

Protestantism

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Prof. Piotr BoÅ, tuÄ± Philosophy course Warsaw School of Economics Spring term 2007/2008 Protestant Philosophy Protestantism was a movement whose aims, motives and actions were primarily of theological nature. The leaders of protestant reformation considered reason and philosophy as secondary to the Biblical revelation and useful only in the way that helps in furthering their religious cause. That is why their teachings are rarely considered as “ philosophy”. At the same time, the philosophical implications of their teachings were of significant influence on the daily lives and historical development of Protestant individuals and societies. I will therefore present the basic foundations of Protestant thought in the way I consider most useful for our Philosophy course. I therefore describe each of the main protestant ideas as close as it is possible to the themes of our classes: metaphysics (what is being?), epistemology (what can be known?), ethics (how people should live?) and political philosophy (how a society should be organized?)i€ª. What is Protestantism? The protestant reformation, initiated in the early sixteenth century in Central Europe, was a theologically-inspired movement led by rebellious Catholic scholars and theologians. These scholars opposed what was perceived by them as the corruption of the Catholic Church’s doctrine and practice. They saw it particularly in the widespread acceptance by the Church of material and financial gains in exchange for the interpretation of its doctrines favorably to its client members but often in stark contrast to the founding principles of the Christian faith. Originally aimed at reforming the Catholic Church (hence the name “ reformation”), soon the reformers and the movement they initiated were faced by the Church authorities’ affirmation of the Pope’s infallibility

and primacy to the Bible. Condemned as heretics, their fate seemed to repeat that of their century-earlier predecessors, whom the Pope ordered to be executed by burning. The spiritual leaders of the reformation appealed then to their political rulers — the princes and city councils in many of contemporary Northern and Central European duchies and city-states. Enjoying at the time a political power already strengthened by the significant demographic, technological and economic progress, most of these rulers embraced the reformers' ideas of individual responsibility in matters of religion and the rejection of the Catholic Church's authority. The official statement of "protestation" by these rulers against the Church's condemnation of the reformers was the reason the term "Protestant" refers since then to all adherents to the reformation doctrines. Apart from the rejection of the Catholic doctrines specified below, Protestants share the core beliefs and founding principles of Christianity. Protestant theology The most important and founding characteristic of Protestantism was its affirmation of the earlier historical claims (most notably that of XIV century Catholic dissident theologians John Wycliffe of England and Jan Hus of Bohemia) that the Christian Bible is the only and complete authoritative source of the knowledge of God and God's will for human beings. The Bible is the word of God, not only because it describes all known instances of God's words and actions in the human world, but as it is itself God's gift to the humanity. It can be therefore read literally, personally and universally. The Protestants considered the Christian Bible to be the ultimate authority on all questions of existence and knowledge, rejecting any human claims that directly contradict it or oppose it. This idea contradicted the Catholic and Orthodox

doctrines, which stated that only theologically educated priests have the power to understand the scriptures and use reason to interpret it.

Protestantism rejected the idea of a central authority other than the Bible that could oppose it in the matters of faith and observance. Other most important common themes in Protestantism, which also distinguish it from other Christian traditions, are most easily summarized by the five “solas”(Latin word for ‘ only’ or ‘ alone’) believed by the Protestants to be the only means of salvation: - Solus Christus (“ Only Christ”) — Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and any human; no other personal, spiritual or material mediator is needed; - Sola scriptura (“ Only the scripture”) — the Christian Bible is the only and complete source of knowledge about God and humanity’s relation to God; - Sola fide (“ Faith alone”) — faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to achieve salvation; - Sola gratia (“ Grace alone”) — salvation is the result of God’s free decision, regardless of what a Christian or anyone else does; - Soli Deo gloria (“ Glory to God alone”) — only God is to be worshipped, no other object or subject. Although they share basic idea of and approach to the Christian faith, amongst Protestantism there are also many doctrinal differences, tracing their origins to the teachings of one of the reformation leaders: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli or Philip Melanchthon. Most of the major disagreements between various protestant denominations concern the organization of the religious institutions and practices. Chief source of contention became the attitude to the sacrament of “ the Lord’s supper” or whether the bread and wine consumed during the mass are merely symbolic or actually transformed body and blood of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther The initiator, chief advocate and most significant leader

