

The Sixteenth Century Reformation's Context and Content: Highlighting the Pivotal Role of Freedom of Conscience

Ganoune Diop, Ph.D &
Doctor Honoris Causa
GC PARL Director
IRLA Secretary General
E-mail: diopg@gc.adventist.org

ABSTRACT: In this article, I want to explore the impact of the Reformation on Christianity taking into account several principles that are intrinsic to the Reformation and which are shared by several traditions, denominations or communions. Also, I want to highlight the role of freedom of conscience which was meant to be the cornerstone of the Reformation. The famous declaration of Martin Luther on the pivotal role of conscience was certainly a critical step in the right direction to celebrating self-determination. Conscience is incontrovertible is defining what it means to be an autonomous and responsible subject. This most intimate freedom is a prerequisite for all other freedoms such as freedom of opinion or freedom of choice.

KEY WORDS: freedom of conscience, Reformation, biblical truth

Introduction

500-years ago, on October 31, 1517, a Catholic monk, Martin Luther, posted at the door of the Castle of Wittenberg, Germany, 95 theses to challenge the practice of selling of indulgences. A Dominican friar and preacher at the service of Pope Leo X, Johann Tetzel, was making a daring claim purposed to capture people's imagination, instigate fear and inspire pity on supposed suffering souls. "As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs." [*So wie das Geld im Kasten klingt; die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt*] He claimed with fervor that indulgences were a means to attenuate the suffering of those caught in the flames of purgatory. In his days, the belief in the existence of purgatory was part of the official teaching of the Catholic tradition, even though many Catholics distanced themselves from this view and criticized Tetzel himself for his unorthodox teaching on the indulgences for the dead. Luther was one of them. He was a Catholic monk who discovered the grace and love of God. The context helps shed some light on the ethos of the times.

The Reformation occurred in a context where several factors were at play. They were certainly religious, but also cultural, political and economic. In this reflection, we will focus on the religious while mentioning where fitting socio-economic and cultural elements.

1. Context of the Reformation

A. *Reformation, Religion and the Fear of Death*

It was a time of religious fervor. To get a pulse of the times, one can mention the famous Girolamo Savonarola who died in 1498, in Florence just about 20 years before the Reformation began. He was a fiery preacher who claimed the gift of prophecy, and wanted to reform the church, calling people to repentance, revival, and

reformation. The prospect of impending judgment, doom and gloom, and the fear of disaster about to strike anytime created vulnerability and susceptibility to religious abuse against those who were in the grip of fear of judgment.

A little over two hundred years earlier, the infamous bubonic plague devastated Europe creating an apocalyptic ambiance nurtured by the belief that the world was about to end and judgment was at the door. Jesus was about to come. Millions of people died throughout Europe. It all started on October 1347. 12 ships arrived in Venice, Italy. On board, dying people covered with black sores. No known cure of a plague called *Pestilentia*, a recurrent disease whose latest reappearance was recorded as recently as in the 1990s. Due to the number of fatalities, the mysterious nature of several outbreaks of epidemics paved the way for rampant superstitions. The disease stricken population of the 15th century thought it was because of divine judgment that *Pestilentia* was decimating the population of Europe.

The Medieval world experienced several epidemics. In 1515 and 1516, just one year before the Reformation, an outbreak of what became known as *The English Sweat, or English sweating sickness* affected England. No wonder that in such an atmosphere, several religious leaders proposed remedies consisting in penance, pilgrimage and payments. Key among those remedies, were the indulgences. There were others. The fear of death was a fertile ground to exploit peoples' superstitions. The politicization of religion, was a convenient pathway to do business. The renovation of Saint Peter's Basilica demanded such tour de force.

B. Luther's Rationale for Challenging the Sale of Indulgences

Martin Luther stood against a mercantilist high jacking or embezzlement of the faith. The bold move to challenge the

authority of the papacy occurred in a context where memories of the Great Schism and long crisis (1378-1417) may have weakened the perception of the absolute authority of the Papacy. The confrontation between three popes prepared the way to conceive alternatives to the authority of popes. Before Luther, John Wycliffe in England, and John Huss in Bohemia/Moravia were precursors who challenged the teachings of the medieval church and the authority conferred to individuals. A definitive move to locate authority, not in the church, or popes or councils but in the bible opened a trajectory that will eventually lead to more divisions and conflicts but also to more freedoms and creativity.

