On more than one occasion I have heard Pat Ryan say on this very platform, “when people ask me a certain kind of question, I answer I am not a theologian I am a historian of religion.” Now the fact is that, by and large, theologians and the humblest parishioner in the pew share a perspective that is different from those of historians of religion. They begin with the assumption that their particular tradition was revealed whole, intact, and monolithic, while historians of religion share the assumption that the various expressions of human religiousness are not, themselves, divine. They, like all human phenomena, have a history, are affected by considerations of time and place. Like all things in the sub-lunar world, they evolve. And that evolution is the real subject of Pat’s presentation tonight. This evolution can go by various names, but it is often referred to as reformation. The stuff of all religious history is reformation of one kind or another: sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle; sometimes self-conscious, sometimes accidental.

As always Pat has done a magisterial job of presenting the stories of the reformations in the three monotheistic traditions and offering a striking hypothesis of the specific external set of events that precipitated them. And as always I am left with mere crumbs from Pat’s sumptuous feast … and footnotes. He has, however, left open an important space for for me: the creation of a self-conscious Reform Judaism which began in Germany about two hundred years ago.

When Pat extended the invitation to reply to his talk he said, “It is the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's ninety-five theses, so I thought it would be good to have a Reform Jew as
a respondent.” Actually that invitation served as a kind of epiphany for me and I am deeply in Pat’s debt, because as I thought about Luther and Reform Judaism I was struck by the commonalities. It framed the history of Reform Judaism in a new light for me.

Of course I cannot talk about Luther without acknowledging the intensity of the anti-Semitism of the later Luther and the extent to which he is responsible for embroidering that hatred into the fabric of German culture. He bears the onus of sowing the seeds that bore such destructive fruit four centuries later. And I cannot help but note that it is to the credit of the World Lutheran Federation following the lead of the Vatican and Nostra Aetate, that they issued a statement of their own condemning anti-Semitism and, remarkably, acknowledging and rejecting the hateful teachings of their own founding father.

And as we begin to talk about the intersection of Luther and Reform Judaism, we could suggest that Reform arose in part in response to the ostracism that Jews experienced in German society as a result of the very culture that Luther bears so much responsibility for shaping.

Two last caveats. I will not be suggesting that there is a perfect overlap between Reform Judaism and the teaching of Martin Luther. It is more like a Venn diagram. There are dimensions of Luther’s teaching that have nothing to do with Reform Judaism, and parts of Reform Judaism that have nothing to do with Luther. But the parts in that Venn diagram that do overlap, that they have in common, are significant, even essential to each.

Nor am I suggesting that the audacious pioneers of Reform Judaism intentionally or consciously appropriated Luther’s ideas. But it is essential to recognize the fact that those ideas were part of the cultural Weltanschauung out of which Reform Judaism emerged.

Now finally: Reform Judaism. What is striking to me in the wake of Pat’s invitation is that Reform Judaism emerged specifically in Germany. There have been, after all, other
approaches to reforming Judaism. The Jews of the Sephardic orbit did not produce a reformation. They evolved an ongoing process of alterations and changes. Their Judaism did not remain static. It adapted and adopted. Yet it includes no single moment of reformation, and no reform movement.

In the world of Ashkenazic Jewry/western Jewry, historians are in agreement that by the late middle ages Jewish religion had indeed grown ossified. It had become intensely intellectualistic, dominated by scholars, and rigidly formalistic, not attuned to the lived realities of the lives of common people. It was due for reformation of some kind.

What is striking was the different forms this reformation took in different settings. In Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century this reformation took the form of Chasidism, a mystical, pietistic movement: non-intellectual, even anti-intellectual; highly emotional; very much attuned to the needs of ordinary folk. What is noteworthy for this discussion is that the Chasidim remained loyal to the inherited forms and formulae of Jewish practice—but they infused them with new meaning.

In contrast, the early part of the next century saw the emergence of the Reform movement take place in Germany. And I would dare to suggest that this reformation of Judaism was heavily influenced by the spirit of Luther’s reformation which pervaded that country. As I turned Pat’s invitation over in my head I began to see the early German stage of Reform Judaism in the context of Luther. I am not suggesting that the early reformers were Lutheran in a theological sense. But they were Lutheran or Lutheristic in their outlook.

