CHAPTER ONE

The movement ‘ad fontes’
and the
outbreak of Reformation

At the close of the middle ages the condition of the Church was nowhere considered to be healthy. A papacy preoccupied with politics and taxation, magnificent in everything except religion; an absentee episcopate; an ignorant clergy; an uninstructed laity; a widespread indifference to the spirit of Christianity beneath the forms of established, though sometimes irregular observance: everything had combined to reduce the spiritual life of Christendom to a state not far removed from bankruptcy.¹

But to those who looked upon her with minds still informed by faith, the Church had not lost the imprint of her divine founder. The quest for and discovery of His presence within her, and its mediation to her members in the world at large, became increasingly a theme of fervent spiritual endeavour, in proportion to the very obstacles which emerged to oppose it. In Northern Europe, the mystical piety of the later middle ages brought a perceptible quickening of spiritual life: in Germany, issuing from the school of Tauler and his followers; in the Low Countries, from the monastery of Windesheim which, through its foundations, helped to spread abroad the spirituality of the devotio moderna.² In Italy too, the humanism of the late Quattrocento


turned in a direction favourable to renewal. The idea arose that Christianity might yet be revived by a return ‘ad fontes’ – to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church. The critical achievement of Lorenzo Valla, in approaching the text of Scripture with a new philological precision, moved the imagination of other humanists – in particular, of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola – to attempt a new kind of synthesis between Christianity and classical antiquity. Plato was introduced as the gateway to St Paul: Christianity became the crown of human dignity, the source and culmination of inner tranquillity.¹

But the influence of these movements was restricted. Christianity, if it were to be again effective, demanded an expression at once more vigorous and universal. The spirituality of the devotio moderna could never aspire to be a substitute for pastoral renewal. The scriptural humanism of Ficino was for scholars. In the end, Pico himself seems to have recognised that it was such; he turned from the Florentine Academy to Savonarola. But Savonarola foundered on the reef of politics.² In Florence – a microcosm, almost, of the world beyond – mind and action were turned back helplessly upon themselves. If the key to renewal were indeed to be found in the return ‘ad fontes’ and the recovery of the Word in its original integrity, the manner in which that recovery could be transmitted to a wider audience remained a mystery. Philology in itself could not lead to the regeneration of the Christian people. Philology therefore went in search of a new mode of exegesis.

At the end of the fifteenth century the schools of Oxford and Paris began to develop an approach to the epistles of St Paul which was to achieve considerable influence. At Oxford especially, the efforts of John Colet were devoted to a direct textual examination of St Paul; and in this task he was assisted by the philological expertise which he had acquired in Italy.³ In the Pauline epistles, with their stark contrast between the wisdom of the intellect and

² R. de Maio, Savonarola e la Curia Romana (Rome, 1965).
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the communication of the Spirit, with their emphasis upon the personal encounter of the soul with Christ and the liberation of mankind from formalism, Colet found the antidote to the cerebral configurations of nominalist theology and of Platonic humanism. Colet’s influence, perpetuated at Magdalen in the teaching of William Latimer and Thomas Linacre, was extended throughout Europe by a writer of outstanding quality: in the person of Erasmus, the new approach to Scripture found a propagandist reared in the spirit of the devotio moderna and nourished upon the humanism of antiquity. Henceforth, the epistles of St Paul became the texts which, more than any other, released the religious energies of the new century.

In 1503 Erasmus published his Enchiridion Militis Christiani, the first of a series of works outlining the programme of the new theology. Firmly based upon the inspiration of Scripture, and in particular, upon the teaching of St Paul, his writings were designed to provide a simple instrument of interior regeneration, no less than a means of collective renewal in the life of Christianity. Erasmus, however, was not Colet: at his hands St Paul lost some of his more drastic qualities, his immediacy and uncompromising fervour. The wisdom of Christ, revealed in the pages of the Bible, was to be accessible to every Christian: the unlettered woman would attend to Scripture, and be familiar with the epistles of St Paul; the ploughman in his tasks, the weaver, the traveller – all alike would meditate upon the gospels, and be enriched with the philosophy of Christ.¹ It is this expression, philosophia Christi, ‘a phrase rich with patristic overtones, signifying a life of wisdom entirely consecrated to God’,² which contains the essence of Erasmus: a phrase too, which suggests the limitations of an approach never likely to arouse much popular response. To espouse in all things restraint and moderation, to cultivate an unimpassioned equipoise – these were his most cherished mental

¹ Cessi, ‘Paolinismo preluterano’, p. 28.
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habits: they had their origin in the study, and their appeal, inevitably, was to the educated.

