The Protestant Reformation as a Metaphysical Revolution

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The Protestant Reformation, like any historical event, is a construction of memory. Memory, in turn, shapes identity. We are what we remember, but more specifically, we are *how* we remember. Memory of the Reformation exists on many levels: national consciousness, particularly in Germany and in other countries directly linked to its major figures; popular memory; religious and specifically confessional memory; professional academic history; and what we might call cultural consciousness, the sense of collective identity invoked in categories like "the modern West," "modernity," and "a secular age." This essay is aimed at this broadest category, for it is here, where boundaries between nations, academic disciplines, and religious communities intersect, that the Reformation is, and must become, an object of philosophical reflection. Indeed, perhaps the most influential interpretations of the Reformation came not from professional academic historians but from philosophers and social scientists, above all Hegel and Max Weber, who together shape our ideas of the Reformation as a triumph of subjectivity on the world-historical stage and the origin of an unintended revolution in the expansion of capitalism. Both of these views assume a more basic premise, still with us, that should be made explicit. The Reformation constitutes an epoch in the collective memory of the modern world.

Epochal concepts are by their nature rare, for they organize large tracts of time into a single unit. Even as academic history has moved away from a dependence on the category of the Reformation as an epochal marker, it still functions this way, for if one asks how we are to define "early modern Europe," reference will inevitably be made to a variety of events and processes, like modern state formation and the Treaty of Westphalia, explanation of which demands consideration of the transformation of religion and society described under the term "Protestant Reformation." Moreover, in the most recent, major, philosophical interpretation of modernity, Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, the Reformation plays a central role, even if it is no longer presented as an event of pure rupture. The emphasis on a series of reforms in Western Europe, starting at least in the twelfth century, has softened the edges of the Reformation, and research trends going back to Heiko Oberman, and even earlier, to Ernst Troeltsch, have highlighted the continuity of the Reformation with the medieval world. These refinements are consequential, but in clarifying the Reformation's contours – or raising more distinctly the problem of its contours – they do not change its epochal status, and this is important.

The Reformation is the only epochal concept in modernity's regime of historicity (to use François Hartog's term) that refers inexorably to an event and single person (the person being Martin Luther), with one exception that I outline below. Our contemporary sense of history is distinct and differentiated the closer it is to us, vague the farther it is from ourselves. So we feel ourselves to be "modern," and minimally not "medieval," and when we seek to narrate the modern as an epoch we have historically made reference to the Renaissance and the Reformation, linked processes that altered the European sense of reality and thus time. But though the Renaissance has its hagiography and even scenic moments (like that of Petrarch climbing Mount Ventoux), nothing in it compares to the sharp singularity of Martin Luther, and of certain defining images that are imprinted onto popular and scholarly memory, like the Diet of Worms. This puts Martin Luther and the Reformation into literally sacred territory, for the only other epochal concept linked so tightly to a single person is of course the foundation

of the Gregorian calendar that now dominates the modern world. Whether referred to as "B.C/A.D." or by academics as "B.C.E./C.E.," the "common era" is nonetheless dated to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and his messianic title is woven into the Gregorian calendar. Jewish, Muslim, Indian, and Chinese calendars run concurrently, and they are significant to very large communities, but the global calendar of business and politics, which provides a shared sense of time, is based on the birth of Jesus. More precisely, we might say that an ingredient in what we call modernity or the modern world is an acceptance of this calendar as a basis on which to experience shared time, for the modern world is in its very name a self-reflexively temporal and thus epochal space, constituted not least by its sense of historical distinctness and novelty.

This fact – the unique role of the Reformation in constituting modern time-consciousness – is rarely noted because it is part of the background structure of the intelligible world. Not knowing where you are is disorienting, but not knowing when you are is terrifying (or perhaps they are finally inseparable modes of orientation). Calendrical time, though historical and contingent, is so basic to the human sense of order that it is rarely questioned, nor do most people reflect on the fact that in existing in the year 2017, they are defined by reference to a series of religious events that may have no personal significance to them but that literally constitute the horizon of their sense of history. As I write this and you read it, there are humans existing concurrently in space who have no conception of, or language for, the entire regime of historicity of which I am speaking. Such groups are increasingly rare, but the fact is important to remember, for in thinking "we" inhabit the "same" time, we by that profound sense constitute perhaps the most basic form of shared, collective identity: recognition of shared time, which means reference to an infinitely contestable but finite and concrete sequence of events and processes. Epochal time, if less specific and basic to mundane life than calendrical time, is perhaps more important in defining a specific sense of historical location and meaning than any other factor. There are Muslims, Jews, and Christians who share the calendars of their co-believers, but believe the current epoch is both the

last one and is going to end imminently: this sense of epochality thus makes a massive difference to the meaning of one's world even for those whose calendars are the same.

