

"THE REFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EMERGENCE OF WESTERN MODERNITY"
German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance (CPG)
Faculty of Law, Thammasat University Fri 27th April 2018
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Honoured Professors, Guests and students... It's an honour to address you this evening. I teach theology, ethics and Church & Society at our seminary - so I welcome this opportunity to collate some thoughts on our subject "The Reformation and its Impact on the Emergence of Western Modernity".

Last October marked 500 years since Martin Luther, a German theologian and priest, sent an academic paper to the Archbishop of Mainz containing 95 theses - or points of conflict - especially regarding the sale of "indulgences" by the Catholic Church (which means in effect people could "buy" tickets to heaven - which made the church rich but the spiritual state of Christianity poor).

This started the Protestant Reformation. Actually, Luther did not intend to break with the Catholic Church - but as the conflict grew and Luther did not retract his views he was forced out of the Catholic community.

A story is told about Luther - one night when staying in a church building,.. in the dark, he reached for a rope to steady himself and was amazed to hear the church bell ring out above him - he had unintentionally pulled the rope to the bell tower and woken up the whole countryside! It has been said that actually through his 95 theses - he pulled a rope and bells started ringing all over Europe. What Luther stated in his 95 theses actually resonated throughout Europe and so the Reformation spread - Germany, France, Switzerland, Scotland, later England...

THE 5 PILLARS OF THE REFORMATION are known as the "solas" - meaning Alone or Only.

1. Sola Scriptura (our authority is "Scripture alone" not scripture PLUS the traditions & dogma of the church)
2. Sola Fide (our salvation is "By faith alone" in Christ's sacrifice on the cross - not man's effort)
3. Sola Gratia (our salvation is "By grace alone" by what God freely gives us in Christ)
4. Solo Christo ("By Christ alone" Jesus is the source of our salvation - not the Church)
5. Soli Deo Gloria ("Glory to God alone" We must not give glory to man but to God)

The point being that **Christ, The Bible and Personal Faith are the foundation of Christian belief - not the Church, its dogma or tradition.** THIS IS THE FUNDAMENTAL POINT regarding the Reformation. **The all powerful "Church" was losing its power or control.**

It's interesting to note that the Protestant Reformation sparked a Catholic "counter-reformation" which brought reform within the Catholic Church - even during the 20th Century ongoing reforms took place - most notably what is called "Vatican 2" from 1962 up to 1965. As a result the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church have significantly closed the gap between them and today there is significant unity between them.

The title of this lecture assumes the Reformation impacted Western Modernity...

WHY SHOULD A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT HAVE SUCH INFLUENCE IN SOCIETY AS A WHOLE?

We must understand how religion and society were inseparably joined together 500 years ago. Jesus himself taught that his followers are to be "salt" and "light" to our society. Rather than talking about a "separation of Church and State" He spoke of His "Kingdom" growing like a seed into a great tree or as yeast permeating flour and causing the whole dough to rise. This was not to be by force but through the lives of committed believers who live out their lives in society. Even the Lord's Prayer - which Christians have prayed for 2000 years says "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven". It is inevitable that the Christian faith will affect society.

But this link between Religion and Society became formalized and politicized when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, became a Christian in the 4th Century. The link became even stronger after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the Holy Roman Empire emerged in the 10th Century, with the Church in Rome at the center. As power grew, so too did the corruption of man to the point that from the 13th century various reformers rose up, such as John Wycliffe, Jan Hus and Peter Waldo, to name just three reformers who came before Luther.

WHY THEN DID THESE EARLIER REFORMERS NOT HAVE AS MUCH INFLUENCE AS LUTHER?

The simple answer is that they did not have the advantage of the "printing press" to spread the word.

Gutenberg developed printing commercially in the 1400's. By the time of the Reformation, more than 13 million books had been printed. Its influence at that time was similar to that of the internet today. Luther, without the printing press, would certainly not have sparked a Continent-wide reformation. He would have been silenced

by the Church. By 1517, however, it was becoming increasingly difficult to silence anyone. One cannot help but see the parallel today of the power of "Social Media".

Printing reduced the churches' monopoly on information and knowledge. Books became commonplace. Along with this, censorship also became commonplace. The church established a list of prohibited books. The more they were prohibited the more they had influence.

WHAT WERE THE MAJOR WAYS THE REFORMATION INFLUENCED AND CHANGED WESTERN SOCIETY? In what ways was it a catalyst for what we may term "Western Modernity" ? I say a "catalyst" because it's one of many influences and it's difficult to avoid being simplistic.

My first point is...

1. Freedom of speech and Freedom of thought

Starting with Luther, the collective power of the "Church" was losing control. People could speak out and have an influence. Luther actually didn't advocate "freedom of speech". He wanted Christians to believe the truth, not whatever they wanted. But by insisting that all human authority is conditional and that conscience is to be governed only by the Bible and the Holy Spirit - who is available to every individual, he basically opened the way for freedom of speech and freedom of thought to the extent that it became the new standard.

For example... for centuries Christians had assumed slavery was evil but necessary - it was simply a fact of life and so went unchallenged. A few Protestants, however, in the 1700s and many more in the 1800s reached a new conviction: that slavery was an absolute and intolerable evil. Many arguments took place. The Protestants were told to shut-up. The authorities sought to censor them. But a new day had arrived - they could not be censored - the Protestants refused to shut-up, and eventually slavery was abolished.

