PLENARY SESSION

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Reform and Society: What are the Ingredients of a Religious Reform?

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Reforms and radicals

To give a short answer to the core question of this part of the plenary, one can say, yes, traditions are mostly reformed by radicals. However, it is important to specify, how one understands the term "radical".

In my understanding, one who seeks to reform a (religious) tradition[1] must go deep to the roots. The Latin term for a root is *radix*, which gave the name to term radical. Therefore, a radical is someone who goes deep to the roots of his/her tradition, considering them critically in the light of his/her context (and vice versa) and trying to bring the best fruits for the present praxis.

In this perspective, then, the opposite of radical is extremist, rather than moderate.[2] Again finding its etymology in Latin, extremist is derived from *exterus*, meaning "outer", or *extremus*, meaning "outermost, utmost". As such, the notion of extreme/extremist/extremism implies something/someone shallow, superficial, ignorant, and not very well thought-through. In all of these "qualities", I would argue, lies a deep risk for society at large.

What has been said so far, implies a challenge to counter the conventional discourse on "radicals". Instead the common image of a blind fanatic, a radical could be a hero of reinterpretation, reform, and renewal who makes profound hermeneutic work with his/her tradition[3]. It can be beneficial not only for that tradition, but also have implications for society at large as radically reinterpreted and reformed traditions can represent a very much desirable voice of the other.

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[1] If we admit that it is even possible to strive intentionally for reform as it "comes out" in the end. I personally doubt the possibility of this. More likely, it seems to me, reform is a "byproduct" that had not envisioned at the very beginning when the then-to-be reformer(s) started to be engaged with his/her tradition radically.

[2] In fact, "moderate" seems to be a mid-way term from this perspective. Although to be appreciated and respected for a number of good reasons, "moderate" does not in several important aspects seem preferable to "radical" as introduced here in this paper.

[3] Tradition here does not necessarily have to be limited to a religious one.

A big question, however, remains, whether it is still possible to reclaim the positive sense of the notion "radical" today, after so much imprecision has formed the public discourse, including the media, for such a long time.

Liberation and conservatism

My thesis is that it is still true today that reforms trigger both liberation and conservatism. I should specify that I will limit my remarks to the field of religion here. To pursue my thesis, I draw from the assumption that religion as a theological and philosophical[4] phenomenon has two poles: hierarchical and liberating, respectively. The hierarchical pole of religion provides order and structure, defending the reality from slipping back into the primordial chaos. On the contrary, the liberating pole opens the horizons, tearing down shackles of legalism and traditionalism and giving the hope of a new beginning. Paul Ricoeur has in mind something similar when he speaks of "social imagination" as the dialectic of "ideology" and "utopia". The elements of hierarchy (Ricoeur's "ideology" and liberation (Ricoeur's "utopia") are to be in a constant creative tension. Whatever maintains an order, hierarchy, and tradition, whatever strives towards perfection and implies the idea of totality (i.e. hierarchy or "ideology"), must be corrected and balanced by something new, open, alternative, and containing the hope for a change (i.e. liberation or "utopia"). Both are necessary. Both core elements are necessary. As theorist Laurence Coupe says, interpreting Ricoeur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, "without the first kind, we would have no sense of society or tradition; without the second kind, we would simply equate the given society and tradition with eternal truth, never challenging or reforming them. Utopia prevents ideology becoming a claustrophobic system; ideology prevents utopia becoming an empty fantasy. Myth, or the social imagination, involves both."[5]

Although Coupe discusses the phenomenon of myth here, I would argue the same nexus also applies to religion, construed in terms of the dialectic of hierarchy and liberation.

For religions then, it is crucial to keep the two poles in balance, to provide both a sense of belonging, identity, and meaning (hierarchy) and a space for creativity, spontaneity, and self-fulfillment (liberation).