This means that the most important epochal concepts are not merely ideas or events, and thus their interpretation cannot be read, however tempting it may be, as one more instance of academic debate. Rather, in understanding or contesting an epochal concept (which always involves historical events and processes) we are always and perhaps most crucially, if not explicitly, understanding and contesting the meaning of our identity. The attempt of the French Revolution to replace the Gregorian calendar, for example, though a failure, marked the accurate sense that time itself would have to be reformed were French society to be as the revolutionaries wished it to be. Here we reach our capacity for the first time to state the initial thesis of this essay in terms whose intelligibility it had first to create: The Protestant Reformation is an ongoing event and category whereby collective time-consciousness is linked to a specific set of transformations in Western European society that were catalyzed in the sixteenth century by Martin Luther. The Reformation is not one event or series of events in the past (though it is not less than that). It is a unique mode of understanding the distinctive character of our identity, and a sufficient condition for inclusion in that "our" arises from the perception or recognition that the Reformation constitutes a part of one's history (whether an individual's or group's), without which what one understands to be one's identity would remain in some substantial sense opaque or unintelligible. The Reformation is already in this sense a global event, for the spread of Protestant Christianity to Africa and Asia (particularly China and South Korea), where it has grown rapidly over the course of the twentieth century, means individuals and groups across those regions experience the Reformation as a crucial part of their identity. Even apart from religious believers, the influence of scholarship and theories influenced by the Reformation, like Weber's argument about the Protestant work ethic, shapes the work of scholars and policymakers across the world (cf. the interesting example of China and Weber's thesis documented in Bruce Gordon's recent biography of Calvin's Institutes).

The Reformation is thus a category constitutive of a geographically global sense of shared temporal orientation and identity (for philosophers familiar with Kant, one can think of such categories as schematized versions of historical transcendentals). This is a high-level prolegomenon, but already it yields a concrete historical result. For it has been often and ferociously debated whether the Reformation is or should be seen primarily as an event that is religious (a term I use to mean any and all things insofar as they relate to worship, piety, and divinity). Without committing my view to answering this question in any specific context (for then the historian's sense of the term "religious" would need to be understood), the global influence of the Reformation, through Christian theology above all, in which specific ideas of God and the Bible shape communities' self-understanding and view of the world, shows that the answer to this question is, yes, the Reformation is primarily a religious event, although this need not and should not be understood to indicate that it is not also an economic and political event. The Reformation in this sense of an identity-constituting mode of religious and historical self-understanding is a transnational, global process spanning centuries in which a set of ideas and practices (materially, for example, a strong attachment to the Protestant Bible; intellectually, psychologically, and linguistically, a strong attachment to "faith" and a religious interpretation of the term's meaning that goes directly back to Luther and the other Reformers) links diverse communities to each other and a shared set of historical events. What we call the Reformation refers most often to the origins of this process, but my concept of the Reformation clarifies why it is so hard to specify the boundaries of the Reformation: they are in motion, even more so than most general categories.

Note that this fact alone – the fact of the Reformation's extraordinary geographical and temporal scope – means that understanding the Reformation is important to a degree that makes overstatement difficult; this is one reason we are reflecting on it after five hundred years. Of how many things could the following be said: "By understanding this one thing, you will gain deep insight into contemporary transformations in Latin America, China, Korea,

America, Western Europe, and detailed historical knowledge of some of the major processes, events, and ideas in modern history?"

