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The Politicization of Repentance

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I would like to begin by relating an incident recorded in one of the letters of Augustine. It occurred in the North African branch of Oea (now Tripoli), when the bishop introduced the new edition of the bible (by Jerome) for use in the church. As a verse in Jona was read aloud, in which Jerome deviated from the traditional (Old Latin? or Greek Septuagint) text, a great tumult arose among the audience. The Greeks said that the reading was incorrect. The bishop asked the opinion of some Jewish townspeople, presumably priests. Either out of ignorance or spite, they said that the Hebrew text was best rendered by the older version. For the sake of peace in the church, the bishop felt it necessary to go back to using the old edition. This example shows how sensitive the ordinary, faithful reader of the scriptures is to changes in the traditional text. I don't know how extensive the demonstration among the audience was but it forced the bishop to change his decision and reinstate the traditional text. (Reported in Ulrich Köpf, "Hieronymus als Bibelübersetzer," Eine Bibel—viele Übersetzungen, ed. Siegfried Meurer, Stuttgart, 1978, p. 76.) We see also how the reactions of the congregation can have an influence on the nature of a religious text.

Now to an example closer to our own experience in English. In 1525, in the first New Testament in English to be translated from the original Greek texts, Tyndale used the words repentance and repent where earlier translations had used penance and do penance. (Others of the controversial words which triggered the heated discussion were congregation for older church, love for older charity, elder for older priest and favour for older grace.)

Tyndale was a superior scholar of Greek but he had controversial theological opinions. He published his views in polemical tracts and also in tendentious glosses and notes. Sir Thomas More criticized Tyndale for this and many other "errors" in a dialogue which Tyndale answered as follows:

And in like manner, by this word penance they make the people understand holy deeds of their enjoining; with which they must make satisfaction unto God-ward for their sins: when all the scripture preacheth that Christ hath made full satisfaction for our sins to God-ward; and we must now be thankful to God again, and kill the lusts of our flesh with holy works of God's enjoining. And I am bound to take patiently all that God layeth on my back; and, if I have hurt my neighbor, to shrive 'confess' myself unto him, and to make him amends, if I have wherewith; or if not, then to ask him forgiveness, and he is bound to forgive me. And as for their penance, the scripture knoweth not of (it). The Greek hath Metanoia and Metanoite, repentance and repent; or forethinking and forethink.
As we say in English, 'It forethinketh me, or I forethink;' and 'I repeat, or it repenteth me;' and 'I am sorry that I did it.' So now the scripture saith, 'Repent, or let it forethink you; and come and believe in the gospel, or glad tidings, that is brought to you in Christ, and so shall all be forgiven you; and henceforth live a new life.' And it shall follow, if I repent in the heart, that I shall do no more so, willingly and of purpose. And if I believed the gospel, what God had done for me in Christ, I should surely love him again, and of love prepare myself unto his commandments. These things to be even so, M. More knoweth well enough: for he understandeth the Greek, and he knew them long ere I. But so blind is covetousness and drunken desire of honour. (Tyndale's Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialog, Cambridge, 1850, pp. 22-23)

Tyndale's attacks on the church and the clergy were among the reasons Henry VIII condemned his New Testament (1530) and banned it in England. It had been printed in Germany but had secretly found its way to England. Tyndale fled to the continent, but was finally arrested, imprisoned, condemned to die, strangled as a heretic and his body was consumed to ashes in September 1536.

Permit me to backtrack just slightly to following the development in German. When Luther first translated the New Testament 1522 (Galat 3:2, 4:17, Mark 1:15), he used besser euch 'better yourselves, improve yourselves, amend your lives,' but five years later in the edition of 1527 he had already decided to change it to Buße. Zwingli (1523) and the Züricher Bible (1531ff) both use the Alemannic form of the same word Luther used in the beginning: Besaerend euch.

The majority of the translations in German from then until now have for the most part followed Luther's choice of Buße but there have been several exceptions. Early translators such as Felbinger 1560, Zinzendorf 1744, Bahrdt 1777 used alternatives for Buße in such as 'change your ways, change your way of thinking, turn around, turn away from, begin anew,' etc. (ändert euch, ändert euren Sins, kehrt um, stellt euch um, ihr müßt völlig neu anfangen), but I am not acquainted with the political ramifications, although I suspect there were some. I believe the dominant position of the Luther text precluded any large scale or organized effort for revision. The greatest number and variety of these alternatives begin to appear about 1930.

