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## Early Protestant spirituality

### Abstract

The many aspects of the early Protestant spirituality (during the sixteenth century) make it difficult to present a systematic bibliography for that period. Interest in the early protestant spirituality has considerably increased among scholars during the last decades. We must therefore proceed to a severe selection. Only studies that deal with the most significant topics will be included. No breakdown of the material can be completely satisfactory. As the main point, however, is to give as clear a picture as possible, one must distinguish in sixteenth century protestant spirituality the following character: biblical, Christocentric, ecclesiastical. Subdivisions of the subject matter in each period will necessarily overlap. But we will reduce this to a minimum.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Protestantism, Christocentrism, ecclesiality.

## Wczesna duchowość protestancka

### Streszczenie

Wiele aspektów wczesnej duchowości protestanckiej (mamy na uwadze szczególnie XVI stulecie) utrudnia usystematyzowanie jej w kontekście narastającej tendencji analizy tego okresu. Zainteresowanie wczesną duchowością protestancką znacznie wzrosło wśród badaczy w ciągu ostatnich dziesięcioleci. Konieczna stała się więc selekcja wyników badań. Uwzględnione zostały tylko te, które dotyczą najważniejszych jej wątków i tematów. Zasadniczym celem tego opracowania stało się przedstawienie możliwie jak najbardziej klarownego jej obrazu. Mając to na uwadze, w szesnastowiecznej duchowości protestanckiej wyróżniliśmy następujące rysy: biblijny, chrystocentryczny oraz kościelno-wspólnotowy. W różnych okresach wyróżnione rysy będą się na siebie nakładać. Dlatego zredukowano je do minimum.

**Słowa kluczowe:** duchowość, protestantyzm, chrystocentryzm, eklezjalność.

## 1. The biblical basis of spirituality

The Father of Reformation emphasized that “the Gospel, to a greater extent than the Last Supper and baptism, is the only certain and noblest hallmark of the Church because only through the Gospel it becomes initiated, formed, nourished, born, shaped, dressed, adorned, strengthened, armed, preserved. In short, all of life and the essence of the Church is in the Word of God”. Upon hearing this Word, faith is born, according to what St. Paul had earlier been teaching “Faith is born from hearing” (Romans 10,17). Commenting on Psalm 119,115, Luther wrote: “By hearing we can walk with a great confidence, as Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path”<sup>1</sup>. In order for all the faithful to be able to listen and understand the message of the Holy Bible, much effort was put into translation of the Bible into German. In 1522, the New Testament was translated into German, and in 1530 the translation of the Old Testament was completed. The whole Bible was published in 1534. Because of this fact, the Bible was in the center of interest of not only theologians but also the faithful. Revelation through the letter of Scripture leads to a deeper understanding of the essence of belief in God. “Every time I hold a text that is like a walnut in an overly hard shell, I throw it right on the rock (i.e. Christ) and I find the sweetest nut there”<sup>2</sup>. Since the very beginning, the Protestant spirituality was also influenced by postilions and songbooks with early Christian hymns and songs written in close connection with the Bible<sup>3</sup>.

Also in the Calvinist spirituality the preaching of the Word became the center of worship. It was in accordance with the principle that only the Word of God through the action of the Holy Spirit determines the relationship of the believer with God. In the Heidelberg Catechism we read: “(...) we cannot be wiser than God, who desires to teach Christianity not through silent idols, but through the vivid preaching of his Word”<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, faith “(...) is not only a cognition full of certainty, by which I acknowledge as certain everything that God has revealed to me in His word, but it is also the intimate trust given by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel”<sup>5</sup>. And so the Holy Scripture became the only factor controlling orthodoxy. However, in the absence of a coordinated interpretation of the texts of God’s revelation, it led to a greater division in church and still,

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<sup>1</sup> M. LUTHER, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, H. BÖHLAU U.A. (ed.), Weimar 1883–1980 (further: WA) 4, 356, 10nn.

<sup>2</sup> WA 2, 12, 32–35.

<sup>3</sup> M. LUTER, *Etliche christliche Lieder*, Wittenberg 1524.

<sup>4</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, q. 98

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 29

it continues to hinder the tendency to settle a common belief in the evangelical reformed churches<sup>6</sup>.

