

Montanist Prophecy and Christian Revelation: A Theological Evaluation

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“*What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*” stands the famous question of Tertullian.¹ Of course, the question itself is more concerned with the right relationship between Greek philosophy and the truth of the gospel: Is there any continuity between the so-called “pagan” businesses or worldly wisdom and the Christian truth revealed in the death, resurrection and message of Jesus Christ, or Christians should all together reject any kinds of thoughts, words and practices that derive from the minds and actions of the “heathens”? Tertullian’s answer is clear-cut. Behind all philosophical teachings, demonic powers are at work; thus, anyone wishing to mix the truth of Jerusalem with the deficient wisdom of Athens will find oneself on shaky grounds: “*Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief*”.² Tertullian’s seemingly definite answer, though, is betrayed by the overall *oeuvre* of the very same man. If we turn to the writings of the African theologian, we discover that he was very much influenced by the philosophies of his time and willingly or unwillingly used the tools of Athens to present and defend the truths of Jerusalem.³

The dilemma behind the question is as ancient as Christianity itself: can Christians in their theology, liturgy and ecclesiastical life build upon the un-Christian foundations that their forerunners had laid down or should they start everything from scratch? Perhaps it is even more straightforward to ask: Can they actually create anything *ex nihilo* without reflecting on their own contexts? These are the questions this paper wishes to ponder on, at least one segment of it which is concerned mainly with the prophetic tradition and praxis of the early church. I intend to turn to a prophetic movement, the so-called Montanist prophecy in the ancient Christian church, which created quite a controversy in contemporary ecclesiastical life and raised serious dilemma in both ancient and contemporary Christian theology: Can a Christian prophet, the deliverer of the divine message use “pagan” techniques in the act of their prophecy or would this syncretistic mixture alter the genuineness of the heavenly message? After briefly introducing the available historiographical evidence on Montanism, I attempt to address the stated questions from a Christian theological point of view.

The Montanist Movement

The story of the New Prophecy movement – later to be labeled as “Montanism” by the opponents – begins in the 160s CE when some of the Christian churches of Asia Minor received embarrassing and unsettling news from the Phrygian highlands, ancient Anatolia. A man named

¹ *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.9; I use the translation of Holmes in Roberts, A., & Donaldson, J. (Eds.). (1989). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 3). T&T Clark and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 243–265.

² *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.10.

³ See Osborn, E. (2001). *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* Cambridge University Press. 27–47. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9780511582882](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511582882); Wilhite, D. E. (2017). *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition*. Routledge. 110–111. DOI: [10.4324/9780203075678](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203075678)

Montanus stood up in an otherwise little town called Ardabau in Phrygian Mysia and began to prophesy in a relatively perplexing way. According to the earliest account written by an unnamed ecclesiastical man quite sometime after the actual events took place (*ca.* 190 CE), Montanus “*experienced some kind of possession and spurious ecstasy*” and consequently “*began to speak and say strange things*”.⁴ The ecstatic prophet caused great sensation in the area and won over many of the faithful members of the Christian congregations who saw in the ministry of Montanus the genuine working of the divine Spirit. Soon two other prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla joined him who just like Montanus “*spoke in a frenzied manner, unsuitably and abnormally*”.⁵ Unfortunately, we have no record of the exact circumstances which made the women to join Montanus. This possession, frenzy, enthusiasm and strange speech – all in all, deemed as false prophecy by the opponent – could not be left without proper investigation and response on the side of the local church hierarchy. In the 170s CE, the Asian ecclesiastical leaders gathered their assemblies in order to examine the sayings of the prophetic trio and as a matter of fact they deemed them to be profane, and according to the narration of the Anonymous “*rejected the heresy, so at length they were thrust out of the Church and excluded from the fellowship*”.⁶ From that point on, the leaders of the movement and their adherents suddenly found themselves outside of the emerging “catholic” flock, and those who wished to return must have gone through rebaptism.

The Asian rejection of the New Prophecy, however, did not put an end to Montanus’ message. The group now considered by many as “heretic” started to organize itself first in Phrygia, then in the wider regions. Apollonius (another early anti-Montanist writer) informs us that Montanus from very early on declared two insignificant Phrygian rural towns, Pepuza and Tymion Jerusalem,⁷ where the adherents of Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla – and their future successors – lived according to strict ascetic standards probably consisting of the forbiddance of digamy (that is remarriage after the death of the spouse), observation of more rigorous fasts than their other Christian fellows, and guarantee of ecclesiastical ranks not only to well-to-do people with considerable social potential but also to those at the periphery of society, many of them women. Probably within a decade, the prophetic movement left its place of birth and through the Asian immigrants got imported to the capital, from there to the western regions in Gaul and, to the south, Africa Proconsularis, where it achieved probably one of its greatest successes by winning the mind of the first prominent Latin theologian, Tertullian.

