

«Reformatio» and Renovation: A Relation between Sources and Future

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Abstract – This essay explores the rapport between categories such as *novum* and *renovatio* and the Protestant Reformation. The privileged connection between modernity and *novum* is evident: and insofar as the Reformation is considered one of the determining factors of the rise of modernity, it would be legitimate to infer a strong link with the notion of *novum*. The relationship is more complicated than it appears at a first glance, as the Reformation did not aim at introducing any «novelty», as it rather aspired to restoring a lost purity. This essay will explore the rapport between Reformation and *novum* and *novitas* in the wider frame of modernity's debt towards the Jewish-Christian sources of temporality. It will also consider the ambiguity of the early modern notion of *renovatio*, to assess the Reformation's specific positioning. The genuine novelty of the Protestant Reformation, will be identified in the affirmation of an ever-renewing hermeneutical exercise.

Words such as *novum*, *renovatio* and *novitas* are loaded with political meaning. This set of terms is often associated with notions of change and transformation, so crucial for the political vocabulary of modernity, and consequently, in one way or another, it is associated with the idea of progress, meant as some kind of «betterment» to be reached in the «future». The word *reformatio* floats somewhere in the same lexical galaxy. Nowadays, terms like «reform» and «reformation» are commonly coupled to change and innovation, and are thus clearly projected into the future. These words define today a variety of processes leading towards new and better arrangements. We discuss the need for administrative reforms, and most of all, political reforms; if an institution or a political actor appears obsolete, a reform is called for. «Revolution» is another component of the vocabulary of modernity whose proximity with *novum*, *novitas* and *renovatio* is evident. In fact, revolution defines sudden, sometimes even dramatic or violent, processes of transformation, which swipe away the past to replace it with a «new», better and more durable order.

These pages will discuss the rapport between one specific Reformation – that with a capital R – and the notions of *renovatio* and *novum*. The term «Reformation» suggests a strong connection with innovation and ultimately with *novum* itself; furthermore, the Reformation is usually associated with the rise of modernity, whose relationship with *novum* is quite evident. In fact, «modern» and «modernity» come from the Latin adverb *modo*, («recently»), which indicates what has just happened; in German, modernity is *sic and simpliciter* the *Neuzeit*. Modernity is the framework within which the first time *novum* has been firmly associated with a positive connotation, generating such categories as progress and betterment. The *novum* of political modernity has also affirmed itself through the great Revolutions. The history of the West is scanned by the great revolutions from the Revolution of the Saints to the Glorious, from the American to the French and Soviet Revolution.

Do these associations justify the reformulation of the Reformation as the «Protestant Revolution» as in the well known book of Naphy?¹. Furthermore, do they authorize to affirm that the Reformation did in fact herald some kind of a *novum*, up to the point of paving the way for the kind of extreme social and political innovation as suggested by the category of «revolution»?

Responses to these questions have been quite contradictory. To begin by a most illustrious example, Hegel assigns to the Reformation the very specific function of announcing the new time: the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* thus introduce the genealogical narrative establishing a firm connection between the Reformation and the modern world, and therefore with the affirmation of a positive assessment of *novum*; the other field is championed, among others, by Troeltsch. In fact, the analysis of Reformation's sources seems to provide many arguments to those who do not see a direct connection between the Reformation, at least in its early stage, and a fully self-aware pursuit of *novum* and *novitas*. The Reformation surely was not oriented towards the establishment of anything «new»: as Ricca points out,

«The Reformers would have been horrified if faced with the hypothesis of a new Church – since the Reformation, although excommunicated from the Catholic Church, was and still is an internal event in the one and only Church of Christ»².

¹ W.C. Naphy, *The Protestant Revolution. From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr.*, London, BBC Books, 2008.

² P. Ricca, *The Reformation and Protestantism. An Inventory of the Issue*, in A. Melloni (ed.), *Martin Luther: A Christian Between Reforms and Modernity (1517-2017)*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017, I, pp. 22-42, here p. 30.

Nor is the connection between the Reformation and social and political innovation evident and immediate. Luther's political and social conservatism is well known; Calvin himself, although he was undoubtedly an innovator under so many aspects, can hardly be defined as an advocate of revolutionary experiments.

