

## Preface

THIS BOOK EXAMINES A HISTORICALLY INFLUENTIAL IDEAL OF CHRISTIAN religious practice and surveys Protestant Reformation theologians defending it in their conception of “true religion.” I will claim in the pages following that with this ideal, these reformers, however unintentionally, supported a notion of God similar to the “god of the philosophers.” Furthermore, in their advocacy of true religion, these reformers implied that the ideal practitioner of true religion should resemble and indeed live like a philosopher, in a sense to be explained in the pages that follow.

I am not making these claims with reference to all Protestants at the time of the Reformation, but to a smaller group, the Reformed tradition, stemming from John Calvin and others. This book, however, is not encouraging abandonment of Reformed Protestantism, nor encouraging becoming Catholic or Lutheran, however much the Reformed thinkers surveyed were in large part critiquing their Catholic and Lutheran theological adversaries. However, it is a book about some particulars of a vaunted religious ideal, and though antedating the Reformation, much Reformation Protestantism beyond the Reformed faction accelerated this ideal into a staple of modern Christian devotion, primarily of course among Protestants, but particularly so among orthodox Protestants. The particulars of this conception of true religion have a seductive simplicity that resonates with much religious practice through the ages, though the ideal provokes too little reflection before assuming too unquestioningly congruence with the Christian religion. Moreover, this ideal—historically fashioned as a reforming principle—permeates many Christian communities of the past and present, and indeed will continue to influence the future.

I write about this phenomenon from within the Reformed theological tradition, simply because it is the Christian tradition I happen to know best. The judgments I make of the Reformed tradition in what follows are not unique to that tradition, for the phenomenon I speak of is easily found in varying degrees in many other Christian traditions, and indeed can be seen in non-Christian religious traditions as well. Moreover, the popularity

## *Preface*

of this religious ideal advances from roots in a kind of basic or natural religion and thus often makes a timeless appeal to common sense. The ideal is also not infrequently called upon as correction to what are deemed religious excesses violating the form of religion assumed by religious reformers, Christian and otherwise. However, the particulars of this ideal for reform are often only faintly Christian, but strongly rationalistic. This is why I have written the book: particulars of this ideal of true religion dictate many details of Christian religious life and worship, but the ideal is dubiously predisposed for the religion it presumes to bolster.

However, in focusing upon the Reformed tradition as my example, that tradition is not deemed the worst offender of what I critique in the pages that follow. Indeed, the point of this book is not about indicting a particular Christian tradition, but rather critiquing a conception of God and human anthropology shared by diverse Christian traditions dutifully emulating a rational ideal often assumed as Christian in character.

The treatment of a subject which might be termed invasive rationalism, moreover, will invite misinterpretation. That is, while I am an Anglican adherent of the Reformed theological tradition, I am also by training and trade a Christian philosopher, and therefore, one interpretation of this work might wrongly mistake the philosopher author as finally understanding correctly the incoherence of Athens and reason when applied to Jerusalem or Christian beliefs. However, I am not following, for example, the route of the medieval Islamic thinker Al-Ghazali, as I understand him. Al-Ghazali began to charge the philosophers of his day with heresy as regarded the faith, while himself having recourse to the mystical theologies of his Islamic tradition. My direction in this book, in a general way, is something of the reverse. That is, I am contending that the theologians of my study advance a questionable form of religious devotion in much of their critique of the material and tangible practices of sacramental religion. These theologians, therefore, I see as relying upon too much rationalism in the defense of their notion of proper religious devotion. I am of course not impugning these theologians for an idea, much less for an idea because it shares historical kinship to a philosophical ideal, but rather for advancing dubious particulars when applied to the Christian religion. Therefore, in this work, neither do I impugn philosophy as philosophy or reason as reason with my claim that a kind of spiritualizing rationalism intrudes upon the worship of the Christian God in this idealized conception. Rather, in evaluating a portion of the Reformation history of striving to live out and practice true religion,

I maintain that an adequate conception of the Christian God bears only remote likeness to the god of the philosophers, and that worshippers of the Christian God need not be reborn as models of cognitive and philosophical creatures who set no store by the material world and its resonances and rhythms in their religious conceptions and practices. In this work, I will refer to these critiqued conceptions and to the anthropological commitments of this ideal as exhibiting allegiance toward a kind of “naked truth.” Said another way, there is a denuded devotion to the Christian God by human worshippers, neither of whom exist in the form of the devotional model encouraged in the critiqued conception of “true religion.”

Nor do I fault the theologians discussed in these pages as owning all responsibility for the popularity of their judgments about the practice of true religion. This is because these conceptions are not the province of intellectuals only, or even theologians or philosophers in particular. The briefest foray into the history of the Christian Church reveals among many lay Christians sympathy for a God conceptualized like the philosopher’s god, with encouragement given to an attendant human anthropology appropriate to the worship of such a god.

What I argue in this work is perhaps beneficially contrasted to the work of other philosophers of rightful note in the Reformed tradition, for much current philosophical interest in the Protestant Reformed religious tradition centers on “Reformed epistemology” as articulated and defended by Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and George Mavrodes, among others. In Reformed epistemology as characterized by these philosophers, Christian religious belief is categorized, in Plantinga’s words, as “epistemologically basic.” This position is acknowledged to be derived from the thought of John Calvin, the sixteenth century Protestant reformer.

Such a position may create the impression that the Reformed tradition is free of the rationalizing temptation provoking the religious believer to produce an account or justification of that belief amenable to rational demands.

