

THE HARMONY SOCIETY AND *THOUGHTS ON THE DESTINY OF MAN*

By CECIL K. BYRD

AMONG the many sectarian communal experiments that began in nineteenth-century America, one of the most successful economically and in years of duration was the Harmony Society. The antecedents of this Society were to be found in the activities of Johann George Rapp, vine-grower and weaver, and other humble men and women of Iptingen, Wuerttemberg, Germany. Rapp and his followers were religious radicals who came to disbelieve in some of the doctrines and practices of the established Lutheran Church, and in the last decade of the eighteenth century formed a separatist congregation, meeting in homes for a form of worship and fellowship. The activities of this religious conventicle were closely scrutinized by local civil and religious authorities. Irreverent activity and flouting of local laws by some members of the congregation led to fines and even imprisonment, but hostility toward clerical and secular authority grew rather than decreased as a result of these clashes. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, group restiveness culminated in a decision to migrate to the United States where complete religious activity was assured and better economic opportunities existed. Rapp came in 1803 to seek land on which the congregation could settle. After much scouting, he finally selected a tract in western Pennsylvania. Most of his congregation followed him in 1804. Some 3,000 acres of land were purchased in

Butler County and the winter of 1804 was spent in constructing homes and other buildings in their village which was named Harmony.

A belief that was apparently basic with the group from its beginnings was that true Christians shared their possessions. It is likely that money for the migration from Germany was put in a common fund, in order that all who desired to come to the United States, irrespective of their finances, could do so. In February, 1805, the group organized formally, embracing written articles of agreement which stipulated a complete communal life for the Society: "We, the subscribers, on our part and on the part of our heirs and descendants, deliver up, renounce and remit all our estate and property consisting of cash, land and chattels, or whatever it may be, to George Rapp and his associates, in Harmony, Butler County, Pennsylvania, as a free gift or donation, for the benefit and use of the community there, and bind ourselves on our part, as well as on the part of our heirs and descendants, to make free renunciation thereof, and to leave the same at the disposal of the superintendents of the community, as if we never had nor possessed it." (Article 1. The original manuscript, in German, is in the Society archives in the Great House at Ambridge, Pa.)

The membership included enough artisans of diversified skills to enable the Society to engage in brewing, distilling, the making of leather products, ropemaking, wine making, the production of textiles, and other small manufacturing. A sufficient number of knowledgeable agriculturalists made farming possible on a large scale. As a result of these agricultural, commercial, and industrial activities, the Society prospered. In a few years Harmony

Society whiskey, beer, wines, textiles, hats, shoes, and agricultural commodities were sold throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys and in many eastern commercial centers. As wealth was accumulated, the Society invested its surplus capital in diversified industries, became large stockholders of railroads, and purchased lands in western Pennsylvania which yielded good returns from timber and oil resources.

The Society lasted from 1805 to 1905. During this period, three towns containing permanent, attractive, and spacious buildings were erected in three different localities. From 1805 to 1815, Harmony, Butler County, Pennsylvania, was the center of settlement. From 1815 to 1825, the Society owned extensive acreage in the Wabash Valley, and Harmony (the present New Harmony), Indiana, was home. In 1824-25 lands were purchased on the Ohio River below Pittsburgh, in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, and the town of Economy (now Ambridge) became the final home of the Society. Due in part to the practice of celibacy and in part to the rigid requirements for admittance, membership in the Society was never large. Total membership for the one hundred years was just over 1,000. The peak year was 1820 when 741 members were recorded. (John A. Bole, *The Harmony Society, a chapter in German American culture history*, Philadelphia, 1904, p. 34.) With but few exceptions, there was a decline in membership each year thereafter. Death and disenchantment gradually thinned the ranks. In 1905, with but three members remaining, the Society was dissolved by mutual consent.

While living at Harmony, Indiana, the Society purchased a printing press. It is not known when or from what source the press was obtained. The earliest piece of

surviving print is a small broadside. The Indiana University Library copy measures 3½ x 2 inches. The information contained on the broadside would suggest that the press was of recent purchase when it was printed. It reads:

Probe stück

Weñ das Gesetz dereinst aus Zion ausgeht, wird ohne Zweifel die Presse ein wichtiges und schätzbores Hülfsmittel seyn.

HARMONIE, den 9 Januar

1824

The extant publications from the press of the Harmony Society consist of broadsides, broadsheets, leaflets, hymnals, collections of essays in praise of nature and God, and school texts. All, excepting one booklet, were printed in the German language. These publications were intended for the use of the membership, and there is no evidence that they circulated outside the Society. One possible exception to this established procedure was the publication of a German and English edition of a small booklet containing the religious, philosophical, and social ideals and principles that governed the founding and operation of the Society. The title page of the German edition of this treatise reads: *Gedanken/ über die/ Bestimmung des Menschen,/ besonders in/ Hinsicht der gegenwärtigen Zeit; von der/ Harmonie Gesellschaft/ in Indiana. 1824./* ([1]-85 pp.) The title page of the English edition reads: *Thoughts/ on the/ Destiny of Man,/ particularly/ with Reference to the present times;/ by the Harmony Society/ in Indiana./ A.D. 1824./* ([1]-96 pp.)