And I must hasten to add that what I am describing is not the Reform Judaism of today. Reform Judaism as it is practiced today has evolved far from its roots in those first German
generations. But it certainly bears the impress of the perspective I will be talking about here, and in its own evolution has struggled with it.

So now, finally, back to the eighteenth century three hundred years after Luther. What Lutheran ideas did earliest Reform Judaism posit? Luther and German Reform Judaism were committed to a rationalist agenda. Both sought to formulate religion along rational lines. Both prized reason over received tradition. These early reformers called themselves not Jews— but Hebrews¹ and said “I am of the Mosaic persuasion.” Early Reform stood wholly and solely on the Bible. They said that unlike Christians who had an admixture of a New Testament, theirs was the religion of the pure Old Testament. They spoke of themselves as reclaiming true Judaism. For them that true Judaism was the Bible. The rabbis were dismissed as excrescences. If you hear *sola scriptura* in this, so do I.

In the process of asserting the primacy of the Bible, the early Jewish reformers rejected any role for the intervening millennia of interpretation or tradition. Luther had felt compelled to reject any doctrines or practices of the Church that were not directly mandated in scripture. Rabbinic tradition, as exemplified in the Talmud, was dismissed by the Jewish reformers as irrelevant. But the Talmud, the foundational text of Jewish life second only to the Bible, had been most attentively studied in Jewish *Yeshivot* (houses of learning) for centuries.

As a corollary these early reformers also rejected the notion of an authoritative interpretation of scriptures. One byword of theirs had it that “every man was his own Torah.” All a person had to do was open the text, read it, and it interpreted itself. This echoed Luther’s rejection of intervening authorities between the text and the believer. This rejection of the Rabbinic tradition had the effect of at best minimizing—more broadly rejecting—the
binding quality of the whole constellation of actions which had to that point characterized Jewish life, things like: the dietary laws,\(^2\) prayer garments, holiday practices.

Practically, it eliminated those actions which differentiated German Jews from their neighbors. Ideologically it had the effect of privatizing Judaism, transforming it from a set of observable outward behaviors into an inward confession. Their Judaism became not a pattern of works, if you will, but a set of beliefs: “I am a follower of the Mosaic persuasion.” Reform Judaism became less a “way of life” and more a faith, a kind of Jewish version of sola fide.\(^3\)

Both Luther and the earliest Reformers shared a commitment to the vernacular. Until that point Jewish worship, study, and teaching was done in Hebrew. The early reformers insisted on German, even as Luther had rejected Latin. Early Reform rabbis prided themselves in their well-crafted German sermons. Just as one of Luther’s towering achievements was his translation of the Bible into good German, so did Reform Judaism insist on approaching its sacred text auf Deutsch.\(^4\)

With Luther it was German Reform Jews who insisted on university-educated religious leadership. Luther called for a “learned ministry.” Many of the early Reform rabbis, such as Abraham Geiger, whom Pat mentioned, earned doctorates at secular universities. Some even elected to call themselves Doctor rather than Rabbi, which led one critic to note, “when rabbis became Doctors, Judaism became sick.”

Luther did not imagine that his reforms were the final chapter. He advocated a Christianity that was always being reformed, *semper reformanda*. The ideology of earliest Reform Judaism was that revelation had not ceased at Sinai or even with the destruction of the Temple. Rather they saw themselves as part of a process of continual revelation. In other words they had as much authority as the rabbis of the Talmud or conceivably the Torah itself.
One last, but profound, element of the overlap in this Venn diagram: Germany itself. Luther clearly rejected the notion of a catholic— with a small c—Christianity, what was called Christendom. His insistence on the vernacular reflected an underlying commitment to the individual nation. His devotion to Germany as such was a significant part of his ideology. Luther’s German nationalism is tragically reflected in the German nationalism of the early reformers. Along with the external manifestations of Jewish life, they threw off all vestiges of Jewish particularism. They rejected any sense of Jewish solidarity—what we have come to refer to as Jewish peoplehood. They believed whole-heartedly in the perfect symbiosis of their German culture and their Jewish inheritance. They looked with contempt at the Ostjuden, the Jews of Eastern Europe. Their descriptions of whom they should have seen as their Eastern brethren are drenched in contempt.

