

THE INCIDENT – REFORMATION AND CULTURAL DIVERGENCE

Speaking notes of Dr. L. Vissing, researcher emeritus, ambassador (ret.), at the Aarhus University conference on the Lutheran Reformation (Rethink Reformation) 1-3 November 2017. The research forming the basis of this intervention is *inter alia* included in Working Papers 3 & 5/2017.

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Two stories from what remains of the Reformation frontline:

Twenty years ago, in a multilateral ministerial meeting, I needed a small favor from the representative of the Holy See. It was about switching the speaking sequence between the Vatican State Secretary and my minister in order to allow the latter to leave early for another function. The Nuntius looked intently at me before saying this, with a wink: “ ... *may I take it, that we can then put the incident behind us ?!*”

Of course the Reformation as well as the Council of Trent had previously been among the subjects the two of us had discussed. So there was no doubt as to what “incident” might refer to. But his playful suggestion – asking something big from an ambassador of a Protestant country in return for a trifle – was funny. I do not remember my answer. Was there any?

Second story, and on a more serious note: arriving at the Holy See as ambassador, one year into the present pontificate, I could not fail to see major efforts by the Rome based congregations to sustain expanding catholicism in geographical areas such as Asia – particularly South Korea – and Africa; and also: acute attention to the challenges posed by sectarian movements. By contrast it was easy to number those congregation members handling contacts to “other Christian churches”; and they did not seem concerned by any pressing policy motives. These modest structures and preoccupations adequately reflected the position and policies I afterwards found when meeting with Roman Church authorities. The attitude encountered was this: we, the Catholic Church, should have been able to reform the institution ourselves. Regrettably we were not. In theological terms Luther just did what we could not do, at that point in time, for political reasons. So Luther yes. But Calvin, Zwingli, Anabaptism, Pietism: still no.

The two stories attest to the present fairly relaxed attitude compared to previous times; this was not the atmosphere, at the religious encounters and other confrontations during the Reformation period, at the Trento Council, at the negotiations leading up to the Augsburg Religious Peace in 1555, and another hundred years later, at the Peace of Westphalia and; and, not so long ago, during the confrontation of the German and Swiss Kulturkampf. One might be tempted to conclude that 500 years after the Reformation, the Catholic Church finally finds itself in agreement with the initial declarations of Luther - to the effect that he was more catholic than Rome.

Of course these attitudes and the resulting present-day atmosphere are retrospect considerations and post-rationalisations. There are other – equally efficient - explanations. The local take-over of Church property and the emergence of “national” churches did not lead to the establishment of powerful competitor institutions. The challenges to the authority of the Catholic Church, and to its faith, do not come from Lutheranism any more but from sectarian movements. The religious situation in Germany, the initial field of confrontation, is largely pacified. There are no contemporary protestant dynamics comparing to the actual expansion of the Roman Church in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Thus the denomination “incident”, with respect to the Lutheran Reformation, could largely be justified, from a contemporary Roman Catholic point of view.

My own attention to the North-South issue in Europe did not primarily derive from the Reformation whether qualified as “incident” or as a major event. Rather from a series of incidents (plural)- taking place over a 44 year period, practically an extended field study deployed in the course of a diplomatic career primarily devoted to Europe and to European Cooperation matters, but also covering Eastern Europe and Northern Africa. I thus systematically noted the examples of cultural divergence emerging directly from the handling of cases and situations. The contexts were multilateral as well as bilateral. The examples included cases from private business as well as common political and institutional issues, such as contemporary discrepancies concerning attitudes to the Monetary Union, to tax and labour market policies, to factors and variables relating to the recent banking and sovereign debt crisis.

All the examples that were merely folklore and picturesque details of no consequence were filtered and eliminated. The only factors and variables retained were those that implied an objective convergence of interests and directly impacted a common decision-making, a project, a cooperation situation: disturbing them, delaying them, or making them impossible.