Throwing a glance to the «modern» condition of time whilst turning back to consider the sources of the Reformation are necessary steps to investigate this contradiction. The exploration of the connection between Reformation and *novum* and *novitas* leads to engage with monumental debates, touching themes such as the role of the Reformation in the rise of modernity. More specifically, this investigation points to the debate concerning the debt of modernity towards Jewish-Christian sources of temporality, a field where some of the major theorists of modernity from Löwith to Blumenberg, have crossed swords. These pages, cannot, for evident reasons, harbour any ambition of doing full justice to this dialogue, and will therefore carry out a more modest task. First of all, they will engage with the question whether the protestant Reformation constitutes a *novum* in its own field or whether it focused on the notion of *renovatio*, and on its specific positioning within the wider framework of the affirmation of a specifically modern temporality.

1. Modern times

Modernity defines itself, at least in a predominant account, by its very special connection with notions of *novum*, *novitas* and *renovatio*. Not only modernity is the «new time», the condition of what has «just» happened; it is a condition that assigns to *novum* an unprecedented positive connotation and that place the best in a future to be reached rather than in a lost golden age. Modernity elaborates a new temporality, a specific alignment of future and past in which the former enlightens and confers meaning to the latter, in view of the possibility of achieving some kind of final and complete fulfilment. This temporal framework provides a distinctive articulation of experience and expectation which goes beyond the usual scope of *historia magistra vitae* insofar as it provides a hermeneutical and not simply exemplary approach to the past³. The decades-long debate on secularization provides the framework

³ The reference is evidently to R. Koselleck, *Futures past. On the Semantics of Historical time*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004; see also M. Miegge, Prologo, in *Il sogno del re di Babilonia, Profetia e storia da Thomas Müntzer a Isaac Newton*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1995.

for discussing the connection between Reformation on the one hand and *novum* and *novitas* on the other hand. As it is known, this debate involved two opposing standpoints confronting each other: those who, with Blumenberg, underlined modernity's independent «legitimacy» and rearticulated the role of modern philosophy in terms of a replacement rather than a re-formulation of theology⁴ on one side, and on the other side those who, from Löwith onwards, stressed the dependence of the temporal categories of modernity on the secularized Jewish-Christian conception of time as a linear progress aiming at a final completion. In this perspective, human events are part of a history, the history of Salvation, proceeding arrow-like through a series of turning points and epoch-marking events, reaching towards the «end» represented by the coming of the Kingdom of God. According to this reconstruction, the eschatological horizon planted the seed for a conception of history oriented towards the future, which, in its secularized version, made room for conceiving of radical social and political transformations⁵.

Linearity and a horizon of hope thus confer legitimacy and worth to the notions of *novum* and *novitas*, projecting social and political agency in the future; yet if on the one hand this conceptual structure of time makes it possible for individual and collective actors to move towards transformation and innovation, may at the same time be held responsible for the pathologies that have affected modernity's relationship with time. Because of its linear and kairological nature, as highlighted by Marramao⁶, the time of modernity is marked by a constant feeling of loss; insofar as time is motion, time is also a never interrupted loss of what was before, or the ever lurking possibility of «missing» something that may happen in the future. *Tempus fugit*, and must be grasped; this means that it may be up for grabs. The modern time-in-motion becomes a «scarce resource», which must be well employed and never

⁴ H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Boston MA, MIT Press, 1983.

⁵ It nonetheless important to clarify that for Löwith the Jewish-Christian eschatology «opened the horizon for our post Christian conception of the world's history» but cannot be immediately identified with historical consciousness itself; «if we venture to say that our modern historical consciousness is derived from Christianity, this can mean only that the eschatological outlook of the New Testament has opened the perspective toward a future fulfilment – originally beyond, and eventually within, historical existence. In consequence of the Christian consciousness we have a historical consciousness which is as Christian by derivation as it is non-Christian by consequence, because it lacks the belief that Christ is the beginning of an end and his life and death the final answer to an otherwise insoluble question». K. Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of Philosophy of History*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 196-197.

