

JAN de BAKKER: AN EARLY MARTYR FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NETHERLANDS

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The Protestant movement in the Netherlands proceeded slowly for over a decade for many reasons. *First*, there was no major leader to inspire followers, and to bring cohesion among the many individuals who were opposed to the Roman Catholic hierarchy and its sacramental system. *Second*, the Imperial political administration was much stronger in present Belgium and the southern half of Holland than it was in the city-states of Switzerland or the Principalities of Saxony. There was no City Council, and no "Frederick the Wise" to provide a "buffer" between the Emperor and the people. The area of the Netherlands which Emperor Charles V controlled was his by hereditary right, administered until 1530 directly by his aunt, Margaret of Austria. *Third*, because of this political situation an inquisition could be, and was, organized with an inquisitor general for the Netherlands. It was surprisingly effective in prohibiting wide-spread religious differences from organizing.

There were, however, several tendencies in the Netherlands which can be loosely termed "Protestant" in the decade following 1520. Some of these were a reflection of Lutheran ideas spread in Augustinian monasteries at Antwerp and Dordrecht. Other developments were more a lay movement reflecting the continuing influence of the Brethren of the Common Life, a movement which emphasized education for other classes of society in addition to the priesthood, and where the Bible was translated and copied for more people to read. Still a third group reflected the new learning of "Humanism" as exemplified best by the Roteerdam-born scholar, Erasmus. The latter, suspected of heresy by his own church, was in correspondence with Luther, and was at the only University in the Netherlands—Louvain—until 1521. The humanist criticism of current Roman Catholic abuses most often found expression through the Latin schools where scholarsip was taken seriously.

On April 29, 1522 Emperor Charles V appointed Frans van der Hulst inquisitor over his territory in the Netherlands because the "heresy" continued to spread. Pope Adrian VI added to this inquisitorial authority when in a bull dated June 1, 1523, he named Frans van der Hulst Inquisitor General with authority of the Church. After

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this latter date, proto-Protestants, whatever their background, had only three choices. *First*, they could recant and probably live out their lives in the good graces of the Roman church. Many did this. *Second*, they could flee their country and find their place in the growing number of Lutheran areas of Northern Germany. Many of the Lutheran ministers and teachers in this part of Germany were of Netherlands origin. *Third*, if they chose not to recant, or were imprisoned before they could flee, they had another choice—death by fire.

The earliest scholar-priest in the Northern Netherlands (or present-day Holland) to undergo the third alternative was Jan de Bakker, a priest near Utrecht. In 1525 he was burned to ashes in the square outside the present Parliamentary buildings in The Hague. An analysis of this man's life, and especially his theological thought as we are able to glean from the extensive report of his trial, is instructive for us in at least two ways. *First*, it shows a theology not strictly Lutheran, but with tendencies much more related to the Biblical Humanism of Erasmus. *Second*, while we are not able to determine the permanent influence of the young priest among his followers, we see that his confidence in his faith was strong enough that he evidently did not waver even when confronted with the fiery alternative.

LIFE OF PISTORIUS

Johannis Pistorius (Jan Janszoon de Bakker van Woerden) was born probably in 1499¹, at Woerden, near Utrecht. His name of "baker"—Bakker in Dutch and Pistorius in Latin—may indicate an early occupation, although it is assumed this means not baker of bread, but of stone, a brick-maker.² It is possible that the father of Pistorius, Jan Diercksz., studied for a time in a school of the Brethren of the Common Life and lived in the same house with Erasmus.³ How much influence the great scholar had upon his fellow Dutch student is un-

