesus was raised from the dead, or that they by constantly affirming a thing which they knew to be false, did willingly involve themselves in so many calamities, and so bitter deaths. The latter could by no means come to pass, inasmuch as very common sense doth abundantly refute it; And therefore, it is apparent that the first is altogether true.

This is strongly reminiscent of Nils Bååt's way of reasoning and demands for proof and eyewitnesses. It is a possibility that cannot be ruled out that Nils Bååt had encountered fragments of Socinian ideas and arguments in military camps during his service in the Swedish-Polish war of 1657–1660.

Woman is Created from a Dog's Tail – Common-Sense Rhetoric in Learned and Popular Culture

Both Arnold and Albert warn against connecting individual examples of disbelief immediately to heretical or unorthodox movements. When people say that these doubts are their own thoughts this should be taken seriously. Arnold also rejects a possible influence from elements of Aristotelian philosophy in late medieval sermons (Arnold 2005:227; Albert 2003:11). The British historian Miri Rubin makes a similar statement in relation to Wyclif's (1324–1384) unorthodox formulations. They were "fed into pre-existing types of doubt and criticism which, in England, had been fairly muted until then" (Rubin 1992:325). Menocchio and Nils Bååt both claim the originality of their ideas. Menocchio refers to books he has read but his thoughts are nothing but his own: "I have never known anyone who had these ideas, and whatever ideas I had came out of my own head."[55] And when Nils was questioned as to "how he had arrived at such ungodly thoughts, perhaps by being instructed by someone or the reading of certain books?" his answer was a straightforward no. "He had always had these thoughts from his youth."[56] Since he had been a soldier he was asked once again by the superior court

if he perhaps had heard some discourses about such things during his time in the army. At first, he did not give a straight answer but eventually he said no.[57] Arnold makes a strong case for material experience as the basis for doubt, independently of unorthodox or heretical ideas. This is nicely illustrated by a case from early eighteenth-century Sweden. The peasant Elias Matsson was reported to have denied the presence of Christ's body in the host in front of his dinner guests. When the guests started to read the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread", he objected loudly – bread could be earned without prayer and kneeling in the church. "I have earned my bread by my own efforts!" And then he cut a piece of bread and said, "this is made of flour just like the host but more filling, and there is no body and blood of Christ present in the Communion."[58] That doubts could arise spontaneously from experience of material production and the social facts of everyday life is at the core of the assumption of a universal mode of practical reason and common sense. However, the cited examples indicate that common-sense arguments in religious matters were widely expressed in both high and low culture. Similarities in formulations across time and country imply that common-sense arguments and practical reasoning constituted a repertoire of idioms and exempla circulating between high and low culture rather than stemming from a popular materialist religion. This circulation between high and low, learned and popular culture has probably been grossly underestimated, as indicated by the following remarkable example:

On a Sunday evening in 1713 in the parish of Lappfjärd in the Finnish part of the Swedish kingdom, a verbal exchange started between a farmer and a wife about the origin of sin. The wife said that the devil and mankind were the origin of sin, and more precisely the devil in the shape of a snake seducing Eve who then persuaded Adam to sin. The farmer responded that woman is worse than man. The wife objected that man was created from dust of earth, but woman from a finer matter, namely Adam's rib. Certainly not, the farmer responded. Woman was created from a dog's tail. When God had taken the rib out of Adam, a dog came running and snatched it away, God hurried to take it back but only got hold of the tip of the dog's tail, and from this tail God created woman, and that's the reason why women are so angry and bark like dogs against their men.[59]