of the reformation was Martin Luther (1483-1546), who is to this day considered the father of Protestantism. For Luther, who received an excellent education in contemporary religious and humanist thought, only the idea of the Christian scripture being the complete word of God allows to answer the question of how can a sinner be ever certain of receiving salvation in the afterlife. Luther strived to live a saintly life as a Catholic monk and university professor in his native lands of Germany. For him, the most defining feature of a person's life was that it is permanently disclosed in all aspects " before God" (Lat. " coram deo"), who is omniscient. Luther's study of the Bible convinced him strongly that sin is an inherent and inevitable characteristic of human beings. It is evidenced in the real world by the overwhelming temptations that humans are subjected to and which they at one point or another fail to resist. Luther saw the religious law as concerned with the ordering of works (rituals or good deeds) to free an individual from the feeling of sin. The Bible however states that the law is powerless in removing sin and serves only to reveal the sinfulness of humans and their inability to deserve salvation by themselves. Luther described his experience of " temptation" (Ger. "anfechtung") as uncertainty of salvation even as one leads a saintly life. This led him to conclude that human inborn sinfulness, rooted in the biblical story of the primordial sin of first humans against God, cannot be eradicated by humans themselves. It therefore rightfully allows God to condemn every single person that stands " before God". Luther suggested a revision of the Catholic Church's teaching and practices and elimination of those he saw as being invented by human reason and claimed to directly contradict or have no basis in the Bible. Influenced by Luther, a

group of significant religious leaders and theologians came to the similar conclusions by their own readings of the Bible. Some of these leaders (like Philip Melanchthon) helped to develop Luther's doctrines further, while others developed their own religious systems. Justification For Luther, given the Bible is the word of God, it can be safely considered as unquestionable in the matters of personal salvation. According to Luther's reading of the Bible and contrary to the teaching of St. Augustine and the Catholic Church, no individual can become righteous and achieve salvation by own effort. For Luther, the Bible clearly states that nothing on earth or in the human sphere can make a person righteous. The only possibility of being justified before God from our own sinfulness and achieve salvation is through God's merciful grace that a person receives regardless of his or her actions or thoughts during life on earth. As humans are unable to gain righteousness by themselves (and being not righteous makes a person's salvation impossible), it can only be imposed on them by what Luther called an "alien righteousness". By this he meant God's merciful gift of his own son Jesus Christ. Christ's perfect righteousness is granted to the believing person, whose sinfulness is in return paid for by Christ's historical death on the cross, as it was for all believers throughout time and space. In this case, faith is given to the believer as the instrument of salvation. Faith was understood by Luther not as anything external (i. e. official membership of a religion, performing good deeds or rituals, verbal or otherwise expression of faithfulness etc.) but as the internalized comprehension of Christ and his righteousness. Faith is therefore the presence of Christ in (or inside the very essence of) the believer. It is accomplished and maintained by the believer's