An example is the Anabaptist communities, for whom biblicality is also a hallmark of their spirituality. From the theological perspective, it has been discussed till today whether Anabaptism can be incorporated into the Reformation. From a historical point of view, there have been continuous attempts to determine its sources. For many, they its origin is in Saxony in Thomas Müntzer. For others, Anabaptism has its roots in Zurich, where the leftist group of radicals comments on Zwingli and his supporters<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, at its beginning this movement is expressed in radically identifying the spirit with the text. As a result, the dialectic of the script and the spirit is abolished by rigid directness. It is emphasized that Anabaptism interprets the Bible through reading by groups of the faithful gathering in private homes, not by public preaching. Secularists have a central role. The Anabaptist communities are a secular movement consisted essentially of a laity who distance themselves from the pastors. Reformational visions of the priests' ministry are seen as lacking biblical foundations: "We too took the Holy Scriptures and learned all possible questions, educated a little, and discovered the great and harmful mistakes of the pastors, including ours"<sup>8</sup>. In this light, even the presidency of the Lord's Supper is passed on the lay people. Subsequent persecution made it difficult for Anabaptists to organize public meetings<sup>9</sup>.

Similarly, following the practice of the baptism of adults, a Baptist movement was initiated at the end of the sixteenth century. Its representatives proclaimed the supremacy of the Word of God over church authority, the necessity of the biblical Christianity, the individual path to knowing God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Giving the faithful personal freedom to interpret the Bible, allows a man to accept the gift of God individually through sincere faith in Christ. His Person then becomes a constant value of spiritual life and leads to inner rebirth and sanctification of the individual. This state lasts for the rest of

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<sup>6</sup> WA 3, 416, 21–22.

<sup>7</sup> P. RICCA, *Zwingli e gli anabattisti: il dialogo che non c'è stato*, "Protestantesimo" 40 (1985), p. 1–32.

<sup>8</sup> L. VON MURALT, W. SCHMID (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, Zürich 1974, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Anabaptists were heavily persecuted during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and into the 17<sup>th</sup> by both Magisterial Protestants and Roman Catholics. While most Anabaptists adhered to a literal interpretation of the *Sermon on the Mount*, which precluded taking oaths, participating in military actions, and participating in civil government, some who practiced re-baptism felt otherwise. They were thus technically Anabaptists, even though conservative Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites and some historians tend to consider them as outside of true Anabaptism. Anabaptist reformers of the Radical Reformation are divided into Radical and the so-called Second Front. Some important Radical Reformation theologians were: John of Leiden, Thomas Müntzer, Kaspar Schwenkfeld, Sebastian Franck, Menno Simons. Second Front Reformers included Hans Denck, Conrad Grebel, Balthasar Hubmaier and Felix Manz.

the life and manifests itself in reading God's Word, prayer and working on own improvement.

As a result, the biblical roots of the spirituality of Protestant communities directly lead to the person of Jesus Christ as the center of faith and teaching. From the very beginning, Christocentrism became the essence of the Reformation. Even before the conflict about the teachings of the indulgences, Luther wrote to his fellow, G. Spenlein: "Learn Christ, my dear brother, the crucified Christ, learn to sing to Him, and without trusting in yourself, tell Him: «You, Lord Jesus, You are my justice, and I am Your sin; You have accepted what is mine and you have given me what is yours; you accepted what you were not and you gave me what I was not»"<sup>10</sup>. The need to meet Christ the Savior has become a characteristic feature of the deepened spirituality<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Christocentric character

From the very beginning, Reformation fully recognizes early Christian Christological dogmas. By accepting in the Son of God, Christ Jesus, two natures, inseparable in him, He is perceived in the context of his saving act. Crucifixion of Jesus is both the atonement of God's justice and God's gift for man. God himself is the initiator and the Giver of salvation. In this light, one cannot speak about the merits of man for God. This is expressed by the principle of *solus Christus*. Thus, the mediation of Mary and other saints in the salvation of man is also excluded. Saint Paul's principle of the only mediator of grace and salvation (1 Tm 2,5) shaped forms of piety in Protestantism. We find there four basic elements characteristic of the relationship of the believer with Christ:

- Christ is close enough to the believer that one can and should turn to Him in times of difficulty caused by sin.
- We reach the merciful God through crucified Christ, who paid for the faults of sinners with his sacrifice.
- In Christ, God did everything for the salvation of a man who only needs to accept it in faith and obedience.
- To understand the gift of God given in Christ, it is necessary to understand the so-called *desperatio fiducialis* – getting rid of confidence in one's own abilities.

<sup>10</sup> WA 1, 35, 24–36.