The anecdote demonstrates the principles of everyday practical reasoning in all ways but this time in a parodical context. Eve's subordinate status and being the immediate cause of Adam's sin is turned the other way around by an incongruent analogy that brings down female and male spiritual qualities to a comparison between the material qualities of human flesh and dust. In the farmer's response God's creation of woman is in its turn placed in the everyday scenario of a cheeky dog snatching a bone from the hands of a fumbling man. The cheekiness and cunning of dogs fighting over bones was

a theme for proverbs: "While two dogs are fighting for a bone, a third runs away with it" (*Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* 2008:122). Taken unaware by the dog, God must be content with what he manages to get hold of according to a simple practical logic. It all ends with a pun: the Swedish word for barking has the double meaning of scolding. An example of popular creativity and inventiveness, so it seems. But the first statement about Eve as made of a finer material is an obvious reminiscence of the learned rhetorical common-sense argument for the nobility of women over men advanced by the German natural philosopher Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) which in its turn can be traced back to Abelard's (1079–1142) proto-feminist epistle to Heloise (Nettesheim 1996:50; 83; Newman 1995:233–234). Neither is the farmer's reply entirely of his own devising. The dialogue between the Finnish wife and the farmer is in fact an almost verbatim staging of some passages in the English poet Edward Gosynhyll's anti-feminist poem *Scole House Of Women* from 1560, most unlikely to be found in the Swedish-Finnish countryside. The verses start with a woman telling the poet that God made us (women) of a much more precious thing than man, namely a ribbon, while man is made of earth. This is denied by the poet who replies that a dog ran off with Adam's rib before God could fashion a woman. Since the dog ate the bone God had to make woman from one of the dog's ribs, which accounts for women's barking at their husbands (Woodbridge 1984:28–29; Gosynhyll 1560: verses 435–439; 498–510). In comparison the Finnish version is more vulgar, leading to greater comic effect, but the storyline is the same. Maybe this dialogue was something that Gosynhyll had in his turn picked up from oral culture?! The origin will of course never be known, but the anecdote can still serve as a source of inspiration for more systematic research in a broader field of statements of doubt, deliberate blasphemies, swearing, proverbs, parodies, and jokes (Cavaillé 2022).

A Shift of Focus Anew – from Likeness to Differences

To what extent Menocchio's and Nils Bååt's common-sense statements were inspired by a cultural repertoire is impossible to know, but their religious views were more than a collection of common-sense idioms. A closer look at the differences in themes and focus and their respective lived experiences and personalities may reveal underlying motifs for developing doubts and rejections into more extensive systems of thought. The concept of lived experience is used here as personal experiences acquired over time from the cultural and social circumstances of one's life.

First, while both Menocchio and Nils Bååt express a strong sense of social criticism, the main target was different. Menocchio's constant references to the sacraments of the church as "merchandise" 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".[60] In Lutheran Sweden, where both church lands and the number of sacraments had been greatly reduced and the clergy transformed into government civil servants, Nils 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's 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 the sake of conscience. Give each one what you owe them, tax as tax should…" (Luther 1648:35). For Nils, things were clear. His God had 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."[61]

Nils Bååt's and Menocchio's cultural and social living conditions were also entirely different. 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 Menocchio the most. How could this multiplicity be understood? A miller by trade, he encountered many individuals. The mill was a meeting place where peasants jostled before the gates waiting to have their grain ground, a time for chatting and the exchange of news and opinions involving the miller as well. Accordingly, millers like tavern keepers were especially receptive to new ideas and inclined to propagate them, writes Ginzburg (Ginzburg 2013:114). His views seem to have long been well known in the village without leading to anyone alerting the authorities. He also seems to have enjoyed a solid social reputation, at least intermittently. He had served as mayor and administered parish finances (Ginzburg 2013:1–2).

Above all, Menocchio's message was *tolerance* or at least religious recognition (Saarinen 2016). 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."[62] From this radical relativism and at the same time inclusive attitude, 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".[63]

Nils expresses a kind of relativism and tolerance as well but of a more defensive character. "Priests and other Christians have the same faith as he,"