At the end of the nineteenth century, another group of Jews sought to throw off the constraints of the previous status quo. These reformers, too, rejected the prevailing religious patterns and identified exclusively with the Hebrew Bible. They were the early supporters of a return to the ancient Jewish homeland. They, too, did not call themselves Jews, but rather Ivrim/Hebrews, like their Biblical forebears. They, too, were explicit in jumping over the teaching of the rabbis to return to the ancient roots. But they identified with Jewish peoplehood. Not so early Reform. The sense of a universal collectivity was as anathema to them as the idea of Church was to Luther. When the movement of political Zionism emerged, early Reform Judaism rejected it forcefully. They said, “Berlin is my Jerusalem and my synagogue is my Temple,” a motto which resonates with tragic irony in light of later history.

So integral was the Germanism of early reform that when German reform Jews emigrated to the United States the vernacular in which they prayed, studied and delivered
sermons…continued to be German. ⁵ When the First World War erupted these German-American Reform Jews were painfully torn. And only that wrenching moment compelled them to embrace English as their vernacular. ⁶ As recently as the early twentieth century Reform Jewish scholars did their graduate work in German universities much the same way Catholic scholars put in some graduate time in Rome. It was the heartland. I hear strong resonances of Luther in that love of the homeland as part of the religious dynamic.

Which brings me to the end of this story. When I mentioned earlier that the Reform Judaism of today is dramatically different from this earliest Reform, let me quickly mention a short list of what it re-incorporated from the Jewish past. Today’s Reform Judaism includes, in no particular order: Hebrew prayer; respectful inclusion of traditional practices; affirmation of Jewish peoplehood; commitment to the State of Israel; attentiveness to the teachings of the rabbis; an acknowledgement of the relevance of the Jewish past. Significantly, the causes of this evolution were not some project of ideological self-reflection, but a tragic historic one and an American demographic one. The futile aspiration of the early Reform to be accepted by their fellow Germans ended with the extermination of that community. The German heartland of Reform Judaism disappeared three generations ago and the center of Reform Judaism shifted to America. The changes in Reform Judaism in America were precipitated when the domination of American Jewish community by German Jews came to an end and they were displaced by the children and grandchildren of Jews from Eastern Europe who brought with them a warmer embrace of the Jewish past, a stronger identity with Jewish peoplehood and a fonder appreciation of Jewish externals. Lutheran ideals meant nothing to them. And Reform Judaism moved on.
NOTES

1 Their Lutheran neighbors, of course, called them Jews.

2 I once encountered an exponent of this perspective who dismissed Jewish dietary laws by telling me “what matters is not what goes into your mouth, but what comes out” —without any awareness that he was paraphrasing Matthew 15:11.

3 It is of interest that it was not a Reform Jew, but an Orthodox leader in Germany, Samson Raphael Hirsch who instructed, “Be a man on the street, and a Jew in your home.” Hirsch, too, seems to have imbibed the Lutheran cultural legacy of religious privatism.

4 Interestingly they did not render the Talmud or other rabbinic literature in German, emblematic of its irrelevance to them.

5 When Reform synagogues began to be established in the State of Israel, visiting American Reform Jews were often confused that the entire service was conducted in Hebrew—though, that language was, in fact, the local vernacular.

6 Actually, attachment to this Germanism has not totally abated. There are to this day, I am told, congregations with German Reform roots that continue on “high state” occasions, to include hymns sung in German.
Rabbi Daniel F. Polish

Rabbi Daniel F. Polish is an accomplished author and scholar. He earned his bachelor’s degree at Northwestern University and completed his rabbinical training at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He earned his doctoral degree at Harvard University. A frequent teacher of both Jewish and Christian audiences, he has addressed interfaith gatherings in places such as Warsaw, Seville, Istanbul, New Delhi, and Bangladesh. He is a published poet and has written or edited a number of books, including *Bringing the Psalms to Life: How to Understand and Use the Book of Psalms; Keeping Faith with the Psalms: Deepen Your Relationship with God Using the Book of Psalms;* and *Talking About God: Exploring the Meaning of Religious Life with Kierkegaard, Buber, Tilich, and Heschel.*

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