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Editorial: Reflections on Reformation

Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German Augustinian monk, initiated the Protestant Reformation in 1517 when he wrote 95 theses criticising the Catholic Church for corruption in Rome, including the buying of ecclesiastical privileges, nepotism, usury and the selling of indulgences, and nailed them on the church door in the town of Wittenberg (Burrows 2016). After some negotiation, Pope Leo X excommunicated him, but the church could not stop Luther's teachings from spreading throughout northern Europe or the world.

The Reformation led to a very violent and politically infuenetial schism throughout Europe and Christianity, prompting among other things catastrophic events like the 30 Years' War, the destruction of English monasteries, and the burning of numerous "heretics." In fact, Catholics and Protestants persecuted each other for hundreds of years.

St. Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuit order in 1537, 20 years after Luther's protest, in part as a response to the reformation, popularly callaed "counter-reformation." Things are different now, after 500 years. In the past like most other Popes, Pope Francis also, himself a Jesuit, spoke harshly of the Protestant reformers. But recently he has changed and praised Luther.

He recently called the German theologian a reformer of his time who rightly criticized a church that was "no model

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to imitate." The Pope added: "There was corruption in the church, worldliness, attachment to money and power" (Burrows 2016).

An Overview of Reformation

It is useful to have a general overview of the Protestant reformation, with view to understand its contemporary relevance.

Nobody denies that Luther's 95 theses, written in Latin, fundamentally challenged the authority and elitism of the Roman Catholic Church. They were a response against increasing corruption and in particular the highly profitable sale of indulgences to fund the building of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther declared that when it came to "justification," there could be no mediation, no brokering by the church. Salvation was strictly a matter between an individual and God (Sherwood 2016).

This was indeed revolutionary. Swiftly translated into German and other European languages, Luther's ideas were the talk of Europe within weeks, spreading also due to the use of the newly discoverd printing presses around 1440 – the Google and Twitter of the medieval era – and triggering religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheaval (Sherwood 2016).

Rome condemned the monk as a heretic, removed him from the priesthood and banned his writings. In response, Luther publicly burned the papal bull. The sale of indulgences plummeted and his ideas started to take hold of the people.

"It released something that still is important: a challenge to authority that has been good for the human community," holds Richard Holloway (2017), the former Anglican bishop of Edinburgh and author of *A Little History of Religion,* who has become agonstic now.

He added: “It had a dark side, but it did move the religious debate on from divine authority imposed from above, and brought into the conversation a sense of protest against that. I think it would have happened in some other way even if it hadn’t been kicked off by Luther. Humans are revolutionary species that are constantly revising and challenging their institutions.”

Luther’s challenge to the once impregnable Catholic Church was soon taken up by others, including John Calvin, whose ideas spread from Geneva to Scotland, France and the Low Countries. In Germany, the new ideas inspired the Peasants’ War of 1524-5. In England, Henry VIII embarked on his own, less clear-cut, separation from the Catholic Church.

Rome launched a counter-reformation but by the end of the 16th century almost all of northern Europe was Protestant, though fractured into warring groups.

As well as bloodshed, the Reformation unleashed terrible destruction of religious heritage and art. In England, more than 800 monasteries, abbeys, nunneries and friaries were seized, libraries destroyed, manuscripts lost, treasures stripped and works of art appropriated. But the Reformation also gave rise to new forms of art, music and literature (Sherwood 2016).

“The dissolution of the monasteries was a tragedy,” said Holloway. “A lot of beauty was lost for ever. But it also released the power of the individual, the power of the small group, against the mighty institution. Loss and gain, that’s our story.”

Luther was complicated, argumentative and bad-tempered, according to Nick Baines, the bishop of Leeds, who delivered a sermon about the Reformation in the monastery at Erfurt, central Germany, where Luther once lived as a monk. “He said some terrible things about Jews,” Baines said, “which in turn had terrible consequences four centuries later. And he

wasn't exactly a proto-feminist. He was grasped by a concept of grace yet he didn't exercise grace towards other people. He was a very brave man, but must have been a nightmare to be around. But most people who change the world are [so]."

It took Catholics some time to see the merits of the challenges posed by Luther, but the church needed reform, according to Bishop William Kenney, the Catholic co-chair of the international dialogue between Lutherans and Catholic. "We had the problem of the sale of indulgences. There was a certain amount of corruption in parts of the church. I do think it was ultimately a good thing for the Catholic church – the Reformation, not the splitting of the church. It was forced to think again, to renew itself, and that is positive."

Yet it took until 1999 for the Catholic and Lutheran churches to agree on a joint declaration that resolved many of the theological issues at the heart of the split (Joint Declaration 1995). "That was an enormous step forward, and we're now trying to work out what the consequences of that are," added Kenney.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict engaged in some dialogue with the Lutherans and other Protestants, but Francis has really pushed it forward. "For 500 years, Europe has had this huge fault line between Catholics and Protestants," said MacCulloch. "Now the pope is going to a Lutheran country to emphasise the division is in the past. It's the culmination of a great deal of work on the part of the Lutherans and the papacy over the past 20 years" (Sherwood 2016).