exposure to the word of God, forever present in the form of the Bible. The fact that a person is granted faith and cultivates it until his or her death and salvation happens only because God wishes so. God can also freely justify any chosen human being. For example, Protestant thinkers believed virtuous people like Socrates (or, say, the late Pope John Paul II) can still achieve salvation despite their sinfulness, if God decides so. A somewhat more difficult but still important in Luther's opinion was his idea that Christians are still totally sinful by themselves and yet totally righteous in Christ. Philip Melanchthon (1497 — 1560), Luther's fellow reformer and professor at the Wittenberg University, developed this into an understanding that became the accepted doctrine of all Protestant churches. Melanchthon contrasted the Catholic idea of sanctification (the process of becoming righteous or sinless) with Lutheran idea of justification as a single, final verdict (or God's declaration) of a person's righteousness on the ground of having faith in (and so the union with) the Christ. The event of God's son Jesus Christ being sent, as it is described in the Bible, to die for the sins of all human beings who ever existed is for Protestant thinkers the only and best way for all people towards salvation, as well as proof of God's love. This concept of justification, characterized in the words of some scholars by a "radical Christocentrism",¹ was shared by all protestant leaders (although with minor differences) and became the defining foundation of all protestant churches.

Predestination The idea of predestination is most popularly associated with the French protestant John Calvin (1509 — 1564). Calvin was the second most influential leader of the reformation. He committed his life to creating a perfect Protestant community in Geneva and writing refined editions of his

book "The Institutes of the Christian Religion", which became the most influential book of the reformation. Many of his teachings turned out to be similar to Luther's. The followers of each of them became organized either in the Calvinist Reformed Churches (mainly in Switzerland and West of Germany) or the Lutheran Churches (mainly in Germany and Scandinavia) and agreed that the differences between them are secondary and do not threaten the core of the Protestant faith. Predestination was not a new concept in Christian theology. It was raised before and discussed even by St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. They saw it mainly as the mystery of God being unknown to some and known to others, allowing only the latter to perform good works in God's name. Calvin taught that God not only determined before the creation who is going to be justified and saved but also who will be condemned (the so called "double" predestination). In fact, according to Calvin, even before an individual is born God decides whether he or she will become a believer and arrive at salvation or not. Calvin called it God's "terrifying decree" (Lat. "decretum horribile"), meaning that it is a powerful law, the reasons of which are unknown to humans. Predestination could be the result of the fact that God knows beforehand how each person would live his or her life. It can as well be the result of God's free will of saving some and damning others. Luther and Melanchthon also believed it is God's choice to allow some sinners to know the truth and become believers worthy of salvation (this is called "single" predestination). They did not however think that God may wish the truth of the Bible to be hidden to some people even if it is openly exposed to them by the believers. Melanchthon held that everyone who would read the Bible and believe God's word can

achieve salvation. For Calvin, predestination is not a concept but a biblical truth. Its implications are the certainty of salvation for all believers and the explanation of the fact that not everyone gets to know God and have faith, even among those who call themselves Christian. Zurich-based reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484 — 1531) supported most of Calvin's teachings. Zwingli asserted that the Bible is clear and straightforward in declaring God's providence as the driving force of all God's creation. If everything ever existed — it existed because and in the way God wanted. God once and forever determined who is to be saved and made it clear for the believers. Calvin maintained that God's presence was evident in the natural order, the humanity and in history — all of them being God's creation. He was convinced that a general feeling of divine supernatural being was present in every human. What he perceived as evidence of it were universal human tendency towards religion, fear of God and guilty conscience. Calvin did not perceive predestination as restricted only to matters of salvation and damnation but as referring to all aspects of life. The historical developments, life and death of God's creatures and most vividly the fact that some individuals enjoy from their birth material and intellectual gifts other people lack — all this is for Calvin the proof of God's providence. Other Protestants share this view only in that good fortune is considered to be granted to the believers by the same token as salvation is, without any claims on why things happen to the rest of creation the way they do. More than this doctrine itself, its assertive articulation and all its implications were criticized from the start even by some Protestants. The main argument against double predestination was that it denies free will and suggests God is a tyrant, who

