Images of Protestantism in Europe:

Historical Overview of Renewal Movements

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- 1. Luther's "constructing of a new church": radicalism, reformation & renewal:
 - a. Let's start with the Reformation, or the beginning of the end of Christendom
 - b. Before that religious dissent was absorbed into the system (e.g., Fransiscans, Beguines) or brutally suppressed (Albigensians, Lollards, Waldensians, Hussites)
 - c. When Luther started his reform attempts, his most important opponent, the cardinal legate Caietanus said that this would mean "to make a new church (*novam construere ecclesiam*)"
 - d. This happened: theological renewal creates new churches, but also the other way around. New centres and new margins make it possible to entertain new radical thinking that would have been unimaginable previously.
- 2. This makes sense from the perspective of innovation theory. Usually, at least two conditions of renewal are often mentioned. For renewal to happen, there must be:
 - a. distance from the centre of power (think of sectarian movements & monasteries) → threatened by mediocrity and compromise → working out certain radical options to the extreme;
 - b. hybridity and unexpected encounters → allowing to ask new, unheard of, questions → if you want to renew, you shouldn't surround yourself with people like yourself, but look for differences (socially, culturally, religiously) within a framework of shared values and purposes;
 - c. Reformation created possibilities for new churches (distance), and for unexpected encounters (e.g., by taking away class differences, and by refugee movements Geneva, Emden, London, etc.).
 - d. But every radical option creates new margins and thus even more radical options...
- 3. Four historical movements of renewal in European Protestantism:
 - a. Anabaptism ('radical reformation' 1525):
 - restorationist programme: back to the NT (agreed with 'magisterial Reformers')
 - severe criticism of infant baptism (Reformation was not radical enough), and its consequences: lack of moral and religious seriousness. From their perspective, the "false prophets" of the mainstream Reformation had merely put a new superficial religious layer on an essentially unchanged "pagan" population. Infant baptism was the root of this evil; this pseudo-Christian ritual seduced people to see their nominal Christianity as the real thing;
 - the world of Christendom (Europe) was a true mission field. Everyone who did not belong to a true believer's community should be counted as "pagan" (*Heiden*). Therefore

Christ's great commission (Matthew 28:18-21) was as valid as ever. While the magisterial Reformers considered their national societies as more or less 'Christian', albeit in need of Reformation, the Anabaptists denied any Christian substance in their contemporaries. For them, the entire world was a "godless generation", a "confused Babylon" (Jakob Hutter). An absolute requirement for church membership was a conscious personal confession of belief, followed by adult baptism, and commitment to a holy life. Members of the true church would subject themselves to rigorous discipline, since "nobody will truly acknowledge Christ, if he does not follow him with his life" (Hans Denck). Active searching for holiness was the characteristic of a true Christian.

- until deep into the 1560s the early Anabaptists had a lively expectation of Christ's second coming. They were convinced that they lived in the very last days of the world. Christ would return soon, and immediately after this the world would be destroyed. In this eschatological hour God himself had called the one true church into being, since all other churches had failed. This belief gave great urgency to their missionary attempts. The Anabaptists went to great lengths to gather God's harvest within the true church, so as to save their neighbours from the approaching judgement. This strong missionary expectation was also a counterbalance to what could have easily turned into a very arrogant and complacent view of 'others'. Surely, many outsiders could become insiders. Or, as Anabaptist leader Hans Hut put it: outside the true church there are many "goodhearted" people who have a "desire for the truth". In the end, the purpose of missionary activity was "that all people will become true Christians" (Ambrosius Spitelmeier). In short, thanks to their missionary zeal the early Anabaptists did not see themselves as a holy remnant against the rest of mankind, but as a holy seed of a new humanity, living in eager expectation of the multitudes that would be drawn in. However, once this missionary zeal had declined (towards the end of the sixteenth century), their remaining convictions could easily lead to a more 'sectarian' position in the narrow, secluded sense of the word.
- Their emphasis on a personal faith, in combination with their ecclesiocentrism and their strong eschatology, led the early Anabaptists to launch a vigorous evangelistic church planting movement. Usually, a wandering preacher ("apostle") who came to a new location tried to contact some followers of the movement. Together they organized a house meeting, with friends, neighbours and relatives, followed by an evangelistic message by the apostle. If there were no believers in that particular place, the preacher would look for people who were prepared to listen, and this could lead to the invitation of baptism. After some people had received baptism, they celebrated communion together, and a new congregation was established. Sometimes, the entire process from evangelism to church planting took only one night. Once the church was planted, the apostle travelled further, and local leadership would take over. It is easy to conceive how this simple method, applied in a receptive environment, could result in hundreds of small churches all over Europe within a few years.

