

**16<sup>th</sup> Century Magisterial Reformers and Radical Reformers**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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I grew up proud to be Lutheran. For me, Martin Luther was a heroic figure, posting his list of 95 Theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. The list primarily contained Luther's points of disagreement with the Roman Catholic practice of offering forgiveness for sale by means of indulgences. Growing up, my grasp of 16<sup>th</sup> century European Christian religious history was limited, to say the least. I absorbed a simplistic view that the Catholics were traditional and wrong, and the Lutherans were reformers and right. People of other religious faiths or of no religious faith did not even register in my world view at the time.

Imagine my surprise when, in seminary, I learned that Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and others were actually moderate reformers, aligned with the power elite of the day. The radical reformers had names that I had never heard of – Anabaptists, anti-Trinitarians, Socinians, Waldensians, among others. The 16<sup>th</sup> century moderate Christian reformers are called “magisterial” reformers because they relied upon the authority of the civil magistrates for enforcement of their views. The magisterial reformers were supported by the nobility and by others who had power.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the radical reformers, the magisterial reformers did not believe in separation of church and state. The magisterial reformers simply wanted to “elbow” the Roman Catholics out of power, so to speak.

As a young person who identified as Lutheran, I had imagined that the Protestant Reformation was a struggle fought on a single front, a struggle fought against the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the Protestant Reformation was fought both there and on an additional front. George Huntston Williams, the pre-eminent historian of the “Radical Reformation,” writes, “With what they considered the papal Antichrist to their right, Luther and Melanchthon, Zwingli then Bullinger, Calvin and Cranmer, readily thought of their common foe to the left as a three-headed

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.freewill-predestination.com/radical.html>.

Cerberus and called the monster abusively, without their wonted theological precision, almost interchangeably Libertinism, Anabaptism, Fanaticism.”<sup>2</sup>

The radical reformers were a disorganized, geographically dispersed motley crew who were generally less educated than the magisterial reformers, who tended to meet in private homes instead of churches, and who, as lay people, took seriously the responsibility they felt to read the Bible. Their interpretations were almost invariably literal, not figurative, which, to my mind, accounts for the emergence of odd flashpoint issues, such as whether a Christian should swear to tell the truth in a court of law (after all, the Bible says *not* to swear) and whether infants should be baptized or whether instead adult believers should be baptized (after all, Jesus was baptized as an *adult*, not as a child).

Disagreements over the swearing of oaths and whether infant baptism or adult “believer’s” baptism was the right thing to do were not just theological points politely discussed among friends. These issues were matters of life and death. People killed each other for being on the wrong side! The radicals tended to be outnumbered. There are many martyrs in our religious family tree. In just a moment, we will hear about some of them, as members and friends of the congregation present “A Brief and Incomplete History of Unitarianism in Europe.” The play was written by the Rev. Sara Zimmerman, who serves the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tampa, Florida.

What is the relevance for us today of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation? First, learning about the complexities of our past helps to keep us honest. Life is now and always has been messy, confusing, and anxiety-provoking -- containing failure and disappointment, as well as comfort, connection, and meaning. More importantly, the religious struggles of 16<sup>th</sup> century Christians in Europe tell us something relevant about religious authority. How are we to evaluate religious truth claims? Why should I believe what you have to say? Why should you believe what I have to say?

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<sup>2</sup> *The Radical Reformation*, Third Edition, Volume XV, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, George Huntston Williams, Truman State University Press, Kirksville, Missouri, 2000, p. xxxv.

The four sources of religious authority are tradition, Scripture, reason, and intuition. Among Christians in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the importance of tradition and Scripture as sources of religious authority did not decrease in *absolute* terms compared to prior centuries. However, the importance of tradition and Scripture decreased in *relative* terms as reliance upon reason and inner knowing became more prevalent. How do we integrate tradition, Scripture, reason, and intuition? Each of these sources of religious authority is important. We need a dynamic balance, an integration of these four sources of religious authority.

Over the past 500 years, the pendulum in liberal religion may have moved toward reason and intuition so dramatically that tradition and Scripture are undervalued. I recently heard of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Pacific Southwest District where a text from the Scripture of one of the world's wisdom traditions is read at every Sunday service.<sup>3</sup> Hearing the Scripture at a Sunday morning service – What a concept! The point, I imagine, is not to encourage a literal interpretation of any particular Scripture. The point, I imagine, is to gently set the pendulum moving toward a *contemporary* balance of tradition, Scripture, reason, and intuition.

Unitarian Universalist minister and humanist, the Rev. Edwin Henry Wilson, who died in 1993, was a primary author of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto I and the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II.<sup>4</sup> He posed, and then he answered, these questions, which are found in the hymn he wrote, #113 in *Singing the Living Tradition*: “Where is our holy church? Where is our holy writ (our holy Scripture)? Where is our holy One? Where is our holy land? Where is our paradise?”

The Rev. Edwin Henry Wilson moved the pendulum toward a new balance of tradition, Scripture, reason, and intuition appropriate for his day. What, if anything, needs to change *today* regarding this balance? What will *our* contribution be? I conclude with his words:

“Where is our holy church? Where race and class unite as equal persons in the search for beauty, truth, and right.

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.tapestryuu.org](http://www.tapestryuu.org).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/wilson.html>.

Where is our holy writ? Where'er a human heart a sacred torch of truth has lit, by inspiration taught.

Where is our holy One? A mighty host respond: The people rise in every land to break the captive's bond.

Where is our holy land? Within the human soul, wherever free minds truly seek with *character* the goal.

Where is our paradise? In aspirations sight, wherein we hope to see arise ten thousand years of right."<sup>5</sup>

May it be so!

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<sup>5</sup> Hymn #113 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993.