

# The Teaching of Reformation History in the Indian Context

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## Introduction

The history of the Reformation is taught in almost all Protestant seminaries, in most cases from the inception of these institutions. This course is also offered for M.Th. students as an optional course under the Senate of Serampore syllabus. One can say that this course is quite popular, partly because of the sentimental attachment of Protestants to this movement and also because of the identity of the Protestant churches.

Almost all the students who come for ministerial training have been introduced to Reformation history in their high school history lessons. Some who have majored in history in colleges have further knowledge of the Reformation. In the World History course taught in high schools, one of the areas covered is Christianity with the Reformation as one of the important movements within Christianity. The section on Reformation history is very much connected with the Renaissance in Europe, with a brief note about Jesus Christ and the founding of Christianity. In the colleges and universities the study of European history includes Reformation history as one of the major movements generally centering around the person of Martin Luther and the Reformation in Germany. I have not come across any serious effort by the writers of these "College text books" to relate the Reformation movement to Indian Protestant churches and in a way it may be too much to expect this from them. The status of Indian Church history in these books (whenever it is covered) is that of an "extension of the Western Church."

## Present Position

In Protestant seminaries Reformation history tends to be taught more or less in the way of indoctrination. Till recently Reformation history was taught by non-Indians wherever their services were available. Since Reformation history was part of the history of the Western Church it was considered best to be taught by a Westerner whether he or she had specialised in the subject or not. Naturally, the danger of indoctrination is much greater if it is taught by a Westerner, especially if he or she has not specialised in that subject. Even in the West it is said by some Church historians that the definitive history of the Reformation has not yet been written. What we have today is

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mostly tainted with the denominational or confessional background and nationality of the author and also the historical school he or she belongs to.

Besides the denominational, confessional, national and historical school backgrounds, the type of syllabus that is followed in writing and teaching affects the teaching of this subject. For a general model one can refer to the syllabus of the Senate of Serampore and the text book published by the Senate. The text book is *The History of the Reformation* by H. Lefever. The general model followed is that the syllabus starts with the study of the so called "background movements" highlighting the social, economic, political and religious movements existing in Europe. Then some personalities are introduced as the "forerunners" of the Reformation. Then comes the *real* movement, the Reformation brought by Luther in Germany, Zwingli in the German speaking part of Switzerland and Calvin in the French speaking part of Switzerland and its spreading to other parts of Europe centering around the local leaders. The Reformation in England is treated as a separate issue with an emphasis equal to that of the continental Reformation. This is also the way the Reformation in Scotland is treated. The syllabus then deals with the "radical" or "left wing" Reformation, taught as the appendix to the movement started by Luther, Zwingli and Calvin which generally goes under the title of the Anabaptist Movement. The movement started by the Anabaptists is given secondary importance mainly because of the opposition they faced from Luther, Zwingli and their followers. This great episode of the 16th Century ends with the "Counter" or "Catholic" Reformation. At the end of the syllabus there is a sentence explaining the significance of the Reformation for the Indian Church which is supposed to be a link joining this movement to India!

### **Need to Teach Reformation History in India**

Dr Kaj Baago, who was Professor of Church History at the United Theological College, Bangalore, between 1960 and 1968, states in his article "On the Teaching of Church History in India" that "It would be a mistake ... to give equal emphasis to all factors and movements just because they all belong to the Universal Church ... As a principle we must stress the movements and events in Western History which explain why things are as they are in the Indian Church."<sup>1</sup> If one accepts this as a criterion for the study of the history of Christianity in India, one has to take the study of the 16th Century Reformation seriously as a good number of Indians belong to the Churches introduced by the western Protestant denominations. Many Indians accepted Roman Catholicism because of the missionary work of Jesuits starting with St Francis Xavier.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin of Church History Association of India*, Sept. 1962, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>2</sup> "The period of Reformation and Counter Reformation (1450-1700) is characterised in Asia by the establishment of Roman (mostly Portuguese) colonies and Roman churches. It would be natural therefore to introduce

The study of the Reformation is important for demonstrating to people that various developments within the historical Church need not be accepted as once for all defined "truths," be it doctrine, church polity, or discipline, for all of them have some historical origin. The most important thing for us as Christians is to express our faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord in the context in which we live, using the language, symbols and other modes of expression of our time. The Reformation in that sense can be a model for us and also an inspiration. The Reformers questioned the relevance of all the major doctrines, church polity, church discipline and authority in the Church and tried to re-define them, taking their context and situation seriously. Their socio-economic, political and cultural situations played an important role in whatever they said and did. But this seems to have been soon forgotten, for their followers tended to form dogmas from what the Reformers said and taught and to accept it as once for all pronounced truth. Furthermore, when the missionaries belonging to these Protestant denominations went to non-European countries, they carried with them the doctrines, church polity and church discipline with which they had been brought up, and introduced them to the new situation without giving any thought to the new context in which they were placed. Soon the imported doctrines, church discipline and church polity were believed to be unchangeable truths in the new churches. It is here that the clear exposition of the historical context in which the Reformation and its teaching emerged can be a liberating point for Indian Christians and for other non-European Protestant Churches. Hence the study of the Reformation has a significant role to play in non-European countries. So one of the reasons why we should teach Reformation history is to take away the "myth" that Reformation principles are indisputable. Reformation history should be taught in such a way that it can inspire working for reformations in our own situations in whatever way possible.