b. Baptists (17th century):

• John Smyth (ex-Anglican clergy) developed a Congregationalist ecclesiology around 1600: (i) churches ought to consist of saints only; (ii) each church ought to elect,

- approve, and ordain its own ministers; (iii) worship should be spiritual, and not limited by prescribed forms; and (iv) each church should be governed by a college of pastors
- Later, after a Dutch episode, Thomas Helwys founded the first Baptist church in Spitalfield, England (1611) → carved out an ecclesiological identity between Anabaptists and 'mainline' Christianity: Arminian doctrine of salvation (contra Calvinist orthodoxy), not opposed to government (contra Anabaptism), believers' baptism (contra mainline church), etc.
- around 1630: Particular Baptists (Calvinists) with strong missionary zeal: a free church in a free state
- characteristics: (i) baptism, (ii) no government involvement in church (separation), (iii) well-ordered church is part of God's plan of redemption: to belong to the right church was crucial for salvation;
- c. Pietism (17th & 18th century):
 - All sorts of renewal movements all over Europe: (i) emphasis on faith as a personal experience instead of merely objective assent to doctrinal statements (a "religion of the heart"), (ii) a search for holiness, (iii) critique of formal, 'dead' religion, and (iv) a critical view of the world as a place of temptation and sin;
 - 1675: *Pia Desideria* (Pious Desires) by Philipp Jakob Spener. Sixfold remedy for church life: (i) return to the Scriptures; (ii) the formation of small group gatherings by faithful lay people (*ecclesiolae in ecclesiae*: "small churches within the church"), who would be the sources of renewal for the national church; (iii) The promotion of a life of active godliness for all Christians; (iv) the replacement of harsh religious controversies with "a practice of heart-felt love toward all unbelievers and heretics"; (v) reservation of the ministry for men who "are themselves true Christians"; (vi) spiritual formation of students training for the ministry
 - Nicolaus Ludwig, Count of Zinzendorf (1700-1760) and the Moravian Brethren: his enemy was a formal and dead orthodoxy that used the Bible to build doctrinal systems rather than connecting people with Jesus. The same intellectualistic approach of the Bible he observed in modern historical criticism. Zinzendorf did not deny that the Bible contains many inaccuracies, but he saw them as proof that the Bible is not written to satisfy our intellectual needs regardless of whether these needs are of an orthodox or a liberal nature. The Bible is written to bring us into a relationship with Jesus Christ, and especially Jesus in his suffering for us. "The saviour is the main case of Scripture; without him there is not even the least harmony". Whoever reads the Bible out of an existential awareness of the "blood and wounds" of Jesus, will find a most simple unity;
 - Zinzendorf did not want to start a new church. Crucial for him was the unity of the entire, invisible church in Christ. The separate "religions" (as Zinzendorf called the different Christian churches) are nothing but historically determined, complementary expressions of this one universal Church. They are all useful and necessary, but the important thing for Herrnhut was "to go straight for the heart". Except for the Moravian Hussites who found their ecclesial home here, the communities that emerged out of the Herrnhut movement were therefore not meant as new churches. Rather, they were experimental "free havens" (Freistätte) with a threefold function: (i) to be a visible sign of unity

between Christians from different churches (the "family of Jesus"); (ii) to be a constant pointer towards the crucified Christ as the centre of Christian community; and (iii) to be a resource of world mission by lay persons. Instead of drawing people out of their church, the communities would encourage people to remain in their churches and give expression to this Christ-centred community there. This happened through new organizational forms ("bands" of three to eight people), and a wide range of liturgical rhythms, among which the meal of communion was the most important;