However, despite – or rather: due to – the considerably successful missionary work of Montanism, the “mainstream” catholic opposition started to react systematically against the followers. An ancient recipe was put into practice: “Cut the head of the snake, and you will kill the snake”. The ecclesiastical leaders, both in verbal and written forms, launched their campaign

⁴ Anonymous, *ap.* Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* (henceforth: *HE*) 5.16.6.; All quotations of ancient Montanist testimonia and oracles are from the collection of Heine, R. E. (1989). *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*. Mercer University Press.; For “profiling” the Anonymous see Tabbernee, W. (2007). *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism*. Brill. 3–7. DOI: [10.1163/ej.97890004158191.i-485](https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.97890004158191.i-485)

⁵ Anonymous, *ap.* *HE* 5.16.9; Heine, R. E. (1989) 17.

⁶ Anonymous, *ap.* *HE* 5.16.10; Heine, R. E. (1989) 17.; Cf. Fischer, J. A. (1974). Die antimontanistischen Synoden des 2./3. Jahrhunderts. *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum*, 6(2), 241–273.

⁷ Apollonius, *ap.* *HE* 5.18.2; Heine, R. E. (1989) 23.

against the leaders by using various methods of what we would call today character assassination. Although he himself was hesitant to accept the contemporary gossips according to which Montanus and Maximilla hung themselves and another of the second-generation leaders, Theodotus fell to the ground due to an unsuccessful ecstatic trance; Anonymous still found it necessary to inform the faithful readers of such claims.⁸ Apollonius went further in reporting all kinds of accusations against the leaders of the movement, including financial abuse, usury, hair-dyeing, eyelids-painting and even playing at dice boards.⁹ Testing the spirit of prophecy was a hard task in early Christian circles, and ever since the words of the Master, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7,16), the behaviour and ethics of the prophets became the focal point of the examination.¹⁰ However, it is hard to take these reports at face value since the very same Apollonius found no contradiction in accusing the prophets of the legislation of new fasting practices and gluttony at the same time.¹¹

Undoubtedly, besides the charges of misbehaviour levelled against the prominent figures of the movement, their ecstatic mode of prophecy figured large in the anti-Montanist campaign. The Anonymous was convinced that the strange utterances were not the result of genuine divine presence in Montanus but a clear sign of demonic possession. Montanus “*gave the adversary access to himself*” and the spirit of the Enemy, viz. Satan used him and the prophetesses likewise to upstir the peace of the churches and lead the members of the congregations astray.¹² Nearly all early opponents agreed that such ecstatic prophecy was contrary to the custom and tradition of the church from the beginning. Some noble and learned bishops even tried to exorcize Maximilla and Priscilla, but those around them did not allow that. A certain Miltiades even composed a whole treatise against them in which he proved “*that a prophet does not have to speak ecstatically*”.¹³ By stating that the activity of the prophetic trio and other leaders of the movement is under the influence of demonic possession, the ecclesiastical opponents set up the social and religious demarcation lines between the heretic “them” and the orthodox “us”.¹⁴ Montanism was presented to the catholic Christians as a deliberate estrangement from the true faith and, thus the true church. The teaching, practice and organizational structure of the Prophecy became a “no-go zone” to the faithful members where if they paid a visit, they would immediately find themselves in the dangerous arena of Satan.

⁸ Anonymous, *ap. HE* 5.16.13-15; Heine, R. E. (1989) 19.

⁹ Apollonius, *ap. HE* 5.18.6-11; Heine, R. E. (1989) 23, 25.

¹⁰ Cf. Didache 11.4-8,12; 12.2 and Shepherd of Hermas *Mandates* 11; For an overview of the „testing” of the prophetic spirit see Bacht, H. (1951). Wahres und Falsches prophentum. *Biblica*, 32(2), 237–262.; Aune, D. E. (1983). *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 207–209.; Tibbs, E. C. (2021). “Do Not Believe Every Spirit”: Discerning the Ethics of Prophetic Agency in Early Christian Culture, *Harvard Theological Review*, 114(1), 27–50.
DOI: [10.1017/S0017816021000043](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816021000043)

¹¹ Apollonius, *ap. HE* 5.18.2; Heine, R. E. (1989) 23.; Cf. Bauer, W. (1934). *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*. Mohr Siebeck. 140–141.