Nevertheless, his influence was immense. It is probably not an exaggeration to state that in the first two decades of the sixteenth century Erasmus gradually captured the intellectual elite of Europe. The originality of his approach – that which constituted its appeal – lay in a conception of the Christian life which depended, not on a series of external observances, but a sustained meditation on the gospels in a manner available to every Christian.¹ The direct reading of Scripture was to be the key to a personal experience of Christianity, which would in turn result in a renewal of the Church at large.

The theology advanced by Erasmus was a matter of the heart and of the emotions, rather than of argument:² a spiritual eloquence which drew its warmth from the living breath of Scripture, and its powers of expression from the literature of classical antiquity and the Fathers. It is not surprising that the humanists of Europe, contemptuous of scholastic thought and impatient with the decadence of ecclesiastical life, should have turned enthusiastically to the new critique of Christianity and society which he provided. Nor is it any less surprising that the theologians of the Sorbonne should have taken profound umbrage. Not only did Erasmus prove himself to be a gifted satirist at their expense: there was also in his thought an aversion to definition and conceptual exactitude, which seemed to threaten the intellectual stability of theology, and hence of orthodoxy itself. It was indeed, this intellectual delicacy, coupled with his own fastidious detachment from popular involvement, which in the long run sapped the Erasmian ideal of its content.

At the same time that Erasmus was embarking on his elaboration of the philosophia Christi, Lefèvre d’Étapes was devoting

² ‘At praecipuis Theologorum scopus est, sapienter enarrare Divinas litteras: de fide, non de frivilis questionibus rationem reddere: de pietate graviter atque efficaciter disserere: lacrymas excutere, ad coaestia inflammare animos.’ Opera, v, Leyden, 1704, 83f–84A.
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himself at Paris to a task which, similar in purpose, differed nonetheless in spirit from that of Erasmus. Lefèvre was no less concerned with the recovery of Scripture: but he looked to it for a hidden, spiritual meaning, accessible only to the mystically enlightened mind. His spirituality, moreover, was marked by an ascetical rigour and intensity of a kind alien to Erasmus. But even less was he a figure of commanding popular appeal. His examination of St Paul remained pre-eminently contemplative: it did not, despite his purpose, engage the field of action. Lefèvre’s reflections on the Pauline texts led him to place more reliance upon grace, and to put greater emphasis on faith, than was common in the accepted view of Christianity. But it did not result in any widespread pastoral renewal.¹ The will to reform was unmistakably present in Lefèvre: the means, all too evidently, were not.

Only in Spain did the reform of the Church receive the support of those in power. Under the direction of Cardinal Cisneros the religious orders, and especially the Franciscans, were recalled to fervour; the clergy were reminded of the true character of their vocation; the university of Alcalá was brought into existence for their education, and for the study and dissemination, through its printing press, of sacred literature. In 1517 there appeared at Alcalá the text of the Complutensian Bible, in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.² During these years of the Cisnerian reform there also developed, independently, a movement based on little reading groups in private homes, where the Bible was extolled as the foundation of interior life. Its adherents were known as the alumbrados or ‘enlightened’; their spirituality, far from being internally consistent, was marked by differentiations which led some of them into ever closer relationship with the Church, while others moved quietly into the paths of private inspiration.³ At the castle of Escalona, where the Marqués de Villena was patron to a little circle of alumbrados, the young Juan de Valdés, whose spiritual influence was to be so deeply felt in the

² For the Cisnerian reform, see Bataillon, Erasme et l’Espagne, and J. C. Nieto, Juan de Valdés and the Origins of the Spanish and Italian Reformation (Geneva, 1970).
³ Nieto, Juan de Valdés, pp. 51–97.
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religious history of the sixteenth century, first became familiar with the methods of Scriptural exegesis which, in a developed form, he was later to transmit throughout the whole of Europe.¹ We shall return to Valdés in a later chapter; for the moment, it is sufficient to note that by 1527, as a student at the University of Alcalá, he had acquired proficiency in Hebrew and Greek, and was known as a ‘juvenis divi Pauli studiosissimus’.² In Spain, as elsewhere in Europe, the study of St Paul was by now paramount among the younger humanists.