- Zinzendorf took measures to prevent that his movement would develop into a sect. Using an older concept of confessions as different paths through which God educates us towards his salvation (tropos paideias), he installed Moravian, Lutheran and Reformed "trope-bishops" (Tropen-Bischöfe) in the community in order to safeguard the theological heritage of each tradition. In this way, the Lutheran and Reformed participants in the community would not be separated from their mother churches, whereas these churches would not shut themselves off completely from the movement. Although the institution was quickly abolished after Zinzendorf's death, it has great ecumenical significance. It shows how Zinzendorf on the one hand was deeply convinced that Christ was indeed the centre of every ecclesiastical confession that was worth its salt, but that he on the other hand was suspicious towards emotional piety at the expense of doctrine. He believed that the Herrnhut community, since it was not dependent on the state, was able to maintain these confessional traditions better than the established state churches. In the future, when the antagonism against the community would have subsided, the churches could receive their most faithful members back from the Herrnhut community, and thus be renewed from within according to the principles of their own confessions.
- even though Zinzendorf was not interested in beginning a new denomination, his movement had certainly unintended church planting potential. For example, Zinzendorf relativized the historical churches in favour of the invisible, universal Church. Exactly this gave him space to consider every local gathering of faithful Christians, regardless of their denominational background, as a true expression of this Church. Although members of his societies were encouraged to remain within their churches, the liturgical density of these congregations, their ecclesial structuring with offices, and their dedication to worldwide mission, made them 'feel' like a church. Nevertheless, the Herrnhut societies have always kept a middle course between being a church and a movement: they tried to remain worshiping, apostolic communities in a non-sectarian, ecumenical spirit.

d. Methodism (18th century):

• Within the field of eighteenth century revivalism, John Wesley (1703-1791) stood his own theological ground against famous contemporaries like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. While the latter were strong Calvinists, believing that Christ's atonement only applied to the elect, Wesley carried forth the tradition of English Arminianism. According to the Calvinists, the salvation or rejection of a sinner was entirely rooted in the hidden will of God. In Wesley's view this doctrine did not leave any meaningful place for sanctification. Against this Wesley insisted that people had a

role to play in their sanctification. In order to let God's grace fully work in their lives, believers must actively participate in the means of grace, such as public and private prayers, the Lord's Supper, and Scripture reading. Through this participation the Spirit transforms believers towards Christian perfection. For Wesley this perfection entailed the filling of the human heart with love for God and neighbour, submitting everything else to that love. To be clear, whereas believers are responsible to use these means of grace, it is the Spirit who brings about this change in their hearts. In this way, Wesley avoided sanctification by works, without undermining the necessity of a holy life.

- When he was called to the American mission field in 1735, after his ordination as an Anglican priest, he tried to return to "the spirit and behaviour of the primitive church", introducing a strict discipline and a variety of ancient liturgical rituals. His success was very limited, but also Wesley noted his own lack of an inner experience of salvation. He had witnessed this experience in a group of Moravian Brethren who had travelled with him to America. Wesley was struck by their conviction that conversion could be quick and simple, and could give someone a complete assurance of faith. Even though Wesley would never agree with the Brethren on their view of assurance (he remained convinced that there were gradations of assurance), the Moravians moved him "from a straightforward High-Church concentration on moral duties as response to divine revelation toward an experiential reliance on divine grace as both God's free gift and God's enablement for service". On his return to England (1738), and after further conversations with Moravian Christians, Wesley underwent a conversion experience in which he felt his heart "strangely warmed". Although he would always remain plagued with self-doubt, this experience provided the energy John Wesley needed to join the revivalist preachers who were drawing such immense crowds in England and America by then.
- Wesley made it clear that the revival movement that he led was never intended to be a separate church. "His image was of groups of disciplined lay Christians within the parish structure of the Church being ministered to by ordained Anglican clergy for purposes of the sacramental ministries". However, in the long run he released a dynamic that could only lead to the formation of a new church. Part of this had to do with his message, which was greeted with suspicion by the majority of Anglican clergy. Another part was related to his practice of appointing lay preachers, and installing an itinerant 'apostolic' ministry, without much regard for parish boundaries. Several scholars have suggested a parallel between Wesley's creation of a corps of committed, disciplined, travelling lay preachers and the earlier itinerant orders of the Roman Catholic Church. The wandering preachers of John Wesley were part of a recurring pattern of 'apostolic' ministries in Christianity. His highly mobile 'soldiers of Christ' adopted a wide range of missionary strategies, such as open air preaching, ritual and drama, love feasts, watch-night services, processions, camp meetings, and Sunday Schools. At the same time they cooperated with local clergy wherever this was possible. After all, Wesley wanted to revitalize the church rather than replace it. During his lifetime, his preachers worked largely within the territories where the Church of England extended its pastoral responsibility.
- If a preacher had some success, he would begin a local "society" of believers. A society could be very small or large, but in the latter case it would usually split to form more societies. They were connected with each other in regional, nation-wide or even international networks ("connexions" or "circuits"). Wesley travelled round the national