In his 95 theses, Luther quotes Matthew 4:17 Tut Buße, das Himmelreich ist nahe herbeigekommen (KJ Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand) He might just as well have chosen the parallel verse from Mark 1:15 Die Zeit ist erfüllt, und das Reich Gottes ist herbeigekommen. (KJ The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.) These verses were interpreted both by those in the centuries right after Christ as well as by those at the time of Luther to mean that the second coming with its last judgement was very close. "Judgement is coming. Don't close your eyes to this fact. Live as though the second coming were tomorrow. Or more ominously: "Judgement is near, repent of your sins and do better."
Let us now take a brief look at some of the changes that have been associated with the development of the theological meaning of repentance. According to Theologische Realenzyklopädie the central concept of Christian theology and piety is Buße 'repentance,' yet, inspite of its great importance, its history has been one of distortion. (Vol. VII, p. 473)

Latin, which replaced Greek as the language of the (Roman) church had paenitentiam agite 'show repentance, penitence.' Here the notion in the Greek of 'change your thinking' has been left behind and a new meaning arises to take its place. In colloquial Latin, there was an inaccurately pronounced form poenitentia along side the etymologically correct form paenitentia. In the minds and language of the linguistically unsophisticated, the careless form with pe was easily associated with the phonetically similar word poena 'punishment' (in our penitentiary). According to Franzjosef Michels (Martin Luther, Inter Nationes: Bonn, 1983, p. 20ff), the unsophisticated Germanic tribes, were familiar with punishments but not with penances or repentance. If one had killed a man for example, he was guilty of murder but was not required to pay with his own life, instead he could pay Wergeld 'manbote, man money, compensation to an overlord for the loss a man.' (The German Buße and English to boot 'to the good' and root of bale 'relief of bale' are both related to OE manbote.) In Germanic law, the emphasis was on restitution and not necessarily in a literal sense, that is, money could be substituted for the life of a man. A Frank of the 6th or 7th century might well have interpreted the call to repentance as: Judgement day is soon. Examine your life and make restitution for whatever things you have done wrong toward man and God. By the 10th century, the substitution had become quantified. In 970, for example, King Edgar of England decreed that an earl who had been condemned to seven years of austere fasting could reduce the sanction to three days if he could persuade 12 and then 120 of his clansmen to fast three days for him. This contains in a nutshell the basic model for indulgences. A punishment of the church can be transmuted just like any other. All that remains is the assignment of amounts to each violation and we have created the Bußgeldkatalog 'fixed penalty code of traffic infractions.'

Indulgences as we understand them were granted for the first time around the middle of the 11th century in southern France, which according to Michels was more than just coincidental. The early Christian church anticipated an imminent second coming. Since it had not happened, several generations had lost faith in the prophecies about the last days. Not until the beginning of the 10th century did they begin to take them more seriously, based in part on the interpretation of a verse from which the end of the world could be calculated to be the year 1000 or 1001. In anticipation of this judgment a first great revival calling the believers to repentance ensued and it produced monastaries, pilgrimages, good works, etc. Delay forced a reinterpretation of the year of the advent as 1300 (1000 + 300) and produced a jubilee year and another wave of intensified religious feeling.

As time went on a distinction gradually came to be made between
'first repentance' as a one time conversion and rebirth and a 'second repentance' as a life-long process of daily repentance, a distinction which the reformers later did away with.

One other piece of information I would like to relate in connection with this discussion is found in the introduction to the 1891 edition of the bible published by Brockhaus (Elberfeld), which includes some excerpts from the preface to the earlier edition of 1855.

It informs the reader as to the reasons for certain choices of words in the translation, for instance, why der Christus (with the article) was used to designate the office of the 'Anointed One,' whereas Christus (without the article) was used for the personal name. In the discussion of the word chosen for 'repentance,' the editor expresses the futility of searching for a more appropriate equivalent for Greek metanoia (KJ repentance).

Even though we have used the word Buße, we are not satisfied with it because it has more of an external character and signifies outward works (Werketun). The word Ekehrung 'conversion' was suggested as an appropriate alternative; yet, though many translators have used it, we have not, because it does not convey the meaning of metanoia. Metanoia is the moral judgement of the soul concerning everything in one's past as well as everything the soul is in the flesh before God. Others have preferred Sinnesänderung 'change of heart or mind' and really have come a little closer to the true meaning. However, because the judgement of the soul with respect to the past was lacking in this word, we felt it necessary to retain the word Buße.