he insists, "though they teach and discuss differently." His request is simple: "if he may be allowed to maintain his beliefs, …another may hold to those he believes to be better…"[64] If Menocchio's ideas were formed by curiosity and an inquiring mind, Nils's statements were made against the backdrop of an increasing social marginalization. Born in a small village in Northern Sweden, he became a soldier in 1657. After returning home he married and set up a household of his own on a small piece of inherited land. His wife was the sister of his closest neighbour Per Nilsson. Nils Bååt's allotment was by far the smallest in the village (Fahlgren 1969:51–56). His brother-in-law Per Nilsson was however an important person. Appointed by the vicar, he hosted prayer meetings in his house for those in Nybyn and nearby villages who could not attend service because of the long distance to the parish church. In the 1680s the relation between Nils and his neighbours became more and more tense, ending in a total breakdown. At a court session in 1685 three neighbours, including his brother-in-law Per Nilsson, complained in the presence of the county governor that Nils had not paid any tax rent to the crown, nor contributed to the village's communal rent for the last ten years.[65] An immediate refunding of the neighbours' expenses was demanded. At the same court session Nils was cited by Per Nilsson for accusing him of theft which he could not prove. Due to lack of means to pay the fines, he was sentenced to be taken into custody with a warning to mend his ways to avoid a much harder, corporal punishment in the future. The warning did not only concern Per Nilsson but all his neighbours and his wife as well, "whom he often maltreats when she gives him advice and tries to stop him from his ungodly way of living".[66] According to the law Per Nilsson had the power and right to represent his sister and he was now authorized to report if Nils continued to maltreat his wife. What the maltreatment was all about is explained by Nils later in the first court interrogation. She had "turned against him", he said, and when asked why he had not attended church or the local prayer meetings his answer was that he could not leave his small children unattended.[67] A poor excuse, so it seems, but also an indication of a total split between him and his wife, leaving him at home with the children when she attended church or prayer meetings in her brother's house. In May the next year (1686) Nils was once again reported by his brother-in-law for quarrelling with his wife and battering her. This time he was sentenced to run the gauntlet – a punishment in which the delinquent is forced to run between two rows of men who strike at him as he passes, a most painful and dishonourable corporal punishment.[68] He must by now have become an outcast, alienated from the local religious and social community alike. In the front line stood his brother-in-law, not only appointed guardian for Nils's wife but also the local guardian of Lutheran orthodoxy and morality, probably with the active support from his sister, Nils's wife. This must without doubt have been a fertile ground for constructing a God of his own.

While Menocchio seems to have been driven by an irresistible wish to argue and discuss, Nils withdrew into his barn to talk with God. The enmity between Nils and his brother-in-law may have been the starting point and his refusal to attend the prayer-meetings the very cause of the quarrels with his wife (there is not a word about drunkenness). In his communication with God, he could compensate for everything he had lost in social life – friendship, recognition, respect and not the least reciprocal sympathy and loyalty. His God was a God who suffered from marginalization as well: "not many people think about me, but I am still the one who has created heaven and earth," God's voice told him.[69] Addressing them both as "you and me", God promises him lifelong loyalty: "since you have followed me from your day of birth, I will follow you to your dying day."[70] This is a relationship modelled on close friendship rather than worship, reverence, and godliness. "A deep friendship" (*en synnerlig vänskap*) is also the explicit term Nils uses to describe their relation.[71] In company with his mate, he could outline a vision of a peaceful world in stark contrast to his own experiences as a soldier and the conflicts with his wife and neighbours. Nils's vision and worldview could thus be seen as firmly anchored in the world of everyday experience in terms of an imagined sociality. Still there are some statements that indicate a possible influence from radical movements and preachers in the reformation.

A Dissemination of Radical Ideas after All?

Surprisingly, no serious efforts were made by the Swedish courts to trace influences from the radical Reformation. So, what were the supposed origins of his ideas? A medical examination of Nils Bååt's "corporal constitution" was suggested by the consistory to find out if some sort of phantasy may have caused his delusion.[72] The district court had, however, already stated that Nils Bååt was neither feeble-minded nor melancholic but in his right mind.[73] This seems also to have been the opinion of the superior court. The presence of the devil was insinuated as another possibility: "it seems as though he regards as his God the one that others take to be the devil". Nils's reply is most remarkable: "his God says that he is God though others call him the devil" and "people do call me a devil, but I am still the true God".[74] Less than two decades before, in the time of the great witch trials, this would most certainly have raised strong suspicions about consorting with the devil. But in 1676 the reality of stories about abductions and meetings with the devil at the witches' sabbath were reassessed as illusions and lies caused by "the devil's play through evil (*arga*) people".[75] The devil's power was hereafter reduced to instigations and illusions, according to the opinion of the judicial authorities. Accordingly, while instigated by the devil for certain, Nils Bååt's delusions were now considered a case of idolatry. The

district court uses the Latin expression *Idolum Fidei* and in the superior court Svea Hovrätt the case is presented by one of the deputy judges as "a most evil example (*res mali exempli*) of idolatry".[76] This may explain the strong and lengthy efforts to convert him.