¹In the "Joannis Pistorii martyrium", published in Paul Fredericq, *Corpus Documentorum Inquisitionum* (hereafter *CDI*) (5 vols, Ghent Universite, 1889-1906), IV, 406-412, and written by Willem Gnapheus, we note these words: "When the young priest was martyred 'xxvii enim annum vix attingerat', which is usually translated, 'he had barely entered his 27th year,' *se*, he had just passed his twenty-sixth birthday. Such is the interpretation used by his biographer, J. W. Gunst, *Joannes Pistorius Woerdensis* (Hilversum, Netherlands De Blauwvoet, 1925), p. 323. This is followed by others who have written about him. Cf. Nico Plomp, *Woerden 600 Jaar Stad* (Woerden, Netherlands, Stichts-Hollandse Bijdragen, 1972), cf. pp. 88-94 for a chapter on Pistorius, the article "Pistorius" by J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (7 vols, Tübingen Mohr, 3rd ed., 1961), V, 388, and "Pistorius" by van der Zyp in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (4 vols, Scottdale, Pennsylvania Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), IV, 182.

²Plomp, *Woerden 600 Jaar Stad*, p. 88.

³Whether this was during Erasmus' study at Deventer (1475-1483) or later at the Steyn monastery at Gouda (1486-1493) is not clear. J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, *Geschiedenis der Kerkbervorming in Nederland van haar ontstaan tot 1531* (Amsterdam G. L. Funke, 1873), p. 362, seems to favor Gouda, while J. W. Gunst, *Johannes Pistorius*, pp. 27f., argues for Deventer. The idea was suggested to Gnapheus biography of Pistorius in *CDI*, IV, 408.

known. Later when the father went with his grown son to Louvain to visit Erasmus, this earlier association was recalled.⁴ Little is known of the youth of Pistorius.

At approximately age twelve young Jan was sent to the School of St. Martin, at the Cathedral in Utrecht. He probably studied the usual Latin *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*.⁵ In approximately 1514 he entered the Hieronymus School, the Latin School, in Utrecht where Hinne Rode was a leader.⁶ There reforming tendencies such as teaching the Bible in the mother tongue, were being introduced by Rode.⁷ Evidently Rode's influence was widespread, and his personality persuasive, for to guard Pistorius from heresy the father withdrew his son and kept him at home for a time,⁸ making bricks we assume. Still the new Word of God continued to spread, in part probably through Pistorius' efforts.⁹ Then the father, to make sure Pistorius had the right doctrines, went with him to Louvain where they were with Erasmus for a time.¹⁰ Pistorius could have studied with Erasmus at the De Lelie house only a short time, for in 1521 Erasmus himself left Louvain for Basel.¹¹

In approximately 1522 Pistorius became pastor, or chaplain, in the small town of Jacobswoude (sometimes called Woubrugge), near his home,¹² and in 1523 he was ordained as priest to serve at Woerden, his home town.¹³ In this year, or perhaps in 1524, he went to Wittenberg where he may have heard the preaching of Luther,¹⁴ now banned by the Empire. About this time he married a widow, but we know almost nothing of his wife Jacoba Jansdochter¹⁵ except the references in the trial proceedings.

In 1524 the lenient bishop of Utrecht, Philip of Burgundy, died, and a more orthodox successor strengthened the administration against heretics. Pistorius was arrested in his home town in May, 1525, amid

⁴The father feared his son's growing interest in Luther's ideas and took him instead, to study with Erasmus in Louvain. The father tells us he stayed eight days. Cf. "Martyrdom," in Fredericq, *CDI*, IV, 483, "daer was ik acht daghen lanck."

⁵J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, p. 42. Gnapheus' record in the "Martyrdom" states that it was "natus duodecim annus" that he went to this school.

⁶J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, p. 42.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸The "Martyrdom" of Gnapheus states it: "Pater vero optimus filio timens exitium, gliscente . . . magis odiosa Lutheranismi suspicione, eum iam e ludo domum revocatum." *CDI*, IV 408.

⁹"Destit . . . inculcare et multos proselytos Christo adducere," *Ibid.*, 408.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹¹Erasmus went to Basel in 1521. Pistorius left Louvain probably by 1522. Cf. J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, p. 83.

¹²J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, in his article "Pistorius" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, V, 388; cf. J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, pp. 93ff.

¹³J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, p. 103.

¹⁴A statement to this effect appears in Gnapheus' "Martyrdom," *CDI*, IV, 409.