In Italy, too, where the influence of Valdés was eventually to be most keenly marked, the early years of the century witnessed a new flowering of religious foundations³ and, in certain circles, a return to the spirit of St Paul. The most remarkable instance of this latter development occurred at Venice, where a group of young noblemen intent on personal sanctity dedicated themselves over a period of years to an exploration of the means available to their ambition. All were humanists; all had been educated at the University of Padua; all were dissatisfied with the sustenance provided by Platonic humanism. At length, in 1510 the leader of this group, Paolo Giustiniani, entered the hermitage of Camaldoli, near Arezzo. He had resolved upon contemplative life as the most effective form of spiritual action.⁴ Shortly afterwards, he was followed into the monastery by almost all the members of his group. There was, however, one notable exception: Gasparo Contarini, at this time a young man of twenty-seven. Contarini’s experiences in these months, his internal conflict, its resolution, and its ultimate consequences are vividly portrayed in a series of letters which he wrote to Giustiniani and his friends.⁵

¹ Nieto, Juan de Valdés, pp. 99–101. For the posthumous influence of Valdés, see D. Ricart, Juan de Valdés y el pensamiento religioso europeo de los siglos XVI–XVII (Mexico, 1958).
² J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, Juan de Valdés réformateur en Espagne et en Italie (Geneva, 1969), p. 16.
³ A. Cistellini, Figure della Riforma Pretridentina (Brescia, 1948).
⁵ H. Jedin (ed.), ‘Contarini und Camaldoli’, Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà, II (1959), 51–117. Contarini’s difficulties at this time are examined by Jedin
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Contarini’s letters reveal beyond doubt that he was preoccupied at this time with problems very similar to those which Luther was experiencing in Germany: and that, after an early crisis, he resolved them in a manner not dissimilar to that which Luther independently adopted. Contarini’s crisis, like that of Luther, revolved around the problem of salvation, and the necessary means to its attainment. In contrast to Luther’s experience, however, it was precipitated by the decision of his friend Giustinni-ani to retire into monastic life. Contarini could not feel it in himself to follow, but his failure to do so made him feel profoundly miserable. On 1 February 1511 he wrote to Giustinniani:

I shall not say, lest I deceive you, that I am coming to keep you company. Such good thoughts are not in me. I only grieve... that I see my friends every day going from what is good to what is better, while my so obstinate mind and hardened heart go from bad to worse.¹

He felt himself like a rudderless ship in the middle of the sea; his mind was troubled, more so than he could express.²

Easter approached, and Contarini retired for recollection to San Giorgio Maggiore. He thought there of Giustinniani who, even yet, feared that his remaining time would be inadequate to atone for his past sins; he thought of his own life, and his failure so much as to approach the standard which Giustinniani set. Reflecting on the contrast, he ‘remained very ill-content and almost in despair’.³ On Holy Saturday he made his way in this frame of mind to San Sebastiano, where he confessed his sins. There he fell into conversation with a priest whom he had never before met. This man, ‘as if he knew my trouble, began to reason with me that the way of salvation was much broader than


many persuaded themselves.¹ The result of their conversation was that Contarini began to ponder in a new way upon the problem of salvation. It became apparent that he was himself incapable of satisfying for his sins:

After I had left him I began to think over for myself what that salvation (‘felicita’) is, and what our condition is. And I understood truly that if I did all the penances possible, and even many more, they would not be enough at one great stroke, I shall not say to merit that salvation, but to atone for my past sins.²

Yet it was not necessary for him to attempt so much; for he now saw that God had permitted His Son to suffer atonement ‘for all those... wish to be members of that body of which Christ is the head’.³ Thus satisfaction had already been accomplished. Hence the members of Christ’s body could ‘with little effort, hope to atone for their sins through the influx of the atonement which our head has made’.⁴ The rest of Contarini’s description must be given in full:

We must attempt merely to unite ourselves with this, our head, with faith, with hope, and with such little love as we are capable of. As regards the satisfaction for the sins committed, and into which human weakness falls, His passion is sufficient and more than sufficient.

