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# Reflections on the state of Reformed theology in Central Europe

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In 1980, I was asked to write a comprehensive article on “Dogmatics” for the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, the most extensive theological encyclopedia of our time. In order to get an adequate survey I called the editor some time later to ask him who would be the contributor for Reformed theology. He replied: “Who is a serious Reformed theologian in Germany today?” Then I realized that I could not answer the question satisfactorily. The editor told me just to include Reformed theology in my overview. (By the way: Some weeks later I called the editor again asking him about Roman Catholic dogmatics. And he said again: “Simply include it.”)

Of course there are Biblical scholars and historians at German universities and seminaries who think of themselves as being Reformed. But there is, as far as I can see, no characteristic Reformed theology. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, claims to be linked to Reformed Theology and was sometimes a speaker at meetings of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. But—you may ask—what is really “Reformed” in his way of doing theology? Moltmann represents a kind of political theology, eager for radical social changes and for peace and justice, where the Bible is understood literally as a blueprint for new social and international structures. Such a social ethics has been often ascribed to Calvinistic traditions. The *Moderamen des Reformierten Bundes* (the association of Reformed parishes in former West Germany) often argued for this kind of theology in the later sixties, seventies, and eighties.

Joachim Staedtke took the chair of Reformed theology in Erlangen in the sixties emphasizing a wide range of social issues in order to draw a profile of the task of Reformed theology. Hans Joachim Kraus at Göttingen, the successor of the distinguished Reformed theologian Otto Weber, understood Biblical and systematic theology as a constructive enterprise for interpreting the kingdom of God as a historical process productive of peace, justice, and true, meaningful life. Kraus's successor Eberhard Busch is a Barth scholar like my friend Michael Beintker (formerly teaching in Halle, East Germany) who holds the chair of Reformed theology in Münster.

It would be a difficult task to differentiate seriously between the theology of Karl Barth and the Reformed tradition. You may know that Karl Barth as a professor studied first and more intensively the writings of Luther than of Calvin or Zwingli - but by doing so he and his friends brought interest in the theology of the Reformers back to life. I remember Friedrich Gogarten saying that as a student at the beginning of the 20th century the only class concerning the Reformation he was able to attend during his study of theology focussed on the buildings and the life style in Wittenberg in the 16th century.

Now there are three chairs of Reformed theology in Germany to serve the theological education of students of regional Reformed churches: in Erlangen, Münster and Göttingen. The latter was founded originally by American Presbyterians after World War I and given to Karl Barth. There is also a lectureship in Reformed Theology at the Seminary in Wuppertal. In other university departments of Protestant theology and Seminaries in the former Prussian territory theological teaching and research is shaped by the 19th century merger of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the (now so called) *Evangelische Kirche der Union* (Evangelical Church of the Union) in the first half of the 19th century.

A remarkable influence of the Reformed heritage is to be found in the presbyterial-synodal constitution of the Evangelical Church of the Union. Systematic theology (dogmatics and ethics) taught in Berlin, Bethel, Bochum, Bonn, Frankfurt am Main, Halle, Mainz, and Wuppertal - and comparatively in Heidelberg, Marburg, and Tübingen - usually integrates Lutheran and Reformed traditions. The decisive difference nowadays is the curriculum's rootedness in the Biblical canon and in the theology of the Reformers. The same is true in Switzerland.

Especially revealing, it seems to me, is the situation in Hungary with its large Reformed population, which in former times strongly opposed the Austrian regime and its links with the Roman Catholic church. There after the uprising in 1956 a so-called "Theology of Service" was developed mainly by Reformed church officials and

theologians.<sup>1</sup> Its intention was to avoid the mistake of the past, a nationalistic and often politically conservative attitude which followed the breakdown of the Austrian empire. But the result was unfortunately a strange closeness of church officials and the Reformed seminaries to the regime that came into power after World War II, as divine providence was identified with the course of history understood as an irresistible movement towards perfect socialism.<sup>2</sup>

That kind of theology claimed to serve the needs of the society, but totally lacked the sound theological judgement and dogmatic precision which would have provided more clarity in ethical and political matters. Karl Barth sometimes criticized this "theology of history" as similar to the German Christian ideology condemned in the *Barmen Declaration*, but his objections are found only in personal letters. In Hungary critical voices were silenced, and even the representatives of the World Council of Churches who visited Hungary were unable to understand the real situation of the ministers and parishioners who were estranged from church officials and theologians who approved the "Theology of Service." Friends who were pushed into the background told me they felt neglected and even betrayed by the politics of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and from the many Reformed theologians in the West who were interested mainly in the social impact of Christian faith and hope, but not in forming sound theological judgements concerning very difficult social, economic, and spiritual issues facing the church.