But there is a further historical result (one that should be uncontroversial) that arises from recognizing the Reformation in its full scope as an epochal and religious concept. Namely, the Reformation by its nature is from an academic standpoint intrinsically interdisciplinary, for its very description requires recourse to academic history, the social sciences, and crucially, as this essay aims to exemplify, philosophy in the broadest sense. Treating everything past a certain point as mere "reception history" of the Reformation is as strange as it would be to say that American history from the nineteenth century onwards is simply the "reception history" of the American Revolution. And, indeed, this analogy is apt at another level. For what the concept I am detailing implies is that the Reformation is part of an unusual, highly significant, and to my knowledge, heretofore uncategorized set of concepts (I have been calling them epochal) that function much more like the concepts of a nation than that of a normal historical event. Such concepts by their nature do at least three things: 1) they constitute a territory that is both geographical and intellectual; 2) they frame and change the meaning of all pre-existing or exogenous data and concepts that exist or come to exist within that territory, analogically rendering them "citizens" or "inhabitants" of the territory; and 3) they constitute territory and data specific to themselves, like states, towns, and institutions of governance.

So far, then, the Reformation can be seen as an epoch-constituting event or process, inseparable from an understanding of modern identity, constitutive of the historical and religious consciousness of a geographically global community. This interpretation establishes the Reformation as something indispensable to any and all wishing to understand modern identity. As a category constituting temporal consciousness, the Reformation is something in and through which we exist. The degree and quality of consciousness may vary radically, but does not change the fact, just as one can inveigh against the Gregorian calendar, but such rage will not alter the fact that (as of this writing) the next New Year will constitute the beginning of 2018.

I have been backing into the Reformation in its normal sense, backing in so slowly and conceptually that historians might be understandably frustrated, if they have not already given the essay up for mere philosophical speculation. But the goal has been to approach at least a formal specification of the Reformation and thereby its meaning, and we can now do so by finally considering Martin Luther as both the archetypical figure created by and creating the Reformation (the figure of the religious prophet and revolutionary) and the founding figure of its own mythology.

Luther is, in a way we should now be able better to appreciate, a unique figure. Most individuals are grasped and approached adequately if never exhaustively through concepts and institutions they did not invent. Luther poses a problem whose only close analogies are those of figures like the Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Paul, Mohammed, or Joseph Smith, with an obvious historically significant connection to Jesus. This is the problem of the founding figure, which I have just provisionally specified, but will clarify as follows: a founding figure is a figure who either creates or so dramatically alters the institutions and ideas that stand between us and them that we cannot approach them save through the extensive use and interpretation of their own effects. In this sense, there most certainly are "great" historical figures, even if no adequate historiography proceeds as if they are the exclusive content of history. That would be absurd, but it is also quite false that one can treat all historical figures equally, as if each individual to the same extent determines or is determined by their social and historical location. The popular and natural reverence given to "founders" in religious and national (a version of religious) contexts arises for a good reason: such figures are immediately and intuitively seen somehow to constitute the group's shared sense of identity, the very means by which it thinks its origins, existence, and future in ways permissive of a sense of continuity through change. The constitutional framers, for example, are thus not contingently indispensable in U.S. law. Whatever a legal theorist's preferred view of the Constitution, the very nature of the Constitution and U.S. legal system entails continued reference to its

founding documents and figures, in conjunction with the processes, cases, and opinions in which they continue to have influence.
The broader Reformation historiography has rightly shifted away from the idea that Luther alone made the Reformation or that the Reformation is primarily a German affair. But for understanding that Reformation, Luther is the indispensable first founder, a fact that was recognized by the other magisterial reformers.

The well-known ideas of Luther suffice to support a picture of the Reformation's significance that is, in my view, a necessary revision of and addition to the historiography. Ultimately, this picture of Luther will help explain the broader meaning of the Reformation, and further clarify the concept of it that this essay has been developing. I claim no originality in the following presentation of Luther's thought, and I wish to focus only on two ideas, or complexes of ideas. The first is Luther's view of the Bible; the second, what has been called Luther's theology of the cross. Were these Luther's only contributions, they would suffice to make Luther what he is but we have not yet recognized him to be: the greatest revolutionary in the history of Western metaphysics.

