Eglise francaise du Saint Esprit

*Spirituality Course June 3, 2020*

Reformed Spirituality (Piety)

**What Christian denominations do we consider to be 'Reformed'?**

Presbyterian, Baptist, Calvinist, United Reformed, Huguenots. (Methodist and Episcopal to a lesser extent).

**Why 'piety' and not 'spirituality'?**

While piety and spirituality both imply becoming a certain sort of person, for Presbyterians the primary focus is always on a manner of living that is consonant with and responsible in relation to one's religious commitments in a community or family (or national) setting.  For them, the word 'spirituality' is less about living. For reformed churches, the word 'spirituality' implies a sort of disembodied holiness or sanctity.

**Who or what were the main historical influences on reformed piety?**

 - The Devotio Moderna (A revival of Christian piety and devotion – not necessarily the foundation of a new religious order, more like an interior reformation and a new style of Christian commitment.  In the Netherlands between the 1370’s and the 1430’s.  Geert Groote (1340 – 1384) Thomas à Kempis (1380 – 1471)  Florens Radewyns (1350 – 1400) The followers of the Devotio Moderna also lived in pious communities – it wasn’t just an interior movement, it was a way of living together and committing yourself to others.

 - Renaissance humanism proposed a transcendent God inaccessible to human understanding or experience, with whom no ecstatic personal encounters could take place. The midpoint between heaven and earth. Therefore the only way you can experience God is through God's actions, not through meditation on God's qualities. This contributed to what the Reformers came to call Covenant Theology, which we’ll discuss later.

 - Reformed Spirituality was also a reaction against populist late-medieval Christian spirituality: Pilgrimages, veneration of relics, excessive Marian devotions, meditations on the Passion of Christ, penitential exercises. The rosary. Stations of the cross. Eucharistic devotions (benediction, Corpus Christi etc) The Sacred Heart. These practices seemed to exist in and for themselves and sometimes had little to do with how one lived in community or in a political organization.

- Reformed spirituality could also have been a reaction against 'inward-turned' spiritualities that seemed to lack any society or ethical frame of reference. (The sort of spiritualities that we looked at when we discussed the Jesuits and Teresa and John). There was a later reaction to this in what is sometimes called the Further Reformation - especially in the Netherlands. The Dutch Golden Age (1600 - 1750) Orthodoxy, Piety, German Pietism and the Puritans in England.

- Calvin's Geneva, the Zurich reformers who saw the Christian community as a republic, not as a strictly liturgical, worshiping or monastic community.

 Reformed Piety as a particular set of Christian values lived out in the larger body-politic or community.

**Heinrich Bullinger (Swiss reformer, successor of Zwingli)**

 "What is, I pray you, more to be delighted in, than the good platform of a well-ordered city, wherein there is (as one did say) the Church well grounded; wherein God is rightly worshipped, and wherein the word of God in faith and charity is duly obeyed, so far forth as it pleaseth God to give the gift of grace; wherein also the magistrate doth defend good discipline and upright laws; wherein the citizens are obedient and at unity among themselves, having their assemblies for true religion and matters of justice; wherein they are used to have honest meetings in the church, in the court, and in places of common exercise; wherein they apply themselves to virtue and the study of learning, seeking an honest living by such sciences as man's life hath need of, by tillage, by merchandise, and other handy occupations; wherein children are honestly trained up, parents recompensed for their pains, the poor maintained of alms, and strangers harbored in their distress."

**Covenant Theology:**

Covenant describes the relationship in which one party initiates and establishes its conditions and the other accepts these conditions and receives whatever attendant benefits or liabilities accrue from the relationship. It is a hierarchical rather than a mutual agreement, rather like a last Will and Testament. Biblical covenants were not made just with individuals. God made covenants with a people: it was a communal affair. Individuals share in its obligations or its benefits only if they are a part of the community with which the covenant has been made.

God alone is the initiating party. God acts, chooses, calls, saves and commissions. People respond, not initiate.