⁶ G. Marramao, *Kairós: Towards an Ontology of 'Due Time'*, Aurora CO, The Davies Group Publishers, 2007.

wasted, as Weber noted referring to the Puritans' methodical conduct of life. For Charles Taylor, the transformation of time into a disposable resource is the result of the process of separation caused by modern secularity of an «ordinary time»⁷ from any reference to a metaphysical reality (a thesis that will be further discussed below). Insofar as its linear and eschatological structure promises that «the best days are ahead of us», it also imposes the imperative to «get there as soon as possible». Modern time does not only possess a specific direction, but features its specific and peculiar rhythm, inclining towards a constant acceleration, so as to even justify a definition of *dromomania*⁸. The obsession with speed is typical of revolutionaries; yet, much more familiar, as by now virtually all-pervasive, is the obsessive *crescendo* that characterizes the pace of Capitalism, as in the iconic representation of Charlie Chaplin's lunch machine of *Modern times*. The constant trend to fasten the pace of time has become such a crucial feature of the modern experience as to prompt Hartmut Rosa to read modernity itself as a process of acceleration, and to explain in the key of the «temporalization of time»⁹ many if not all the paradoxical and counterintuitive results of modernity, such as social disintegration, environmental devastation, loss of qualitative individuality and surrender of rational autonomy; Capitalism itself would rather be the effect of this process of acceleration than its overarching cause. Whatever the order of factors may be, the result still is that Capitalism has transformed time into a resource and thus into a commodity by developing a temporal rhythm that has turned innovation into an imperative and obsolescence into a destiny.

Modernity's relationship with *novum* and *novitas* therefore presents a mixture of lights and shades; but whatever the diagnosis may be, the symptoms did not reveal themselves all at once. The anxiety-inducing awareness of a future to be realized did not arise since the inception of modernity, nor did the faith in progress and betterment. *Novitas* and *Novum* gained their positive connotation somehow at the expense of *renovatio*, and only at the end of a long and winding itinerary, whose turning point is to be found at the end of the *siècle des lumières*. Virtually all the narratives of modernity consider the autonomization process of modern historical conscience – and consequently, the full legitimacy

⁷ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2007, specifically Ch. 4 of Part I: «Modern Social Imaginaries».

⁸ P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, Boston MA, MIT Press, 2006.

⁹ H. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 59.

of *novum* and transformation – as more or less accomplished with Enlightenment. The great Revolutions of the 18th century are reflexively and purposefully projected towards the future. Their protagonists, both individual and collectives, were fully conscious of their historical role, and openly declared their intention to proceed to a «new foundation» – a *novus ordo seclorum* – on better and more durable terms than those of the old *régime*, thus opening the way to the revolutions of the 19th and 20th century, even more determined in their intention to create a new society, and even a new humanity¹⁰.

Insofar as the notion of *novum* is heavily indebted to that of *renovatio*, it may be observed that the itinerary of modernity begins with a U turn; in fact, the term *renovatio* was originally articulated as the aspiration to «revive», to «bring back to life» something precious that was lost or dead; not surprisingly, the evocative term of «Renaissance» suggests more the coming back to life from the kingdom of the dead than it heralds a straightforward *novitas*. Many of the most important processes of political transformation in early Modernity were in fact conceived as restorations of an original order unlawfully subverted, exactly as in the case, shortly to be discussed below, of the protestant Reformation. The very term «revolution», so crucial for modern politics, did not originally represent a movement forward as much as an ellipsis. *Revolutio* stems from the vocabulary of modern science, where it indicated revolving movement of celestial bodies around their orbit so as to come back to the point of departure. Even the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689, although the first rebellion of the modern age was to be called revolution by its contemporaries, privileged the astronomic meaning of the term, presenting itself as a process of re-instauration of the proper constitution unduly perverted and corrupted. «Accordingly, what is noticeably absent from the meaning of revolution, even at the end of the 17th century, is any connection with innovation and the inauguration of a new order»¹¹. As in early 16th century European society the need for the reformation was the object of «abundant, almost obsessive» debates:

«No other words carried the conceptual richness and emotive power of the pair *reformatio-renovatio* which – as an organizing image, object and expression of hope and rallying slogan – resonated in nearly every segment of society»¹².

¹⁰ P. Zagorin, *Theories of Revolution in Contemporary Historiography*, in «Political Science Quarterly», 88, 1973, 1, pp. 23-52, here p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² G. Strauss, *Ideas of Reformatio and Renovatio from the Middle Ages to the Reformation*, in T.A. Brady et al. (eds.), *Handbook of European History*, 2 vols., II: *Visions, Programs and Outcomes*, Leiden, Brill, 1995, pp. 1-30, here p. 1.