Luther, so the story goes, emancipated the Bible from papal and ecclesial authority and established it as the only and highest criterion of truth. So long as we recognize that Luther, like the other magisterial reformers, was profoundly churchly, and never envisioned nor intended to create an individualistic Christianity (here Ernst Troeltsch's interpretation in *Protestantism and Progress* is quite relevant), we can let the traditional story stand, with a proviso. Logically, the "only" is true in that, from a skeptical standpoint, the Bible becomes for Luther and other Protestants the only authority to which one can definitively appeal, but historically the Protestant reformers, including Luther, ascribed value and authority (relativized to their interpretations of Scripture) to churchly traditions and councils. The apt distinction here is "false as to cause, true as to effect." Eventually, by a logic that I, in concurrence with some though not all scholars, see as inevitable, the Reformation did create a Christianity in which the Bible alone was the

authority and tradition was demoted even from its secondary pedestal, paving the way for the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

This was indeed revolutionary, but more important, to my view, is Luther's actual treatment of the biblical text itself as open to revision. That is, the Bible, as a canonical collection of books, could be, in the form Luther found it, wrong (not qua Bible, but in its historical form). This attitude is most famously expressed in Luther's desire to throw "old Jimmy" (the Epistle of James) into the fire due to its legalism. But the theological significance lies deeper.

To be treated as a revisable body of texts, the Bible had first to be seen as a human book. The Qur'an, for example, cannot, in a traditional view, be regarded as a human text – it has forever existed in its original Arabic form in heaven and was as such revealed to Mohammed. Luther did not by any means view the Bible as Spinoza or Hobbes or the higher criticism that developed from them would, namely as only or primarily a human book, but the very contingency implicit in Luther's view of the historical body of Scriptural texts, and the prophetic authority at least implicitly ascribed to himself, functionally puts the Reformation, thanks in no small part to Luther, much closer to the historical context of early Christianity than any successful movement in medieval Christianity. This condition of flexibility, openness, and critique, directed at the Scriptural texts explicitly by the seventeenth century, is built into the Reformation because of Luther's view of himself and the Bible. There is no question that this can be seen as simply the operation of Renaissance philology, most evident and influential in Erasmus's work on the New Testament, but its meaning is very different when it is contained within the broader, more traditional structure of the medieval church, in which the authority of Scripture, the theologically highest norm, was highly mediated through the magisterium of the church. By diffusing and mediating Scriptural authority, such a form of Christianity (which cannot without anachronism be identified with post-Protestant Catholicism, but is similar enough for our purposes) actually enables a far more flexible, or less explosive, approach to Scripture than does Protestantism, in which quite literally everything

can be a stake in a commentary on Scripture or a novel proposal regarding its status, contents, or meaning.

So Luther's view of Scripture implies its human as well as its divine origin. So far, so uncontroversial. But this shift needs to be seen in a broader philosophical and historical framework. As the foundation of Christianity, the Bible was thus the foundation of the entire normative culture of the Europe of Luther's day. This does not mean that culture or especially the church expressed or conformed to Scripture – indeed, all the cries for reform, of which Luther's was only one of many, indicate the opposite. But the theological and cultural status of the Bible created an unusual situation, namely, one in which a theological shift, like that effected by Luther, could alter the implicit structure of the entire system of authority in a culture. This could only be possible because of the highly textual character of the medieval Latin West, the enormous authority given in it to books and, above all, the Bible. Even then the Bible in its traditional framework, mediated through councils, popes, and an army of theologians and expert interpreters, was relatively immune to widespread contestation: even to access it one needed literacy in Latin and thus an education in the medieval university. Since Luther's view of the Bible itself generated the need to translate it into German, Luther was not simply changing the relative status of the ultimate authority of Latin Christendom. He created both the theological rationale and the institutional impetus for a total transformation through the spread of literacy as a means of access to the Bible.

Here one should pause and consider a somewhat far-fetched but not unhelpful analogy. Start with the relatively chaotic conditions of the early Christianity, in which there was no single Bible, no agreed canon, and a wide variety of teachers claiming authority, reading different texts and reading the same texts differently. Now imagine that, in this context, one teacher decided that everyone needed not just oral access to the texts (as they would have in the synagogue or church, where they could hear them read), but the capacity to read and interpret them, and then put in motion the processes whereby this became possible. Who

would imagine that from such a position a single, authoritative form of Christianity would ever have emerged, particularly apart from political intervention?