Copies of both editions are in the Indiana University Library. *Gedanken* measures 4 13/16 x 7 5/16 inches. *Thoughts* measures 4 5/16 x 7 1/16 inches. The paper used in both editions is a rag wove stock. That used in *Thoughts*

is muddy or light coffee tone in appearance and the presence on many of the pages of fine blue threads would indicate that the rags which went into the making were unbleached. Some of the paper used in the printing of *Gedanken* is whiter in appearance, though some of the pages were printed on the same paper stock used in *Thoughts*. All of the paper used in both editions was probably made in the same mill. Ledger books in the Society archives record purchases of printing paper in 1824 and 1825 from the firms of A. Way in Pittsburgh and Wallace and Pope in Louisville. The first paper mill in Indiana was constructed at Madison in 1826. The paper used for these two editions could have been made in mills in western Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Kentucky.

A scholar has recently reported that George Rapp was the author of *Gedanken*, and that he borrowed some of his philosophical ideas from the German philosopher Herder. (Karl J. Arndt, "Herder and the Harmony Society," *Germanic Review*, April, 1941.) *Thoughts* is the English translation of *Gedanken*. The translation, while free, reproduces the German original faithfully. The translator has rearranged and paraphrased sentences and has broken up the long paragraphs of the original German into a series of short paragraphs in the translation. Frequently the translator has felt free to amplify the original statements by qualifying clauses and minor elaborations and illustrations of his own. Where the ideas and reflections of the German are often general and sometimes vague, the translation tends to render them precise and pointed. The English equivalent of the German text ends with line six on page 89. The remaining seven pages of *Thoughts* were probably composed by the translator.

The treatise contains many ideas and reiterations or rephrasing of those basic ideas. The theological, political, social, and educational philosophy that motivated George Rapp and his associates to form the Harmony Society are discussed repetitively and at length. Rapp and many of his followers strongly believed that they had been chosen of God to lead the world from error to truth: "Nature always begins her reformation with a few, and as soon as these have removed the evil, and regulated their own propensities, others, become gradually united to them, and are brought at length to the enjoyment of social happiness." (*Thoughts*, p. 80. The same idea is expressed on pp. 11, 27, 49, 65, 79.) Rapp accepted the doctrine of the Second Advent. Indeed he believed that Christ's return to earth was imminent and a literal kingdom would be established in Palestine. During Rapp's life he held himself financially and spiritually ready to move the Society there. Many members of the Society similarly regarded this life as but a brief preparation for the establishment of an actual kingdom of Christ on earth. "The cloud has gathered itself and is waiting for the coming of the lord [*sic*] in a visible body. This is the godly Kingdom which Jesus of Nazareth announced & exerted himself to promote" (*Thoughts*, p. 17. See also p. 42.)

A strong feeling against secular authority was one of the factors which led to the migration from Germany, and though the Society co-operated with state and federal authorities in the United States in most matters, male members did refuse militia service in Indiana, and the Society regularly paid fines for their refusal. This feeling against "government" is reflected in the treatise: "Christianity however ought never to have had any other but the best

& most upright men, in its communities, and ought to have been governed by superintendents and fathers, without the aid of secular power. Religion ought to have settled all disputes among christians [*sic*] and not the judiciary tribunals." (*Thoughts*, pp. 18-19. See also p. 26.)

The most distinctive practice of the Harmony Society was that of holding all possessions in common ownership. Both Rapp and most of the trustees who followed him were firm believers in Christian communism in which all lands, goods, and wealth were shared equally by all members of the Society. Rapp found confirmation for this doctrine in the Bible and defended it in *Thoughts*: "A person will find the inward felicity of his life nowhere, excepting in an active industrious unity, where all is divided and shared in brotherly love, in defiance of the infinite differences of minds." (*Thoughts*, p. 44.) Nor did the Society permit drones: "If any member does not live for the promotion of the common interest, and does not contribute by his exertions to the general welfare of the society, he will gradually die away and be excluded altogether." (*Thoughts*, p. 74.)

During the entire existence of the Society, though there was an elective process, it was ruled by trustees. Indeed, the trustees exercised almost absolute authority over the membership, decreeing the standard of personal conduct even to the style of dress and the hour of retiring and arising. In most respects it was a theocracy, and George Rapp was a firm believer in that form of government: "The reigning system ought to have been a true and pure theocracy." (*Thoughts*, p. 19.)

The motives which led the Harmony Society to publish *Gedanken* and its English translation *Thoughts* were, we

believe, accurately described by Bole more than fifty years ago: "No doubt the Society received many requests for a statement of its principles. It had also been maligned by persons who had lived in it for a time, and who had withdrawn or been expelled These reasons led in 1824 to the publication of a statement of the principles upon which the Society was founded and of its aspirations." (Bole, p. 45.) If Bole's undocumented analysis was correct, then it follows quite logically that the published treatise was intended for circulation outside the Society.