Still there are some obvious similarities with radical ideas, apart from the already mentioned Socinianism. The first concerns the voice of God once heard when he was out mowing grass in the field. One of the founding leaders of Quakerism, James Nayler, told a similar story about hearing a voice when he was at work at the plough (Leachman 1997:212). The Quakers developed an extensive publishing business from the middle of the seventeenth century, reaching the Nordic countries in 1666 with a tract published in Danish (Peters 2005; Aarek 2002). Just as in the case of Socinianism it can't be ruled out that Nils had heard some talk about Quakers and their beliefs during his military service in the Swedish-Polish war (Fahlgren 1969:52).[77] There are however profound differences as well. While the voice was identified by Fox and Nayler as the voice of Christ and internalized into the soul and conscience as an "Inner Light", the voice of Nils's God was audible and principally situated in the barn (Pennington 2021:ch. 4, especially 69–94). And whereas the communication between Nils and his God was conducted on equal terms "whenever he wanted", the guidance of the Inner Light was often experienced as explicit verbal commands (Barbour 1964:111–115). Nevertheless, Nils's statement that "he was in God and God in him" is reminiscent of the early Quakers' doctrine of "celestial inhabitation". The latter was however perceived by the early quakers as a most literal and even corporal presence of Christ dwelling in the body unlike Nils Bååt's conception of the soul as the spiritual abode of God (Bailey 1992:75–136).[78]

Radical ideas were however present closer at hand. In a trial from 1672 a student in the secondary school in the town of Gävle south of Umeå, Olai Rahm, was reported to have said that "Christ was a son of a whore, Mary was a whore and Joseph a whoremonger". This was further explained before the court as follows: Christ cannot be the son of God, since God is a spiritual being, and a spirit cannot have sexual intercourse with a woman and even if it were so, Christ could not have been born legitimate since Mary was betrothed to Joseph.[79] What is of particular interest here is not Olai's common-sense reasoning but his explicit reference to a book written by "Andreas Kempe". Anders Pedersson Kempe (1622–1689) was an artillery officer stationed in Frösön south-west of Umeå. He became strongly influenced by the Bohemian evangelic priest, chiliast, and visionary Paul Felgenhauer (1593–1661) (Hasselberg 1922:9–33; Ambjörnsson 1981). The book referred to was most probably Kempe's Swedish translation of Felgenhauer's *Probatorium Theologicum*, printed in Amsterdam in 1664. Kempe had left Sweden in 1670 when threatened with prosecution, but copies of his translations still circulated in the nearby county of Jämtland. There is however not a word

about Christ as being simply human in Felgenhauer's text. On the contrary. What is claimed in the text is that Christ is of an entirely divine nature. As such he has two shapes – one divine and one human. In human shape his flesh and blood are still of divine nature, not to be confused with the earthly, perishable flesh and blood of sinful humans. In his earthly appearance he is according to Felgenhauer "a heavenly man" (*himmelsk människa*). Just as Christ has only one nature, God is just one person (*individuum*). Christ is thus just a "pouring out" (*uttömmelse*) of God in human form (Felgenhauer/Kempe 1664:4–5; 17–18; cf. Ambjörnsson 1981:52–55). In his heavenly human shape Christ still needed an earthly father: "If Christ had no father on earth, how could he then have been born a legitimate child, and be a son of David?" (Felgenhauer/Kempe 1664:9). Maybe it was this passage that had caught Olai's attention and inspired his distorted version and common-sense conclusions according to the social facts of everyday life. Could fragments of Kempe's and Felgenhauer's antitrinitarian ideas have still been circulating twenty years later? That Christ could only be found within oneself is expressed by Kempe and Felgenhauer in formulations that come close to some of Nils's utterances. Felgenhauer/Kempe: "Our immortal soul or spirit is the spirit of the Almighty" (Felgenhauer/Kempe 1664:18–19). Nils: "the soul is God himself who is in every man." Felgenhauer/Kempe: "The Son is in the Father, and the Father in the Son" (Felgenhauer 1666:146). Nils: "God is in him, and he is in God." There is also an even more intriguing possibility that Felgenhauer/Kempe's claim that the "inner man" could arise from earthly flesh and become heavenly already on earth is echoed in Nils's characterization of his relationship with God (Ambjörnsson 1981:54–55).[80] God had told him 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 [he] Nils Olofsson cannot die yet but live on".[81] Maybe Nils's description of their relationship should not be interpreted as a bringing down to an imagined sociality of everyday life, but as an elevation of himself to a celestial level?! Apart from the highest improbability that Nils had read any of Felgenhauer's and Kempe's texts, this is effectively denied by his entire appearance before the court. When asked in what way he had been the cause of peace, he answers in a provocative style "who knows if prayers haven't been able to accomplish something" followed by a sarcastic "you know that, right?"[82]