In the case of the dispute in the early 16th century, the 95 theses were contesting the function of indulgences in salvation and the claim that the Pope had the prerogative or power to deliver souls from purgatory.

The undergirding issue in the dispute was that of one's standing before God and salvation. In popular beliefs, the alternatives for life after death were heaven, hell, or purgatory. In a context of judgment, death, and uncertainty as to the future, fear and trembling about one's destiny or one's relatives fate, religion, seen as trade with God, flourished. One could basically purchase salvation. In other words, Salvation was for sale.

Martin Luther's reading of the Pauline epistle to the Romans, according to which "the just shall live by faith," changed everything. The Apostle Paul unequivocally stated, "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith," and echoing the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk, he adds "it is written a person shall live by faith." He concluded with the following: "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law." (Romans 3:28)." How can a person be righteous before God? This question haunted and traumatized Martin Luther. The Reformation was first an answer to this question. It was more, however.

C. Luther and the End of the World

An incontrovertible perspective to understand Martin Luther's thoughts is his eschatology, his beliefs and teachings about the last things and the end of the world. "As soon as one delves into the study of Luther's works, especially his sermons and expositions of the Bible, one is rather fascinated by the overwhelming presence of eschatological thought in what the great Protestant Reformer had to say and write. The crux of the matter is not to be found simply in his references to the papacy as the antichrist, nor in his clear warnings against the Turks, nor even in his expressions of a longing for the last day. Rather, it is to be found in the fact that that eschaton—the consummation of all things into the coming Kingdom of God—was a central and very compelling force that drove and motivated Luther as a person and as a theologian." (Vogel 1986, 249-264)

His "interpretation of apocalyptic symbols and prophecies agrees to a certain extent with the interpretation of his time." However, one should keep in mind that "Luther's theology is thoroughly eschatological in the strict sense of expecting the end of the world. His thoughts about the eschaton are not a conventional appendix but a section of his theology which is rooted in, indispensable to, and a decisive part of the substance of his theology. Luther did not merely repeat the old traditional answers to the central questions of eschatology. In this doctrine, too, he is the Reformer." (Althaus 1966, 404-405)

2. The Meaning of the Principles of the Reformation

To capture the multiple facets of the Reformation and entertain a broader and more comprehensive understanding, it is helpful to identify several principles that are intrinsic to the Reformation. They are shared by several traditions, denominations or communions. Many of these principles were code expressions meant to capture

the disputes at stake. They also indicated what was understood as the gospel or good news of the New Covenant. The principles of the Reformation including the five "*Solas*," and other insights and changes in belief were adopted with the purpose of restoring what was understood as new covenant ethos.

Core to the issues of the Reformation is that of mediation. Following the argument of the epistle to Hebrews, the Reformers postulated there was no other mediator but Christ. Furthermore, Jesus Christ has introduced a new economy of direct access to God. All are now welcome without going through holy places such the sanctuary/temple, holy objects such as the sacrifices and relics, and holy ritual performances of the priests. Direct access to God made all these means irrelevant for salvation. Salvation is now viewed in reference to grace, faith, Christ and the glory of God. All these beliefs were grounded on the Bible. The core tenets of post-Reformation Christian beliefs were based on the following:

1. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone is the foundation for faith, beliefs and practice, not Scripture along with tradition or decision of councils, papal bulls, edicts, or decrees). The "Scripture principle" is the conviction that the Bible is the only absolute source of authority and that all believers are equal before it. It is Protestantism's central, unifying idea. (McGrath, 2007) However, it is critical to remember that the foundation of Luther's experience was his relationship with God. Thinkers have drawn attention to the possible pitfall of bibliolatry. Luther's relation with Scripture is more complex and deserves a more informed evaluation.
2. *Sola Gratia* (grace alone, not grace along with merits when it comes to salvation)
3. *Sola Fide* (Faith alone, not faith with works to earn salvation). The nature of justification was at the root of the Reformation. For the Lutheran Reformation, it was

considered “the first and chief article, the ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines.”¹ Justification was the crux of all the disputes. (See the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” by *The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church*)