For practical purposes I put these examples and symptoms in three categories:

First: the items related to the management of time. Dividing time into segments, or keeping it unitary. Preparation and implementation phases. But also: the background structure of cultural time. The linear time model is dominant. There are

however residuals of other time structures: redundant, pendulum or circular schemes.

The second category contained spatial characteristics of a given culture. It comprised concrete space as well as symbolic space conceptions, direct or indirect relations, admission or marginalization of intermediaries, recourse to parallel systems and structures, or primary systemic resilience. Among the mechanisms of mental space: transgression and transcendence.

So far the concepts proposed by E.T Hall and G. Hofstede were applicable to a significant portion of the examples. But a notable residual existed with respect to discursive practice.

That became the third category, built on background questions of this type: to which degree are words, rhetorics, allowed to evolve, deploy beyond the reach of facts and things? Does a culture prioritize top-down normative proceedings or bottom-up factual behavior? Is authority a question of words, of dignified silence or of action?

Beyond this listing and primitive division of an empirical material conceptual tools were needed to move on. No universal key was available, and no single discipline could be expected to serve the purpose alone.

On the limited field of the Reformation and its consequences there was of course Max Weber. But Weber rejected anything exceeding this perspective, pointing towards a European ethnography¹. The cultural perception is explicitly qualified as invalid – and as an expression of ignorance. The Protestant Ethic sees the Reformation as the moment when a religious movement accompanies, and amplifies, socio-economic developments. On the specifics of Latin economic systems there was also recent analytical work by Clavero.

Intercultural theory – Hofstede, Hall – went for some distance, but failed to dig into the origins of these discrepancies. As already mentioned: time and space were covered, but – as also admitted by Hofstede himself ² - it was largely inefficient with respect to discursive practices. Analysis of private business dealings were plenty,

¹ Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik I*, p. 74 *Die Berufung auf den "Volkscharakter" ist nicht nur überhaupt lediglich das Bekenntnis des Nichtwissens, sondern in unserem Fall auch gänzlich hinfällig [...] Erst die Macht religiöser Bewegungen – nicht sie allein, aber sie zuerst – hat hier jene Unterschiede geschaffen, die wir heute empfinden.*

² Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences*, p. 425: *"Language plays a crucial role in intercultural interactions. Having to express oneself in another language means having to adopt someone else's frame of reference. ...In the Anglophone literature on intercultural encounters, the role of language tends to be underestimated; many of the authors are monolingual themselves, and it is almost impossible to grasp the importance of language if one has not struggled with learning one or more foreign languages. Having to express oneself in another language means having to adopt someone else's frame of reference ..." If one does not know the language of one's country of residence one misses a lot of subtleties of the culture and is forced to remain a relative outsider, caught in stereotypes ...Paradoxically, having English, the world trade language (lingua franca), as one's mother tongue is a liability, not an asset, for truly communicating with other cultures."*

including on mergers and acquisitions. Much less analytical work was available on political, including multilateral matters.

Supplementary perspectives on the background of some examples could be found in the work done on the Indo-European Corpus by Stig Wikander, Georges Dumézil, and by Emile Benvéniste. Especially on the properties of symbolic space and on the concept of authority.

There were significant indications regarding the North-South polarity in Classical European Ethnography. I would refer to the major work of Klaus E. Müller in this respect. Hippocrates of course, Tacitus and Cesar. The latter does not invoke strategic nor security policy arguments when he defines the Northern Limit of Roman influence as the Rhine, but only cultural reasons : ...“...everything is different”. In the famous ethnographic excursus of the book VI of the Gallic Wars he explicitly draws parallels between the Roman-Latin cultural context on the one hand, and the Gallia Transalpina on the other. But when it comes to Germany he marks the contrast. Including on points that appear as notable with respect to the Lutheran Reformation: no specific functional category for priests.