¹⁵J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, pp. 153-156.

protests of the towns-folk that the authorities had no right to invade the privileges of this old town. He was taken to the Voorport prison in The Hague.¹⁶ While there he had a chance to relate details of his trial to his friend, Willem Gnapheus, who recorded it for posterity. Some of Pistorius' theological ideas can be gleaned from his sharp replies to the inquisitors. On September 15, 1525, Jan de Bakker—or Pistorius—was burned in The Hague, the first martyr for Protestantism in the Northern Netherlands. In 1925, four hundred years later, a special service of thanksgiving and remembrance was held in the Great St. Jacobs Church in The Hague. A part of this commemoration included dedicating a special window in the church known as the "Jan de Bakker, or Pistorius" window.

PISTORIUS' TRIAL

The record of the trial of Pistorius, as compiled by Gulielmus Gnapheus, must be used to analyze his theology and the reasons for his coming into conflict with the church and the civil authorities.¹⁷ Gnapheus, a Humanist scholar, rector of the Latin School in The Hague, wrote this report of the trial between 1525 and 1529 when he himself was on the Inquisitors' list. Gnapheus ultimately fled to Germany in 1530 where he lived and taught for almost thirty more years.

Pistorius left no theological writing of his own, having been executed at the age of twenty-six, as we have seen. Two theological concerns stand out in his trial as most important. Subordinate to these other ideas take their rightful place. These two are: *first*, the centrality of the Scriptures; and *second*, his understanding of the nature of the Church, and the ways in which an individual lives out his religious faith. We will analyze each of these in turn.

After preliminary discussion about how scripture is to be interpreted, who has the authority to interpret it, and the extra-scriptural tradition in the Roman Catholic Church, Pistorius stated clearly:

"The meaning of the Holy Scriptures is not hidden under the commentaries of the doctors nor in the decrees of the councils. The conclusions are given to us by the clear and true Word of God, Wherewith we determine what we should and should not do, if we would not be found in error. It is blasphemy against God that you understand the Word of God by means of your own opinions and fancies."¹⁸

¹⁶J. W. Gunst, *Pistorius*, p. 197.

¹⁷The "Martyrdom," by Gnapheus, including a summary of the trial, is published in Fredericq, *CDI*, IV, 406-452 in Latin, and 453-495 in Dutch translation.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 473

He affirmed that he believed all scripture, all books of the Bible.¹⁹ Then his inquisitors asked about the suggestion that many other things were done by Jesus not contained in the written scriptures (John 21:25).²⁰ They hoped to trick him into admitting the possibility of their trust in tradition and in ceremonies and even in the doctors of the church.

Pistorius, however, countered with the truth as he understood it: "There is but one true holy doctor in the Holy Church, that is the Holy Ghost, who teaches all truth."²¹ Furthermore, since Christ taught all that was necessary for eternal life, "prove to me where Christ gave the right to any man or council to teach to us what he had forgotten (*vergheten*)."²²

The prisoner was asked how he distinguished when the Holy Ghost spoke. He answered simply, "The one who has not the Spirit of Christ within himself does not belong to him."²³ "The scripture needs the help of no doctors to clarify what the scripture itself presents richly and fully."²⁴

Pistorius then stated his concept of the Church. "I have said that the Holy Church is a sinless and a spiritual gathering of all who are loyal to Christ, and who rely on nothing more than the Word of God."²⁵ As such, it is constituted by spiritual authority and not by earthly power. "Your church, however, which you serve on bended knee, is the *ecclesia malignantium* (the Church of the malicious), and the Pope sits there in the elevated chair called the *cathedra pestilentie* (*sic*), (the chair of pestilence). I will have nothing to do with this, your church, and will willingly be banned therefrom."²⁶

"You speak as a mad man, and blaspheme the Holy Roman Church."²⁷

Pistorius insisted that the inquisitors state the accusations made against him, while quickly denying that they had any authority over him. "The Church has no authority that it should be the instrument for damnation. She also does not have the power to make any new articles of faith, nor to pronounce any commands contrary to the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, this law against marriage is not valid. It behooves men to disregard that command which is clearly contrary to the clear Word of God."²⁸

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 456

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 457

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 457

²²*Ibid.*, p. 457

²³*Ibid.*, p. 457

²⁴*Ibid.*, p., 467

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 477

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 477

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 477

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 474f

They accused him of denying the Church, if he denied its authority. Pistorius, however, disagreed. He affirmed that he believed in the Holy Christian Church, and that he was a member thereof.