¹² Anonymous, *ap. HE* 5.16.79-10; Heine, R. E. (1989) 15–17.

¹³ Anonymous, *ap. HE* 5.17.1; Heine, R. E. (1989) 21.

¹⁴ “The stakes are high: the question of who has true, real (divine) knowledge is linked to issues of authority and identity in communities. For the early-third-century texts we investigated, debates over prophecy and ecstasy are tied to the issue of who is truly Christian, who is part of the ‘true church’ and who stands outside it.” – Nasrallah, L. (2003). “*An Ecstasy of Folly*”: *Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity*. Harvard University Press. 198–201., 201.

Montanist Prophecy: Christianized “Paganism”?

From the turn of the third century on, thus it became commonplace to argue that Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla were the mouthpieces not of the Spirit-Paraclete as they would say of themselves but the tools in the hands of Satan. They were not Christians but impostors with questionable and barbaric religious backgrounds who never really left behind their “pagan” heritage. With the rise of heresiology proper, such beliefs and literary *topoi* became widespread in polemical writings. Our heresy-hunters did not lack imagination and snatched the opportunity quickly to scare their audience with all kinds of dubious Montanist practices which might resemble non-Christian bizarre rites. Cyril of Jerusalem knew of the child slaughters taking place during the Montanist mysteries in Pepuza; Epiphanius reported a Montanist sub-group that pierced babies with bronze needles and used the outpouring blood for sacrifice,¹⁵ while Augustine believed that young children’s blood was mixed with flour to make the eucharistic bread.¹⁶ Just as previously “pagans” accused Christians of such uncivilized deeds in order to discredit the movement *in toto*, now deliberate misunderstandings of Montanist sacramental rites proved effective in the hands of the “orthodox” to prove the Prophecy unworthy of the name Christian.¹⁷ Ecstatic behaviour was also explained away by the heresiologists, who found the un-Christian past of Montanus a convincing explanation for the strange phenomenon. The fourth century – in no way unbiased – treatise which reconstructed a dialogue between an “Orthodox” and a “Montanist,” we find the very first occurrence of the charge that Montanus was “a priest of an idol”.¹⁸ Jerome writing to Marcella after calling Maximilla and Priscilla “insane women,” holds the view that Montanus was a “castrated half-man” (*abscisus et semiuir*).¹⁹ Epiphanius likewise condemned those people who participated in the “Bacchic frenzy” of Montanist gatherings.²⁰ With these designations, Montanism was presented as a suspicious movement that had more to do with demonic paganism than true Christianity.

Montanus and his companions, though, did not count themselves “pagans”. On the contrary, from the literary evidence, we can reconstruct clearly that they truly believed that their prophetic ministry was rooted deeply in biblical and postbiblical *Christian* prophetic tradition. In the early years of the confrontation with the opposing bishops, they argued that they were the successors of well-known New Testament and post-apostolic prophets: Agabus, Judas, Silas, the daughters

¹⁵ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.14; Heine, R. E. (1989) 130–131.

¹⁶ Augustine, *De haeresibus* 26; Heine, R. E. (1989) 162–163.

¹⁷ The later (fourth-century) Montanist sub-groups probably did perform some rites which seemed odd and “barbaric” to the orthodox opponents. As scholars point out, these ritual tattooing and eucharistic practices were the results of the literary of reading of some passages in the Book of Revelation. The anti-Montanist writers certainly did not see this connection that clearly. See Elm, S. (1996). “Pierced by Bronze Needles”: Anti-Montanist Charges of Ritual Stigmatization in Their Fourth-Century Context. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 4(4), 409–439. DOI: [10.1353/earl.1996.0076](https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1996.0076); Trevett, C. (1995). Fingers up Noses and Pricking with Needles: Possible Reminiscences of Revelation in Later Montanism. *Vigiliae Christianae*, 49(3), 258–269. DOI: [10.2307/1584198](https://doi.org/10.2307/1584198); Tabbernee, W. (2011). Initiation/Baptism in the Montanist Movement. In D. Hellholm, T. Vegge, Ø. Norderval, & C. Hellholm (Eds.), *Abolution, Initiation, and Baptism Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (pp. 917–945.). De Gruyter. DOI: [10.1515/9783110247534.917](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110247534.917)

¹⁸ *Dialogus Montanistae et Orthodoxi* 4.5-6; Heine, R. E. (1989) 122–123; Also Didymus of Alexandria *De trinitate* 3.41.3; Heine, R. E. (1989) 146–147.