Demography and family structures represented another possible attack profile: this very topography, centered on the Rhine-Danube line, appears in the Emmanuel Todd work on family structures in Europe (*l'Invention de l'Europe*), reaching further with respect to the Reformation. In the zone of cultural confrontation, along the Roman Limes, Todd notes the existence of a particular hybrid family structure - the incomplete stem family (*la famille souche incomplète*) - between the North and the South.

Finally: the analytical work done on the nature and orientation of the policy instruments of the European Union, be it on trade, taxes, harmonization, debt, banking or other fields.

Combining these approaches the main point emerges – not surprisingly – as the enduring existence and validity of the Rhine-Danube line as a zone of cultural demarcation, before and after the Reformation.

Admittedly movements have taken place, provisionally pushing limits. To the South: Protestant influence can be registered in Bologna in the early phases of the Reformation. In his work on the Trent Church Council, Hubert Jedin notes that the strongest moment of Crypto-Lutheran influence on the Council occurs during the 2nd session, precisely at Bologna. To the North: mid XVIIth century Counter-Reformation pursues its spiritual recovery ambitions into what is today a protestant heartland, Niedersachsen.

Over time the upper Rhine-Danube line remains however the principal cultural boundary. One cannot fail to note, while drawing a map of the venues for the religious encounters of the Reformation period, that with only a few exceptions - they take place right on or close to this very limit.

In spite of Max Weber the Reformation fits well into such a cultural perspective, as an actualization of an existing gap, rather than a novum. Other factors are involved - institutional degeneration, marriage of priests - but the single most important element is this: the discrepancy between systems relying heavily on intermediaries, and other systems tending to establish direct communication lines. Direct or indirect ways, cutting short or using relays. In early XVIth century theological terms this becomes: salvation through Faith alone or relying on the mechanisms and services of an institutional machine to provide it. This conflict on the issue of the indulgences is what sets off the cultural stress-test.

Everything else considered central a with respect to the Lutheran Reformation comes later: the lessons of Saint Paul, political considerations, economic interests, including take-over of Church property – and legal prerogatives.

And if there had been no need to finance the new St. Peters Cathedral? No indulgences? Of course the idea cannot be entertained - even on a purely speculative note - that the Reformation did not have to happen. Because heresy was not only a religious deviation but also a way, often the only possible way inside a unified Christianity, to express regional particularities. Also because powerful radical tendencies and Reform movements to follow (Zwingli, Calvin, Anabaptism, Pietism) would have carried the day, along with the factors and variables mentioned and developed by Weber : socio-economic developments in the preceding century, the active companionship of religious ideology in the successive deployment of capitalism.

Also because the authority of the Church was heavily undermined, for everybody to see, even on the inside. Resuming the developments of preceding pontificates the Florentine statesman Guicciardini formulated some strong words in this respect³ .

These factors sufficiently explain why it could happen, at that point in time. But why so late, why only gathering of critical mass, resulting in confrontation, in 1517? Church Reform had been announced at every papal election during the preceding centuries and several medieval heretical movements had contested Roman authority.

³ Guicciardini, *Ricordi* 28 (*Maxims and Reflections*) *I know no man who feels deeper disgust than I do at the ambition, avarice, and profligacy of the priesthood, as well because every one of these vices is odious in itself, as because each of them separately and all of them together are utterly abhorrent in men making profession of a life dedicated to God. Besides which, these vices are by nature so contrary to one another, that they can coexist only in some monstrous subject. And yet the position I have filled under several Popes has obliged me for personal reasons to desire their greatness. But for this I should have loved Martin Luther as myself: not that I would be loosed from the laws prescribed by the Christian religion as commonly interpreted and understood, but because I long to see this pack of scoundrels brought within due bounds, that is to say, purged of their vices or stripped of their authority* (Io non so a chi dispiaccia piú che a me la ambizione, la avarizia e le mollizie de' preti; sí perché ognuno di questi vizi in sé è odioso, sí perché ciascuno e tutti insieme si convengono poco a chi fa professione di vita dipendente da Dio; e ancora perché sono vizi sí contrari che non possono stare insieme se non in uno subietto molto strano. Nondimeno el grado che ho avuto con piú pontefici, m'ha necessitato a amare per el particolare mio la grandezza loro; e se non fussi questo rispetto, arei amato Martino Luther quanto me medesimo, non per liberarmi dalle legge indotte dalla religione cristiana nel modo che è interpretata e intesa communemente, ma per vedere ridurre questa caterva di scelerati a' termini debiti, cioè a restare o senza vizi o senza autoritá).