"How do you know?" they asked.

"The Spirit of God convinces me of that. . . . The Spirit of God convinces us that we are children of God."

The inquisitors replied, "How audaciously these Lutherans speak!"²⁹

The accusers then reminded Pistorius that they had authority from the Church and had power to condemn him if he did not listen to reason and admit his errors. Pistorius said that he could only listen to them as representing the Lord who sent them. "You have indicated you are ambassadors and commissioners of the Emperor, as indicated by your letter;" therefore, they should not use Christ's words, "whoever hears you hears me (Luke 10:16)." "You inquisitors are actually 'new Scribes and Pharisees, whose works are wicked and evil, and contrary to gospel truth and teaching.'"³⁰

"Paul said, 'Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect,' (I Pet. 2:18)," the inquisitor continued.

Pistorius reminded him that was not said by Paul, but by Peter, "so well you know the scriptures!"³¹

The officials suggested that if it were not for the authority of the church the land would be over-run by murderers and robbers. Pistorius argued that this keeping of order was the function of the power of the prince. It should not be directed against heretics, but should be used to control unruly men such as these, and Barabbas. That is the function of the state, but the sword of the Spirit is never for this type of punishment.³² The inquisitors concluded that Pistorius was not only critical of Mother Church, but that he even denied the power of the Keys.

Pistorius agreed: "You understand me well,"³³

The prisoner had an opportunity during the questioning to allude to several other aspects of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the most serious charges the inquisitors brought against him was that as a priest he had dared to take a wife. They asked him about this rumor several times, and he turned the discussion to other issues. But they persisted. Pistorius then explained himself, referring to the admonition of the Scriptures, "Be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:22),"

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 482

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 455

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 468

³²*Ibid.*, p. 469

³³*Ibid.*, p. 491

and Paul's admonition "It is better to marry than to burn (I Cor. 7:9)." "The Scripture has not singled out any group as exceptions, and leaves all men free. Those in priestly orders, therefore, are free according to God's command to marry rather than suffer serious danger of burning in the flesh."⁸⁴

The inquisitors, however, continued the questioning. They insisted, "You have a wife and will not admit it openly. You are guilty of misdeed."⁸⁵

Pistorius brought the discussion directly to the point. He asked, "Which do you think would be better that a priest should sleep with one whore one night, and with another the next night, and then someone else's wife—or on the other hand, that he should be married to one wife?"⁸⁶ They answered: "Neither is commendable."⁸⁷ One of the accusers elaborated: "I would rather that you had slept with the devil, than with your wife; I would rather that you had associated with whores, than with your wife; for you have played such a game with us."⁸⁸ Pistorius finally admitted that he had a wife but even under threat of death he refused to renounce her.

In relation to Pistorius' criticism of the Roman Catholic hierarchy the question of his own ordination arose. "How do you know you are really a priest. . . who has made you a priest, or has ordained you?"⁸⁹

"The bishop ordained me."⁹⁰

"Do you believe he had that power to ordain? . . . Concerning this there is nothing in the Scriptures. . . . How do you come to believe he has this power?"⁹¹

Pistorius answered sharply, "He received this power from the Pope, to create papal priests. . . . But this kind of priest I count as chaff, because it was done for money. . . . I hold this type of priesthood to be of no worth. Those who are made priests by the papal authority are not priests."⁹² "No one can make one a priest, but men should choose servants of the community following the apostolic examples, as the Apostle Paul wrote for us."⁹³

"Do you then believe that all Christian men are priests? . . . All men can perform masses, baptism and administer the sacraments? . . .