Francis had "softened the tone", said Holloway. "The conversation will get warmer and sweeter, and who knows where it will lead. But the Roman Catholic church is a bit like a colossal aircraft carrier, and it takes a long time to make even tiny modifications.

"My hunch is that we're probably moving to a stage where we'll have the religious equivalent of multiculturalism. We won't seek to merge, as it were, but we'll seek to see the value in differences as long as they're balanced with a sympathetic tolerance towards each other."

From a Catholic perspective, Kenney said he thought there was a "realistic possibility" that the traditions could unite. "But there are big questions that need to be resolved," he warned.

Among those is the issue of women. Despite his warmth towards women members of the Catholic church and his frequent acknowledgement of the role they play in lay leadership, Pope Francis has insisted that "the door is closed" to women priests, though recently he showed that he was open to the possibility of women deacons.

The Lutherans have no such compunction. The Church of Sweden has had women pastors for more than half a century, the Danes for almost 70 years. And the gulf between the two churches on this issue will be underscored this week when Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic church, came face to face with the head of the Church of Sweden, Archbishop Antje Jackelén – a woman and a scholar (Sherwood 2016).

Key Dates

1517 Publication of Luther's 95 theses arguing that salvation depends on faith alone

1521 Luther refuses to recant and is formally excommunicated by Pope Leo X

1522 His translation of the New Testament into common German gives ordinary people access to the scriptures and fuels criticism of the Roman church

1524 German peasants, partly inspired by Luther, rise up against feudal overlords

1526 Publication of William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament

1534 Act of Supremacy, making Henry VIII head of the church in England, heralds the English Reformation

1545 Council of Trent opens, to clarify doctrine and reform the Catholic church

1618 Revolt in Bohemia starts Thirty Years War across Europe

1648 Peace of Westphalia entrenches Protestantism in northern Europe, but the consequences of Luther's revolt reverberate for centuries to come (Sherwood 2016).

Relevance of Reformation

On the Quincentennial of the beginning of Reformation (1517), *Jnanadeepa* wants to recall some of these significant events from a predominantly Catholic perspective and explore the significance of reformation for today. The first three articles are historical in nature. The first historical article by the eminent Church historian, Isaac Padinjarekuttu, studies the causes of reformation. The second article by the historian James Puliurumpil explores the distance from reformation to counter reformation leading to the lack of unity in the Church. The third article by Leonard Fernando highlights the change in the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans. We are now at a point of time when the wounds of history have been healed to a large extent and so we are able to look at persons, events and belief system in a more balanced way.

The next two articles are missiological ones. The eminent missiologist Jacob Kavunkal reflects on the role of laity in

Church's mission. It argues that the two key concepts of the Reformation as advocated by Luther, i.e., the spiritual authority of Scripture and the common priesthood of Christians based on baptism, can strengthen ecumenism and pave the way for church unity. The next article by Julian Saldanha explores the larger impact of reformation on mission. It surveys the Protestant approach to reformation and studies how they have rediscovered the need for mission for the contemporary times.

The article by Indologist Subhash Anand enquires the special role of faith, grace and scripture in Luther in order to reflect on its Indian significance. This is followed by an artile by Systematic Theologian Kurien Kunnumpuram who analyses the response of the Second Vatican Council to reformation. The next article by Protestant Theologian Muthuraj Swamy dwells on Freedom for a Christian, which is so precious to Martin Luther and which could be the guiding principle for today's ecumenical dialogue. The final article by the editor invites us to reflect on the contemporary relevance of Reformation, based on the definitions of Jesus, that our society accepts: both the medieval society and ours.

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Editor June 2017

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The Causes of the Reformation

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Abstract: This article looks into some of the reasons for reformation. On 31st October, 2017, the Christian world keeps the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the event that permanently divided the western Church into Catholic and Protestant. Who could be blamed for it? Apparently, the main responsibility for it should be laid at the door of the papacy, if what has been said above is any indication, or on Martin Luther, who, according to many Catholics, should be considered the prime factor. But let us go deeper into the question and see how complex the situation was before we fix the blame on one person or one event. It was not the result of one cause or the work of one man. "Long before the outbreak of the Reformation things occurred, facts were provided, steps were taken, ideas were spread and emotions were stirred, which facilitated, made possible, provoked, and even made unavoidable the coming of a revolt against the church – so unavoidable that we can speak of an inner historical necessity." This article look at some of these factors in detail.

The successor of Pope Leo X, Adrian VI, said at his first consistorial allocution: "Depravity has become so taken for granted that those soiled by it no longer notice the stench of sin." The progress of the Reformation clearly shows the guilt of the Catholic Church in the emergence of reformation. This reminds us of saying of the famous