Vested interests in existing situation were too important. Also: the institutional profile and of the Pre-Trento Catholic Church may be difficult to perceive today as the Trento Church “format” and behavior is what we still have today. However the multiple infractions of specific church rules registered during provincial synods of Northern Europe show that the medieval christian church was in fact a reasonably permissive entity. Too tolerant to react unless in cases of outright heresy; to provoke a large challenge of authority at the popular level, perhaps with exceptions such as the Catharism in Southern France. In 1517 the over-exploitation of the indulgences sets off the stress-test to mutual tolerance, leading to a moment of alienation.

Summing up:

The factors and variables of enduring North-South relevance can only partially be linked to the Reformation experience. Other factors had an impact before the Luther intervention. Their anchorage is to be found in more remote corners of the indo-european corpus; in the discrepancies and incompatibilities between regional interpretations of a common cultural ground, leaving their marks on a common mythology and legend, as partially opposed mental algorithms, also maintained by languages.

Algorithm would be a metaphor. A final question: is this metaphor correct? We have, in fact to deal with diverging software lines. It could also be compared to DNA, as different strands. But the choice of metaphor is less important than its bearing and efficiency. As long as it remains clear that this is no surrender to essentialism, the image should just convey the message that modification is possible; algorithms change, DNA changes. However a series of factors and components remain stable over time.

Inside this cultural History of Europe there are not only confrontations – be they Reformation, or the *Kulturkampf* (remarkable by the explicit identification of the issue) - but also periods of armistice, even peace, where the cultural gap does not reach the stress or crisis level; where the efficiency of unifying factors relegate these tendencies to the background. Such was the Roman Empire, with its legal system and thoughtful immigration policies; such were also the European Middle Ages, with a shapening of common purposes: saving souls and fighting for the roads to the Holy Land, and with the Church as a provider of cultural unity. Such is also, by and large, the XVIIIth century knowledge society with its extended sharing of values. Perhaps also the phase we have just shared, from WW2 till Brexit - during which we have deployed cooperation parameters ressembling those developed during the religious encounters of the Reformation, to cope with the cultural gap. Not the ways of the Pre-Trento Church: tolerance, laissez-faire and looking the other way. Rather negotiation and adjustment modes. Confronting our discrepancies and incompatibilities on substance and style through dealings which may often be dilatory, tactical, procedural; but which once in a while do not exclude direct and pragmatic handling

of issues, as in Worms from 1540 till 41. Nor, as up to the Augsburg Religious Peace in 1555: agreements to disagree and handling of cohabitation.⁴

⁴ Direct confrontation with no purpose of agreement (Augsburg 1518, Speyer 1529). Occasions where the impact is mainly local (Nürnberg, Memming 1525), but fielding also general N/S themes: need for intercessors, intermediaries. Other encounters are preponderantly procedural (Frankfurter Anstand 1539, Hagenau 1540). Some are tactical pretexts, smokescreens for dissimulation of political purposes (Regensburg 1546). There are equally moments of substance, covering the ground laid out already at Leipzig in 1519: the three disputations at Zürich (1523-24) are in this category. Also the beginning of the Augsburg Reichstag of 1530. Key moments of substance and pragmatic negotiation at Worms (1540-41), but without delivering the result at the following Regensburg conference (1541). After the *de facto* discontinuation of efforts to establish a common platform the management of cohabitation becomes the main target (Augsburg Religious Peace 1555). Contradictions are papered over and paid for in currency of uncertainty.