Here we see the conscientious translator struggling with a term which in the course of time has assumed inappropriate connotations, yet he does not feel the price of selecting some other term is worth it and does not want to make the break with tradition, since the new word itself would likewise not be adequate to express such an important theological concept. We do not expect the single word baptism to carry all the meaning. When necessary we modify a concept by adding a qualification. We use the same word for baptism as most other Christian churches, yet our concept is very different from many of them. When a distinction is necessary, we say 'baptism by immersion' to avoid any misunderstanding. We could make a similar qualification for repentance where necessary without replacing the basic terminology.

A radical change in terminology was instututed by the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-, opponent of the National-Socialist regime, father of the Bekennende Kirche) who pondered the question of how people become Christians. He replaced the traditional term Buße with Umkehr 'turn around' in order to avoid the notion that we are dealing with a single or several individual events in the sense of the catholic sacrament of penance or of the pietistic experience of conversion and penitent struggles. The meaning most often associated with words with the root umkehr- is 'reverse, invert or make opposite.' Although it is supposed to effect the individual in all
Aspects of life, the word itself focuses on the single event of turning around and reduces the emphasis on constant repentance throughout one's entire life, that is it also does away with any distinction between the first or great repentance and the second or small repentance.

As an example of the usual meaning of the verb umkehren, let me refer to a 19th century pamphlet on language teaching by the noted linguist Wilhelm Vietor. He entitled it Der Sprachunterricht muß umkehren, not 'language instruction must repent' but with the older meaning 'language instruction must reverse its course, do something entirely different.'

This radical change in terminology is reflected in the modernizing translation known as the Einheitsübersetzung (Vorläufige Endfassung 1971, Endfassung 1980) inaugurated by the Catholic bishops of Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Lüttich, Bozen-Brixen and ultimately approved by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany and the Protestant Bible Association of the Federal Republic of Germany. This edition systematically substitutes Umkehr for Buße to refer to the central Christian concept of repentance. In the wake of this sweeping change, the Luther translation of 1975 was also modernized in an attempt to make it more understandable for the modern reader. Besides these and other changes in the vocabulary of this latest revision, it removed the most striking stylistic features of Luther's Bible (the Saxon genitive 'in my father's house' (in meines Vaters Haus, bis an der Welt Endes) and the positioning of the verb in mid-sentence instead of at the end (Matth 25:31): 'when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory (Wenn aber der Menschensohn kommen wird in seiner Herrlichkeit und alle Engel mit ihm, dann wird er sitzen auf dem Thron der Herrlichkeit). This 5th revision in a century set off a wave of controversy in the popular and scholarly press, especially among those who were familiar with Luther's style and did not want to give up there cherished religious vocabulary. The publication of this latest revision was discussed in an article by Renate Schostack in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of 31 October 1984). Its German title has echoes of the present discussion: "Rückkehr zum Reformator" 'Return to the Reformer.' Its English title ignores the essence of the article "New Bible gets unheralded welcome."

As a result of all the furor, the Council of Protestant Churches in (the Federal Republic of) Germany commissioned a revision of the 1975 version of the Luther text, which in essence turned out to be a work of restoration, a return to the reformer's original translation. They changed Luther's text only where they felt it could not be understood by modern readers. In the summer of 1984, after three years' work by German theologians and language experts, it came off the presses.

One of the words that was replaced in the 1984 revision was the controversial word Umkehr. Luther's choice (Buße) was restored except in two passages which have seem to have more general meaning
Acts 11:18, 20:21). One of the central considerations mentioned in the report was the fact that Protestant hymns and the Book of Common Prayer used Luther's wording almost exclusively and a radical departure would create a chasm between the two segments of religious life. The Synod of the Protestant Church in the Federal Republic of Germany to be held in Lübeck will likely recommend the use of the restored text of 1984. Church officials in the German Democratic Republic have already done so. The prospect is that the restored text of 1984 will be approved for official use by all German speaking protestants.

An inquiry to a member of the commission on revision into possible reasons for the return to Luther's for 'repentence.' brought the following response:

With regard to the change of Umkehr to Buße, we decided to restore Luther's concept in its biblical meaning even if or precisely because of the fact that for the most part it is used only in compounds like Bußgeld in modern German. Letter from Dieter Gutzen, 21 January 1985)

I believe he is saying that because the word Buße is used in the negative religious sense of penance only in compound words, it is free to be used in its positive biblical and religious sense as envisioned by Luther. He goes on to point out their general attitude of making sure that the revision maintained the style of Luther as much as possible. The restoration of the term Buße definitely belongs in this category. We can conclude that the strongest motive in the restoration of the term, is to be found in the dissatisfaction with the modernizing approach of the last revision and in an attempt to rehabilitate the image and style of Luther.