condemns sinners unjustly since they were created by God this way. This led Calvin to declare predestination's existence in force as certain, regardless of its reasons being possible to grasp by humans or not. Work ethic In social sciences, Protestantism is most widely associated with the work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" by Max Weber (1864 — 1920). Weber's famous thesis was that Protestants cultivated a unique work ethic that made them intrinsically more materialistic, perfectionist and hard working in comparison to other religions. This in turn may explain why capitalism, the XIX century industrial revolution (and later XX century information technology revolution) flourished in the Protestant-dominated countries and not anywhere else. Protestant work ethic can be seen as the result of the Protestant philosophy as described above. As the Bible is the complete word of God accessible and understandable equally to all believers, it is the ultimate judge of ethical life. Protestants believe that justification is a gift of God, received by faith on account of Christ's death. God transforms the sinners into believers once and for all. A Protestant's life should therefore be the evidence of being a new, better human, more virtuous than non-believers. The Protestants therefore were taught that hard work is a sign of grace and being a better person makes it an obligation to perfect oneself and the world in God's name for the benefit of the individual and society as a whole. This conviction was most strongly practiced in the societies dominated by the Calvinist principles. Calvin's strong articulation of the predestination implied that material success, personal wellbeing and achievements in competitions with other people were indisputable signs of being God's chosen for salvation. A Protestant can still fail in some respect.

He or she therefore evidently lacks (or have lost) part of the virtue of true believer and should gain it by even harder work with the aim of achieving a visible progress in this area. For Lutherans, hard work and a virtuous life with the aim of perfecting oneself and the world are also considered to be expressions of gratitude to God for the atonement and liberation from sin. These ethical principles have also their basis explicitly commanded in the Bible. Two Kingdoms Given the above description, all Protestant Christians should behave in the way true believers do. It can be concluded that in the political organization of the Christian society, Christians can be granted full freedom and trust, as they are unlikely to sin or commit crimes. Someone who acts to the contrary proves to be not a true believer and his or her rights can be taken away. Partly because of this reasoning and partly as a result of a struggle in contemporary political realities, Luther advanced a theory of “Two Kingdoms”, first expressed by St Augustine. In Luther’s view, there is the kingdom of God, where true believers obey the will of God and need no compulsion in obeying the law. In the kingdom of the world, on the other hand, people do not follow God’s word and hence are unrighteous and lawless, requiring a coercive secular government to enforce order. The Reformed tradition adopted a slightly different approach. The most radical in his views was Zwingli, who unsuccessfully advocated that the governments should strictly follow the Bible in instituting rules for the society. Calvin, an educated and trained lawyer, sought to use political and legal organization only as the means to an end, which was for him a community of virtuous people in a just state. Many observers describe Geneva under Calvin’s rule as “ a practical utopianism”. It perhaps should be noted that Calvin was

otherwise notorious for burning alive or banishing his opponents. Generally however, Protestant states were based on the assumption of freedom and trustworthiness of every citizen until he or she proved to be prone to sin. In case of the violation of a law, the punishment would be very strict and the criminal forever deemed untrustworthy. Another logical outcome of the protestant ideal of the individual and the society was the doctrine of priesthood of all believers and their implied equality in all spheres. Each true believer has the status of a priest, as he or she doesn't need any intermediary between God and his or her own self, other than Christ present in one's own heart. All believers should therefore prove the truth of God's word with their life, words, actions and behavior in the community. As A. E. McGrath and D. C. Marks put it: " Both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions saw the church and the state as different means to a similar end, which was to bring the entire creation into a proper service and worship of God".

Author: Mateusz Nawrocki Sources: Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, " The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism", Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007 (Introduction, Chapters: 1, 2, 3). Hans J. Hillerbrand (ed.), " The Encyclopedia of Protestantism", Vol. 1-4, New York (NY) and London: Routledge, 2004 (entries: " Calvin, John", " Doctrine", " Justification", " Kingdom of God", " Luther, Martin", " Melancthon, Philip", " Predestination", " Theology", " Zwingli, Huldrych", " Zwinglianism"). Wikipedia, URL: www.wikipedia.org (accessed: 01. 04. 08), entries: " Five Solas", " Protestantism", " Protestant Reformation", " Protestant work ethic".