The Relevance of the XVIth Century Theology for the XXIst (2/2)

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The Relevance of Sixteenth Century Theology for the Twenty-first

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In order to connect what I am to say this afternoon with this morning's lecture, it is important to realize that in many ways the Second Vatican Council is the vindication, within Roman Catholic circles, of much that the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century stood for. When I was growing up as a Protestant in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, it was much easier than it is now to distinguish between Catholic and Protestant. We, the Protestants, insisted on the authority of Scripture, and encouraged everybody to read the Bible for themselves. We met weeknights in people's homes to study the Bible and to pray. We worshiped in the vernacular and were convinced that it was important for the congregation to participate actively in worship. insisted on the centrality of preaching and expected a sermon at every Sunday worship service. We proclaimed the priesthood of all believers and implemented it in vigorous lay ministry programs. And on the basis of all that, we proclaimed our superiority over the Roman Catholic Church--which in turn proclaimed its superiority over us on the basis that it did not practice any of these innovations, but rather continued with the same worship, the same language, and the same structures that it had before the Reformation.

Now all that has changed. And it has changed drastically. All over the world, the mass is said in the vernacular. All over Latin America, tens of thousands of Catholic groups meet regularly in homes to study the Bible and to discuss its message for contemporary life. Preaching has become a regular feature of Catholic masses. And all over the world the ministry of Catholic

laity is being affirmed in a myriad ways. As is well known, all of this, and more, has happened partly as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

What is not often seen is the degree to which that council reflected the insights and the needs of the periphery of Roman Catholicism. Ever since the Protestant Reformation, and partly as a response to it, the trend in the Roman Catholic Church had been toward centralization. The Council of Trent was clearly a centralizing council. Everything was to be run and determined by Rome. Unity was unity around the Pope, and the Latin mass and the Vulgate were symbols and guarantors of that unity. That centralizing tendency continued for centuries, culminating in the papacy of Pius IX, the first pope ever to proclaim dogma on his own authority, without the aid of a council, and in the First Vatican Council, which declared the pope infallible. During all of this time, the Roman Catholic vision of unity was one of uniformity, with the periphery reflecting not only the guidelines, but even the language, the culture, and the mores of the center.

Then came the Second Vatican Council. Amid all the pageantry, one element that the press often missed in the composition of that council is the degree to which it represented the periphery of the Roman Catholic Church. More than half of the bishops present at the Council came from churches so poor that the richer churches had to cover their expenses so they could attend the council. Only forty-six percent of the bishops came from the North Atlantic. Forty-two percent represented churches in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Given its composition, and to some degree with the support of John XXIII, it is not surprising that the Council soon turned into a revolt of the periphery. To begin with, many of the periti to whom the Council turned for guidance, although Europeans, were people who had long been silenced by Rome. Then, the Council rejected every single document that had been prepared by the curia and its theologians. With the sole exception of the Constitution on the Liturgy, which was passed after major redrafting, all the other documents were sent back, not only to be redrafted, but to be redrafted by a new commission named by the Council itself. John XXIII had convoked the Council with a mandate to proceed to the *aggiornamento*--the updating--of the Church, and it was clear that this was precisely what the Council intended to do--much to the bewilderment of the curia. After Pope John's death, Paul VI tried to restrain the Council somewhat but to no avail. There were even some suggestions that the pope ought to dissolve the Council and send the bishops home, but it was too late for that. Ever since, there have been more than indications that Rome is not happy with many of the results of the Council. But the church at the periphery will no longer allow the center to dictate its life. And the center has learned that it is not wise to seek to impose its will too abruptly.

Part of what happened in Roman Catholicism between Trent and Vatican Il was the growth of its periphery. The sixteenth century, the time of the Reformation and of Trent, was also a time of unprecedented expansion for Christianity--particularly Roman Catholic Christianity. The Spanish planted churches in the Western Hemisphere, from Mexico to Patagonia, and then crossed the Pacific to the Philippines. The Portuguese did likewise in the coast of Africa, in India, Ceylon, and

as far as Japan. At first, most of these were fairly small churches; but eventually they grew, to the point that at the time of Vatican Il they encompassed the vast majority of Catholic Christians in the world. Thus, although structurally very centralized, by the mid-twentieth century Roman Catholicism had become a religion of the geographical and political peripheries of the world. And therefore, it is not surprising that the Second Vatican Council did what it did, that today, while there is in the center a desire to reclaim and even to impose its power, that has become impossible.