Let me turn now to developments outside the realm of the text itself. Beginning in 1968, progressive elements in the Catholic Church have repeatedly tried to bring about some reforms. In 1950, several groups decided to organize and hold their own Katholikentag at the same time as the regularly established general meeting of the Catholic Church in West Germany. Among them were three well-known personalities: 1) Hans Küng, reform minded theologian from Tübingen who was refused permission to teach because of his doubts about the infallibility of the pope, 2) Johann Baptist Metz, professor of theology at Münster who was refused the chair of ecumenical theology in Munich because of his leftist political leanings, 3) Norbert Greinacher, professor of pastoral theology in Tübingen who formed the committee for Christian rights in the church after the Küng affair. These reformers felt that the church was just going around in circles and not addressing the needs of the young people, especially with respect to giving the sacrament to homosexuals and divorced people, the marriage of priests, and the peace movement. In a demonstration at the meeting, the protesters had on their placards the picture of a nun in religious habit striking a rocket with her umbrella. The motto around the edge reads: Kehrt um. Entrüstet euch. 'Turn around, be indignant,' or 'Change your course. Be full of indignation.' Those of you who know German realize, of course, that their is a double meaning
for each part of the slogan. The new, religious meaning for the first part is 'repent,' conjuring up a revivalist atmosphere and the new meaning for the second part is 'disarm yourselves.' Actually, it is a very clever, double pun for the peace movement against the nuclear arms race: "Repent, Disarm." A second version of the motto in another protest movement of the grass roots church reads: Kehrt um-- widersteht den Herren der Welt. 'turn around(repent, resist the lords of this world.'

The motto for the peace weak in Heidelberg in October 1984 was:
Noch ist Zeit zur Umkehr: Weg mit Rüstungswahn und Militarisierung! Nein zu Pershing II und Cruise Missile! 'There is still time to turn back/repent. Down with the insanity of armaments and militarization. No to Pershing II and Cruise Missiles.' Once again the atmosphere of final judgement is conjured up from the religious heritage to frighten people, in this case, to oppose military and political activity.

The most recent issue of Der Spiegel (4 February 1985, Nr. 6/1985) contains part three of an article by Oskar Fontaine ("Der andere Fortschritt"), in which he discusses the protest vote and the prospects of the Social Democrats and the Greens ('Environmentalists') forming a working coalition. In the article there is a picture of a person at a demonstration holding up a neckerchief. There is the outline of a church and a hand. It is indistinct and I can't tell what the relationship between the church and the hand is. Across the top of the neckerchief is the motto: Umkehr zum Leben, 'Return to life' or 'repent and turn to a better life.' Underneath the church is the phrase: Die Zeit ist da für ein Nein ohne jedes Ja zu Massenvernichtungswaffen. 'It's time to say no without any yes (at all) to weapons of mass destruction.' The caption over the picture reads: Das Kirchenvolk ist dabei, die Bibel beim Wort zu nehmen. 'Lay members are taking the bible literally. Beneath the caption we read: Der Glaube an den Schöpfer verbietet es, die Natur zu plündern und auszunutzen. 'Faith in creator forbids the plundering and exploitation of nature.'

Clearly kehrt um has become associated in the press and in demonstrations within the Catholic Church and elsewhere with reform, resistance and rebellion. In the popular press, it no longer has only the older theological meaning 'repent' but often it has in addition the older meaning 'turn around, turn back' and the new meaning 'rebell.' It now is most likely to mean 'Change your political course,' and not 'sorrow and change because of moral shortcomings.

In our own sphere, the EU came into the hands of the church translators at a time when the standard works had just been retranslated (not revised) from the English and was at the press being typeset. Thus the new translations of the standard works in German (1980) in a manner similar to the revision of the Luther text swept aside 130 years of tradition and replaced all examples of Buße with Umkehr, even going so far as creating the unique phrase Umkehr üben on the model of the older Buße tun instead of using the corresponding verb umkehren. At the same time, the Luther translation of the bible
was abandoned as the official bible of the church and the Einheitsübersetzung was required for all official church uses. There were a few voices that objected to the wholesale discarding of the language of Luther and wrote letters and articles but for the most part these radical changes were accepted quietly. The ones most effected by the decision were those who were very close to the traditional text of Luther and were prevented from using it in Sunday school classes and other official church contexts.