Concluding Remarks – a Restless Freethinker versus a Frustrated Provocateur

Nils's answers before the court are marked by sarcasm and irony. When questioned he could answer with a smile and joking gestures or in rebuking words like "you ought to know" or "you understand better, don't you, my

good gentlemen".[83] His words about Christ as a devil or the devil's follower are uttered with a smile.[84] The question of the trinity he turns into a sardonic joke: "it is no wonder that I am poor, who have no more than one God. Ye who have so many must be far wealthier."[85] Time after time the court admonishes him to stop smiling and take the examination seriously, reminding him of the death sentence that hung over his head. This casts new light on Nils's motives. God's voice in the barn should probably not be seen as a place of refuge but rather as a deficient counter-image to the Lutheran God that represented his brother-in-law and the authorities. He did not need to attend prayer meetings or catechism examinations since "he had God at home" was his answer when questioned by the court and probably also what he had told the priest and his brother-in-law.[86] Such a strategy was however double-edged. According to the examining priests in the consistory Nils had expressed regret at having talked about God's voice in the barn "since it made people think that I was completely mad."[87] Not to be taken seriously would certainly have undermined his arrogant sarcasm and ironies. The spiritual essence of his described relationship with God can also be questioned. Matters discussed were hardly sacral, ranging from the paying of taxes to the keeping of the peace in everyday life. And when admonished that the word of God is food for the soul his answer reveals a basic materialist and sensuous rather than spiritual and transcendental attitude to life: "food for the soul is also when you have something tasty to put in your mouth."[88] On the other hand, the utterance about God being in him and he in God did not necessarily contradict this down-to-earth attitude. If God was present in every human soul, there was no need for churches, priests, sacred texts or communion rituals. God became a lifelong companion with whom one could have daily conversations instead of a distant Lord demanding to be worshipped.

In any case his stubbornness and provocations cost him dearly. Put to hard physical labour on a starvation diet with a shackle around his ankle he was locked up almost naked in an unheated ice-cold prison cell at night.[89] After enduring this torture for several months he eventually resigned and renounced his "delusions".

Menocchio, by contrast, addresses the inquisitors with respect. He is eager to explain his ideas and often makes additions on his own initiative. His taste for argument was well known among the villagers. Several times people had heard him say that he wished for nothing more than to express his opinion before the ecclesiastical and secular authorities (Ginzburg 2013:8). Entangling himself in sometimes long expositions, Nils's replies were in contrast always short and abrupt. While Nils returned home a broken man, Menocchio could not resist taking up his arguments once again after being released from the first trial, even though he must have been aware that recidivists were to be executed.[90] In November 1599 Menocchio was

executed at sixty-seven years of age (Ginzburg 2013:121). Almost a century later in 1696 Nils died at the age of fifty-nine, destitute and marked by his longstanding suffering in custody (Fahlgren 1969:93–94). Thus, while equal in the use of common-sense arguments to question religious doctrine, Menocchio and Nils were contrasts in personal style and social motives – a restless freethinker driven by a taste for argument versus a frustrated provocateur nurtured by social marginalization and public humiliation. Behind the same mode of thinking there were at the same time also substantial differences in statements of religious beliefs – an illustration of the complexity of Walker Bynum's distinction between likeness and lookalikes.