The story of Protestantism is rather similar to that of Roman Catholicism--except that the great geographic expansion of Protestantism did not come in the sixteenth century but in the nineteenth. At the time of the Reformation, and throughout the sixteenth century, Protestantism was generally limited to a few countries in northern Europe. In the seventeenth century, with the colonial expansion of Great Britain, Protestantism came to these shores. But it was in the nineteenth century, with the "opening" of Africa and the demise of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, that Protestantism really made headway in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. As was earlier the case with Catholic missions, much of this Protestant missionary enterprise was connected with colonial expansion--but that is a subject for another occasion. What is important to remark here is that there has been a change in the ethnic and cultural composition of Protestantism that is parallel to that which took place in Roman Catholicism. And this change is taking place at an incredibly rapid pace. When I was growing up in Latin America, Pentecostalism was just an interesting phenomenon that had recently entered the area. Today,

there are twice as many Pentecostals in Latin America as there are United Methodists in the United States. And the largest Presbyterian church in the world is not in Edinburgh or in New York, but in Seoul, Korea.

The statistics are staggering. At the beginning of this century, approximately half of all Christians lived in Europe. By now, less than one quarter of all Christians live in Europe. At the beginning of the century, roughly one fifth of all Christians were non-white. By the end of the century, that figure will have increased to two thirds--from 20% to more than 60%.

In short, what has taken place throughout the world is that for the first time in its history, Christianity has become a truly universal religion, and that the old centers do not know how to deal with this new reality--just as in the sixteenth century Rome and Paris did not know how to deal with Wittenberg and Geneva.

The periphery, however, is such not only in the geographical sense but also in the political and economic sense. In what has traditionally been called the First World--the North Atlantic and its transplants in places such as Australia and New Zealand--there have always been significant social elements that have been marginalized and silenced. In this country, Native and African Americans, as well as other ethnic minorities, have not been allowed a voice, not only in the future of the nation and the church, but even in their own future. In Australia and New Zealand, the same is true of the native populations of those lands. In all of those countries, as

throughout Europe, the form that economic development has taken in the last decades has produced an increasing underclass of poor people who are not only marginal, but even expendable. Two or three decades ago, these people were exploited. Now, some of them are so marginalized that they cannot even be exploited!

Throughout the world, and clearly within the church, the largest marginalized group is women. Clearly, the marginalization of women is not always the same, depending also on other factors such as class, race, education, and ecclesiastical denomination. But the fact remains that in general women have been marginal throughout the history of the church and are still largely so.

It is at this point that the experience of the sixteenth century becomes particularly relevant. Now, just as then, the periphery may see things that the center cannot see. In the sixteenth century the great protest against indulgences did not come from Rome, because Rome was benefitting from the existing order, and therefore could not see the corruption it entailed as well as could Luther in Wittenberg. Likewise, if we revisit the issue I raised this morning, of the degree to which the present polities of most denominations in the US lead to systems of pastoral appointments that come perilously close to simony, it is clear that generally one will not hear such concerns voiced by the larger and richer congregations, which get the pastors they want, nor by those individuals who have followed the present systems and have moved up in the hierarchy to the point that they are now the ones who manage the system. Some of them will indeed express concern and seek ways to ameliorate the system and to limit its abuses. But

by far the strongest voices of concern will come from rural and poor urban churches--churches that sorely need creative and innovative leadership, but, at the same time see that leadership concentrated in those congregations that least need it.