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 461

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 469

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 469

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 470

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 493

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 457

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 458

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 458

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 458

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 458

But it is written that only those of the class of the Levites were of the priestly estate.”⁴⁴

Pistorius quoted scripture as he answered, “Thus speaks the Lord God. ‘All the Kingdoms of the world have become His Kingdom, and belong to Him (Rev. 11:15?).’ Here he speaks not only of the Levites, but of all the people of Israel. Peter also writes to us, ‘You shall be a chosen race, and a royal priesthood (I Pet. 2:9).’ I do not say that all should preach or that all should perform the services for the community. . . . But I say that we are all called to the priesthood of Christ; and the priesthood of the Law in Christ is as follows. We all must offer to God the killing (*sterving*) of our bodies (the old Adam) as a worthy offering, so should we pray for each other through the law of brotherly love.”⁴⁵

The inquisitors understood the implication clearly and complained, “You have qualms about the sacrament of orders, which Martin Luther has completely cast out.”⁴⁶

When the sentence of death was about to be pronounced Pistorius was given the opportunity for final confession. Rather than the usual confession of various types of sins, he gave a confession of faith.⁴⁷ This took the inquisitors off their guard, so they began to question him about the sacrament of penance. “Is that a confession?”⁴⁸ “You shall go to your death without absolution.”⁴⁹

Pistorius answered, “I know who shall give me absolution.”⁵⁰

“Again, you seem like a Lutheran, when you do not ask for absolution from a priest.”⁵¹

“Christ has promised me forgiveness of all my sins through the shedding of his blood, which promises he has confirmed with his death.”⁵²

The inquisitors agreed among themselves, “He speaks his confession secretly, as the heretics do.”⁵³ “Who shall forgive your sins?”⁵⁴

Pistorius concluded the argument, “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, who has borne our sickness (*cranckheyden*),

⁴⁴*Ibid*, p 458

⁴⁵*Ibid*, p 458

⁴⁶*Ibid*, p 459

⁴⁷*Ibid*, p 489

⁴⁸*Ibid*, p 489

⁴⁹*Ibid*, p 490

⁵⁰*Ibid*, p 490

⁵¹*Ibid*, p 490

⁵²*Ibid*, p 490

⁵³*Ibid*, p 491

⁵⁴*Ibid*, p 491

and has offered an eternal sacrifice for our sins,"⁵⁵ is the source of this forgiveness.

The discussion then centered in the sacrament of the Eucharist. "The Church has said that no one can perform a mass other than upon an altar with appropriate ornamentation (*ornamenten*) if the consecration is to be valid. Should you not be sinning then if you speak the *verba consecrationis* using only a table without ornamentation?"⁵⁶

The prisoner answered, summarizing his view in one statement. "The Lord's Supper receives its power (*cracht*) not from outer ornaments, or times, or from hours, but from the words of God alone. In that *mysterium* the apostles never became concerned with such things. So, in whatever place and time, whenever the words are narrated and proffered among believing Christians, there is the true celebration of the sacrament."⁵⁷

"I think you are more harmful than Luther himself!"⁵⁸

There is little mention of baptism. Pistorius, however, was accused of baptizing in the name of Christ only, and not of the three persons of the Trinity. He was reminded that this trinitarian formula was biblical!⁵⁹ He said that baptism was really a baptism of the power of God. Baptism in the name of Christ only was not meant to diminish the importance of baptism, but there was no value in merely speaking the precise words. It was the reference to the power of God alone that was the important element,⁶⁰ and not the exact formula.