### **Teaching Reformation History in the Indian Context**

Today we are in the ecumenical age and the spirit of ecumenism is seen even at the level of the local congregations. It is therefore most important that the history of Christianity in general, and Reformation history in particular, is taught in an ecumenical spirit. However, since one cannot expect an unbiased historical account, teaching Reformation history from an ecumenical outlook may be the

the period with an account of the rising Spanish-Portuguese power in America, Africa and Asia, and the Concordat between these countries and the Pope (the Padroado etc.). This incidentally explains why the rulers of these countries had no use of the Reformation movement in contrast to Germany, Scandinavia, England and Scotland. The main chapter, however, should describe the Reformation and the formation of Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican Churches. The final chapter would deal with the Counter-Reformation, emphasising the Jesuit order and its missionary activity in America, Africa and especially Asia." *Ibid.*, p. 11.

'saving grace" to keep the denominational, confessional, national and political biases to the minimum.

Secondly, the danger of over-estimating the Reformation by Protestants should be avoided. Even though in European history the Reformation movement played a significant role, when it is taught in the Indian context, the significance of it has to be balanced by the movement in the Eastern and Asian Churches. When this is done one would not be misled into thinking that everything significant happened only in Europe and that Christianity is a western religion.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the "hierarchical" structure as it exists today in the syllabus should be avoided. For example, one should avoid seeing some events and persons as background subjects (e.g., categorising Wycliff and Huss as forerunners), other events following Luther, Zwingli and Calvin as reactionary movements (e.g., Catholic Reformation termed as Counter Reformation), and those movements which took an independent stand, setting themselves apart from movements brought about by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin as "unorthodox" (e.g. the Anabaptist movements, Armenianism). All events and persons of this time must be seen from the point of view of the specific contribution they made in a specific historical context. In this way superior or inferior labels will not be attached to any events simply because chronologically they happened at different times. If Reformation history is to be taught in this way, the teacher has to change radically the time schedule, giving much more time to the so called "forerunner" and "reactionary" and "unorthodox" movements than they do now, so that they may all be judged against their own background.

Fourthly, in teaching, one of the temptations the teacher might fall into is to interpret the Reformation movement as a fight on moral issues. While movements started by Savonarola, Wycliff and Huss can be broadly branded as a fight against moral abuses in the Church, the 16th Century Reformers and their movement were centred mostly around theological issues and doctrines. As such I feel attention should be given to the Reformers' questioning of various doctrines and traditions held by the Church and the reformations of many of these.<sup>4</sup>

Fifthly, besides the socio-economic, political and cultural context, these theological formulations have to be seen from the point of view of the impact of the European Renaissance (which of course could be classified under cultural revolution in Europe). The study of biblical

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> "The origin of this upheaval cannot be understood or explained as a response to particular abuses, but rather as a new apprehension of reality. A fundamentally religious movement, the Reformation raised the basic question of authority in the Church, and thus called into question the whole system of scholastic theology, papal government, and monastic piety." (James M. Headley, "The Continental Reformation" in *The Meaning of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974 p. 131.)

languages and thereby the first look into the Scriptures, and the revival of the study of the early Fathers especially, gave a momentum to the movement. It is therefore important to inform the students of the strong sense of attachment the Reformers had to the Scriptures, the historical Church and its doctrines in spite of their commitment to reformulating or discarding elements as they found it necessary. This means that the Reformers did not blindly accept everything, but tried to reinterpret, reformulate and recast the Christian faith, taking their context and the need of the time seriously.

Finally, giving emphasis to theological formulations, theological treatises and theological debates does not mean one should undermine the Reformers' concern about the moral abuses in the Church. All the Reformers were very much concerned about the situation of the ordinary congregation member. In other words their pastoral concern compelled them to point out corruption and call for moral upliftment in the Church. So it may be necessary that the three types of emphasis found between 1300-1600 A.D. in the attempt to reform the Western Church — the constitutional and legal reforms of the conciliarists and conciliar movements,<sup>5</sup> the moral reforms of the movements headed by Savnarola, Wycliff, Huss and to a certain extent by some groups of the Anabaptists, and the theological and moral reforms (as far as these had an effect on pastoral work) by the reformers of the 16th Century — are to be taught to give a complete picture of the movement.