Such an urgency was in itself the result of a vibrant set of expectations for a radical transformation, which emerged throughout the previous two centuries, embracing society as a whole as well as the Church. In this medieval tradition, the notion of reformation (*reformatio*) is inextricably linked with that of *renovatio*, meant as the effort of bringing back to life a lost heritage, as well as to that of *restauratio*. This aspiration to renewing and restoring could also be coupled to a millenarian belief in God's direct judgement and intervention. Joachim da Fiore and Savonarola are but two among the most typical expressions of this longing for a dramatic social and religious renewal. The myth of a future great *renovatio* sustains and shapes the intellectual and philosophical world of the Renaissance; the fervid expectation of this re-vitalisation of a lost ideal will pave the way for genuinely innovative forms of critique of the past heritage¹³. In this historical and cultural atmosphere, «reformare in melius» the Church meant essentially to restore it to the original purity¹⁴.

Just as they remained for a long indebted to a past-oriented understanding of *renovatio*, the notions of *novum* and *novitas* did not immediately emancipate themselves from their theological roots. The relationship of the categories of modernity with eschatology, millenarianism and prophecy stretches for at least two centuries of the history of Western culture, and it is more dialectic and complex than it looks at first sight, embracing many fields, from politics to the birth of modern science. The road leading to Enlightenment's philosophy as well as to faith in progress and the itineraries of Millenarianism have crossed each other on unexpected grounds, which cannot be retraced if observed through the lens of a purely rationalist critique. Such studies as those of Richard Popkin, Margaret C. Jacob, Hillel Schwarz and Mario Miegge¹⁵ have investigated the importance of the millenarian tradition in European political and philosophical thought. Going beyond the categories of «fanaticism» and «enthusiasm» as applied by rationalist critique, these works aimed at establishing Millenarianism as a fully fledged «third force» in the development of early modern political and philosophical thought. An excellent example of such unexpected proximities is the

¹³ C. Vasoli, *Le filosofie del Rinascimento*, edited by P. Pisavino, Milano, Mondadori, 2002, p. XIV.

¹⁴ G. Strauss, *Ideas of Reformatio and Renovatio*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵ In addition to M. Miegge, *Il sogno del re di Babilonia*, see at least M.C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720*, New York, Gordon & Breach, 1976; R. Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1992; H. Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England*, Berkeley - CA Los Angeles CA, University of California Press, 1980.

myth of a future *Instauratio magna*: the hope for a full deployment of human knowledge and for its capability of investigating Nature did go hand in hand with millenarian expectations, as it was narrated as a sign of the approaching of the completion of time¹⁶.

2. Reformation – back to the sources

The way ahead in establishing the connection between Reformation and such categories as *novum*, *renovatio* and *novitas* may seem to stretch ahead plain and straightforward, if considered within the mainstream narratives reconstructing the Reformation's contribution to modernity. In these accounts, the Reformation plays a crucial role in bringing about such processes as secularization, individualization and rationalization. It would thus produce an emancipatory effect on human agency which would bring momentous consequences on transformative political and social agency, and, at the end of the day, it would even favor the affirmation of *novum* and *novitas*. Other genealogies pay more attention also to the not-so-bright sides. In his great fresco of *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor observes how the protestant Reformation favored the emergence of a «new» and «purely profane» temporal dimension, by severing the ties between the «ordinary time» of human life with what he defines as «higher times», the special points of connection with eternity and transcendence. Taylor thus considers modern «secularization» from the point of view of the rejection of higher times:

«Now the move to what I am calling ‘secularity’ is obviously related to this radically purged time-consciousness. It comes when associations are placed firmly and wholly in homogeneous, profane time, whether or not the higher time is negated altogether, or other associations are still admitted to exist in it»¹⁷.

This separation cannot fail to affect the modern social imaginaries, and to bear important consequences for the emergence of the specific moral order of modernity, as it provides the natural habitat for the «buffered self» resulted from the great disembedding of modernity¹⁸. Politically speaking, the separation between higher times and ordinary times promoted by the Reformation ends up enhancing a model of direct access

¹⁶ M.C. Jacob, *Millenarianism and Science in the Late Seventeenth Century*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», 37, 1976, 2, pp. 335-341; C. Webster, *The Great Instauration. Science Medicine and Reform 1626-1660*, London, Duckworth, 1975.