<sup>11</sup> S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline*, in: E.A. DREYER, M.S. BURROWS (ed.), *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* Baltimore 2005; PH. SHELDRAKE, *Christian Spirituality and Social Transformation*, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Oxford 2016.

This kind of adherence to Christ in faith has the characteristics of Christian mysticism shaped by the absolute humility of a sinful man. Spirituality built in this way does not seek luxurious experiences, but rather requires acceptance of what is given in Jesus beforehand and free. We can talk about a kind of passive spirituality here. God did everything in Christ. Man has little to do, even in the inner life<sup>12</sup>. Emphasized by Martin Luther, humble sensitivity to Christ's merits for man, is confirmed in Melancthon teaching: *Hoc est Christum cognoscere beneficia eius cognoscere*. As a result, the knowledge and experience of salvation is acquired during the preaching of Christ learned from the teaching of the Bible. On its pages, He is seen as the only Savior who freely forgave guilt and sins.

We find the analogous, Christocentric concentration of Protestant spirituality in Calvin's writings: "Because we see that all the various elements of our salvation are contained in Jesus Christ, it is necessary to guard against placing elsewhere even the smallest part of Him"<sup>13</sup>. If we seek salvation, the same name of Jesus teaches us that it is in Him. "The heart of the pastoral teaching of the fathers of the Reformation is the proclamation of free salvation in Christ: Just as in Christ were chosen those whom God predestined for life before the world was created, so too in him we have the seal of our election, if we accept and accept it by faith".

It is therefore important to understand the biblical principles and norms in this regard. This will be done from a dogmatic-ethical view that will be motivated by a Christocentric perspective. Central to forgiveness is what God has done in Christ to move towards us in brokenness and sin whilst inviting our repentant response. Christ has done a complete work in this regard, and therefore God is faithful and righteous to Christ to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. A Christocentric view accentuates God's initiative in forgiveness and necessitates us to differentiate between God's unconditional offering of forgiveness and his conditional applying of forgiveness. It is shown that this differentiation is crucial in the understanding and application of forgiveness as portrayed in the Bible. Christ is normative in offering forgiveness, and therefore it should be done in his name. Christ is also normative in the realisation of forgiveness and therefore he is the Subject of forgiveness, not a human being<sup>14</sup>.

Luther's Christocentric *Large Confession* may be appreciated further when it is compared with the confessions that were drafted chiefly by Melancthon. The *Schwabach Articles* (Article V), the *Marburg Articles* (Article V–VII), and the

<sup>12</sup> W. VON LÖWENICH, *Theologia crucis*, Bologna 1975, p. 189–217.

<sup>13</sup> K. BARTH, *The Theology of John Calvin*, Grand Rapids 1995, p. 337n.

<sup>14</sup> J. MACQUARRIE, *Paths of spirituality*, London 1992, p. 135n; R.A. MULLER, *A Note on "Christocentrism" and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology*, "Westminster Theological Journal" 68 (2006) 2, p. 253n.

*Augsburg Confession* (Article IV) all emphasize our faith for justification: “This faith is our righteousness”<sup>15</sup>. In contrast, Luther in his *Large Confession* writes that we are saved “through the one righteousness which our Saviour Jesus Christ is and has bestowed upon us (...). We are saved *through Christ alone*”<sup>16</sup>. In fact, Luther does not give a formula for the doctrine of justification in the *Large Confession*. Rather, he confesses our salvation from the point of view of Christ in his accomplishment and delivery rather than from our human point of view in reception of the benefits of Christ’s work through faith. The focal point in the *Large Confession* is not a faith event or spiritual event, but the Christ event.

Finally, we can say that the center of the spirituality of the Reformation is a personal communion with the living Lord within his community. Therefore, it is impossible to omit its validity.

### 3. The importance of the community

Generally speaking Luther speaks of the Church as an external community, bigger than and not dependent on the faithful. It is a community called into existence by God’s Word (through Word and Sacrament). But we need to note how in making this point of the faithful’s dependence on the Church he does at times refer to it in the feminine gender, as Mother. When dealing with polemics against the Catholic hierarchy he speaks of the Church without reference to the priesthood, but in other contexts makes the priesthood a necessary ingredient of the true Church.

Luther’s mature thought defines the church as a tangible “Christian, holy people” within history, constituted by distinctive public practices. This church is necessarily institutionalized: the “universal priesthood” is corporate rather than individual, and cannot be fully realized without ministers acting in *persona ecclesiae*. Ordered ministry and common priesthood are interdependent and mutually constitutive. Finally, following his central principle that God gives spiritual gifts only through public, bodily means, Luther allows no separation of justifying faith from bodily adherence to the Christian people<sup>17</sup>.

