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Religion and Reform

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Introduction

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In 2018, five hundred years after the century of Christian reforms began, most scholars of religion have some framework for the term “religion” while admitting that it is a slippery category. And the slipperiness amplifies when we consider “reform,” a word that most scholars of religion associate with an event or series of events that effect change in the traditions they study. The papers in this volume come from a 2018 symposium on religion and reform, held in Martin Luther’s five-century shadow, that brought together nearly twenty scholars to think through questions of reform in religion. What, though, does it mean to think about reform in the context of religion, if religion is something without clear consensus?

At the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 1517 publication of his 95 Theses, Joan Acocella published a discursive review in *The New Yorker* of recent books on Martin Luther with her own summary and assessment of his life and the impact of his work. She wrote in the last paragraph: “The transformations he set in motion were incidental to his struggles, which remained irreducibly personal. His goal was not to usher in modernity but simply to make religion religious again.” What does it mean that Luther was trying to return the “religious” to his “religion,” especially in the context of Luther’s personal life? Luther’s life and work were

consistently attacked by deep depression and a host of other medical ailments. He struggled not only to change a church but also, like many people, to change himself. His focus on “reform” was immediately personal while being transcendentally oriented – he wanted a changed Catholic Church in its approach to God and devotion, and a changed self. His religion was an expression of religious devotion that he maintained in the face of illnesses. Luther’s impulse to reform played off the depth of his devotion and his own struggles. And so, the things for which Luther is most known are the things that were, for him, second to the primary reformation of himself.

Another reformer (this one of theories of religion), the late Jonathan Z. Smith, probed some of these same issues in his essay “Religion, Religions, Religious.” Smith pointed out that the precise etymology of “religion” is unclear; many scholars think that it relates to the Latin *ligo*, “to bind”; it is also possible, though, that it comes from *lego*, “to collect” or “to choose” or even “to read” (269). Is religion something that collects ideas, binds to transcendence, or derives from reading texts or signs? Smith noted that people often identify as “religion” or “religious” only those things that make sense to them or map onto their own experiences – in this way, the category can derive, sometimes mistakenly, from the personal experience of the inquiring mind (269). This orientation is not a useful approach when trying to look at religion or religions as a whole, but Smith’s warning is important to keep in mind when studying rituals, texts, and beliefs. Our analysis of religion often relies on what we hold most deeply in ourselves. Our subjectivity can tint our understanding of religion and, likewise, reform.

And our own analyses of religion can blind us to the intricacies of other traditions, as noted in Tomoko Masuzawa’s book *The Invention of World Religions*. She demonstrated that the category of “religion” placed on things outside of Christianity was an imposition of European ideals (including the superiority of European thinking) on other groups. By inventing the field of “world religions” through comparison, we were not comparing like to like. Instead we looked primarily for those things that appeared similar enough to what we knew from our own experiences, noted how they differed, and then passed the *rest* of the religion off as the odd trappings of another culture. Instead of studying the religion on its own terms, sometimes we study it through the lens of what we have experienced of religion in our own contexts.

The questions of religion and reform in this supplementary volume of the *Journal of Religion & Society* assume that we know what religion is, and that we can then think about how to reform it or assess re-formation within it or look to religion to re-form other parts of human society. However, questions of reform within (or because of) religion require careful consideration of the categories, assumptions, and personal orientations that we bring to the study of religion itself. Even the very word “religion,” if we take the commonly assumed etymology from *ligo*, is an imposition of thought onto varied beliefs, rituals, texts, and traditions – assuming that they somehow bind together a group or bind the practitioner to something or someone else. Like Martin Luther, our perspectives on religion and reform are personal; they are reflections of our intimate selves and what we hold to be most true and most dear.

Perhaps the answer to how we understand religion and reform as categories comes in the life of Luther. Religion was an expression of his personal desire to see the transcendent experienced in the lives of sixteenth-century Europeans. Acocella summarized Luther in the

final line: “All he asked for was sincerity, but this made a great difference.” He wanted sincere practitioners of Christianity, whatever it was as a religion, and his quest for sincerity drove the religion into a century of turmoil and soul-searching. In this, the reform of religion reflected Luther’s own life of turmoil, soul-searching, desire for sincerity in himself, and quest for the transcendence that he believed could heal his troubled mind. Religion, as a reaching toward and response to transcendence, was the reform for Luther’s own self. Intensely personal, intimate, and a driving force in how he operated.

In an essay in the *Massachusetts Review of Books*, Catherine Chin suggested that making meaning from historical peoples, like Luther himself, derives less from finding out how they were understandable, but instead on focusing our efforts to see the parts of them that we cannot understand. She wrote of her essay itself that “It is also a plea to create history that is itself weird, as a way of refusing to ignore the weirdness of the world we live in” (480). By “weird” we should understand those things (people, events, practices, beliefs, rituals, etc.) that seem wholly unlike our own selves, our own contexts, or our own experiences. In trying to make sense of Luther, in trying to make sense of “religion” as a category, in trying to understand “reform” in the context of religion, perhaps we normalize too much our own experiences as people – we are, innately, weird from an outsider’s perspective.

So instead of considering these essays as definitively expressing reform in religion, perhaps we should look at them as the fractures and fissures, the individualizations, in collective human expressions of what religion and reform meant to a group of scholars at one place in one time. The essays in this volume speak to who and what these human scholars are as reflected parts of the human whole. They are, at the same time, personal and scholarly expressions of the “weirdness of the world we live in.” Luther wanted to reconcile the turmoils external (religion) and internal (himself); in doing this, he highlighted for us the intense humanity of both religion and reform.

Religion and reform are not easily reduceable categories, nor are these essays. Religion is an expression of humanity; reform is an expression of humanity. To make humans fit into little boxes, “all made out of ticky-tacky” and that “all look just the same” as the Malvina Reynolds song says, is to strip us of our individual and collective searching of what others might call weird, of which religion and the quest for change are two of the strangest. Religion and reform fit together as expressions of our weirdness, expressions of our interior and personal selves, and expressions of what we choose to bind us together to others, human or not.

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