The inquisitor then turned to the question of fasting. Didn't Moses fast for forty days—and isn't that sufficiently Biblical?⁶¹ Pistorius said, "I hear you well. But how is it that one, on pain of committing a deadly sin, must fast on certain days, with certain foods, and on another day he may eat that food? Does this agree with the scriptures? I think not. . . . We do read of fasting in the Scriptures. I do not, however, find mention of specific days or foods. I also do not find that any banning or excommunication, or any punishments which they who disobey must suffer."⁶²

"Would you even eat meat on Friday?"⁶³

"I say to you that my conscience is free to do that, on all days and at all times. One day is no better than another. Paul criticized the

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 491

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 482

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 482

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 482

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 455

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 456

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 460

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 460

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 480

Galatians because they distinguished between days and times. In that criticism the Roman Church and all her adherents is also criticized.”⁶⁴

Pistorius was convinced that this faith was not unique to him, for he commented that “there are many thousands in Holland who have the same faith and understanding that I do.”⁶⁵ He was ready to face martyrdom and was not concerned for the life of the flesh, because “Christ taught me that I must lose the life here in order to find eternal life.”⁶⁶

“But don’t you have concern for your parents, or for your wife?” he was asked. Yes, he loved them, but he loved the truth of God more.

Toward the end of the trial Pistorius’ father was brought in to plead with the son that since his sins were small, he should recant and be free. As they discussed the situation, in which Pistorius explained that a recantation was much more serious than that, it became obvious that the faith of the father was very similar to that of the son. The inquisitors asked the father if he had read these theological errors for himself, or had he been taught by his son? He replied “I do not know what to say, except that I got this from the New Testament that I have read. I have never read your decrees.”⁶⁷ He bade farewell to his son, never to see him in this life again. Gnapheus reports that the father’s parting words were: “I pray, my beloved son, that you will never stray from the Word of God. I will gladly offer you as Abraham offered his son, and parting will not be sorrowful for us.”⁶⁸

This father, Jan Dierxsoen van Woerden, may have been trained earlier in Biblical studies, and may have been associated directly with Erasmus. If so, this may account for his seeming quick agreement with the unwavering interpretation of the son.

Even at the end, Pistorius does not seem to lose confidence. He continued his sharp replies to his accusers, never evading issues, and never wavering from what he believed God and the Biblical record should mean to the church of his day. Even his humor was evident. For example, in one interplay of accusation and reply he said to his accusers, “You smear your knife with honey!”⁶⁹

Finally, for the last time they asked, “Will you not recant?”⁷⁰ His answer: “In no way.” Furthermore, “I shall advocate the Word of God to the end of my life, with the help of God.”⁷¹

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 481

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 488

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 491

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 484

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 487

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 488

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 487

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 459

On September 15, 1525, Jan van Woerden—Pistorius—was “burned to ashes.”⁷² The analysis of the death was written also by his friend, Gnapheus, who gave the setting, and listed all church and state dignitaries who were there. He told how Pistorius’ priestly robes were taken off and a yellow robe of a traitor and a yellow hat put on him instead. Then as he mounted the scaffold he began to sing “*Te Deum Laudemus*.” Gnapheus said that he seemed as happy as though it were his wedding day!⁷³

The final sentence of the inquisitors included, according to Gnapheus, these items of erroneous belief or action: that

- (a) the Pope was not the Vicar of Christ, and he was not greater than any other apostle;
- (b) the Pope could bind no one to sin, nor release him therefrom;
- (c) man could eat meat on Friday without sin;
- (d) a priest could marry one wife and sleep with her without sin;
- (e) he had gone to Wittenberg and had there read and listened to Luther’s sermons, after the Imperial ban against Luther and his works had been pronounced;
- (f) he had been accused earlier in Utrecht of certain heresy; he had promised to assert the articles no more, but he reverted to former heresy;
- (g) that no one was guilty if he confessed his sin secretly *i.e.* not to a priest;
- (h) that a worthy man, possessing the Holy Ghost, could consecrate the sacraments at the altar.

THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The theological implications in Pistorius’ statements at his trial are many, although not thoroughly analyzed in this interesting trial. He insists that the scriptures give straight-forward direction to life, and no human institution, whether Imperial or Ecclesiastical, has any authority to make changes, either deleting requirements, or establishing new commands for the religious life. Pistorius thus reflects the Humanist emphasis on the centrality of the Bible as interpreted simply, without metaphor, allegory or other philosophical modifications or qualifications. Against this understanding he contrasted many of the medieval Roman Catholic developments, especially its sacramental system. This sacramentalism seemed to make God’s action too rigid, or *ex opera operato*, and extra-scriptural. This Bible-centered approach

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 495

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 495

was also contrasted with the use of Aristotle, Aquinas and Scotus in the medieval church's attempt to substantiate its doctrine.