4. Solus Christus (Christ alone, the only mediator between God and humans). This principle presupposes that it takes only God to lead to God. Only God can forgive offenses to God. Only God can save and offer eternal life.
5. Soli Deo Gloria (To God be all the glory, only God is worthy to be worshiped and prayed to, not spirits, angels, Mary, or saints).
6. Presbyterii Fidelium (Priesthood of all believers, the New Covenant is characterized by free access to God). Except for Christ's, the Reformation contests all other mediations. Angels, Mary, saints, popes and bishops cannot usurp the unique prerogative of Christ, the only mediator between God and humans. The premise of this principle is the new covenant of direct access to all who come to faith in God, just as priests had access to the Holy Place of the Sanctuary and the High priest to the most holy place, before God's presence. In the new covenant, God graciously grants access to Him through faith in and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.
7. Ecclesia Semper Reformanda. The Church is in a continuous process of Reformation until God makes all things perfect again. This principle is consonant with the sufficiency of Jesus Christ who alone will be able to complete the Reformation, given his prerogative to renew all things at his Second Coming. In this perspective, reformation, restoration and renewal are inseparable. If sanctification can be conceived as God's work in the believers during his or her lifetime, the church also is bound to be in a perpetual state of Reformation until the

kingdom of God becomes universal and materializes in the whole universe.

8. From the Reformation on, the 7 sacraments are reduced to 2: Baptism and Communion. Obviously, the latter was and is understood differently by Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. Terms such as transubstantiation and consubstantiation were used to express the beliefs regarding what happens to the bread and wine during communion or Eucharist. Furthermore, for Luther, marriage is not a sacrament. It is civil and political covenant. When Luther, the monk, got married to a former nun, Katharine von Bora, there was no turning back regarding the status of priesthood and marriage. Celibacy was no longer considered mandatory for priests.
9. Freedom of conscience is the cornerstone of the Reformation. The famous declaration of Martin Luther on the pivotal role of conscience is in order: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything; for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen" (Martin Luther, April 1521). Lack of conformity to this principle has tarnished the tremendous legacy of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation could not be completed without a comprehensive and consistent adoption of freedom of conscience.
10. The principle of legitimate authority in belief and practice. The Reformation sets limits to every authority and tradition. The Reformation challenged Greco-Roman philosophical categories and worldviews. The philosophical and theological choices to privilege medieval scholasticism through adoption of Aquinas and his synthesis of Aristotle with biblical Christian thought shifted back to Augustinism and his integration of Platonic

and Neoplatonic worldviews. Luther, having been an Augustinian Monk was certainly influenced by Augustin's approach to Christian life and spirituality. He did not look favorably to what he considered as scholasticism speculations remote from the faith of the ordinary people.

11. The primacy of a biblical anthropology over Greco-Roman understanding of the nature of the soul. This aspect of the Reformation needs to be taken into consideration. It highlights the tension between a biblical Christian understanding of human nature and that borrowed from Greco-Roman philosophies. A deeper grasp of the issues that characterized the Reformation further benefits from understanding the world of ideas, the prevailing philosophies and systems of thoughts. At an earlier stage in the history the Catholic Church, it was observed that "Augustinian mysticism and emphasis on faith and individual illumination and grace" were the dominant features which showed adoption of the categories of Plato's thoughts into Christianity. However, "when politely relegated to a subordinate position in the official church theology, fled onto the developing sects and creeds that sought to revive the original character of Christianity in the late Middle Age." (Ebenstein 1951, 214) From the 13th century, Thomism was the major scholastic philosophy embraced by the Catholic church. The adoption of the philosophies of both Plato and Aristotle brought in understanding of the Christian faith that post reformation Christian traditions would challenge. "Plato's doctrine of vision as the ultimate form of knowing the Good, his concept of God, his tendency toward mysticism, his contempt of matter and idealization of spirit, his conception of Ideas as the essence of reality, his scheme of an ideal society in which the spiritual element would rule—all these Platonic strands could be easily woven into the texture of Early Christian life and thought. (Ebenstein 1951, 210) They include the nature of the soul, the immortality or non-immortality of the soul and other

beliefs which are today part of the landscape of historic Christian churches' beliefs. The enormous influence of Thomas Aquinas brought a new synthesis. "Scholastic philosophy reached its 'golden age' in the thirteenth century, which was the peak of papal power. The evolution of the church as an institution of universal aspirations demanded a universal, comprehensive and systematic philosophy. The synthesis of theological doctrine, as elaborated and refined over a thousand years, provided one cornerstone of the new edifice. The rediscovery of Aristotle provided the other." (Ebenstein 1951, 212) Luther was an Augustinian Monk. It has been observed that "Protestantism was a return to the beginnings of Christianity not only because of its stress on the earlier religious sources over the later, but because of its preference of St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas, of Plato to Aristotle." (Ebenstein 1951, 214)