God is supreme sovereign. He is sovereign in creation (through the doctrine of Divine Providence). He is sovereign in salvation (through the doctrines of election and predestination)

Individual salvation is important, but not central: probably because there is a deep skepticism of individual religious experiences of a mystical or ecstatic sort. The primary goal isn't individual experience or individual self-improvement, it is the welfare of your neighbor.

**Human nature and how the idea that we are depraved creatures by nature affects our approach to spirituality.**

Total depravity has an easy mnemonic to help us remember its chief points: TULIP

T.U.L.I.P, or the Five points of Calvinism

* **T**otal Depravity:  We can do absolutely no good works. We are dead in sin.
* **U**nconditional Election: God chooses to give some people eternal life without looking for anything good in them.
* **L**imited Atonement: Atonement is not offered to anyone apart from the elect of God.
* **I**rresistible Grace: God’s grace to save a person can’t be resisted. You might be dragged to heaven against your will…….
* **P**reservation of the Saints:  God preserves His people so that they can’t be lost. Once saved, always saved.

Reformed theology and piety exhibit a complete and profound distrust of the capacities of human nature. Human nature is by definition sinful. No part of the human person is untouched by sin. This belief doesn't just have profound implications for theology (the notions of grace, predestination, original sin etc.), it also has implications for church governance. Human freedom, unless hedged in with strict checks and balances, will turn everything to a complete disaster. Representative government ensures that no one is free to have her or his own way. It is a sort of safety-catch to mitigate the effects of one defective will exercised on the people in despotism.  All of this throws us back on God alone.

Of course, this is going to have a profound impact on your spirituality. There is no ‘rowing’ here, it’s all ‘sailing’. Your prayers will begin with an act of thanksgiving to an all-powerful God, an expression of your unworthiness to address Him, renewed thanks for His action in saving you, an expression of your unworthiness to ask for anything apart from the fact that you’re confident of God’s grace, and then a list of requests.

**The sufficiency of the scriptures**

Everything that we need for our salvation is included in scripture. It contains what we should believe and how we ought to live in relation to God and also in relation to other human beings. Scripture is "the only infallible rule of faith and practice." The Bible is the one and only source that can't fail you.  Jesus is the means by which we interpret the Bible. If there is something in it that we find difficult, we ask ourselves the question: "How would Jesus interpret it?"

**The mind**

The centrality of scriptural interpretation places a great emphasis on the right use of the mind and the training of the mind. Presbyterians have set up lots of schools and colleges: sound preparation is a necessary adjunct for useful and faithful living under a sovereign God. Democracy is predicated on a well-educated electorate. The Protestants knew how to read, and learning is a vehicle for responsible discipleship.

**The blurring of the distinction between sacred and secular**

The emphasis is more on the incarnation than on the atonement. No dimension of human life and experience lies outside the sphere of God's sovereignty.  Mature growth in community is more important and more all-encompassing than individual spiritual quest. Engagement with the world is more important and more useful than withdrawal from it. This isn’t to be confused with what people call the Protestant Work Ethic.

**The Genevan Psalter**

The Psalms  Marot’s *Letter to the Ladies of France* - an introduction to a translation of the first fifty Psalms of Geneva into French. The daily use of the psalter isn’t limited to the corporate or private gatherings - it can be used in every part of life. If you learn it by heart, you can relate it to the different settings you are in during the day: in the shop, ploughing the fields, travelling from one place to another. They set the psalms to well-known tunes that people had been singing forever.

In the Psalter there is much emphasis on creation and how God is revealed in creation. This infuses people into the psalms and sets people to recalling them during the day in their daily occupations.

**The Psalter and Reformed Spirituality**

In the Reformed tradition, the community—the church—is understood as the first vector of God’s grace. At the same time a global evolution happens in Western society with the development of interiority and the individual self. A lot of triggers for these transformations. Look at some aspects of these evolutions in the reformed context. In the Reformed tradition one the major place of corporate and private worship is the book of Psalms translated into French by Clément Marot and Théodore de Bèze at the beginning of the Genevan Reformation (1562). The Psalter was the core of reformed worship. During church gatherings the psalms were sung in monody, with no musical accompaniment. Only in household (“Les maisons”) people could use polyphony.