My argument in this book, however, is that the impression of independence from rational containment is only partially the case in this tradition, because a proclivity to rationalism *is* strong and evident in the early Reformed thinkers of the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, this feature of Reformed devotion and worship has long been noted by scholars describing this tradition, while rarely touched upon by most within the tradition. The resonances between the Reformed tradition and a kind of philosophical

## *Preface*

rationalism, while not reflecting common aims at the level of ideology (or theology), nonetheless reflect some common epistemological, anthropological, and metaphysical commitments that are evident in comparing the rationalism prominent in portions of the historical Western tradition of philosophy to these early Reformed religious thinkers. Thus, though not seeking to advance philosophically at the time of the early Reformation, but instead to arrive at what this tradition called true religion, the Reformed tradition nevertheless weakens Christian consciousness with a devotional rationalism in that quest for true religion.

The Reformed tradition of course shares in the general Protestant opposition to philosophy characteristic of the early Reformation. However, in Luther, opposition to philosophy becomes most strenuous at the very level where it remains in force in the Reformed tradition. The reticence of Luther toward philosophy is basically over its rationalism. In the Reformed tradition, its own rationalism is responsible for what sympathy it has with philosophy. Contrary to the common and understandable perception of Protestants and philosophers as pursuing disparate routes to truth, as in, for example, reliance upon revelation or reason respectively, I argue that in this early Reformed tradition, there is a latent rationalism vying to progressively elevate religious communion between God and the worshipper to levels proportionately distant from the senses and material media. In the transformation of religious practice by these Reformed thinkers, their negative critique of the association of materiality to religion takes the form of the charges of ritualism, superstition, and idolatry. Meanwhile, the religious ideal of these reformers insists that the devotional life of true religion be lived largely bereft of materiality because of these attendant liabilities.

Many of the material aspects of religion in this conception seem foreign and therefore are frequently minimized or sacrificed in this notion of true religion. This disunion comes about because a Reformed Protestantism that sought a reformation of aids to worship incorporated rationalism as a Protestant principle by a strenuous and halting preference for the spiritual over the sensual. In the most zealous Reformed combating of possible occasion for idolatry, the antipathy toward the sensual and material elements of religious devotion pushed some early Reformed thinkers toward a conception of religious truth and practice increasingly bereft of material elements. There is, therefore, a corresponding restraint placed upon the human soul to find virtually all spiritual nourishment in a spiritual God, and largely without the means of material aids. In this conception, because

the Christian aids to devotion to God are teeming with the potential of idolatry, much of the piety of the early Reformed tradition, in the desire to draw closer to the divine, as a consequence, paradoxically draws closer to rationalism in how God is conceptualized—and to the metaphysical mind-god of rationalism and implicitly to the god of the philosophers. Accordingly, the devotee of God assumes the psychological or mental pose of a philosopher.

The affinity of the Reformed thinkers for the rationalism characteristic of philosophy is not for the most part an affinity for philosophy. Rather, it is an affinity for rationalism, which accounts for the peculiar and paradoxical affinity of these Protestants for the rational mind of the philosopher, with *anthropos philosophicus* esteemed as the truest human model for the practice of true religion. It is scarcely cause for wonder, then, that many scholars have seen in the particulars of this expression of true religion the unintended cultivation of later modern rationalism. For that reason, my first chapter will briefly engage this legacy of the Reformed tradition.

In philosophical terms, the reticence of the Reformed tradition toward the religious value of materiality is a transformation from a religious to a rational philosophical consciousness. The nineteenth century Protestant German philosopher Hegel offers justifications for such an historical change, and in this work, I will take some issue with Hegel's positive estimation of such an historical transition, while I nevertheless make use of his conceptual terminology. Moreover, my inquiry concerns the attitude toward materiality by the early Reformed thinkers that accomplishes this feat in terms of a transformation of religious consciousness. I will claim that in slighting or dismissing material considerations from Christian devotion, sectors of Protestantism moved true religion into a philosophical consciousness as evidenced by the practices of true religion.

In making the claims of this book, I am not contending merely for the logical truism that any religion or ideology in its assertions embraces some philosophy or philosophical form, no matter how emphatic its denial of such. Rather, and contrary to Hegel, I argue that the negative judgment upon the propriety of material components and resonances for religious devotion represents something of a depleting historical shift of consciousness in Christian practice and devotion to the Christian God.

At the same time, this transformed religious culture provided a needed reformation of how the Christian religious world comported with the secular world, and indeed, in some particulars, rightly disciplined medieval

## *Preface*

models of Christian religious devotion run amuck. Nevertheless, my larger estimation is that the change of religious consciousness often expresses itself as a kind of religion scarcely congruent with the material facets of the Christian religion. Moreover, the shift from a robust, though admittedly at times excessive, material Christian practice toward a stage of trimmed religious worship may end by impugning virtually anything for religious devotion except the human mind in communion with the mind of God. Meanwhile, many of the aids to Christian devotion are averted and castigated so as to ensure having only God. This religious ideal, however, revolves around a notion of truth as “naked”—as sufficient because it is true, but nevertheless foundering in lacking a robust conception of the material dimensions of Christian truth, while the conception promoted is significantly indebted to a rational and spiritualizing point of view. This particular, but still popular, ideal of true religion truncates Christian consciousness, life, and devotion, as it nevertheless, in part ushered in the modern Western world.

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