12. The principle of human dignity and humans' infinite worth through creation in God's image and loved by God undergirds every principle. God's love motivates the incarnation to save the human family God created for fellowship. This principle ultimately undergirds all the others. The principle is the foundation for all human rights.

3. Implications

The Reformation irreversibly changed the world of the Christian faith. The 12 principles, characteristics, and insights into the post-Reformation world give us perspectives on how the initiatives of Luther and other Reformers changed the world of the Renaissance and ever since. A new world of differences was born. The acceptance and embrace of the dignity of difference brought a new era in religious thought. A new awareness of the importance of freedom dawn upon the world.

In Zurich, it was this conviction that the freedom of the Gospel should take precedence over legislations about fasting or eating meat or fish depending on the day and the time that brought another aspect of the Reformation. Leo Jud, Ulrich Zwingli, and Christoph Scheurl highlighted this aspect of the Reformation. A journey of freedom was launched. Holy places, holy objects, holy performances, rites, and rituals lost their mandatory aspect. The idea of a new covenant of direct access challenged to the core the idea of mediations and sacraments. This Reformation thinking was rooted in New covenant thinking. This was the purpose of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, who argued the sufficiency of Christ over temple, sacrifices, or cultic performances.

4. Further Insights on the Reformation and Freedom of Conscience

More profoundly, it was freedom of conscience which directed medieval thinking into a trajectory that would gradually open all the freedoms we claim today. They would not happen overnight as history witnesses. In fact, the fight for freedoms and self-determination will tragically cost millions of lives. Self-sacrifice and advocacy for human dignity throughout centuries since have helped us to get to where we are today, though there is still a long way to go to make this world a better place for millions.

According to Emmanuel Kant, Martin Luther is one who elevated the primacy of conscience over doctrine. This conviction may be connected to Kant's famous moral imperative according to which human beings should never be treated as means to an end. The importance of human conscience is inseparably connected to religious freedom, or freedom of religion or belief. Nevertheless, the status of religious freedom was ambiguous since the beginning of the Reformation. Religious freedom was granted to states, not to individuals.

Cujus Regio, Ejus Religio is a witness to that fact. The religion of the ruler was to dictate the religion of those ruled. This meant that early on during the Reformation, religious freedom was conceived as a matter of prerogative of the state, not individuals. It would take few more centuries for religious freedom to gain the status of a universal human right, even though its universality is still increasingly challenged by totalitarian political circles and even in academic circles.

5. Religious Freedom and Claims to Truth

As the history of the Christian church has shown, the claim to truth without religious freedom ends in tragedy. The early Reformers' contributions to the rediscovery of biblical truth is undeniable. However, the early neglect of freedom of conscience led to unnecessary violence and unspeakable suffering. Despite their tremendous contributions to the restoration of biblical truth, blind spots in the history of the Reformation were also present due to the lack of full adoption of freedom of conscience and religious freedom for all.

Intolerance made its way in what was supposed to be an experience of freedom. The peasants took literally the postulate of Christian freedom Martin Luther articulated so well. "A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone." The peasants took this statement literally to brush off the yoke, princes were imposing upon them. It sparked a conflict that would end tragically. Luther sided with princes, the armed conflict resulted in an estimated 100,000 deaths.

In Zurich, another tragedy occurred when Felix Mann and Conrad Grebel were not allowed to believe according to the dictates of their

conscience. They were murdered by drowning them because of their belief in baptism by immersion. In Geneva, Calvin let Michel Servet be burned at the stake because of doctrinal differences. The latter did not believe in a triune God. He paid his life for it. The episode clouded the significant contributions of the Reformation. But the main lessons learned is that the claim to truth should always be accompanied by the right of others to believe differently, or not to believe at all.

