

Tradition is the New Radical

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In the following, I will share some thoughts and discussions that led up to the conference theme “Tradition is the New Radical.”

After one of our lunches, walking through Lundagård, the park just north of the Cathedral, Professor Jayne Svenungsson told me about a very famous artist, Lana Del Rey, who in a short time has gained iconic status among young women globally. Her trademark has been to play with gender clichés, for example by dressing up as a housewife from the 1950s. How is it that some still consider her to be not only iconic, but also a feminist icon? She acts and writes her songs as if the feminist movement never existed. Or maybe on the contrary she plays with stereotypes and celebrates “traditional femininity” exactly *because* she is part of a post-feminist-revolution-generation. In a review of Del Rey’s 2015 album *Honeymoon*, a journalist noted that in the twenty-first century, as a woman, to voluntarily move toward themes like submission, weakness, and sexual passivity is indeed to call the current regulations for how a pop star identity is constructed in question; in a time when “girl power” is more salable than when the Spice Girls had their breakthrough.

One can also add to the picture that Lana Del Rey in an interview, when asked if she is a feminist, replied in the negative and thereby definitely “out-narrated” herself from the norm.

The very same journalist also came to the conclusion that when the time comes in the future to summarize the progress it is not unlikely that non-feminist Lana Del Rey proves to be our time’s pioneer of female artistry. She might not be an explicit representative for “girl power,” but she is doing a tremendous job for young girls’ possibilities to be able to be grouchy, both in pictures and images and in the music, and still be pop millionaires.

We live in a time where tradition and traditional in different areas have become the radical.

The Swedish professor emeritus of the history of ideas in Gothenburg, Sven-Erik Liedman,

claims in an article that the concept of radical in relation to tradition has linguistically changed during the twentieth century. In the 1930s and the immediately following decades, to be radical meant to be a liberal anti-traditionalist. An anti-traditionalist position implied a continuous critical examination of so-called “tradition-arguments.” The meaning of radical has shifted and today it denotes, on the contrary, different ways of emphasizing tradition, highlighting different aspects of it, and sometimes also claiming certain positions as more authentic than others. Sven-Erik Liedman exemplifies this change by stating that today a radical could refer to a violent extremist. Young people are taught that they run the risk of becoming radicalized; the worst example of course being someone who got in the net of ISIS.

Another example that Liedman offers of this change of the concept radical is the descriptions of Trump and Republican politics during the US election campaigns. At the end of July, an analyst of Trump in a Swedish morning paper claimed that Trump “had opened the door for extreme and radical ideas,” and that the Republican Party had gone through a radicalization.

Liedman highlights that historically, the opponents of the radicals were traditionalists who claimed that the enduring should be preserved simply because it had proved durable. This is according to Liedman the unreflected conservatism above argument.

He continues:

Whereas the radicals at that time wanted to question everything, the radicals of today are on the contrary looking back to history/tradition, seeking out something original or at least a lost golden age. The radicalized Islamists want to retrieve the days of the Prophet. Trump and his supporters talk about a time when America was great. In that sense they are all reactionaries.

One can of course argue with Liedman, but bearing his analysis of a changed meaning of the concept “radical” in mind, we can now turn to our own field.

Through the Lana Del Rey discussion in Lundagård, Professor Svenungsson and I came to the conclusion that further analysis about similar tradition-oriented trends in theology needs to be carried out. Because one could say that over the past two decades a strong trend also in theology has been a reclaiming of traditions, not least the retrieval of patristic and medieval traditions, often for radical purposes. We are curious about the content and possible consequences of these changes in use of traditions related to theology and especially related to gender issues. Whereas much (above all Protestant) theology during modernity sought to be progressive by means of distancing itself from tradition, recent currents

within both Anglican and Roman Catholic theology seek progress through the retrieval of hidden, forgotten, or suppressed aspects of the tradition. On the one hand, the aim is to further enhance the radical analyses of the biblical tradition in order to continue along the emancipatory track set out by feminist and queer theologians in the past decades. On the other hand, the aim is also to investigate possible flipsides of this fascination with tradition. In focusing our attention on liberating symbols and practices in the past, is there a risk that we lose sight of existing gender stereotypes on a concrete societal and ecclesial level? Are conservative patterns regarding gender and sexuality sometimes even being reproduced under the guise of seemingly radical historical metaphors?

These are questions that will be addressed in the presentations of this conference.