Reformation ABCs

# U is for universalism

Today universalism is usually interpreted as “universal salvation.” For Reformers universalism referred to a philosophy that argued some concepts are true for all people across cultural groups. By the mid 1400s, Nominalist philosophers rejected universalism in favor of the existence of particulars. Luther had studied Scholasticism, a theology that relied on the power of human reason in matters of faith (via antiqua or the old way) and learned Nominalism (via moderna or the new way) as a graduate student. Both schools distinguished God’s absolute power from God’s ordained power (how things were actually ordered given all possibilities). Nominalist William of Ockham used the distinction to explain justification in this way: God may choose to count good deeds as meritorious; God may accept or condemn humans regardless of their actions; and God may forgive sin without also conveying grace.

According to some Nominalists, humans unaided by grace could perform good works, repent of sin, and love God. Luther rejected that claim. According to Luther, grace comes before human decision, humans lack the ability to love God without God’s grace, and God does not justify apart from grace. Luther reintroduced the biblical teaching that salvation comes through the grace of Jesus Christ and that Christ’s righteousness covers human sins (universals). Whether or not all humans will be saved is up to God (particulars).

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# V is for via antiqua (the old way) and via moderna (the new way)

Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and other Reformers wrote during times of cultural transition spanning the late Middle Ages (1300-1500) and the early Renaissance (1400-1500). During this time in western Europe, Scholasticism, a method for teaching and learning that emphasized the power of human reasoning in all things, was the primary school of theology and had been for a thousand years. However, Scholasticism’s lessons varied across its teachers. For example, Thomas Aquinas denied any conflict between faith and reason, while John Duns Scotus argued that reason was limited in matters of faith. Later thinkers like William of Ockham separated philosophy from theology, arguing that belief in God is based on faith, not rational thought. As an Augustinian monk Luther studied Scholastic theology (via antiqua), and as a doctoral student he studied Nominalism, a branch of theology that argued universals and abstractions do not exist, only particular instances of ideas and concepts exist (via moderna). Educated in both schools of theology and aware of disputes among teachers within each school, Luther did not fully accept either. In the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Luther argued against aspects of both old and new forms of theology.

Zwingli studied Erasmus, a proponent of the via media (middle way) between the two extremes of faith as either fully compatible or fully incompatible with rational thought. Influenced by different schools of thought and different teachers within each school, the Reformers shaped theological understandings that differed from Rome and from one another.

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# V is for Vows, Monastic

In July of 1505 Martin Luther joined the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine and took his vows as a monk. What would cause him to make this dramatic change from his previous study of law? It was the terrifying experience of being caught in a lighting storm in which he promised this to Saint Anna. This vow was to change not only his own life, but the course of the Church. Once a monk, Luther read for the first time the pages of scripture and found there not the judgmental, hateful God he had been taught to believe in, but the merciful, loving God he craved. It was also in the pages of scripture he found a church much in need of reform. In fact, that reform would also include the monastic system, which Luther came to regard as an evil distortion of the essence of Christianity, with the compulsory nature of monastic vows. He noted in his Brief Answer to Duke George's Latest Book that “if ever a monk got into heaven by monkery, I too would have found my way there”—justification with God was not gained through the works of the monastic system, but received as God’s gift of grace. After Luther repudiated his vows to marry the former nun Katharina Von Bora in 1525, he would ultimately recommend that monasteries be disbanded or converted into institutions of learning.

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