Another implication arises from his contrast between what we call the "secular" authority and the "spiritual." The former is the power to control unruly individuals such as Barabbas, and to mete out physical punishment for crimes against the temporal order. Spiritual authority, however, is quite different. This comes from God, and is manifest by an inner conviction that the Spirit of God or of Christ, has spoken directly to an individual. The "Kingdom of God is within you" he would say, and the authority of that Kingdom is an inward authority. As a corollary to this understanding he denied that either papal or imperial authority—and he probably equated the two—could make any new requirement, or could legislate beliefs or actions contrary to the straight-forward scriptural admonition, or which counteracted the Spirit of God speaking from within.

As an elaboration of this spiritual authority within, and of the direct, literal interpretation of the Scriptures, Pistorius held a concept of the Church which had no place for the sacramental system of his day—hence in his anti-sacramental interpretation he was a "sacramentist." One of the main charges against Pistorius concerned his marriage in opposition to the Roman Catholic practice. His reference to Paul's admonition to "marry rather than burn" can hardly be thought of as a positive interpretation of marriage. It was, however, an opposition based on scriptural grounds.

The record of his trial revealed his criticisms of other sacraments as well. In baptism one called on the power of God not through the elements, nor through a precise formula. One received the grace of God directly, on the basis of the true inner intention of the participants. There is sharp criticism for the sacrament of orders. Priests are consecrated by God directly—not by means of an earthly ordination or by men or unworthy authority or false motives.

With reference to the sacrament of Eucharist he made major modifications. The ornamentations, the place, the times, the words spoken were not basic. The crucial aspect was that it be done for pure motives in the presence of believing Christians. The context leads us to assume that the doctrine of transubstantiation was totally foreign to Pistorius' interpretation as well.

Repentance, Pistorius felt, was not dispensed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Forgiveness for true penitence came from God directly, when one had faith in the already-accomplished sacrifice of the Lamb of God "a full and sufficient sacrifice" for us all. Thus, at

the time of his martyrdom he could reject the offer of a priestly confessor with a clear conscience, and know that the needed forgiveness was nevertheless available. There is no mention of confirmation, and nothing which gives us any idea of his approach to this statement. With respect to Pistorius' idea of the oil of the last unction nothing is recorded. One of his contemporaries, however, had already stated that since the power of life and death was in the hands of God, the oil itself was useful only for one's shoes.

The question of fasting was not officially a part of the sacramental system, but it was often treated as though it were. Pistorius rejected the idea that there was any benefit from man-made law as to when to fast, or with reference to which foods to exclude. He would have argued that it is not what goes into the body in eating (Matt. 15:11) or what one does not eat that makes the difference. What is important is the inner disposition of faith, trust, confidence, discipline and assurance of forgiveness and salvation. This came from God through the community of believers, the church, and through reading and meditating on the Biblical record. In the last analysis this inner faith—inner Spirit—was not affected by outer authority, nor threat of punishment, nor even by fire itself.

Thus the first martyr of the Reformation in the Northern Netherlands met the inquisitorial flames. His faith was inspired not by the theology of Luther, but more directly by the love of learning, and careful Scriptural interpretation of the Northern Humanist movement. His theological interpretations assumed a straight-forward interpretation of the Scripture alone. His rejection of the church's hierarchy and of earthly authority, and his criticisms of the abuses and moral lapses of his day, reminds us of Erasmus' *Enchiridion*. His steadfastness in face of martyrdom shows again the strengthening power of faith in the face of serious consequences. His example reminds us that what one assumes to be a spiritual concern or a spiritual principle may, according to the interpretation of another, have serious consequences in the secular—political, cultural—realm, where diversity brings only threats and insecurity. Thus, above all, his example shows us the difficulty of a Reformation, spiritual in character, where one does not enjoy protection from political authorities who share one's basic assumptions.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 494f

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