¹⁷ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 146 ff.

society, as it provides a social imaginary of radical horizontality «where each member is immediate to the whole»¹⁹. This mechanism of direct access generates, in Taylor's reconstruction, momentous processes, and in particular it bears special consequences on modern democracy. On the one hand, the modern concept of popular sovereignty such as expressed in the formula «we the people» necessarily implies the horizontal simultaneity of ordinary time. On the other, the smooth and homogenous time of secularization also shares all the challenges and dangers of the «great disembedding», first and foremost the loss of a sense of purpose and orientation derived from the severance from a narrative of Time with a capital T. In order to regain some kind of meaning, individuals are left to the task of filling their own time with a series of «mini *kairos*», articulated in personal and individualized narratives²⁰. Although Taylor does not explicitly draw this conclusion, this homogenized, immanent and secular time is definitely more prone to being appropriated and transformed into a mere commodity by the predatory rhythm of Capitalism.

A closer look, more concentrated on the theological Reformed heritage itself than on its consequences on Modernity, may nonetheless reveal that the connection between either of these views of modern time and the protestant Reformation follows a less linear and more winding path. The category of «protestant Reformation» is in itself quite elusive – in fact, more and more of current historiography finds it more appropriate to speak of Reformations and of Protestantisms in the plural form²¹. At the very least, it is necessary to differentiate between the magisterial Reformation (to put it simply, that originated from Luther and Calvin) and those individual and collective components of what is currently defined as «radical Reformation» which finds its crucial expressions in Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists. These two souls of the protestant Reformation did not differ solely in their ecclesiological and political views, but developed distinct theological approaches which are quite relevant for the theme here discussed.

At a first glance, the temporality of the magisterial Reformation seems to be neither fast nor furious. Recalling that in Luther's perception the Reformation meant «going back» to the origins of the Church – i.e.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 714.

²¹ U. Rublach, *Introduction*, in U. Rublach (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1-22.

the Scripture – it is surely necessary, although hardly innovative. As it is known, Luther never claimed that it was necessary to establish a «new» Church. On the contrary, he saw his action as a work of restoration, a fight to remove the many «inventions», the illegitimate and harmful innovations and deviations introduced throughout the history of the Church. Luther is by no means an exception within the cultural and spiritual condition of early modern Europe. On the contrary, he is evidently involved in the «spirit of the time», so powerfully captured by Strauss.

Many passages of Luther's writings testify of his intention of abolishing all unjustified «inventions», as he defines all doctrines and practices that had no foundation in the Scripture. One of these inventions is the distinction between clergy and laity: in the *Letter to German Nobility* Luther affirms: «It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the 'spiritual estate'; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the 'temporal estate'»²². Another «invention» is the affirmation that the spiritual power is superior to the temporal power; among all dangerous innovations, especially pernicious is the prohibition for every believer to approach the Bible. According to the Reformer, this is a wickedly invented fable, and they cannot produce a letter in defense of the claim that the interpretation of the Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the Pope alone²³. The *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* lists and fights back all the inventions of the Pope, in the name of their scriptural foundations. For example, discussing ordination, Luther affirms:

«I do not hold that this rite, which has been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am opposed to the invention of human fictions. And it is not right to give out as divinely instituted what was not divinely instituted, lest we become a laughing-stock to our opponents. We ought to see to it that every article of faith of which we boast be certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture»²⁴.

All Roman Catholic sacraments are submitted to the scrutiny of the Scripture, which thus becomes the criterion to assess the legitimacy of any ecclesial practice or theological belief.

²² M. Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, 1520 <https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Luther-Christian-Nobility.pdf> (last accessed June 10 2018).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁴ M. Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (Luther, http://uploads.worldlibrary.net/uploads/pdf/20110830030704babylonian_captivity.pdf, 58 last accessed June 10, 2018).