Reformed theology in Hungary has now to rebuild a reliable teaching ministry nearly from scratch. Church and theology must deal with a situation where the church has enormous opportunities, for example in higher education, but lacks the spiritual and intellectual resources to match them. At the same time there is the dangerous inclination to develop a merely private religious life in order to strengthen a kind of solitary personal religiosity. On the other hand, being a Christian today really needs a very personal spiritual life embedded deeply in the life of the church and aware of the coming of God in public and personal affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> See the documentation of Zoltán Balog, edited by Gerhard Sauter: *Mitarbeiter des Zeitgeistes? Die Auseinandersetzung über die Zeitgemäßheit als Kriterium kirchlichen Handelns und die Kriterien theologischer Entscheidungen in der Reformierten Kirche Ungarns 1967-1992* (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Bern/New York/Paris/Wien: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my article "A Certain Speechlessness: Theological Reflections on the Political Changes in Europe," *Soundings* 78 (1994): 163-177; with some alterations published as "Theological Reflections on the Political Changes in Europe," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1994): 15-28.

Now, how can we exhibit the proper characteristics of Reformed theology in order to clarify and strengthen it not only in Hungary, but throughout Central Europe and perhaps also in the United Kingdom and in America without being merely traditionalist, confessionalist, and even anti-ecumenical?

Let us start first with the structure of the Sunday service. It should concentrate on the proclamation of the Gospel. Reformed preaching has often been very close to instruction for Christian life. How can this be distinguished sharply enough from sheer religious information on one hand and from ethical indoctrination on the other? And in a culture which is overwhelmed with semi-information by the mass media; how can a preacher find sufficient attention for preaching which is able to guide? The Reformed service cannot count on a rich liturgy. How much is it dependent on the ability to listen, to concentrate, to meditate?

As second step I would like to emphasize the administration of the church, especially the role of the presbytery and the synod. Often I have noticed the temptation to follow political modes of discussion and decision making. How can we avoid theological judgements which are shaped by already rigid convictions which are merely decorated with theological motifs? Are there direct, immediate biblical analogies for social and political issues of our times? What should be the theological sound procedure in finding ethical judgments?

Here we have to take into account, third, the readiness to revise church doctrines by discovering the inexhaustible richness of a biblical witness which is neither harmonized nor systematized. How can we think and act in a way that is shaped by sincere Biblical theology formed by the Biblical narrative? Let us discover the constitution of theological arguments by being faithful to the Scripture which is faithful to us! The Reformed heritage directs our attention to the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus Christ and as a treasury of God's promises.

There is, fourth, the rational nature of Reformed theology - the rationality which, for example, comes into effect when we speak of a cognition of God's acting in history and in social affairs. There is even a certain affinity to the Enlightenment. How can we respect this heritage and at the same time avoid rationalism and religious ideology?

Another marker of Reformed theology is, fifth, the awareness of God's sovereignty, expressed especially in the doctrine of election. How can we make clear that God's election does not allow us to show hostility towards other churches and religions but makes us sensitive for the particularity of the church?

Sixth, renewed attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit would lead us to the notion of the diverse forms of God's activity, helping us to understand Christ's presence as the coming one in the eucharist.

Seventh, last, but not least, there is the difficult and troublesome relation between eschatology and history. The understanding of this relationship has been, as I have tried to show elsewhere, one of the weaknesses of Reformed theology in recent times, but it can also become one of the very important contributions of Reformed theology to the ecumenical dialog.

These few remarks can only be a sketch mainly of open questions calling all of us to be engaged jointly in drawing a fuller and more adequate picture.