All of which brings us to another parallelism between the sixteenth century and the coming twenty-first. The concerns that Luther voiced were there long before Luther embraced and proclaimed them. Luther himself had no intention of becoming the leader of a great movement of reform. That is why his 95 theses were originally written in Latin. AIL he was expecting was an academic debate on the matter, perhaps in the hope that the debate would eventually lead to reform. Much to his surprise, someone translated his theses into German and had them printed. Apart from Savonarola in Florence, this was the first time that the printing press became a medium for religious propaganda. And, although it was not Luther who initiated the idea, he soon became a most able pamphleteer, writing and publishing tracts that sought both to lead the masses and to give voice to the perspectives and concerns of those very masses. Something similar is beginning to happen in our day. Concerns that have long been there are finding voice and are making themselves heard far beyond the limits of their own traditional constituencies.

Look for instance at Black theology. Long before German scholars told us so, the African American Christian community knew that the center of the Old Testament is not the Law of Mt. Sinai but the deliverance of Israel from the yoke of "Go down, Moses, way down into Egypt

land. Tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go." Out of an experience of slavery and yearning for deliverance, African Americans read Scripture--the same Scripture that the masses read--in a different way. They read Scripture that way, they sang it that way, for over two hundred years. But it is only in relatively recent times that Black theology has found an articulation that must be heard by the rest of theology. Luther did not invent what he called "the just grievances of the German people." He simply voiced them. voiced them both in Latin and in German. Because they were voiced in Latin, and posted at the Wittenberg door as other subjects for academic debate were posted, they had to be taken seriously by the academic community. Because the German community somehow resounded to what Luther said, and because the printing press now provided ways to turn those words into a mass movement, the church at large had to take heed--and refused to hear at its own peril. Likewise, Black theology is not an invention of recent decades. What has happened relatively recently is that Black theology has been spoken in the hallowed halls of some of our most prestigious theological institutions and has been published by “respectable” publishers. So, today, traditional theology refuses to hear at its own peril.

Other examples abound. Think for instance about Latin America and take as a case study the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe that has played such an important role in Mexican history. For centuries, the "Virgen morena", the "dark-skinned Virgin," has been the center of Mexican devotion. This, to such a point that her image was on the first flag of Mexico, when the nation rose up in arms against Spanish domination. More recently, scholars who are themselves

devoted to the Virgen morena, and who have participated in devotions to her since their early childhood, have made it clear that in the story of Guadalupe there is also a protest and a vindication of the native Mexican over against their Spanish conquerors. The story itself, for those of you who do not know it, tells of Juan Diego, a poor and unlearned Indian, who has a vision of the Virgin who instructs him to take a message to the bishop (who obviously is Spanish). The bishop, however, refuses to listen--as was to be expected. Finally, by means of a miracle, the Virgin confirms that Juan Diego is indeed her chosen messenger, and the Spanish bishop is forced to comply with the instructions the Indian Juan Diego gives him. That is the story in a nutshell. It is a story that every Mexican knows from childhood. Over the generations, it has been coopted into the church and its hierarchy, so that for a time it seemed that this was a purely religious story, with no political or social ramifications. In recent decades, however, Mexican and Mexican American scholars have begun to explore the manner in which the story, and the devotion stemming from it, have functioned in Mexican society and have made it clear that the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe is also a cry of protest against exploitation and racial and cultural chauvinism. Since these scholars have been trained at places such as the Gregorian University in Rome and the Institute Catholique in Paris, they have expressed these views in traditional academic language, as a contribution to academic scholarship--much as Luther posted his ninety-five theses in Latin. Yet, because these views also bring to the fore "the just grievances of the Mexican [and especially of the mestizo Mexican] people," many in the rank and file confirm that there has indeed always been this element of protest and vindication in their devotions to Guadalupe. Much as the printing press was the medium whereby Luther's

words were shared and transmitted from town to town, the mimeograph and the copy machine have become the medium whereby today these scholars' views are carried from parish to parish, and from base community to base community.