Luther’s view of the church and its ministry are both grounded in the Word of God, the promise of the gospel. The church exists wherever the Word of God is proclaimed, and the church is a spiritual community oriented to and shaped

<sup>15</sup> R. KOLB, J.A. NESTINGEN (ed.), *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, Minneapolis 2001, p. 85, 89–90.

<sup>16</sup> WA 26, 502, 25; 26, 505, 18-19; 26, 506, 1; AE 37: 362, 364, 365, 366.

<sup>17</sup> D.S. YEAGO, “*A Christian, Holy People*” *Martin Luther on Salvation and the Church*, “*Modern Theology*”, 13 (1997) 1, p. 101–120.

by this Word in its life by the power of the Holy Spirit. The distinctions in Luther's ecclesiology, such as visible versus invisible, are hermeneutical rather than ontological. Luther's later ecclesiological writings also reflect his Spirit and letter hermeneutic, even as he engages new battle fronts, so that the gospel remains at the centre of the church's proclamation and life. For God's Word to continue to be preached, God has instituted the office of ministry to which specific persons are called, who are entrusted with this great treasure. Luther's view of the office of ministry should be interpreted in light of, but not as opposed to, his view of the royal priesthood, which he develops as an ecclesiological concept. Bishops are a specific instance of the public office of ministry, at the heart of which is the preaching of the gospel and overseeing its right preaching for the sake of God's people.

Calvin also sees spirituality as communal. While he believes evil affects every aspect of the human being, his hopeful understanding of creation sets the stage for public piety in the Christian life. To Calvin, creation is the work of God, good and capable of restoration. Humans, united with the church body, are meant to engage actively with society to achieve this restoration, while avoiding attachment to the world and its values.

Not only does the Spirit teach us, the Spirit also unites all Christians in scripture reading. Thus sacrament and word unite Christians – who become the church, a community of scripture readers. Private piety combined with unity in the church body leads to Christian participation in the larger public. Through worship, Calvin's use of the psalter further ties personal and corporate prayer together. The congregation sings together, and individuals in turn sing the Psalms at work and home.

For Calvin, the church provides the necessary corporate dimension of support for faith, giving individuals the ability to understand rightly. Scripture and sacrament, reading and worship – all are rooted in practices for the individual and the community. For Calvin, the individual's union with Christ and the body of Christ are both indispensable to the Christian's individual development as well as the church's contribution to God's salvation of the world<sup>18</sup>.

Spirituality is a popular word that today often has connotations of individualism and can be unrelated to theology or institutional religion. For Calvin, however, piety defines the attitude and actions of all those who respond to God's self-revelation in Christ and are gathered in Christ's Body, the church, by the Holy Spirit. The foundation of piety is God's gift of faith, adoption in

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<sup>18</sup> TH.F. LATINI, *The Church as Mother: The Theme of Union in Christ in Calvin's and Luther's Ecclesiology*, in: R. WALD HOLDER (ed.), *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, Göttingen 2013, p. 183–201.

Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit acting on the human heart as well as the mind.

The two great commandments give shape to Calvin's piety: "Love God" and "Love your neighbour", elaborated in the moral law, the Ten Commandments. The first table of the law, summarized as the *officia pietatis*, the duties of piety, is more closely related to traditional ideas of piety as acts of worship. The second table of the law, the *officia charitatis*, or duties of love, is for Calvin the necessary corollary. For the regenerate person of faith, the law provides the structures of Calvin's corporate and personal piety. Faith in itself cannot be seen but it finds visible expression in the *officia pietatis* and the *officia charitatis*.

The acts of worship and devotion that manifest piety are both individual and corporate. Principal among these is prayer, which Calvin calls "the chief exercise of faith", the expression of trust in and obedience to God. True prayer must come from the heart and does not need words. However, it is also very appropriate to use words in prayer, at least in part to help the person praying to concentrate. Corporate prayer in the gathered community of the church is especially essential in Calvin's understanding of the *officia pietatis*<sup>19</sup>.