- circuit, and he expected his preachers to do the same on a regional level. Starting in 1748 quarterly circuit meetings were held, thus thickening Methodist relationships and constructing what may be called pre-denominational structures. A preacher, constantly riding his circuit, would visit each society probably once in every two weeks. There he would preach every morning and evening, meet the leadership, visit classes, supervise teachers, and resolve differences.
- This system had many advantages. The flexibility of the circuit-system made it possible for Methodism to grow rapidly, since local groups were largely self-multiplying. The continual turnover of itinerants meant that weaker preachers would be tolerated more easily, and that societies were not hampered in their growth by poor leadership. For Wesley himself it meant that his preachers were prevented from building up a personal following. If a preacher would leave, or start his own church, this would usually not result in a huge loss of members. In short, the entire structure of societies, circuits and itinerants was a skilful combination of bottom-up vitality and top-down discipline.
- 4. General characteristics of these renewal movements (also among Pentecostals and immigrant churches in 20th century):
 - a. An experience of New Testament reality. Restoration or 'primitivism' is a common characteristic of these movements. But they did not just attempt to reform the church according to what they considered biblical or pre-Constantinian standards. For them, the New Testament was much more than the source of origin for Christianity, much more than the revered beginnings of a long tradition. It was the perennial template for reform; a powerhouse of spiritual reality for everyone who would enter it. Thus, to return to the New Testament was to enter life in God's presence. Therefore it was crucial to reintroduce the pre-institutional patterns of church life, to install New Testament standards of ethical behaviour, and to accept and obey the New Testament practice of baptism. Restorationism was first and foremost an adventure of ever-new discoveries; it gave access to exactly those experiences that were needed to form the people of God anew and engage the world. These movements strongly believed that only a New Testament kind of Christianity would be able to address the great crisis in church and society.
 - b. A sense of societal crisis. A great sense of urgency inspired all these movements. Whoever studies them cannot but be impressed by their sheer vitality, their explosion of energy, and the great costs that they were prepared to suffer. Obviously, they were provoked by what they considered as the insufficient reformation of the church, but usually this was combined with a vision of a moral society a society where the message of Christ would shine in every dark corner. As John Wesley put it, salvation was more than "a blessing which lies on the other side of death". In other words, there was a huge challenge to be faced and it should be faced now. The importance of the here and now as the time for reform was sometimes supported by strong eschatological convictions. The men and women in these reform movements saw themselves as riding the waves of the future; God would use them to finally change the world for his purpose.
 - c. *Empowerment of the laity*. According to Miroslav Volf, the prime emphasis of the dissenting Christian movements in Europe was the empowerment of the 'ordinary' Christian. "The structures of that particular ecclesial power would have to be changed in which 'two or three faithful people' remain powerless against the powerful hierarchy". In all these movements there was a strong awareness that in order to meet the particular challenge of their age the true people of God men *and* women should be mobilized and