While far from a direct analogy, the example speaks to an important point. If one logically follows through the implications of making the Bible accessible to all people because they ought to read and interpret it themselves, then one quickly arrives at what indeed happened in Europe: a revolutionary spread of literacy combined with a massive increase in the theological significance each and any reader of the Scriptures, if Protestant, could attribute to herself. In addition to this, one has teachers, like Luther and—according to Bruce Gordon—Calvin and Zwingli, who saw themselves as genuine prophets authorized and capable of reshaping Christianity, which was not a distinct religion in the modern sense but something bound up with the entire world as it was then lived, felt, and imagined.

There is no definitive way that one can answer the following question, but it is important to ask: was there a connection between Luther's at least implicit and substantial humanization of Scripture, and the shift towards an increase in the religious authority of the reader, and the necessity of the Bible's translation, in order that it be accessible to the common person? We can note the following facts. First, cultural or religious traditions in which a body of sacred texts exist are generally controlled by a scribal elite; there is little to no impulse to translate the texts, and they tend to remain strongly linked to oral culture. One can think of the Brahmans reading the Vedas in Sanskrit, the rabbis studying the Torah and Talmud in Hebrew and Aramaic, the mandarins learning the classical texts of China, or muftis adjudicating issues from the Arabic of the Qur'an and Hadith. Scribal culture is a mode of organizing ultimate religious authority in a society, and no matter how important texts are, their interpretation is far less dangerous for being contained in an already enclosed elite group. Luther broke—actively, vigorously, and with theological reasons he saw as derived from the Bible itself—with what was in effect the scribal culture that had evolved from the monastic schools into the medieval university. It

could simply be a coincidental corollary that Luther has such a novel view of the Bible and its authority and that he, more than any figure in Christian history, is responsible for theologically rationalizing and effecting the spread of literacy and putting the Bible into the average person's hands – which, note, is precisely to revolutionize what the "average" person would be in society, viz. at least literate.

Thus Luther's "view of the Bible" is not just a view of the Bible; it is a totally revolutionary revisioning in theory and practice of human life and society, in which literacy becomes a basic condition of humanity. Because of the Reformation – and this point cannot be overstated, and it is a point in which the Reformation, quite distinct from the Renaissance generally, is the cause – a world has evolved in which this is true: without being literate one cannot participate fully in the modern world, here understood precisely as the world the Reformation made.

Luther thus set in motion a fundamental alteration of the world, namely the democratization of alphabetic literacy, and this is closely linked with Protestantism: wherever Protestant Christianity goes, literacy follows. Because the Bible must be read, it must be written in the language of the people. Literacy creates the condition of a revolt against the very theology and religion that was its inspiration, but literacy cannot unmake itself. One can now be a brilliant atheist with a biting pen, writing for millions of readers of every class, but only because of the world the Protestant Reformation made.

Thus in the content and institutional logic of Luther's theology of Scripture, Luther textualized God and the world, making Scriptural access to God a norm for all believers. The continuity of liturgy and the services of churches, as institutions, could have remained entirely unaltered – of course they did not – but their meaning fundamentally would have been reshaped regardless by the fact that the churchgoers would be literate. Were a Catholic service today liturgically identical to one held in the thirteenth century it still would be completely different in its meaning by virtue of the participants' status as highly literate and catechized members of a post-industrial society, who are capable, if

they wish, of reading papal encyclicals in their own language, taking theology classes, and arguing with or about their bishop. We can neither unmake nor even unimagine literacy, so basic is it to humans who have acquired it.

We can, by a stretch that will be justified momentarily, consider Luther's view of the Bible the formal content of his revolution (this is partly sheer pious adherence to the old distinction between the "formal and material" content of the Reformation).

The material content on which I wish to focus in the next and last section of the essay is Luther's theology of the cross, which, following Walter von Löwenrich, I consider a good summary of Luther's theology (but even if one disagreed, its presence here would be justified). The essence of Luther's *theologia crucis* is the appearance of God under the opposite form. This is Luther's theology of paradox: that the great God of power and majesty appears in humble garments as a human man; that the infinite cloaks itself in finitude; that the grace of God is revealed first through the law; and on it goes. At its heart, as the name indicates, Luther's theology of the cross holds the cross itself to be the absolute center of divine revelation, for it is here that all the paradoxes come together in a shattering of finite human reason: the infinite, eternal, immaterial God dying as man of flesh and bone and oozing blood, in time, on a Roman cross.