Something similar has happened in the case of women. Women have always had their sub-culture in the midst of every male-dominated culture. In some places, they have even had a language of their own. But even here in the West, it has always been clear that women look at things differently than men. Traditionally, this has been the subject matter for jokes about how women ran the church, how strange their perspective was, and so on. Men have long suspected that women had different perspectives on the Gospel, on Scriptures, on the Church. Men also knew--or thought they knew--that such perspectives were distorted, intellectually questionable, ruled by emotions and even by menstrual cycles! Today, however, that has begun to change. Not only in the church but throughout society, and not only in this society, but throughout the world. Women are making their voices to be heard. In the field of theology and the church, which is our central concern here, no one can doubt that women are making significant contributions to every field of academic endeavor. But more than that, as a whole, part of what is happening is that academically trained women are producing today's equivalent of Luther's ninety-five theses in Latin over and over again. And when those theses are posted in our Wittenberg doors--in our academic journals and books--women throughout the world are translating and disseminating these modern-day theses and finding many who say "Amen."

Luther did not invent the grievances of the German people. Luther did not invent the Gospel of justification by faith. Luther simply read the Gospel out of his own experience as a German and as a true believer. And in so doing he read the Gospel in a way that, while surprising and even threatening to the traditional theological and ecclesiastical establishment, was true both to the Gospel itself and to the life-experience and the needs of the German people. From the margins, Luther looked at the Gospel. And because he read it from the margins, the margins recognized themselves in what he said. And because what he was reading was the Gospel, and not his own idiosyncratic, private, whimsical construction of it, eventually even the center had to recognize and to vindicate much of what he said.

There is, however, one significant difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism that makes it more difficult for the Protestant periphery to make itself heard at the traditional centers of power and of theological leadership. Protestantism was born at a time when nationalism was also making great progress. In Western Europe, the modern nations were just being born, or about to be born. In fact, Protestantism often made use of nationalistic sentiments in order to buttress its position against Roman Catholicism. The result was the birth of a number of national churches, each independent from the others. There has never been, for instance, a single Lutheran Church, but rather a fellowship of national and regional churches united by their common adherence to the Confession of Augsburg. Likewise, there has never been a single Reformed church, but a communion that loosely links the various national churches of the Netherlands, Scotland, Hungary, the Palatinate, France, etc. In contrast,

although the Roman Catholic Church has national and regional conferences of bishops that determine some of the policies to be followed in a particular nation or region, all Roman Catholics belong to the same church.

In practical terms, what this means for the issues I am discussing here is that the Roman Catholic periphery is still part of the same church, and therefore much more difficult to ignore than the various Protestant peripheries. The Second Vatican Council included representatives from very different nations and cultures, and many of them from dioceses that were quite poor. But they were all part of the same church and the same organization.

Among Protestants, on the other hand, peripheral churches in the poorer nations of the world can be more easily ignored, since they are not part of the same organic body. Indeed, I suspect that one of the reasons why there is so much resistance in this country, and in some other First-World countries, to the ecumenical movement is that it forces Christians here to listen to what Christians at the periphery are saying. Thus, North American resistance to the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century has much in common with South European resistance to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth.

To further complicate matters, Protestant denominationalism has often reflected class and cultural distinctions. Therefore, even within a particular country, quite often the periphery belongs to a different denomination than the center. In this country, Episcopalians generally

belong to a certain echelon of society, Methodists to another, and Pentecostals to still another. This makes things very convenient for those in the so-called "mainline" denominations who do not wish to listen to the periphery, often using theological disagreements and differences in polity as excuses to ignore those whose perspective we do not like. In this regard, however, it is imperative that we ask: In a country and a society in which so many are increasingly marginalized, how can a church in the same breath call itself "mainline" and Christian? Is not our insistence on the dubious title of “mainline” indication that we, too, are resistant to the voices of the margins? It is quite easy for many of us to consider ourselves quite liberal and forward-looking because we support the initiatives of the World Council of Churches. Then we look down on Christians in our own cities who belong to less traditional or less “respectable” churches, claiming that we do so for theological reasons, when, in fact, we are afraid the society at large will get us confused with them, and we might thereby lose some of our own prestige. Perhaps those peripheries, too, have something to teach us, and we fail to listen to them at our own loss.