### **Some Specific Suggestions**

As I have pointed out above, persons and events have to be treated giving due weight to the contribution they made in a particular time and context rather than seeing them as an introduction or an appendix to the "main" reformers and the movements they have started. Two such movements that need to be given due weight in our teaching are the Anabaptist movement and the Catholic Reformation. In most of the standard Reformation history books written by persons belonging to Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican or Catholic traditions, persons involved in the Anabaptist movement are projected as fanatics, simpletons or heretics. But we have plenty of literature now produced by scholars belonging to their tradition in English (mainly coming from Mennonite scholars from the United States) giving a more accurate account of the movement and the theological position of the different groups that existed within the Anabaptist stream. Among other things, one of their distinct contributions was in paying the way for religious toleration. Even though some groups within the Anabaptists were militant in spirit, in general their stand was to abstain from taking the sword and to insist on non-participation in war whether it was for religious or non-religious purposes. This was

<sup>5</sup> I presume students were made familiar with the Conciliar Movement while studying Christianity in Medieval Europe.

considered in the 16th Century as evading the responsibility of a good citizen. However, this stand in the long run acted as a reminder to the followers of the other Reformed parties regarding the forgotten values of toleration and respect for individual freedom.

In the same way the Roman Catholic Reformation, which was till recently called the "Counter Reformation," has to be taught from the point of view of what exactly went on within the Roman Catholic Church in the face of the Protestant Reformation rather than to exhibit how stubborn the Roman Catholic Church was in spite of the "glaring truths" projected by the Reformers. This could easily be done by referring to books written by Roman Catholic historians alongside those of Protestant historians. This would help the students to have a more balanced picture of the kind of theological debate which went on within the Roman Catholic Church and the attempts for practical reform. This may be a better approach until such time as an unbiased historical account is produced.

What I am therefore suggesting is that we make an attempt to give a more balanced interpretation of the Anabaptist movement and the Roman Catholic Reformation. I am not asking for a "sympathetic approach" but more of a historical approach, with an effort to keep existing biases to a minimum.

That means, for example, that the syllabus should still include the reaction of the Papacy, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and their use of political powers against the Protestant Reformers, their unsympathetic approach towards the Reformers who were in almost all cases their own products; the persecution of the Anabaptists and other dissenting groups both by the Roman Catholics and the Protestants, and the pronouncement of anathemas by the Council of Trent on the doctrines formulated by the Reformers. The students should also be made aware of the exaggerated statements made by the Reformers and their followers, regarding the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church and the exaggerated allegation that the Roman Catholic Church deliberately made a number of "wrong interpretations" of the Scriptures to uphold their dogmas and traditions.

Furthermore, it should include both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches' manipulation and use of the secular powers to consolidate their own positions.

It is this type of approach which will lead one to the conclusion that both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches had a share in the breaking of Christendom and adding to the confusion of the 16th Century. If one is willing to accept this conclusion, the Roman Catholic historian need not be over-defensive about the role of his Church during the 16th Century and at the same time the Protestant historian need not interpret the Reformation as the only way to overcome corruption and evil and thereby inaugurate a new era of freedom.

Besides the Reformation history being written by historians belonging to different Churches, denominations or confessional groups,

Reformation histories are being written by persons belonging to different academic disciplines. While the teacher has to welcome these additional materials, the quite recent interpretation of the Reformation from a political ideological stand brings a new challenge to the subject. Reformation history or some aspects connected with this movement are seen by persons belonging to the Socialist countries from the perspective of their own political ideology. They tend to see the revolution brought by the 16th Century Reformers as the "bourgeois revolution" paving a way to the revolution of the working class. No attempt has been made in India to include such writers in our reading list. But it is worthwhile to introduce our students to this kind of interpretation based on political ideology. That does not mean that the Reformation histories written by the western historians do not subscribe to any political ideology. For that matter whether any historian in his historical writing can be free from the particular political ideology in which he or she has been brought up and trained is a larger question which has to be dealt with to the extent that the students are specialising in history. But histories written from a socialist political point of view will assist in evaluating histories written from the perspective of other political ideologies which so far are taken for granted as objective and neutral as far as political ideology is concerned.

In the Indian context one has to interpret the Reformation Movement also as an attempt to indigenise Christianity. The Reformers took their nation and religious context seriously, even though they were all placed in a European context. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the rewriting of liturgy, theological writings in vernacular languages helped in reaching at least the educated and in making Christianity more meaningful to them.

Finally, the most important lesson one has to communicate from the Reformation, besides familiarising students with the facts and figures of the persons and events connected with the movement, is the freedom the Reformers exercised in questioning the traditions and doctrines held by the Church hierarchy and the Christians of that time, when they felt them to be more of a barrier than a liberating force. The liberty they exercised with their commitment to liberate people from various theological, sociological, political, even in certain cases economic barriers, is a lesson for us. So today standing by the Reformation spirit does not mean being dogmatic about the doctrines they pronounced but exercising the freedom the Reformers exercised. Here we have to keep in mind the principle of the Reformers that the "Church is an ever reforming Church." Of course, while striving to reform the Church, we should also keep in mind that the Reformers in their Reformation work did this with a great pastoral concern.

## **Conclusion**

Even in Europe, where the Reformers worked, the Churches they built are dwindling in membership and looking for new reforms and direction. Reform or renewal is a cry everywhere. In such cases

we can draw our strength from the 16th Century Reformation without being dogmatic about it. But one may raise the question, whether one needs to go to Reformation history to get inspiration to reform or renew the Church today. The answer is, certainly not. But the knowledge of the past could certainly be a tool for the present and future.