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[22] First trial, May 7, 1584, Del Col 1996:47, cf. 57, where he claims that those spirits were produced by nature, just as worms are produced from a cheese.
[23] First trial, May 12, 1584, Del Col 1996:57.
[24] First trial, May 7, 1584, Del Col 1996:47; 57.
[25] First trial, May 7, 1584, Del Col 1996:51; 53.
[26] First trial, May 7, 1584, Del Col 1996:52.
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[42] For this concept see Levine 2001.
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[44] First trial, February 2, 1584, Del Col 1996:17.
[45] First trial, February 2, 1584, Del Col 1996:13.
[46] First trial, February 7, 1584, Del Col 1996:26; Second trial, July 19, 1599, Del Col 1996:137.
[47] For critical reviews and comments on the debate, see Lukes 2000; Yoshida 2014, chapter 5; Österman 2021.
[48] For Sahlin's critique of Obeyesekere's use of the term, see Sahlins 1995:148–156.
[49] Cf. Reynolds 1991:30 for the term "common-sense rationalism".
[50] This is how Febvre's conclusion has been traditionally interpreted. For a modified argument see Wootton 1988.
[51] Chazelle 1992:21, a material entity may not be considered "truly" present if it has been endowed with the appearance of another material entity; for something to be classified as veritas, it must continue to possess only characteristics originally belonging to it. Cf. Radding 2003:xii–xiii.
[52] "Bernard Gui on the Albigensians", text from Gui 1905:381–382. Quotes from *Historia Albigensium* in Rubin 1992:321.
[53] Berengi calls this a case of "elementary rationalism". I thank Mattia Corso for this reference.
[54] Deniq; ne quid statuatur, quod ipsi sanæ rationi repugnet, seu contradictionem involvat. Cf. Wilbur 1977:5.
[55] First trial, February 22, 1584, Del Col 1996:34.
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[59] Justitierevisionen, July 6, 1713, no. 25, Swedish National Archive, Marieberg, Stockholm. Cf. Olli 2007:82–83.
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[63] First trial, April 28, 1584, Del Col 1996:53.
[64] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 731h; f. 732h; f.733v.
[65] Court record, Umeå socken, May 3–5, 1685, f. 535v.
[66] Court record, Umeå socken, May 3–5, 1685, f. 536h.
[67] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 725v, f. 726v.
[68] The records are not preserved but the trial and punishment are mentioned in the records from the first interrogation September 26, 1687, f. 726v.
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[75] Royal letter to Trolldomskommissionen i Stockholm, quoted in Linderholm 1913:208.
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[77] Court record, Svea Hovrätt, July 18, 1688, f. 132h.
[78] Court record, Umeå socken, May 7–8, 1688, f. 729v; f. 733v.
[79] Court record, Gävle rådstugurätt och magistrat, AIb:13, March 16, 1671.
[80] This possibility was according to Felgehauer and Kempe uncovered for the first time by the arrival of Christ, Felgenhauer 1666:174–175.
[81] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 727v.
[82] Court record, Svea hovrätt, July 18, 1688, f. 131v.
[83] Court record, Svea Hovrätt, July 18, 1688, f. 129h, f. 131v.

[84] Court record, Umeå socken, May 7–8, 1688, f. 730v.
[85] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 727h.
[86] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 727v.
[87] Court record, Svea Hovrätt, September 19, 1688, f. 589.
[88] Court record, Umeå socken, September 24, 1687, f. 727v.
[89] Court record, Svea Hovrätt, October 13, 1688, f. 828; Letter from the warden of the royal castle Georg Stiernhoff December, 1688, Stockholm Consistory EIII:37, no. 80; Letter from the governor general Christoffer Gyllenstierna to his Royal Majesty, January 5, 1689, Överståthållarämbetets äldre kansli, BIa registratur.
[90] This was spelt out explicitly in the commutation sentence, Del Col 1996:xcix.