In the Psalter, God is present in the creation. God’s actions are to be deciphered through the natural elements. The Psalter makes the natural world present. Natural imagery, how God is being revealed and revealing himself in creation through metaphors and comparisons (streams, mountains etc.). The frequentation of the psalter with its omnipresence of the whole of creation (not just humans), marked Reformed piety deeply.

The Psalter has become the core of the reformed identity and liturgy. For the Huguenots especially, in their persecution and exile, the Psalter in its early translation (“langue de Canaan”) was a key locus and tool of their identity and resistance. As time passed, the language of the first translation became old and there was attempt to update it but it faced a lot of resistance because the early translation had been the language in which people had suffered and rejoiced through hardship (persecution, exile etc.)

**The Psalter and Attention to God’s work in Creation**

The devotional use of the psalter shaped the way the Reformed faithful throughout the world (as it was translated in many European languages and made available en masse) looked at creation, not only as beautiful work of God but also a place of inspiration for devotional practices. The simplicity of reformed worship is centered on the simplicity of God’s revelation in creation. Bernard Palissy is a good example of this attention. He created ornamental plates in ceramics. Ponds where you see aquatic animals. Palissy’s ceramics are not merely beautiful and realistic representations of nature but something else is happening that bears witness to a spiritual meditation. Meaningful iconography. As when for instance a snake comes in the pond and all the animals try to flee away. This depiction of the natural world acknowledges a spiritual value to the depiction of creation as a locus of God’s presence and also as metaphor for contemporary issues and meditations about human life. The trouble introduced by the snake cannot but recall the context of the Wars of Religions during which Palissy was creating his ceramics. The whole of Creation, animal and humans, is a place where God is being revealed to us and mutually interpret each other so as to reveal our sin and God’s active power. Humans are related to the rest of God’s creation. Creation is understood as part of the covenantal community which is core to the Reformed tradition.

**Reformed Pietism and the Birth of Natural Science from Reformed Devotion**

One of the strongholds of the Reformed faith was the Netherlands. International trade, colonial endeavors throughout the world. Expansion of wealth. One of the wealthiest regions in the world. In the 17th century, desire for a revival of Reformed faith. Some people considered the church being crippled by a form of dryness, too much convention and mundanity that was a hindrance for true, heartfelt Christianity. Development of small groups gathering in the spirit of *devotio moderna*. These movement where still present in the Netherlands, although monastic life had disappeared in northern Netherlands (United Provinces). Creation of small group gatherings, house churches, who desired to revive the piety of the whole church. Jean de Labadie (1610-1674) and Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) played a key role in the Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*) in the Netherlands. Jean de Labadie was trained as a Jesuit in France and then became a reformed pastor. Very charismatic. Anna Maria van Schurman, “first student”, first woman to attend the university at Utrecht. She was a very learned woman (spoke 12 languages, wrote the first grammar of Ethiopian language etc.). Both developed this new form of gathering on the example of the early church, first as part of the Dutch Reformed Church, and then as a separate community. They nonetheless maintained a very strong network in the established Reformed church. In the Labadist movement, merging of a certain catholic spirituality, that invites to live in the story you’re telling with you emotions, and the Reformed tradition that puts the stress on the church as the place of God’s revelation and the Bible as the center of liturgical practice.

Now, it is interesting to see how this plays out in the Reformed people’s relationship to God, creation and the Church. An interesting aspect of the reformed spirituality that is usually understated is it the importance of creation as an “icon” of God’s presence; you can contemplate in creation a certain innocence that is not per se corrupted by sin. In a sense there is in creation a form of sacredness that remains but can nonetheless be corrupted by men’s unruled use of creation. This conception of creation makes it possible to understanding nature and a devotion to nature not as a mere secular and scientific enquiry but as a contemplation of creation as a place of God’s working presence. Development at the same time of the religious idea and experience of God’s Providence: God is working in us and in the world through time and place themselves. Not only in church and creation but throughout everything.