- be gathered in communities either in congregations or in para-ecclesial societies. This mobilization was done, through an Arminian approach of soteriology (people must actively contribute to their salvation), through emphasizing the experiential dimension of faith, through raising the standards of Christian life ('holiness' is the refrain of the dissenting song), and through redefining the church as a people rather than an institution.
- d. *Missionary zeal*. All these movements showed a great commitment to evangelism, and often to social action as well. The proclamation of the gospel and the gathering of the faithful in communities that were dedicated to discipleship and mission was the primary instrument to achieve the God-given purpose of changing society. Their common assumption was that of a wide gap between the formal, cultural or nominal Christianity of the majority of Europeans, and serious, biblical Christianity that was demonstrated in a life of holiness and obedience. Later this was increasingly combined with a sense of personal affection for Jesus Christ as the hallmark of what true Christians distinguished from mere 'baptized pagans'. It was believed that true Christians were needed, either because Christ would return soon to deliver his true church (as in early Anabaptism), or because the only road to a reform of society would be through individual conversions (as in the evangelical revivals).
- e. *Innovative practices*. Clearly, the leading figures of these movements belonged to what we would call the 'creative minorities' of their times. They were highly entrepreneurial, full of initiative, and often in possession of great managerial skills. The dissenting movements of European Christianity have enriched the church in many ways. Theologically, they have widened the imagination by radicalizing church-world distinctions (engaging the 'sectarian' option), by underlining the missionary nature of the church (long before any 'mainline' church would do this), and by emphasizing the priesthood of all believers. In terms of practice they have re-introduced itinerancy as a way of ministry; they organized the people of God for action through small groups and 'societies'; they furthered 'primitive' congregational practices like singing, prayer meetings, the love meal and other supposedly New Testament rituals.

5. Concluding missiological thoughts:

- a. the missionary nature of the church was found in the margins of European Christianity
 - today, official documents mention the 'nature' and the 'mission' of the church in one breath. It has become a truism that mission happens in six continents, and that the distinction between 'mission bases' and 'mission fields' is no longer tenable. These are new developments that could not be surmised by the large majority of European Christians before the twentieth century. In my opinion the role of the first Protestant separatist movements in Europe has been crucial in preparing this new theological vision. They were ready to give their freedom and their lives for the evangelization of their own continent. In this way they made mission a matter of *confession*, something that belongs to the very identity of the church;
 - they did this mainly by undermining the traditional concept of a Christian nation. Most of the separatist movements in Europe opted for a gathered church, consisting of committed Christians and dedicating themselves to a life of discipleship. In other words, they were the first for a long time who conceptualized the church as a community within or even in opposition to the wider society. This made it possible to see Europe as a mission field, like any other place where the pilgrim church lives a precarious life amidst

- unbelievers, inviting them to respond to the gospel. Most leading European theologians would not arrive at this position before the Second World War.
- also in another way, the early Protestant church planters were pioneers of a missionary ecclesiology. Their mobilization of 'ordinary' Christians put mission back into the heart of the congregation. In the 1840s Johann Gerhard Oncken, the Baptist apostle of Germany, said famously that "every Baptist is a missionary" and that "every apostolic Christian church must be a Mission Society". Today we have become used to the claim of the essential missionary nature of the local congregation, but we must remember that this claim is a delayed formal recognition of grassroot insights that had lived in Europe for a long time already. These insights have been kept alive primarily in these fringe movements of European Christianity.

b. the ecumenical challenge of renewal:

- the whole difference between 'established' and 'free' churches (or between 'voluntary' and 'nominal' Christianity) predicates on a society in which Christianity was by and large the ruling narrative (Christendom). Now that this society is history (even in countries with a strong folk church tradition), new challenges emerge: no longer is mission a matter of reaching out to 'nominal' Christians or 'baptized pagans', but increasingly the difference between nominal and voluntary Christianity does not make sense anymore. All churches are free churches now. The revival model has collapsed; we are in search of true mission now;
- different churches keep different views of secular reality. As far as I can see, the traditional free churches maintain a post-Christendom perspective: there is a free market of religion, churches must be entrepreneurial, they compete for customers, etc. This makes a lot of sense (religion = consumption), but they tend to forget another insight that is kept more faithfully by the former established churches: the post-Christian element of our societies, the lack of Christian formation, the anti-religious criticism, the implausibility of faith for many Europeans. And there is the post-modern take, which emphasizes the sub-rational dimension of our choices, the importance of liturgy and ritual, the sacramental aspects of life. I believe we need all of this in our mission today, and that's why an ecumenical approach is so important. It would be destructive for our mission today if Christians kept operating along the old lines of 'established' vs. 'free', or 'nominal' vs. 'choice', or 'church' vs. 'sect'. Here and there we see new constellations emerge, as for example: hybrid congregations (mergers between different church traditions), cooperations between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals in Southern European countries, or ancient mainline Protestant churches embarking on church planting (fresh expressions, Gemeindegründung, pioniersprojecten).

Quote: Europe may be a "laboratory for new forms of faith, new structures of organization and interaction, that can accommodate to a dominant secular environment" (Philip Jenkins)