If Luther was not the first (and he was not) to speak of God dying, he was the first to make this theological position central to his system, and in doing so, in his theology of the cross, Luther set off an internal explosion at the foundation of Western philosophy and religion.

Theology was originally the culmination of philosophy, and what we call metaphysics was historically simply theology in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition through and in which "Christian theology" was developed and elaborated. (This is a claim I argue at length elsewhere). At the foundation of theology is the thought of its inventor, Plato, and for Plato nothing is more basic than the fact that the highest reality is

divine, and that the divine is eternal, immutable, and identical with intelligibility and reality itself. Thus divinity, rationality, and eternity were equated in the Western metaphysical/theological tradition. It is not until the nineteenth century that a widespread questioning of this equation emerges, and not until the twentieth that it breaks down. But the decisive turning point in its collapse lies in the theology of Luther, which, seen in its proper historical context, is of a piece with the history of metaphysics and philosophy more broadly as a tradition inseparable from religion. For Luther does not deny reason to God, nor does he, contrary to common presentations, deny reason or its importance to humans. Rather, he sees in Jesus and the cross a vision that renders God more transcendent and immanent than had ever before been seen. Human reason, for Luther, is aimed at and fitted for the world, for mundane reality, what he views as the earthly as opposed to the heavenly kingdom. It could never grasp God in his own being, and thus, contrary to Platonism, does not participate by its nature in divinity. God's infinity and majesty can only be known through revelation, and that only through God's humiliation in the incarnation and cross, where we know God in human flesh. Luther's God dies, and that death is not incidental to the life of God but paradoxically the manifestation of God's inconceivable immortality and infinity.

All of this God wills, and it is God's will more than anything else that determines the shape of the world and the knowledge we have of God. Since God must reveal himself, revelation is linked to divine volition, and thus the knowledge of God can only be had through the action of God, first in creation (here quite unlike his wayward descendant, Karl Barth) and definitively in the incarnation. Luther's voluntarism (the primacy of will over intellect) was not new – it was of a piece with the Augustinianism that the other Reformers would share – but, once again, its meaning is new due to the alteration of its systematic context. For Augustine's voluntarism is held in tension with the profound Platonism of Augustine's thought. Luther quite explicitly rejects crucial aspects of the Platonic tradition for the sake of a more radical statement of what he sees as Christian revelation, and thus his voluntarism is untied from any tension with Platonic forms, or eternal, divine intelligibility to

which we have access by the very fact of our rationality (and it is not adequate simply to see Luther here as an unoriginal proponent of medieval nominalism and voluntarism).

Arthur Lovejoy famously argued that the Western tradition has two incompatible pictures of God, one as pure static intelligibility, the other as divine will and agency, the first derived from Greek philosophy, the second from the Hebrew Scriptures. Lovejoy was right, and *The Great Chain of Being* remains one of the greatest synthetic interpretations of Western philosophy and religion. He concludes that, in the end, the voluntaristic vision does seem the more biblical one, and it is this vision that, by the nineteenth century, triumphs.

But this process was made, if not inevitable, highly probable based on Luther's theology. For Luther, too, has two gods, but they are not Lovejoy's two gods. They are the *deus absconditus* and the *deus revelatus*, the hidden and revealed God, and we only encounter the hidden god as he is revealed. The God behind predestination, the hidden god, we must fly from, and into the arms of the revealed God, Jesus Christ. Luther holds these two gods together with an electrical power that has not been rivaled or achieved since (and through it he has a largely untapped wealth of metaphysical insight to which philosophers and theologians alike have been blind), although the psychological and intellectual strain seems to burn through his writing and life. But this was a new tension, and his two gods are not the gods of Plato and Abraham, but something much closer to Satan and Jesus, to a cosmic dualism re-mythologized through Christianity, metaphysicalized through the language of theology, and operationalized into history through the profound determinism of his doctrine of predestination, which would only reveal its full religious and cultural effects through its developments in Reformed thought (which, for complex reasons, could not hold together the tensions as Luther's could).