*“Innocent selfhood is the one of every particular Being created sensitive or insensitive ; Inanimate or animate ; Intelligent, or Non-Intelligent, such as it has been made and created by God, being its pure & simple Participation according to the measure of what God has granted it : This Being coming out of God, & remaining such as he created it, is certainly righteous & good, pure & holy in its manner, & moreover united to God, in that that it is what he wants it to be, & is nothing by its own Being or will, of which God does not want it to be ; and thus it is one in God & with God, since God is the nobler and stronger Being ; the Being on which the Created is dependent & to which it has & must have all its connection.” Jean de Labadie, Treatise of the Self*

When you are thinking of the Reformed tradition as centered on the word of God and engaged in listening to it (as you can see with the central presence of the pulpit in Reformed churches), it is interesting to see that creation itself is also directly preaching to you if you listen to it. This has been very important for the Huguenots who have been deprived of worship houses and were forced to gather outside in the maquis or Désert. It has been showed that Huguenots developed a keenness for arboriculture and botany (many réfugiés became naturalists or jardiniers for elite gardens in the Refuge, developed new breeds of plants etc.). This interest in understanding creation didn’t come from a very modern and secular scientific perspective as we may think today but from a devotional one: how is God working in Creation? How is God with us in what we see around us? How is He giving life to plants, animal, matter? How is there life an image of his action, of my own life and relation to God?

But we are not, as human beings, living in a state of “innocent selfhood”. We have not listened to God’s word and have become rebellious to it. We have not fully attuned ourselves to God’s word. In this period in the Netherlands, controversies in the Reformed church. Some try to develop a rationalistic understanding of creation as it was the moment of a great scientific élan. Scientists were more or less religious. The French philosopher René Descartes was regarded as the leader of this rationalistic and technological approach to human knowledge, bound to develop a mastery of humans over creation: “to render ourselves as lords and possessors of nature.” For the cartesian worldview, we’re not called to be just gardeners and keepers of the creation, conceived as a secular nature, but lords and exploiters of it. This cartesian stand was opposed by others in the Reformed tradition who were arguing in favor of a spiritual relation to creation.

People thought that by deepening their spiritual life you could “repair” the loss of innocence. Reformed pietism insisted on the process of “regeneration” that it entailed. Labadie and Schurman created the community of the “Reformed Church secluded from the World”, also known as Labadists. They gathered together people in a new form of monastic life (autarchic life, men and women…). They understood the church as a school in the spirit of Comenius’ new pedagogical programs: in the church you were to conform yourself to God’s will through an attention His working in community and creation.

*“Selfhood repaired is the self which has fallen away from its nature and its origin - but not abandoned or completely rejected by God, even though it has been separated from Him for a while, and been contrary to him; but by His mercy and by His grace has been looked upon with compassion, called to a saintly and pure nature, and brought back to the Being, to be happy, to be no longer self-centered and as a result unhappy and condemned by God forever: abandoned forever by him and left to itself - to its wickedness and its eternal fragmentation. This leads to the sin of the definition of the self by the self and to true hell.” Labadie, Traité du Soi*

A lot of members of the community where women. They wrote a lot of hymns in which you can see the influence of Ignatian spirituality. They believed that there is something to be done in Christ to subjugate the unruled self that attempts to dominate everything. Regeneration was understood as not only something spiritual (brainy) but also embodied. Many members of the community bear witness to these views. Hendrik van Deventer, sometimes called “the father of obstetrics”, was a member of the community. Giving birth has always been a metaphor of spiritual growth. At that time in history you couldn’t separate the scientific attention to the world and a religiously inspired restoration and contemplation of creation. Deventer also worked on podiatric: it’s helping people for walk but it’s also something deeply spiritual because you’re putting people back on their feet, restoring their bodies just like Christ does in the Gospel narratives. One of the best know member of the community is Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). She joined the community in the early 1680’s. She was from a prominent family of engravers, painters and drawers in Nurnberg. She developed an early interest in bugs and insects. Her studies couldn’t be separated by her religious life. Her scientific work was not separate from her spiritual life. She started her study book with the inscription “Mit Gott” (with God) in which she did sketches of plants and small animals.