Even this skeletal evidence may suffice to show how Luther's critique to the past history of the Church responds to his need to go «back» to a lost original purity. Therefore, Luther's action of «re-form» must be understood as aiming at reviving (*renovatio*) the early Church on the basis of the Scripture and not in the sense of establishing any «new» foundation; as, on the contrary, has been the Roman custom. The couple *restoratio/renovatio* continues to play a crucial role also in the second generation of the magisterial Reformation, as it is well evident in the case of Jean Calvin. The reformer of Geneva continues the work of purification of the Church from all deviations introduced by Rome, and more specifically the usurpation of the rights of the people of the Church by the papacy. Chapter 5 of Book IV of his *Institution* carries the crystal-clear title *Que toute la forme ancienne du régime ecclésiastique a été renversée par la tyrannie de la papauté*. The whole chapter illustrates how the people of the Church has been deprived of every right in the elections of bishops, and analyzes how the original role of ministers and deacons has been transformed; the power of the Pope and the bishops is judged as a form of usurpation. Affirmations that echo very closely Luther's position are to be found in Chapter 8 of Book IV, where Calvin affirms that only the word of God is the foundation of the Church's doctrine as well as the authority of ministry, and recalls how the papacy «perverted» its original purity. Adherence to the Scripture becomes once again the yardstick to measure the true nature of the Church; significantly, this principle prevents Calvin from expressing a complete condemnation of the Church of Rome. In Chapters 8 and 9 of Book III of his *Institution* Calvin draws a parallel between the Christian Church and the people of Israel. Just like many among the kings of Israel had at times «turned aside from the pure worship of God» the Papists have vitiated and corrupted the state of religion. However, the people of Israel maintained some elements of the original «church» even under the deviating kings; and insofar as the Roman church does too, Calvin is prompted to acknowledge that it still possesses some sparks of authenticity miraculously preserved²⁵.

Many more pieces of textual evidence could be cited. Nonetheless, even these few references may show how Calvin's ecclesiology, which surely deserves to be defined as «innovative», in the reformer's mind stems from the need to re-dress some kind of wrong, thus «bringing back»

²⁵ J. Calvin, *L'Institution chrétienne*, Aix en Provence, KERYGMA, 1978 (ed. orig. *Institutio christiana religionis*, Geneve, Robert Estienne, 1559).

a lost treasure: under this point of view, Luther and Calvin share the same point of departure in their theological and ecclesiological journey. However, the central role which both Luther and Calvin assign to the Scripture cause *reformatio* to be a process, not an event. The Church, just as any other human institution, is always *sub judice*: constantly in the presence of God and of his word. The formula «*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*» is almost undoubtedly apocryphal, to be attributed more to Barth than to the Reformers, and yet the essential spirit of the Reformation's enterprise. The Scripture therefore becomes the unavoidable point of reference – but what is truly innovative in the Reformation is that this point can be accessed by every believer without the mediation of the clergy or the *magisterium*.

3. The time of the Spirit

The radical Reformation looks at the couple *renovatio/reformatio* from quite a different and distinctive angle. Whilst for the magisterial Reformation the Scripture is the undisputed criterion to determine which measures may be conducive to the restoration of the lost purity of the Church, the galaxy of the radical Reformation – starting with Müntzer – privileges the role of the Spirit, and accuses Luther and his followers to «hide behind the Scripture», so to say, using it as an excuse for bridling the Spirit's freedom. This point is developed by Müntzer as well as by Sebastian Franck, another critic of Luther. Typical of Franck is the juxtaposition between the constraints of life «in the Flesh» and the complete freedom of life in the Spirit. In his *Paradoxa* (1534), Franck goes to the extent of presenting even the Scripture as part of the life in the flesh, and of consequently affirming that it should not constitute a limit to the transforming power of the Spirit²⁶. The possibility of *renovatio* is thus projected more decidedly into a future dimension, as it gets once and forever disentangled from its anchorage to the past represented by the lutheran imperative of referring to the Scripture as ultimate criterion.

Neither Luther nor Calvin actually deserved the fierce accusation, moved by their radical adversaries, of transforming the Scripture in a sort of idol to be passively worshipped. In fact, both affirmed quite clearly that the foundation of the faith is in the Bible interpreted with the help of the Spirit. Nonetheless, they both assumed the Bible as a kind of

²⁶ S. Franck, *Paradoxa*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2015.

kathékon to measure human actions, the antidote against the temptation of mistaking human will with God's words whilst Müntzer, Franck, and the Anabaptist instead affirmed the primacy of the Spirit over and above this hermeneutical imperative. These considerations may be of some help in placing the relationship between magisterial and radical reformations in a clearer perspective, shifting the focus from the political opposition of conservatism versus revolutionary politics as articulated by Ernst Bloch²⁷ to a more genuinely theological cleavage, revolving around the possibility of identifying God's project and God's kingdom with any human, historically determined political project. This distinction provides a key to understanding the profound controversies that have emerged on Millenarianism since the inception of the Reformation and that continued for at least the following two centuries of its history.