Thus Martin Luther is the greatest metaphysician of the modern world, in that he introduced the most extraordinary structural change and innovation into a tradition, Platonism, that had maintained its core

integrity for over two thousand years. It would require a book (on which I am working) to chart this transformation through Kant and German Idealism, but we cannot rightly interpret the philosophy or theology of the last five centuries without seeing Protestantism as itself a metaphysical revolution, with Luther as the founding figure.

The course of this essay has suggested three distinct theses. First, that the Protestant Reformation is kind of transcendental category (a category for the possibility) of modern identity, specifically its time consciousness, due to its status as an epochal concept through which we articulate the origins and nature of modernity. The Reformation is in this sense an ineliminable dimension of modern consciousness as the very catalyst of its emergence. Second, that Martin Luther's theology of the Bible, what I called the formal content of the Reformation, led to the transformation that is mass alphabetic literacy (as both a norm and increasingly achieved reality) while, at the same time and arguably from the same cause, it revolutionized the meaning of the Bible, creating the conditions of higher criticism and theological plurality characteristic of distinctively modern Christianity. Third, that Luther's theology, in its formal content, which I summarized as his theology of the cross, an embrace of paradox, rejection of Platonism, and transformation of the systemic meaning of voluntarism, constitutes the most significant metaphysical revolution in the modern world. More aptly, we might say it constitutes the metaphysical revolution of the modern world, and, as I will argue in another context, provides the framework within which to interpret the developments of both modern philosophy and theology, read as a single tradition.

Now it is critical to see that these three distinct theses jointly constitute in their meaning the significance of my title: the Protestant Reformation as a metaphysical revolution.

Metaphysics has historically had as its highest object the divine and has thus been formally identical to theology. What a culture believes to be the highest realities shapes in highly complex ways the structure of that society. So ancient Greek culture, for example, organized itself around

its calendar, which marked a series of divine events and actions, and Greek festivals and religious rites were, at the level of the polis, coordinated around these events of shared time, shared time, note, that was linked to the gods. In all of human history there has not yet been a successful culture-wide calendar that is non-religious (Mao's calendrical revolution was to introduce the Gregorian calendar, for example, to replace the Chinese calendar in civic life). Whatever we believe as individuals, or even as whole groups, divinity and time are so deeply linked that we still share and order time through reference to divine events.

The Reformation is not just an example of this truth but a deepening of it, for the Reformation is a religious event that shapes an entire epoch in and through which the world has come to articulate its most universal and ambitious achievements, including the very structures of modern knowledge and science that enable this essay to be written, read, and conveyed digitally across the globe at the moment of its original publication. Literacy is the necessary (but by no means sufficient) condition of all that we think of as modern knowledge. Mass literacy is the foundation of the entire economic order that we inhabit, and it has spread around the world. Thus at our conclusion we arrive at a new framework within which to interpret the pregnant and controversial lines that open Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

> A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared that (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.

We must surely question Weber's "only," but we cannot deny that whatever their origin, the entire world as it self-conceives into a unitary phenomenon does so through reference to historical processes in which the Protestant Reformation is central, that it is indeed part of the very

means by which we organize time, and through time, our sense of order, of past, present, and future. Moreover, it is the Reformation that plays a crucial role in changing the metaphysical tradition that underlies the theological picture of God not only in Christianity but in traditional Judaism, Islam, and philosophy descended from Plato and Aristotle.

We can think the highest things in two senses: as an object and as a mode. Historically, the tradition from which the Reformation flows thought of the gods as the highest realities, whether identified with the stars, or a creator, or final end. Through theology, what we more typically call metaphysics, the mode by which we accessed the highest things was reason. Both reason and the divine have collapsed as objects of widespread credibility, and the Reformation played no small part in this collapse, even if one does not view its role as wholly or even primarily negative (as I do not). How this happened is a complex story that cannot be told here, but in which Martin Heidegger plays a crucial role. What has replaced reason and the divine is a questionable condition variously described as secular, now even post-secular, post-metaphysical, post-modern (a category that, like a bad cheese, has aged poorly). In short, no one knows. We are perhaps post-imaginative, for we cannot even name a new era.

What we certainly are not is post-Reformation. The Reformation stands as a continued challenge to us to interpret and question the meaning of our identity: where have we come from, and where are we going? And who are "we," after all? After 500 years, the Reformation remains indispensable to any answer one might give those questions.

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