**The Spiritual Teaching of Insects**

Merian drew a lot of studies of insects and other animals. In line with the Reformed tradition of looking at God’s presence in the natural world of the psalter, Merian painted creatures in their natural innocent state. Her work echoes the orthodox tradition of iconography and the Greek Fathers. The theory of iconography has played a role in the development of natural sciences. Quote from John Damascus, Treatise on Divine Images : “I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.” Merian was trying to decode in nature how God was working. The secularization of science was not there in the beginning and not a necessary consequence of the Reformed tradition which has also created spiritual artists and scientists like Merian. In this form of Reformed pietism, and especially in Labadist piety, the whole natural world has the potential to become an icon of God. No reason in this tradition to exploit creation and abuse it.

Amphibians and butterflies also embody a form of spiritual teaching. Butterflies are called by two names in Greek, lepidoptera (“scaled-winged”) or psyche, which also means the soul. When Merian depicts a silkworm it’s an icon of our spiritual life: worm = our life on earth, stuffing ourselves; chrysalis = death in Christ, stillness; butterfly = elevation to the heavens. Merian does mention this spiritual meaning quite explicitly but when you look at her work vis-à-vis the spiritual context of her community, the devotion poetry etc. you cannot but see the connections. Her drawings are not just well-done attempts to be realistically portraying nature as we think of it in the time of photography. But it is a deep attention, she is trying to embody in her drawing to “innocent” presence of the insects. She was paying attention to the movement of the insects’ evolution, there contemplative life in God. Amphibians live in different levels (literally means “two lives”). The different phases of the life of butterflies and amphibians have a spiritual meaning.

This question of attention to nature was not detached from economical questions. Flowers were embodying the frailty of life but also wealth, especially the tulip. In the Golden Age of the Netherlands, plants like tulips became financial assets that disconnected them totally from their natural value and dignity as flowers. They became “goods” and were no longer considered “innocent being” and gifts of God. Now, Merian work is very different from this capitalistic and consumerist relation to plants. In the very same time, Merian was paying attention to the context of the plants, trying to understand the insects on their host plants. This attitude was a deeply religious one, it really echoed the Labadist way of reading the Bible. For the Labadists, following Ignatian influence, you had to be present to the text and in it with our imagination, heart and whole being. They paid attention to the “sitting in life” (Sitz im Leben) of the text, trying to understand them in relation to their condition, place in life, reading them as a personal address: what is this text telling me, telling us as a church? Not just what does this text say per se. Merian’s naturalistic work and desire to understand deeper the context of these animals led her to a field study in Suriname. She also tried to understand the medicinal virtue of the plant by learning from the Native Americans. She came back to the Netherlands and published Metamorphoses of the Insects of Surinam.

Usually we see the Reformed tradition and its supposedly outcome in capitalism, evangelicalism, fundamentalism etc. but in the Reformed tradition there has been a development of a form of pietism that endeavored to understand the whole creation as a place of revelation of God.

*“Why is not, I often say, the whole world a Host,*

*Which continously sacrifices itself to God?”*

Jean de Labadie, *Fragmens de quelques poesies et sentimens d’esprit de M. de Labadie*, Amsterdam, J. Wasterliers, 1678.

**Conclusion**

Just like you pray an icon to be in the presence of God in the orthodox tradition, you can find God in the whole of creation in the Reformed tradition. For reformed pietism, the deciphering of the Book of nature has been shaped by and interacting with biblical hermeneutics/methods of interpretation. The psalms lifted people up into God’s presence - eventually the words of the psalms themselves became less crucial: they had already paved the way to infused contemplation and new creations of new hymns and songs expressing joy in God’s presence throughout creation and in the heart of their communities.

**Questions:**

1. How does a closer observation of nature help you to see the interrelatedness of things and people?
2. Why are our prayers about / for nature either about ‘What a lovely world God has made!’ or ‘We’re so sorry we’ve messed it up’. Why do our prayers veer between the sentimental and the guilty?
3. How can we listen to scientists of faith and ask them about their lives of prayer and how their work relates to their faith?