The early generation of the Reformation witnessed a proper explosion of millenarian expectations. Given the reasons outlined in paragraph 2, it is hardly surprising to see how the hopes of *renovatio* could translate into the belief in a closer eschatological horizon; however, this is not the only element to be taken into consideration. A crucial factor has to be identified at the level of the specific ecclesiology introduced by the Reformation. «Before the reformation the Church integrated the possible end of the world with its organization of time – the end of time was sublimated in the Church. The reformation breaks this equilibrium»²⁸. Koselleck's reconstruction can be reformulated borrowing Taylor's vocabulary, to stress how the Reformation deprived the Church of the role of providing the mediating point between the «high time» of transcendence and the «ordinary time» of human action. The results, at least in part, contradicted Taylor's diagnosis, as the final outcome was not the deployment of the empty and homogenous time of secularity as much as a new mode of conceiving the relationship between the theological plan of eschatological hope with that of historical political projects. «Barring the possibility of sublimation within the church, eschatological expectations and hopes are re-oriented towards this present world»²⁹. The elimination of the mediating points between immanence and eschatology, however, posed for Luther and the magisterial Reformation in general a major theological challenge; protecting the Word of God

²⁷ E. Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution*, in *Ernst Bloch Gesamtausgabe*, 16 vols., II, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969.

²⁸ R. Koselleck, *Future Past*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

from any attempt of appropriation by one human agent an other. The *Bauernkrieg* is a paradigmatic and tragic example of how Luther had to re-position himself towards the historical hope in the coming of the Kingdom of God. Luther's political conservatism, such as expressed in the inevitably evoked doctrine of the two kingdoms, cannot and should not be removed from the overall picture, and yet it cannot be presented as the only one possible reason. What was at stake was much more than the defense of earthly authorities, namely an essential theological principle such as the unbridgeable difference between God's plan and human projects.

Calvin's position on eschatology is perhaps even more drastic than Luther's one, insofar as he adamantly states that the age of Prophecies is definitely closed with the coming of the Christ. Consequently, he is just as firm in severely undermining the status of the Church in relationship with the Kingdom of God, and in drastically reframing Augustine's vision of the Church as an image *intra homines* of the *civitas Dei*: most definitely, the *compagnie des fidèles* is not the embassy of the Kingdom of God. The history of later Calvinism will nonetheless feature many revamps of the millenarian fever. Various forms of *enthousiasme* will surface in times of crisis, as it was made evident in the case of the *Église au Desert* or in the Rebellion of the *Camisards*. The bitter controversies opposing the *furieux Jurieu* to the more «enlightened» expressions of Calvinism, from Pierre Bayle to the theological school of Saumur are an exemplary illustration of this deep-set contradiction within the history of the Reformation³⁰.

This account seems to suggest a clear cut juxtaposition between an «institutional» Protestantism prone to a «spiritualization» of eschatology and the galaxy of millenarian «fanatics». Other genealogies however present a more nuanced, and also more faithful, image of the eschatological line of reflection within the Reformation, in the wake of the historical scholarship mentioned in paragraph 1. Among them a fundamental contribution has been offered by the work of Mario Miegge, with his profound and acute reading of Calvin's eschatological perspective which permits to overcome the simplified opposition between fanaticism and reasonableness. Through a deep and sophisticated analysis of his writings, Miegge suggests to read Calvin's theology in the key of a herme-

³⁰ On this topic, see at least A. Minerbi Belgrado, *Sulla crisi della teologia filosofica del Seicento, Pierre Jurieu e dintorni*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2008 e M. Yardeni, *Le Réfuge Protestant*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1985.

neutical model; his «hermeneutical approach» sheds new light also on other expressions of eschatological expectations. The essential point of Miegge's interpretation of Calvin is the reversed order between history and prophecy. Prophecy is not the key to interpretation of history, nor a ready-to-use kit for predicting the future. On the contrary, history throws light on the interpretation of prophecy. This model goes far beyond the well-known terms of *historia magistra vitae* and the exemplary value of history, as it engages with the transcendental dimension of God's design, which is and remains impenetrable to the natural light of reason³¹. The space left for human beings is the space of hermeneutics, which corresponds to the space in between of secularity; a space that is not as empty and homogenous as the ordinary time described by Taylor, as it is continuously enlightened and questioned by the latent, yet palpable presence of an eschatological horizon.