Calvin believed that faith is strengthened by the use of the external aids God has ordained. Besides public prayers and Scripture, the sacraments form a significant part of Calvin's understanding of the *officia pietatis*. They are seals of God's promises and confessions of faith, having personal and corporate dimensions for the believer and the community. Although the importance of sacraments for Calvin was long neglected in studies of his piety, in the twentieth century scholars recognized the vital role of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the reformer's teaching on practical faith and devotion (not simply theological doctrine). Calvin's attention to the sacraments is distinctive not least because both sacraments are necessarily corporate actions in the gathered church, a reminder that Protestants, and the Reformed tradition in particular, rejected "private" sacraments and reoriented sacramental piety to corporate church life. The individual Christian can and must believe, by God's grace, but the individual believes in the context of the community of faith. The *officia pietatis* are grounded in the church's life even when the Christian prays in her closet<sup>20</sup>.

In keeping with his understanding of the Bible, Calvin insisted that faith can sometimes be more truly expressed by love for the neighbour, seen in *officia charitatis*, than by acts of worship (*officia pietatis*). Ceremonies can be hypocriti-

<sup>19</sup> J. MIKKONEN, *Luther and Calvin on Paul's epistle to the Galatians: an analysis and comparison of substantial concepts in Luther's 1531/35 and Calvin's 1546/48 commentaries on Galatians*, Åbo 2007.

<sup>20</sup> W.H. NEUSER, *Exercitium pietatis – Calvin's Interpretation of the Lord's Prayer*, "Acta Theologica Supplementum" 10 (2008), p. 95–107.



cal but real compassion requires more than simply acting a part. For this reason, piety cannot be only a matter of prayers, sermons, and sacraments but it must be lived out in the practice of daily life in the world.

One of the most important expressions of this inner worldly piety is love for the neighbour in need, love from the heart given intelligent and practical form with both head and hands. The Christian church and its members are obligated to be aware of and respond to the real situations of the poor, the sick and afflicted, the ignorant and sinful. Each Christian must be attentive to see the neighbour as the image of God and treat all neighbours not as they deserve but as God deserves. The work of ecclesiastical discipline (from discipline, training) and the ministry of the deacons are two corporate manifestations of love for the neighbour in concern for the soul and the body. Pastors and elders work together to teach, correct, and reconcile where there are visible evidences of ignorance of God's will and disobedience to it, of conflict and injustice in the community. Deacons serve to identify and respond to physical ills of all kinds; those who can work are called to do so, those who cannot care for themselves should have their needs met with compassion and genuine good will<sup>21</sup>.

In different ways each Christian shares the responsibility to act in love for the neighbour. Calvin's world was more hierarchical than the modern west but his principle – everything one “possesses” is a gift from God and carries with it responsibility – applied to all ranks of society. Thus any material possession, or any talent of mind, or any power of position or office, must be received as God's gift. All God's blessings are given for human good and meant to be enjoyed, according to God's will. However, God's will requires attention to God's purposes, careful stewardship, moral strength, intelligence, courageous and self-denying action, and constant recourse to prayer.

Calvin's piety means both worshiping God according to God's own word and living in daily obedience to God in the community of faith and the world God created. This active knowledge of God by faith is our highest good and joy. After confessing the divine majesty of the Holy Trinity, the office and works of the Son, and the service of the Holy Spirit, Luther gives a summary of the works of the Triune God in terms of His giving: “The Father gives Himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us (...). The Son Himself subsequently gave Himself and bestowed all His works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness (...). The Holy Spirit comes and gives Himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ. He does this both inwardly and outwardly-inwardly through faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly, however, through

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<sup>21</sup> W. BALKE, *Calvin and The, Church and Society*, Potchefstroom 1982, p. 51.

the Gospel, through baptism and the sacrament of the altar, through which as through three means or ways he comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ to bring the benefit of salvation”<sup>22</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

For many Protestant spirituality will sounds like an oxymoron. Although the term spirituality has become a popular alternative to words like religion and theology, it is still frequently associated with mysticism and personal devotion in non-Protestant tradition. Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, however, Protestant churches have spawned their own spiritual movements with distinct patterns of revival and agendas for renewal. The current interest in integrating intellectual curiosities with faith-transforming practices is leading mainline Protestants to re-examine their history from the lens provided by spirituality. For the purpose of this paper, spirituality means the way in which members of a religious community nurture and practice their faith. By turning to the Protestant heritage, especially the spiritual life of the sixteenth century movements and leaders, the author of paper wants to discover a spiritual legacy that affirms the early Protestant tradition and provides spiritual practices that deepen the faith and the commitments to love and justice.

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<sup>22</sup> WA 26, 505; 38, 506, 12; AE 37: 366.

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