Statements made by trustees of the Society, before and after Bole summarized his conclusions, deny that anything was ever printed for outside circulation. Trustees R. L. Baker and Jacob Henrici, replying to a correspondent in 1867, wrote: ". . . but until now we never felt ourselves competent or called upon to publish anything for anybody outside of our Society . . . being convinced that the impending final judgment will under the Lord's direction, make a more effectual impression in one day than all the printing presses could do in a century without it." (Bole, pp. 57-59.) John S. Duss, the last male trustee of the Society, was sure "The booklet was not printed for dissemination—indeed the numerous repetitions in the subject matter lend color to the story 'that the printer, for practice on the new 1824 printing press, compiled the Rapp philosophical jottings.'" (John S. Duss, *The Harmonists, a personal history*, Harrisburg, 1943, p. 54.)

A letter recently found by the writer in the Society archives should be fit proof that the translated treatise was intended for circulation beyond the confines of the Society. In addition, this letter contains hitherto unsuspected facts relating to the publication of *Thoughts*. Written by Isaac Blackford, lawyer, jurist, and friend of the Society, it was

addressed to Frederick Rapp at Harmony, dated Vincennes, 16 March, 1825:

Your letter of the 14th inst. is recd. with the enclosure. The writings you allude to shall be ready in a few days.

The papers for Doc. Miller are finished, & he takes them with him.

I have examined that part of your father's composition which has been printed. There are a great many errors, and the style is very imperfect. My advice is that it be carefully corrected, and printed over again. The Doctr. thinks so too.

I should regret to see it put in circulation, in the defective form it now has. The only way to do justice to the work, will be to transcribe the greater part of it anew. If you wish, I will go on with it as fast as possible. I have the printed part here & will require no other assistance.

There is no evidence that Isaac Blackford had any facility with the German language. It is fairly clear that he was working with printed sheets in the English language. *Thoughts* was the only English language publication the Society ever printed. It then can be concluded that the Blackford letter referred to the unfinished *Thoughts*. Blackford was assisting the translators of *Gedanken* with a crude or less than perfect English translation. Possibly Frederick Rapp, adopted son of George Rapp, J. C. Muller, Society doctor and printer, and Gertrude Rapp, granddaughter of George, all of whom had some ability with the English language at this time, had done the initial translation of *Gedanken*. Before *Thoughts* was completely printed, apprehension developed about the quality of the translation and Blackford was asked for editorial advice.

No one has questioned the date 1824 as the year in which *Gedanken* and *Thoughts* were printed. No evidence

to the contrary for *Gedanken* has yet been offered. The Blackford letter, however, reveals that printing on *Thoughts* was not completed by March, 1825. It is not known whether the advice of Blackford was followed and *Thoughts* corrected and reprinted. A receipted invoice in the Society archives of Eichbaum and Johnston, printers, publishers, and booksellers of Pittsburgh, dated August 25, 1825, would indicate the approximate completion date of *Thoughts*. Two entries on the invoice are enlightening:

6 qr. Blue paper	1.50
Printing 300 "Thought & c	3.00

The six quires of blue paper invoiced could have been the paper used as a cover for *Thoughts*. All copies ever examined by the writer have been uniformly bound in blue paper of the same stock. It is unlikely that Eichbaum and Johnston printed 300 copies of a 96-page booklet for the price of \$3. It is believed that the entry "Printing 300 "Thought & c . . ." on the invoice represented the price paid the Pittsburgh firm for printing the title page of *Thoughts*. The title page was printed separately and does not form part of the first signature of *Thoughts*. It was printed on a single sheet which was folded so that the first blank leaf is an end sheet glued to the blue paper cover. Then follows the title page with the verso blank. The type used in printing the title page appears to be from the same type family used to print the main body of *Thoughts*, but it is not from the same font. It is possible that the Society did not possess English type of the size desired for the title page and resorted to Eichbaum and Johnston for the printing.

From the available documentary evidence, it can be concluded that *Thoughts* was printed solely to be spread abroad. Since only a very few members of the Society

could read English, it would seem highly improbable that the English translation was printed for the edification and instruction of the membership. Circumstantial evidence drawn from the booklet itself leads to the conclusion that *Gedanken* was also printed primarily for outside circulation. Passages found scattered throughout the treatise (see especially pp. 66, 70, 72, 75, 76) were obviously attempts to explain the Society to persons unfamiliar with its internal organization and operation. Such explanations would have been unnecessary for the membership. Frederick Rapp, business agent, was the person responsible for having the two booklets printed. It is logical to believe that he wanted the publications to send out in response to the many requests for information on the Society. He may have felt that, by circulating copies of the booklet in appropriate places, some of the prevalent misapprehension concerning the Society and its aims could be corrected.

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