¹⁹ Jerome, *Ep.* 41.4; Heine, R. E. (1989) 150–151.

²⁰ Epiphanius *Panarion* 49.3; Heine, R. E. (1989) 134–135.

of Philip, Ammia in Philadelphia and Quadratus.²¹ Later they combatted the “catholic” claim that ecstatic prophecy never belonged to the tradition of the church by pointing to well-known Old- and New Testament figures who clearly exhibited certain types of ecstasy: Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, David, Abraham, the apostle Peter all seemed to go through some sort of trance-like experience according to the followers of Montanus. In addition, the wording of the Septuagint helped them too in the building of their argument: God cast an ecstasy on Adam (Gen 2,21-24 LXX) just as Abraham (Gen 15,13 LXX) and David (Ps 115,2 LXX) prophesied while in ecstasy.²² The opponents were not convinced. The early third-century document, which the fourth-century heresiologist Epiphanius quoted in length in his *Panarion* testifies that the “catholic” side did not accept these Old and New Testament precedents as proofs to the orthopraxis of Montanist ecstatic prophecy. The unidentified writer refutes these claims by stating clearly that the term “ecstasy” has many different meanings: it either denotes the “ecstasy of sleep” by which one’s senses are altered, yet the soul itself remains attached to the mind, or it could also refer to the “excessive amount of amazement” that one experiences once faced with something astonishing.²³ According to the anti-Montanist writer, the prophets of old times experienced only these two kinds of ecstasies, and God never cast an ecstasy of “madness” on them by which their soul would have departed from their governing faculty.²⁴ The true prophet – old and new – is in full possession of their mind and never experiences any kind of ecstasy of human cognition. “Orthodox” prophecy began to be portrayed as a sober-minded intellectual act that is the final product of the power of the Spirit that comes not in a radical alteration of *ratio* but in a calm and ordered manner.

From the few Montanist oracles who owe their survival because opponents cited them in their anti-Montanist writings, it becomes even more evident that Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla regarded themselves as authentic mouthpieces of the divine. Groh and, more recently, Mader proved that the ecstatic utterances of the prophets were not unintelligible and unarticulated “pseudolalia” but rather accurately formulated theological statements in line with earlier Christian traditions.²⁵ Ecstasy served not as the ultimate goal in the process of delivering God’s message to the people but only the *form* by which this goal was to be achieved. Jesus once promised to his disciples that after his ascension, another Paraclete would step into his role in

²¹ *ap.* Anonymous *ap.* HE 5.17.2-3; Heine, R. E. (1989) 20–21.

²² For a careful analysis of Montanist and anti-Montanist debate over ecstasy in Epiphanius’ source see Nasrallah (2003); Trevett, C. (1996). *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*. Cambridge University Press. 86–95. DOI: [10.1017/CBO9780511520587](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511520587); Dell’Isola, M. (2017). Montanism and Ecstasy, The Case of Theodotus’ Death (Eus. HE V,16,14-15). In A. Destro & M. Pesce (Eds.), *Texts, Practices, and Groups: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the History of Jesus’ Followers in the First Two Centuries, First Annual Meeting of Bertinoro (2-5 October 2014)* (pp. 377–394). Brepols Publisher. DOI: [10.1484/M.JAOC-EB.5.111712](https://doi.org/10.1484/M.JAOC-EB.5.111712); Dell’Isola, M. (2020). “They are not the words of a rational man”: ecstatic prophecy in Montanism, In V. Gasparini, M. Patzelt, R. Raja, A. Rieger, J. Rüpke & E. Urciuoli (Ed.), *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics* (pp. 71-86). De Gruyter. DOI: [10.1515/9783110557596-005](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110557596-005)

²³ *ap.* *Panarion* 48.4.5-6; Heine, R. E. (1989) 34–35.; Cf. Nasrallah (2003) 155–196.

²⁴ For the lengthy prove see *ap.* *Panarion* 48.3-5.; Heine, R. E. (1989) 30–31ff.