What does all of this mean for a mainline seminary such as this one, located in a fairly respectable area in the most powerful city in the world? It clearly means that we have resources that few others have. I have not looked recently at your recruitment material, but if your recruitment office is like most other recruitment offices, I suspect you make much of being in the nation's capital, of all the museums and other cultural resources available to your students, of the opportunity to see government at work, and to reflect on the burning social issues of our

time. All of this is good and valuable. The question, however, is not whether or not we make use of these resources. Rather the question is *how* we make use of them. We can no more avoid being at the center than the doctor of the law who asked Jesus who was his neighbor could avoid being a Jew and become a Samaritan. But the lawyer *could* avoid acting like the priest and the Levite. Learning from the Samaritan, he could go and do likewise.

We cannot decide, by some act of will, that we are no longer at the center, that we are no longer in the capital city of the most powerful nation in the world. But we can and must decide that despite this situation, and perhaps even because of this situation, we shall take special care to listen to the periphery. To listen to the periphery that is geographically far from us, in places such as El Salvador, Uganda, and Tamil Nadu. And to listen to the periphery that is much closer to us, in the barrios and ghettos of this city of social contrasts.

Not all the reformers in the sixteenth century were from the periphery. Indeed, most had the option of opting for the new voices coming from the margins or remaining in their own centers of prestige. That was the case, for instance, of a young man by the name of John Calvin, who was not born into high places, but did have sufficiently high connections to have his future as a lawyer and perhaps as a cleric fairly well assured. He had studied at some of the best schools of his time, including law under the famous professors Pierre de l'Estoile at the University of Orléans, and Andrea Alciati at Bourges, and had made a name for himself among the students of letters in a new institution recently founded by Francis I in Paris. He had already published his

first book, and it had been received, if not with universal acclaim, at least with approval on the part of some of the leading scholars of his time. He was part of a group of humanists who hoped to reform the church by simply cleansing it of some of the most extreme abuses but without challenging its doctrines or its organizations or its structures of power. Other members of that group included the Rector of the University of Paris, a personal friend of long standing, and even the king's sister, who repeatedly invited reformist preachers to the Louvre. He was at the very center of power in his time, living practically under the shade of the Louvre, and his future seemed fairly well assured.

Then he began listening to the periphery. We do not know how or when. We do not even know what he read. Apparently, he read at least a sermon by Martin Luther on Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." At any rate, as he listened to the periphery, he felt compelled to give up some of the privileges of the center. In 1534 he returned to his native town of Noyon in order to resign the ecclesiastical benefices that had long provided his main economic sustenance. As his ideas became known, it became impossible for him to remain in Paris. In 1534, his position as a "Lutheran" in France became untenable, and he fled into exile in Basel, where he wrote the first edition of his *Institutes*. He never returned to his homeland and eventually died an exile, looking longingly over the mountains to that beautiful land of France that was forever denied him.

The lawyer who asked the question of Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" did not have the option to be other than what he was: a Jew, a doctor of the law, a religious man much like the priest and the Levite. Yet, having heard the story of the Good Samaritan, he did have the option: "Go and do likewise."

The lawyer who had reached the highest intellectual circles of humanist Paris did not have the option but to be what he was: a lawyer, a scholar, a man of letters, a citizen of the most powerful nation of his time. Yet, having heard the voices from the margins he did have an option: "Go and do likewise."

Go and do likewise. Listen to the cries from the roadside, as the Good Samaritan did. Listen to the new voices in theology as John Calvin did. Listen, and we shall be part of the Reformation of the twenty-first century, the greatest reformation the church has ever seen. Refuse to listen. Insist on our positions of privilege, and we will still be part of that coming reformation. But we shall be on the side of the forces that resist change, like those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who wished to keep the Gospel for themselves and their own kindred, or like those scholars in Paris who devoted their entire careers to finding fault with Protestantism.

A church that has long been characterized as "mainline"; an institution of that church in the capital city of the most powerful nation the world has ever seen; members and ministers of that church; professors and students of this and other similar institutions, we have no option but to

be what we are. Yet, having heard the story of the Good Samaritan, having heard the story of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and having heard the voices that call us today from the peripheries of the world, we do have an option: "Go and do likewise." God, grant us the power and the grace to do so!