In a letter of 23 January 1981, leaders of the church in German speaking areas were enjoined to use in all official contexts the new Einheitsübersetzung and the new standard works which had adopted the vocabulary of the EU. They were also asked to urge members to do the same. Leaders and members interpreted this so narrowly that in some cases members were not allowed to quote the scriptures in Sunday school according to the traditional Luther text. Taken literally, this single directive would have eradicated from the religious vocabulary of German speaking saints traditional terms used by Protestants since Luther and in the LDS church since the first translation of the Book of Mormon into German in 1852, words like Buße 'repentance,' Heiland 'savior,' Nichtjuden 'gentiles' and many others. Over the next few years, there was enough resistance to the exclusive use of the new text and the stigmatizing of the traditional text that a new directive (13 January 1984) was issued to clarify the use of the approved scriptures. It explains that the official church Bible (EU) will be used for bible quotations in all publications. Members are free, however, to use any Bible version they choose. It notes that it may even be helpful to use several versions at once so as to arrive at a better understanding of a given passage. There is also a caution about the fact that the introductions and notes do not necessarily reflect church doctrine. The fact is that the introductions in the Einheitsübersetzung deny the unity of Isaiah (it has three subheadings: Protojesaja 1:1-39:8, Deuterojesaja 40:1-55:13 and Tritojesaja 56:1-66:24), dispute the Pauline authorship of certain letters and otherwise include the results of modern textual and higher criticism, including the interspersing of the books of the Apocrypha throughout the Old Testament. A letter by the translation department in Frankfurt to the editor of Dialogue (Vol. 17, No. 4, Winter 1984) about the new German standard works reports that efforts to have an edition published without the Apocrypha or with the Apocrypha in a separate section will depend on ecumenical recognition—surely a lengthy and uncertain process. In the meantime, members are expected to rely on the statement in the 91st Section of the D & C. It does concede that it is unfortunate that the apocryphal books are difficult to identify as such.

When I first heard of the new directive, I thought it would reflect a policy similar to that expressed by the Protestant Church in Germany who have in essence reversed themselves and returned to a slightly modified version of the traditional text of Luther. In my naivete, I thought it would at least allow members to use either the EU or the revised Luther text (of 1984) for general use in the church. When I had a chance to examine the letter in greater detail, it became clear that they had not changed their position at all with
respect to the use of the official text but had merely allowed members to use any other version they might choose as an aid to interpret or clarify the "official" text. Since the basic concepts of the gospel are now clothed in the language of the EU (Umkehr for Buße, etc.) and the new standard works (Errettung für Heiland, die Andern for die Nichtjuden, etc.), a linguistic dichotomy has been created.

On the one hand, we have the Catholic Church and the official part of the LDS Church in the West. On the other hand, we have the Protestant Church of the Federal Republic of Germany and of the German Democratic Republic, and the unofficial portion of the members of the LDS Church in the West and the LDS Church in general in the East, all of whom recommend and use the traditional text of Luther. (A colleague who recently returned from Leipzig reports that the sacramental prayers are given there in the traditional form and not in the form in the new standard works.)

The adoption of the EU and wholesale modernization in the standard works gives rise to a paradox. The church has now approved for German what it has refused for decades to do for English. On the one hand, we cling in English to an archaic text not based on the best manuscripts and decry the critical inroads in more modern texts, but on the other hand, we abandon a similar Luther tradition based on the same manuscripts and embrace for German the very things we stubbornly resist in English. I believe this is a real problem raised by the new translation of the standard works in German and the controversy related to it. We must make up our mind. Should we pursue one course in English and a very different course in German? If we should choose to follow for German the course presently followed in English, we would return to the Luther text for official use. If we should choose to follow for English the course recently adopted for German, we would discontinue using the King James version and approve a more modern version or make our own translation.

In my opinion, further revision of the EU will be minimal or limited to ecumenical compromise in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, and that would mean that the vocabulary in the New Testament that has been adopted in the standard works in German will remain unchanged. The question in the Church for the future revolves around whether the projected revision of the standard works in German, in addition to incorporating the changes of the revised text of the English edition, will revise the basic theological concepts ('repentance' and 'savior') to correspond to the traditional Mormon and Protestant terminology. The alternative is to allow the present dichotomy to continue until time eventually erodes and overcomes it. The conservative stance of the LDS Church in the German Democratic Republic and the recent return to the language of Luther by the Protestant Church in both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic are strong arguments for us to do the same, that is, to admit that it was premature and precipitous to alter the traditional text so radically and to restore the traditional terminology of Luther in the next revision of the standard works.