²⁵ Groh, D. E. (1985). Utterance and Exegesis: Biblical Interpretation in the Montanist Crisis. In D. E. Groh & R. Jewett (Eds.), *The Living Text, Essays in Honor of Ernest W. Saunders* (73–95). University Press of America.; Mader, H. E. (2012). *Montanistische Orakel und kirchliche Opposition: Der frühe Streit zwischen den phrygischen “neuen Propheten” und dem Autor der vorepiphaniischen Quelle als biblische Wirkungsgeschichte des 2. Jh. n.Chr.* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. DOI: [10.13109/9783666539794](https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666539794)

leading the faithful followers to all truths (see John 14-16), and this conviction – still very much alive in Asia in the second century – probably fuelled the self-understanding of the Montanist prophets.²⁶ He himself devoted to Montanus' teaching, Tertullian made the connection between the Johannine Paraclete and the teaching and practice of the movement even clearer. In his so-called Montanist works (written after *ca.* 207/208 CE) he rebuked again and again the wider Christian community – called cynically *psychics* – for refusing to pay heed to the now clear teaching of the Paraclete, which touched upon delicate matters of everyday Christian practice: veiling of virgins in the church, rules for fasting, strict monogamy, flight during persecution, etc.²⁷ Throughout his treatises, Tertullian was at pains to demonstrate from Scripture and the “natural order” that there is nothing new in the proclamations of the Paraclete and the prophets who mediated these but all seemingly novel ethical standards are, in fact, the “logical” consequences of God's original intentions to his contemporary people in the sphere of Christian discipleship. Tertullian was aware that in some cases, the Montanist ascetic rigorism might easily be compared by the opponents to certain “pagan” cults, yet even this seemed as proof for the truth of it. Writing on the Montanist practice of xerophagy (dry fast):

“But it is enough for me that you, by heaping blasphemies upon our xerophagies, put them on a level with the chastity of an Isis and a Cybele. I admit the comparison in the way of evidence. Hence (our xerophagy) will be proved divine, which the devil, the emulator of things divine, imitates. It is out of truth that falsehood is built; out of religion that superstition is compacted.”²⁸

Such suspicion over the “pagan” roots of Montanist prophecy and practice survived throughout the centuries. With the rise of comparative religious studies, parallels between Montanus' ecstatic prophecy and ascetic practices, let alone the rites of later Montanist sub-groups and certain religious cults in the Graeco-Roman world, were brought to light. Several studies were eager to draw attention to the striking similarities between the ecstatic utterances of the Delphic Pythia and the non-intelligible behaviour of the Montanist prophets.²⁹ It is widely attested that the Apollo-cult was indeed very much at home in Western Asia, and besides the great shrines in Delphi and Claros, Phrygia – the birthplace of Montanism – could boast with local temples of the god in Hierapolis and Laodicea. The kind of irrational prophecy exhibited by our prophets can easily be explained by the influence of the local enthusiastic prophetic tradition, which helped members of the native communities – especially in the rural areas – by easing their worries about the present and feeding their hopes for the future all by the authority of the divine. Montanus' allegedly eunuch status – as attested by Jerome – also turned out to be a fertile point of comparison. The Phrygian Mother Goddess – known in the Roman world by Cybele – was one of the most ancient of the deities in the homeland of Montanus, and as Roller pointed out,

²⁶ See Aland, K. (1955). *Der Montanismus und die kleinasiatische Theologie. Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 46, 109–116.; Seim, T. K. (2010). *Johannine Echoes in Early Montanism*, in T. Rasimus (Ed.), *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (345–364), Brill.; Trevett, C. (1996) 93–94, 141–150.

²⁷ Tabbernee, W. (2001). “Will the real Paraclete please speak forth!”: the Catholic-Montanist conflict over pneumatology. In B. E. Hinze & D. L. Dabney (Eds.), *Advants of the Spirit: An Introduction to the Current Study of Pneumatology* (97–118.), Marquette University Press.

²⁸ *De ieiunio* 16.7; I use the translation of Thelwall in Roberts, A., & Donaldson, J. (Eds.). (1989). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 4). T&T Clark and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 102–115.