Perhaps a contemporary example may be of use to illustrate the point. The religious landscape of today, whether or not we decide to define it as postmodern, is characterized by a high degree of variety, colorfulness, and "fluidity". It can be legitimately construed in terms of a marketplace or, perhaps more appropriately, a shopping mall. Religious experience can then often be identified with shopping (or window-shopping). The sheer degree of possibilities can for many people be perplexing and overwhelming. One of the common responses to the "fluidity" of the contemporary religious scene is the attraction toward conservative, even rigid religious movements today. This is a phenomenon that has multiple levels and can also be interesting from sociological and/or psychological perspectives.

Luther as a fundamentalist?

Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to think of Luther as a fundamentalist, since (religious) fundamentalism is a modern, i.e. post-Enlightenment phenomenon. To be more precise, Christian fundamentalism developed as a reaction to the so-called Modernist theology. The former's origins are usually traced back to the Niagara Bible Conference series in 1876-1897.

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[4] However, this argument has also its significant sociological and psychological implications.
[5] Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 96-97. For Ricoeur's treatment of the subject see Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. G. H. Taylor, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 312.

To go back to our theme, however, it is appropriate, I believe, to speak of Luther as a fundamental thinker as he indeed strived to go back to the fundamentals of (Christian) faith and life. To be sure, there are many (even too many) troubling, and even condemnable issues regarding Luther, not least in the field of Jewish-Christian relations. Nevertheless, there is also Luther's legacy that remains, to my mind, valid until today. It includes his revisiting of such notions as justification by grace, sin, repentance, freedom, etc. This points to the role Luther had as a (re)interpreter, (re)reader, and (re)newer of awareness and practice for his context.

For us today, especially (but not only) those of us who claim standing in Luther's tradition, there is a serious task of going beyond Luther – of re-reading Luther, and leaving behind or reform (if possible) that which cannot be taken for granted anymore. These problematic areas would include Luther's attitude toward his opponents as well as Luther's views on apocalypticism. Similarly, one might critically ask whether Luther did not neglect some other aspects/notions of tradition (cf. catholicity) through his emphasis on the select themes (especially justification by grace through faith).

Some of these points might on the face of it betray certain traits of fundamentalism. However, it would take a Luther scholar to pronounce an ultimate opinion on the subject. I can only say that for me as a theologian standing in the Lutheran tradition, Martin Luther remains to be a fundamental thinker.

Reformation – printing – modern technologies

I do not dare to go as far as to say that what the invention of the printing press meant for the 16th-century Reformation is analogical to what modern technologies mean for faith communities today. However, certain remarks can be made on this subject. I will limit myself to three of them. First, technologies, the media, and networking indeed play a significant role in the enormous growth and development of certain religious movements, especially of charismatic orientation. For instance, scholars of neo-Pentecostalism argue that the phenomenon of modern technologies is one of the four or five key factors behind the rapid growth and spread of transnational African-initiated neo-Pentecostal churches.

Second, it can indeed be expected that modern technologies and ways of communication will have a deep impact on religion in the years to come. By way of example, consider how differently books, on the one hand, and blogs/podcasts/YouTube videos, on the other hand, work as source of knowledge/information. And perhaps to say the obvious, consider the degree to which there has been a shift from the former to the latter among general audiences, including especially young people. From a theological perspective, one should not overlook that this shift has implications on the ways one (re)reads and reinterprets texts, including sacred scriptures. The implications of this process can potentially be either positive or negative. The positive implications include the fact that modern technologies foster a more holistic and dynamic approach to knowledge, the employment of human faculties such as intuition, and the relational quality of knowledge. On the contrary, the negative implications include especially the latent risk inherent to modern technologies, namely that the latter has the pernicious potential to encourage and nurture superficiality, alienation, and the creation of artificial realities. It seems that a good balance between modern technologies and more traditional sources of knowledge and information can represent a suitable way of addressing this challenge.

Finally, third, modern technologies need to be considered vis-à-vis the fact that humans are corporeal beings.[6] Interesting theological discussions are to be expected, for example, around such issues as the viability of the administration of the Eucharist/Holy Communion online (e.g. via Skype).

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[6] Here I leave aside the phenomena of transhumanism, human enhancement, or virtual reality. This section merely focuses on modern technologies as sources of knowledge and means of communication.