Freedom of speech and Freedom of thought is also illustrated through the universities. The university system originated in the 11th and 12th centuries as a centre for higher Christian learning. Unity in Diversity - diverse subjects or sciences find their unity in God... Theology, the study of God, was the Queen of the Sciences. This was still true after the Reformation in the American colonies. Harvard was established only a few years after the arrival of the pilgrims; Yale and Princeton were established initially as seminaries (to train ministers of religion). But with Freedom of Speech and Thought becoming the new norm, Protestant universities and scholars led the way in the emergence of the new natural sciences in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Enlightenment followed in this trend. Gradually Philosophy - not Theology - became the Queen of the Sciences. What had been held by the Church as irrefutable dogma concerning the natural world - was challenged by scientific thought. For instance lightening during a thunderstorm was no longer assumed to be God showing His anger - but was explained in scientific terms. God, who used to be used to explain all natural phenomena was reduced to only what could not be explained scientifically. God became known as the "God of the gaps" and the gaps in our understanding were getting smaller and smaller. This led Nietzsche to conclude that, from a scientific view point, "God is Dead"! In response, it should be noted that it was Protestant theologians who actively engaged with Enlightenment ideas to develop good Christian theology in the light of new scientific knowledge. They saw that the Christian faith and scientific knowledge do not need to be opposed to each other - but actually complement each other. This was in contrast to Catholic theologians who still had to hold to church dogma or else face the Inquisition.

With the Protestant Freedom of Speech and Thought comes a dual challenge - which is still a challenge up to the present day. Firstly, how should we deal with "heresy" - i.e. wrong teaching? Everyone is free to publish or believe what they interpret to be the truth. Secondly, how do we maintain unity with the ever increasing multiplication of denominations. The Catholic church still has only one authority or head ... but since the Reformation, Protestants have many heads with many denominations.

My second point of how the Reformation affected Western Modernity is linked to the first point...

2. Equality and Individualism

- as expressed in our system of Western Democracy and Individual Rights

From the very beginning of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we are told that God created mankind in His image - both male and female. Hence the belief in the value of each individual is deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian thought. This had been suppressed by the Church of the Middle Ages but was reaffirmed through the Reformation. The individual can stand up against the collective institution of the Church. William Tyndale was quoted as saying "I defy the Pope and all his laws... If God spares my life, I will cause a boy that drives the plough to know the Scriptures better than the Pope does". Up to that time the Bible could only be in its original language or else in Latin - but the ordinary person could not understand Latin. So, by translating the Bible into the common language, Tyndale and others set free each individual to read and understand for themselves - without having to rely on the Church or the Priest.

Freedom of the individual, and the value placed on each individual, whatever their place in society, gradually led to the establishment of democratic governments, social welfare systems, human rights movements and what we understand by the "rights of the individual". Democratic government, for instance, is limited by the fact that the elected government is not free to do whatever they choose but may be challenged and is accountable to those who elected them. No-one is above the law. The concept of government is limited because it must not infringe on civil liberties and individual human rights. From the very first days of the Christian Church 2000 years ago, Christians were confronted with what to do when their right to believe and propagate their belief was restricted by the authorities that be. Many Christians died as martyrs because they refused to call Caesar LORD. Many were thrown to the lions or burnt alive. The Bible teaches submission to authority - but also teaches freedom of conscience, that is to stand firm to what one believes to be true as an individual. Limited government respects the rights of the individual to his or her belief and their freedom to worship.

My third point is... the Reformation affected Western Modernity in relation to...

3. Innovation, Capitalism and the Law

God's first command to mankind at the beginning of the Bible is to be fruitful and multiply. When He made us in His image, He commanded us to care for and govern the rest of creation. It is natural, therefore, for the Christian to be creative, innovative and to be a good steward of the environment. The Reformation, especially through the influence of Protestant theologians such as John Calvin, reaffirmed man's position within creation through emphasis on God's election and calling. We are chosen and called to believe. We are God's people who should live out our lives and even our professions to the glory of God. This has been labelled the "Protestant Work Ethic".

This ethic of hard work and innovation, coupled with the existing view of man as governing and controlling his environment, paved the way for the Industrial Revolution of 1760 to 1840. Modernity began to take shape as never before, as well as a new found prosperity that was not restricted to the elite. Capitalism flourished.

The religious foundations of Western Law is well documented. After the Reformation, Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction (i.e. where the courtroom was controlled by the church) was gradually replaced by other forms of jurisdiction. The Reformation did, however, provide a strong foundation and confidence in Theonomous based ethics which derives what is right and wrong from God's character and his moral law, in particular the Ten Commandments. Immanuel Kant's deontology, for example, was firmly theonomous and is still influential today.

Before I conclude my lecture I would like to mention briefly...

THE BREAKDOWN OF MODERNITY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

It is ironic that the very Modernity the Reformation helped give birth to, i.e. freedom of inquiry leading to the Enlightenment; the Industrial Revolution leading to Capitalism, has been one of the main instruments to lead people away from the very heart of the Reformation in the first place, namely personal faith in God. Europe has generally turned away from faith in God and has become increasingly secular, humanistic and materialistic. Privatization has made religious belief and values a "private" affair - not to be brought into the marketplace. Increasingly theonomous ethics have been replaced by autonomous pragmatism and relativism. As faith and humility before God our Creator has diminished, so too has greed increased. Instead of being carers and stewards of our environment we are now destroying it. Capitalism and the abuse of moral law have become virtually synonymous.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Western Modernity is rapidly changing to Post-Modernity. Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics reveal that science does not provide neat answers to all our questions. Western "millennials" (those born after around 1980) are more skeptical of the neat answers we thought science would give and are increasingly open to "spirituality" - but not to the religious forms of previous generations. Millennials tend to be negative towards capitalism and generally resent the greed and abuses of their predecessors.

And so I conclude my lecture. "The Reformation and its Impact on the Emergence of Western Modernity". I suggest the Reformation was formative in its influence on...

1. Freedom of speech and Freedom of thought
2. Equality and Individualism
3. Innovation, Capitalism and the Law

Thank you very much.

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