²⁹ Hirschmann, V.-E. (2005). *Horrenda Secta. Untersuchungen zum frühchristlichen Montanismus und seinen Verbindungen zur paganen Religion Phrygiens*. Franz Steiner Verlag, 70ff.

the self-castration of the so-called *galli* priests of the Mother was an earnest act of devotion to the service of the goddess.³⁰ The Attis-Cybele celebrations in the springtime, including ritual crying and ecstasy, found their counterpart in earlier or later Montanism, too. The Montanist gatherings were designated as “bacchic frenzy” by Epiphanius; thus, the similarities with the old Dionysian-Bacchic celebrations were offered as parallels where everything directed the participants to some kind of cathartic, irrational state, “a profound alteration of personality” as Dodds once put it.³¹

The striking similarities proved to some scholars that there is more truth to the ancient suspicion of the “pagan” roots of Montanism than mere malice or ill will on the part of the opposition. Goree’s general judgment by which he maintained that Montanism “was, in reality, a syncretistic movement which drew upon principles found in the cult of Cybele” found many sympathizers in the last century.³² Theologians and scholars of confessional church backgrounds found great allies in such voices. For the nineteenth-century Roman Catholic polymath, Ernst Renan Montanism meant the incarnation of a sectarian spirit, which made up the category of *chrétienté bizarre*, a type of fanaticism that threatened the stability of the church.³³ The great scholar of the movement, Labriolle was no less unbiased in his evaluation: Montanus’ ecstasy gave way to “irresponsible and uncontrollable” spiritual tendencies.³⁴ Whale, too, held up the view that ancient and modern heresies all share the same conviction: the preference of individual voices for the official teaching of the church.³⁵ Stewart is similarly unemphatic to the movement: the strange utterances of Montanus under no means could have come from the Spirit, instead “arose from the flesh and through the wiles of the devil”.³⁶

“Was the ‘Spirit’ which Tertullian preached... the Father of Lies, or was it the Spirit of God?” – stated the dilemma of one scholar in the past.³⁷ Undoubtedly, historians and scholars of late antiquity do not wish to answer this question since the answer lies far beyond the reach of descriptive scholarship. It is certain that the social and religious context in which Montanism appeared played a massive role in the formation of the movement’s profile. We owe a great debt to scholars of the past who drew our attention to the fact that just as all movements of antiquity – religious or “secular” – Montanism too a product of the special context in which it appeared. Any theological assessment of Montanism cannot ignore this decisive conclusion. Yet, if the prophecy of Montanus and his fellow companions was influenced by or even

³⁰ Roller, L. E. (1999). *In Search of God the Mother: A Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. University of California Press. 252.; Roller, L. E. (1997). The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest. *Gender & History*, 9(3), 542–559. DOI: [10.1111/1468-0424.00075](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00075); Cf. Hirschmann, V.-E. (2005); Benko, S. (2003). *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*. Brill, 140ff.; Freeman, G. (1950). Montanism and the Pagan Cults. *Dominican Studies*, 3(4), 297–316.

³¹ Dodds, E. R. (1951). *The Greeks and the Irrational*. University of California Press, 77.

³² Goree, B. W. (1980). *The Cultural Basis of Montanism* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Baylor University, v.

³³ Renan, E. (1882). *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du Monde Antique*. Calmann-Lévy, 217.

³⁴ de Labriolle, P. (1913). *La Crise Montaniste*. Ernest Leroux Editeur, 556.

³⁵ Whale, J. S. (1934). The Heretics of the Church and Recurring Heresies: Montanus. *Expository Times*, 45(11), 496–500, 496.

³⁶ Stewart, A. (n.d.). Was the Church Right to Condemn Montanism? Covenant Protestant Reformed Church. <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/montanism/>

³⁷ de Soyres, J. (1878). *Montanism and the Primitive Church: A Study in the Ecclesiastical History of the Second Century*. Deighton Bell & George Bell, 130 – 131.

formulated along the lines of un-Christian factors (religious and social), would that mean we cannot regard their prophecy as Christian? If Montanus was, in fact, previously a Galli or the priest of Apollo, would that be a definite disqualification for Christian prophetic office in the church? I am convinced that before a definite answer could be given to these questions, it is of utmost importance to turn the nature of Christian revelation and formulate a principle by which the human elements in the process of prophetic deliverance can theologially be judged.