4. «Reformatio semper interpretanda»

The few and scanty reflections offered in this paper cannot have the ambition of providing a definite answer to the question whether the Reformation had in fact promoted the emergence of such political categories as *novum* or *novitas*. If anything, they seem to complicate, rather than clarify, the terms of the question. The aspects of Luther's and Calvin's thought which have been briefly discussed above seem to suggest that the effects they produced – if any – were in fact mostly unintended. Strauss somehow implies such a conclusion, when he states that the mental and verbal charge of hopes and anticipations carried by «reform» and «renewal» was so high that it could not have failed to release itself upon such a spectacular public figure and the well-publicized struggles of his embattled career³². Luther, and to a certain extent Calvin himself, followed a path that was established ahead of them which created a series of «misunderstandings», whilst in reality their project consisted mostly in a journey back towards the sources of Christianity.

Evidently, the Reformers did not mean to re-found the Church; yet, their work changed the path towards faith, thus constituting a different kind of renovation, which would not simply look backwards but rather introduce a genuine *novum*. Paolo Ricca magisterially highlights how, as

³¹ M. Miegge, *Il sogno del re di Babilonia*, p. 205.

³² G. Strauss, *Ideas of Reformatio and Renovatio*, p. 3.

a «community of Faith in the Trinitarian God and in Jesus Christ» the Reformation did not re-found anything.

«The Reformation gave a genuinely new foundation to the Church insofar as it replaced the Magisterium with the Scripture which, as is known, was always present in the life, cult, and faith of the Church, but it had never before been taken as its foundation. The Reformation did exactly that»³³.

Therefore, there was no new Church, but rather a different model of the one and only Church of Christ: this is indeed what the Reformation created. Thus, the Church of the Reformation is not simply a reformed Catholic Church, but rather another model of the Church. Similarly, Protestantism is not simply a Reformed Catholicism, but rather another way of being Christians – a new type of Christianity.

The conclusion that can be drawn is at the same time minimal and monumental: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda as interpretatio semper interpretanda*. The genuine novelty of the protestant Reformation, therefore, should be traced in the priority it assigned to an unavoidable hermeneutical imperative – and in the accessibility of this hermeneutical exercise. The Reformation did not replace the «old» Church with a «new» one – but submitted the one and only Church to a constant work of re-assessment and of *renovatio* in the light of the Scripture, whose message could and should never be identified with its human interpretation. Nor did the Reformation in its original sources intended to re-found society, as did the Anabaptists, who were moved by the conviction of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. This separation between the scope of human innovation and God's *eskata*, however, does not necessarily bring to the expulsion of any perspective of transformation and innovation from the scope of human action, nor does Luther's and Calvin's understanding of *renovatio* begin and end with a simple restoration of the past, as in their view any human institution – starting with the reformed Church – is framed by a process of constant questioning and reassessment. In fact, the Reformation separated any human project from its divine matrix, conceiving the *civitas hominum* as a set of temporary, however much necessary, arrangements, where human institution (and government among them) were to be respected for their function yet never to be assimilated to God's unquestioned sovereignty.

³³ P. Ricca, *The Reformation and Protestantism*, pp. 28-30.

Taylor's reconstruction of the divorce of secular time from higher times caused by the elimination of mediating agents is indeed illuminating, yet, it can be counterbalanced by looking at the hermeneutical imperative, identified by Miegge as the crucial and distinctive feature of Reformed theological approach to time, its secularization, and prophecy. The space in between of secularity, in this perspective, is not an absolute, empty and opaque present, continuously threatened by insignificance, where customized mini-*kairos* constitute the only alternative. The refusal to see the Church as a mediation point with eschatology and the even firmer admonition against any human appropriation of eschatology expressed by Luther and Calvin does not automatically bar the way to any possibility of human agency oriented towards a perspective of transformation. Gauchet's re-articulation of the *saeculum* as a time of separation, a time in between the present and the accomplishment of the eschatological promise of *parousia*³⁴ captures the essence of the Reformation's view. Consequently, the time-in-between becomes the space where human beings may respond to God's calling, the space to be filled by human actions: a present constantly stirred and interrogated by the ever renewed and renewing action of the word of God, to be lived in the perspective of a future that can never be completely mapped. As in Barth words,

«The *basileia* is here, and yet it is not here; it is revealed, yet it is also hidden; it is present, but always future; it is at hand, indeed in the very midst, yet it is constantly expected, being still, and this time seriously, the object of the petition: Thy Kingdom come»³⁵.

³⁴ M. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999.

³⁵ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols, Edinburgh, Clark, 1957-1969, III: *The Doctrine of Creation*, 1958, Part 3, p. 156.