To embrace religious freedom is to integrate the need for the dignity of difference. It is to adopt a personal attitude of tolerance whereby tolerance is an expression of solidarity with every member of the human family. Religious freedom is a commitment not to despise human beings. It is a certain benevolent attitude towards other human beings. It translates into respect for every human being. This can only be genuine when other peoples' rights are respected.

Whether on the side of Catholic beliefs as synthesized by Aquinas or the Protestant Reformers, there was unfortunately room for violence against those labelled as heretics because they believe differently. When it comes to the Christian faith, the world has come a long way. Though not capturing or being the ideal formulation of people's rights, the concept of tolerance has come to express what human beings owe to one another. Tolerance does not mean a condescending attitude towards those who believe differently in general and minorities. Tolerance is connected to the idea of "bearing with." It has a connotation of solidarity.

Concluding Thoughts on the Reformation: Lessons Learned

The context of the Reformation includes several aspects to take into consideration. The apocalyptic ambiance prompted by previous epidemics which decimated the Medieval world reinforced fear.

The prevalent belief that the world was going to end, the obsession Luther and others had about one's standing before God and the fear of divine judgment all contributed to superstitions and vulnerability to exploitation and abuses. The issue of salvation and how to obtain it brought along superstitions and rites and rituals purposed to bring relief to those who suffer in purgatory, and assurance of a better fate in the life to come for those who supported the church through material means. Luther objected to the sale of the indulgences and captured people's attention through his 95 theses posted at the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. The Reformation was needed to further the cause of freedom. Freedom to have access to God as stipulated by the new covenant, freedom from mediators and freedom to relate directly to God the heavenly father Jesus came to reveal.

These truths were salvific; however, other dimensions of the truth of freedom were neglected. One of the great lessons of the Reformation is that claims to truth must be paired with the freedom of others to choose to believe or not to believe. Otherwise, privileging one's beliefs while despising others may lead to despotism, violence, and murders. Notorious Reformers tarnished their amazing legacy by not upholding freedom of religion or belief for all, even for those who differ.

Freedom of conscience was meant to be the cornerstone of the Reformation. The famous declaration of Martin Luther on the pivotal role of conscience was certainly a critical step in the right direction to celebrating self-determination. Conscience is incontrovertible in defining what it means to be an autonomous and responsible subject. This most intimate freedom is a prerequisite for all other freedoms such as freedom of opinion or freedom of choice, and of expression. The words of Martin Luther as he stuck to the dictates of his own conscience inspired generations of believers and non-religious people alike.

“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason...
my conscience is captive to the Word of God.
I cannot and will not recant anything,
for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.
Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me Amen.”
(Martin Luther April 1521).

We wished that the same freedom of conscience be granted to all. His severe diatribes against Jews would have never been uttered if he was unfailingly committed to recognize the same freedom to all. Freedom of conscience not only undergirds all the principles of the Reformation, it is an antidote against violations of people rights to believe differently or not to believe. Obviously, there are other aspects of the Reformation that should not be forgotten.

1. The accessibility of religious music to the people. With Luther, it was no longer a monopoly of the sacred priests but for all.
2. The availability of the Bible in the idiom people could understand. Luther's translation of the Bible in German is a landmark in the history of the Christian faith. The word of God, the Bible was now found in the language of the people. A new idiom was created for the people. This phenomenon benefited from Guttenberg's invention of the printing press and provided the Reformation with a formidable means to spread the Bible throughout the then Holy Roman Empire and beyond.

These and other contributions make the Reformation a wealth of significant ideas that have helped shape our contemporary world. In spite of the violence Christians perpetrated against one another, the Reformation has moved the world to a better place. Today Christians are asking one another for forgiveness for the brutal past of betrayals of the gospel of peace. Jesus never forced his disciples to stay with him. He asked them if they would not also go along with those who were abandoning him. Jesus was free to let people be free to choose

him or not. Freedom of conscience was for him pre-condition sine qua non, without which the covenant of truth fellowship and love would not be possible.

Note

¹ "Rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum" Weimar Edition of Luther's Works (WA), 39, I, 205. "The doctrine of Justification is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ."

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