The synergism of divine revelation

The concept of divine revelation is surely the cornerstone of Christian theology. The message of Christianity and its truth is solely based on the conviction that God reveals the god-self to humans. However, this self-revealing act of God never happens outside of time and space without physical circumstances and human agency. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner even went that far as stating that we cannot talk about revelation as an objective reality until it becomes a reality in the subject, too: *“Revelation is indeed that which becomes manifest to us through a definite action of God; it means that we, whose eyes were formerly closed, have now opened them to a certain light; that upon us, who were in the darkness, the light has shone. Thus revelation only reaches its goal in the subject, man.”*³⁸ It is to say, there is no timeless, infinite revelation of God that would be disconnected from the sphere and dimension of human existence. God reveals the god-self to *us*, humans, and this personal encounter between the ultimate “Thou” and the human “I” constitutes proper revelation. This divine revelation is not given in general; the restitutive encounter does not touch upon lifeless objects but is given in certain historical contexts to certain individuals and communities *through* human agency, mediatorship, individuals who are “chosen” to transmit the words that God entrusted them to say to the people. This is the point that prophecy plays a massive role. On the one end, there is the divine who wishes to reveal the god-self to the people; on the other end, there is the human agent – all in all, a *person* – with well-traceable contextual factors: cognition, thoughts, emotions, worldview, religious, educational, political and economic background. We cannot fall into the trap of Protestant orthodoxy, which as a defense mechanism too problematic to go into detail here, formulated the doctrine of verbal inspiration and maintained that God simply used the prophets of the Scriptures to reach the addressees. In this system of thoughts, prophets became typewriters in the hands of the “great novelist”, totally passive instruments who unreflectively delivered the divine message to the people.

If we turn our attention to the mystery of revelation, we find such assessments to be hardly valid. The rise of psychology, desperate to search the depths of the human *psyche* and bring to light the motives of speech and deeds hidden in the unknown realm of the subconscious also had a massive impact on twentieth-century biblical scholarship. The prophets became the subject of psychological investigations, and though the findings often produced side-tracked results, it became apparent to biblical theologians that the human factors did not leave untouched the prophetic ministry. The great philosopher of Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who himself was unsympathetic to the psychological approaches of prophecy, emphasized the

³⁸ Brunner, E. (1947). *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*. The Westminster Press, 33.

need to see the prophets as they are: persons who participated with their whole being in the formulation of the prophetic message. In line with Brunner's argument, Heschel clearly presents God in personalistic terms. According to the Jewish scriptures, God is not a metaphysical being but a *person* who participates actively in the historical events of Israel.³⁹ Heschel uses the term *pathos* to denote this involvement of God in the worldly business of men. In line with this starting point, the prophet is portrayed by Heschel as *homo symphatetikos* who, in the moment of vocation, experiences the overwhelming reality of God's pathos-filled insight and emotional reality and reacts to this dynamic and powerful vision with their own existence. Prophecy is nothing else but the meeting point, a powerful act of synergism of the active divine pathos and the reactive human resonance to it. In describing the nature of revelation, the individual character of the prophet must be emphasised:

*"The prophet is a person, not a microphone. (...) The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response – not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the world, the subjective side of the message."*⁴⁰

Such divine-human cooperation in the process of revelation is a familiar concept in Protestant theology. The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin highlighted the dignified importance of human agency in the act of preaching. God could indeed communicate their will and message to the people directly without any mediatorship, but "*he prefers to do it by means of men*".⁴¹ The servants of the church (apostles, prophets, preachers and ministers) are ordained in order to be the chosen vessels through which God's "treasure" (the heavenly wisdom) is proclaimed to the people. The act of proclamation likewise carries a double nature in itself. Like the sacraments, which mediate transcendental realities *through* physical objects, the words of the preaching also serve as means through which the divine reaches the ears of the members of the church. According to Calvin, this is not a mechanical process: the *preadicatio* of the minister does not automatically become the Word of God, just as the mediated grace is given in the sacraments only if the Spirit is at work in the hearts of the receivers.⁴² As Kodácsy points out, preaching is truly seen as a disclosed wonder in the Reformed tradition and the divine-human dialectic behind this wonder is best to be understood in a Chalcedonian tension. Just as the properties of the human *and* the divine natures of Christ "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably" relate to each other in the same personal unity, in the same manner, the transcendent (divine) and immanent (human) characteristics are interwoven in the act of proclamation.⁴³ The human act of deliverance – as Bohren points out – is truly a "theonom"

³⁹ See Heschel, A. J. (1983). *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁴⁰ Heschel, A. J. (2001). *The Prophets*. Harper Perennial, xxii.

⁴¹ Calvin, J. (2006). *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol. 2). The Westminster Press, IV.3.1, 1053.

