

Spielräume eines Pfarrers vor der Reformation.

Ulrich Krafft in Ulm

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Ulrich Krafft (1455–1516) was trained as a lawyer at the prestigious University of Pavia (Italy) and was a recognized university professor and, later, a pastor in Ulm (Bavaria, Germany). Berndt Hamm (Emeritus Professor of History of the Church at the *Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*) has produced an in-depth and detailed monograph on Krafft, whose theological and philosophical system played a major role in the cultural process leading to the spread of the Reformation in Central Europe.

Krafft's attitude shows that particular sensitivity that would have found its fertile ground in the Protestant movements. This is expressed both through a comprehensive analysis of social reality and with an innovative theological proposal. The rediscovery of Ulrich Krafft and his role as a precursor to Protestantism deserve to be better known and studied. His undoubted value is significant not only for theologians and philosophers but also for historians of legal and economic theories.

This intellectual biography is divided into nine chapters to which is added a substantial part dedicated to sources, manuscripts, and literature. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 could be considered the core of the monograph, where Hamm dwells in great detail on the evolution of Krafft's theology from a linguistic, philosophical, and symbolic perspective, tracing Krafft's most important doctrinal and political-economic contributions.

Krafft was a member of one of Ulm's most distinguished and politically important patrician families. He taught in Tübingen, Freiburg, and Basel and became one of the most famous Roman law experts in Germany. Furthermore, as a parish priest, Krafft also left a profound mark as a virtuous theologian and preacher. His sermons were of such intensity and originality that they were printed and widely circulated. In his surviving sermons Krafft displays a freedom of thought and expression. He depicts Ulm as a trading metropolis of the late Middle Ages, and as a Free Imperial City of the Holy Roman Empire, situated on the left bank of the Danube with its trade and cultural routes from the Black Forest to the Black Sea.

As a scholar and parish priest, Krafft devoted himself to social and economic issues analyzing the conditions of the city, and speaking in favor of weavers and others who were threatened by poverty and corrupt policies. His analysis starts from a framework of social psychology. Krafft considered all high-ranking people in "danger of arrogance," and he warned holders of political power to avoid the deleterious fall into the vicious circle of self-referentiality.

Krafft extended this view to religious people and clergymen, showing how some are inexperienced and devoted; and others, instead, are learned but without any faith. He preached patiently to the laity so that they were able to distinguish between doctrine and person. Krafft represents the traditional conception of ministry, and, on the basis of Augustine, insists on the validity of official priestly acts, regardless of personal moral qualities.

In his line of action, Ulrich Krafft united two fundamental directions. On the one hand, tradition is preserved and, on the other hand, his preaching led to the frontiers of theological speculation. He never opposed the ancient and medieval ecclesiastical authorities but rather creatively developed their “theological tools,” giving life to innovative biblical interpretation, a renewed structure of sermons, and an (individualized) pastoral care, more in accordance with the needs of the times.

In many of his sermons, Krafft spoke of Noah’s Ark as the construction of a life of piety, which every Christian as a “spiritual carpenter” is called to create from the material (wood) of his virtues. This metaphor is quite distinct from traditional symbolism of the ark. It highlights the value of personal commitment in individual and social transformation. Krafft solicits the external and internal practice of the virtues in humble prayer (with respect to God), in chaste fasting (with respect to one’s body) and in almsgiving as a loving attitude (with respect to others). And this usual “triad of penance” corresponds to his invectives against the “triad of the vice” of pride, fornication, and greed.

From a pastoral and legal point of view, Krafft was by no means unaware of the modern, spiritual, and religious currents of his time. On the basis of what emerges from the reflections of his former colleagues from Tübingen (including Gabriel Biel, Martin Plantsch, and Konrad Summenhart), he dedicated himself to understanding the ethical problems of a society in profound transformation in the wake of John Duns Scotus and the Franciscan School. This theological-juridical emphasis includes political, social, and economic aspects of community life such as the need for reform of the Church from within and the battle against superstition and usury. His preaching effected economic legislation that favored artisans and small businesses overwhelmed by vexatious taxation and oppressive regulations.

His particular attention to education fits into this historical environment. The pedagogical theme is one of his central interests and one of the main objectives of his mission as a law professor and pastor. In his will, Krafft bequeathed all his books to the city of Ulm, making them accessible to all citizens. According to his idea, a city library aimed to expand reason and spirituality. Furthermore, it would have provided the necessary knowledge in the (intellectual) process to salvation. It would have served as a platform for shared solutions in order to reach a better management of social, political, and economic relations.

Hamm’s study of Krafft’s work provides readers with significant insights into the connections between the late Middle Ages, Renaissance humanism, and the Reformation. The monograph also has the merit of inserting historical reflections in the broadest European spectrum with a series of profound interrelations among the pre-Reformation movements and mutual influences between the main Continental cities and their intellectual centers. This historical analysis serves as a starting point for further investigations on the evolution of the Reformation and its currents with their specific characteristics. The work would deserve to be translated into English for a better knowledge of the central figure of Ulrich Krafft and his philosophical legacy.

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