⁴² DeVries, D. (2004). Calvin's Preaching. In D. K. McKim (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (106–124). Cambridge University Press.

⁴³ "Unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably" refer to the so-called Chalcedonian definition of the two (divine and human) natures of Christ. See Kelly, J. N. D. (1978). *Early Christian Doctrines*. New York, 338–343.; Kodácsy, T. (2019). *A homiletikai aptum: Hogyan lesz a szószéki beszédből igehirdetés?*. KRE & L'Harmattan, 73–85.

reality; the initiative always comes from God, and at the same time, it is a “reciprocal” process in which all the objectives that constitute the human being become the *locus* of revelation. Every human technique, method, and word should not be put as opposite realities to the divine miracle of revelation but undoubtedly be seen as an integral part of the synergic (divine-human) nature of revelation.⁴⁴

These brief sketches of the anatomy of revelation seem to point in the very same direction that Locke phrased this way: “God, when he makes a prophet, does not unmake the man”.⁴⁵ Prophecy should not be regarded as a sterile ground in which the prophet’s own circumstances and background do not play a role at all. They are not only the passive recipients and the holders of the word of God but the creative shapers of it. If I wish to twist the old theological statement deliberately, I would say that we can speak of the *imago prophetae* in this regard: the image and likeness of the human agent are always detectable in the outcome of revelation. Does this make the divine message altered? Does this fact make it doubtful or unreliable? I certainly do not think so. It is a reality that follows the mode in which theology articulated the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ: total human and total human; the two realities exist together in tension and one personal reality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the prophetic movement in the early church, commonly referred to as Montanism which raised serious questions both in the contemporary polemical writings and modern scholarship about the nature of Christian prophecy. As I have shown, the manner of Montanist prophecy and certain sacramental rites exhibited striking similarities to the “pagan” religious cults of Phrygia. From a purely socio-religious point of view, such traits of syncretism do not constitute a problem since all religious movements formulate their message and structures of thought based on already existing patterns. Thus, the conclusion of Hirschmann almost sounds commonplace: “*Montanus served God in the manner that was firmly established in the pagan cults of the Phrygian region over centuries*”.⁴⁶ From a theological point of view, the question of the relationship between elements of “pagan” religiosity and Christian theology and practice proves to be more complex. Although the Montanist prophets regarded their prophetic ministry as Christian and in line with biblical standards, already the anti-Montanist polemics tended to portray the movement as a dubious heresy influenced by several “pagan” cults. Building on the findings of scholars of comparative religious studies, modern theological assessments often highlighted the “unchristian” nature of Montanus’ prophecy and consequently refused to regard it as a genuinely God-inspired movement. A brief theological evaluation of the nature of revelation, however, betrays that we cannot regard divine revelation as an abstract act of the godhead that does not make use of human agency. Prophecy as a form of revelatory act should be seen as a synergic concept in which both divine and human characteristics work together in the deliverance of the message. Even if Montanus’ mode of prophecy in which he delivered the divine message owed much to the way “pagans” of his

⁴⁴ Bohren, R. (1974). *Predigtlehre*. Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 65ff.

⁴⁵ Locke, J. (1997). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Penguin Books, 621.

⁴⁶ Hirschmann, V.-E. (2005) 99.

surroundings articulated the message of the divine, he did not alter the Christian mystery of revelation. If we reckon Montanus' prophecy as paganism and demonic possession, perhaps we should also haul the Greek apologists of the second and third centuries for using Greek philosophy in the articulation of their Logos-theology; Origen, Gregory of Nyssa or Augustin – among many others – for mixing Neoplatonic flavours to the truths of the Christian gospel. The question at the start of this paper was formulated: Can Christians, in their mode of prophesying or theologizing, use “unchristian” elements or should they keep a considerable distance from these? In light of the findings, it is better to attest that if a massive “cleaning-up” would be started in the field of theology and religious life of the early church in order to point out all the “unchristian” elements in these areas, perhaps nothing would remain to us. I strongly agree with Pedlar's insight on the matter: *“There are no ‘purely’ theological convictions, because theology is always worked out in the course of the church's life in history, and it is bound to be affected by social, political, and cultural factors”*.⁴⁷ Prophecy is no exception.

⁴⁷ Pedlar, J. (2012, May 3). *The influence of “non-theological factors” on the rise of Montanism*. James Pedlar. <https://jamespedlar.ca/2012/05/03/the-influence-of-non-theological-factors-on-the-rise-of-montanism/>