Through this thought I was changed from great fear and suffering to happiness. I began with my whole spirit to turn to this greatest good which I saw, for love of me, on the cross, with his arms open, and his breast opened right up to his heart. Thus I, the wretch who had not had enough courage for the atonement of my iniquities to leave the world and do penance, turned to him; and since I asked him to let me share in the satisfaction which he, without any sins of his own, had made for us, he was quick to accept me and to cause his Father completely to cancel the debt I had contracted, which I by myself was incapable of satisfying.

Now shall I not sleep securely although in the midst of the city, although I have not paid off (‘satisfaci’) the debt I had contracted, since I have such a payer of my debt? Truly I shall sleep and wake as securely as if I had spent all my life in the hermitage with the intention of never tiring of such a task.⁵

¹ ‘Contarini und Camoldoli’, p. 64. ² Ibid. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid. ⁵ Ibid.
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In this episode, as recounted by Contarini, we may observe the same advance from fear to confidence, from helplessness to absolute assurance, which characterised the experience of Luther. It is enough to justify Jedin's description of the matter as a *Turnerlebnis*. Contarini himself spoke of it as 'an experience brighter than the sun'.¹ Like Luther, Contarini found in the contemplation of Christ's sacrifice the solvent of his fears, and the resolution of his anxious strivings for perfection. His own works were powerless to assist him: confidence in Christ was everything.

But in certain important aspects, and in its consequences, Contarini's experience was not identical with that of Luther. Contarini did not altogether dismiss the role of human effort in salvation: men, he believed, were justified by faith, but not by faith alone. In addition, there was hope, and 'such little love as we are capable of'. Luther would not allow that any effort, however 'little', could be availing to salvation; nor did he believe that man, in himself, was capable of love. To suppose that works were meritorious in any sense, seemed to him to place a blasphemous limitation on the absolute efficacy of Christ's sufferings. Contarini, unlike Luther, made no negations: he sought merely to remove the props of self-reliance which prevented men from trusting themselves utterly to Christ. He replaced an emphasis; he did not distrust, as Luther did, the idea of cooperation between grace and nature.

Thus he was not prompted to assume the task of prophecy, declaring against the corruption of a Church which placed obstacles between mankind and God. On the contrary, his experience of renewal had occurred within the bosom of the Church, and was closely linked with the sacrament of penance. He remained convinced that the means to reform lay within the Church herself: despite every humanly-contrived deformity, the Church retained the Spirit of grace and truth. Hence reform must be initiated from within.²

As yet, Contarini was in no position to reform the Church. He was not a priest; he held no ecclesiastical office. Instead, he served the Venetian government for a further fifteen years, until the time came when he was finally enabled to influence the course of Catholic reform. During the intervening period, the fruits of his experience began to ripen and, ‘in the midst of the city’, its consequences became ever more apparent. He continued to correspond with his friends in the hermitage of Camaldoli, visiting them occasionally and conversing with them on spiritual matters. He strenuously defended the validity of a Christian life lived in the world, at one time even arguing its superiority to contemplative life. He read continuously in Scripture and the early Fathers, especially St Augustine and St Gregory, whom he considered to excel ‘in interpretatione mystice de la Scriptura’. Most significantly, he found in the writings of St Paul the confirmation of his innermost experience. On 20 April 1513 he wrote to Giustiniani: ‘I know fully that in ourselves we are insufficient, as St Paul says, to think, let alone do, anything good, and that all praise must be directed to him alone who is the source and origin of all things good.’

The last of Contarini’s surviving letters to Giustiniani was written on 7 February 1523. In it, he speaks of ‘various emotions’ which still trouble his ‘scarcely confirmed, or rather my unstable heart’; and he continues with a renewed affirmation of his confidence in Christ, in support of which he again appeals to the testimony of St Paul:

Wherefore I have truly come to the firm conclusion (which, however, I had first read and experienced for myself) that no one can at any time justify himself through his works or purge his mind of its inclinations. One must turn to the divine grace obtained through faith in Jesus Christ, as St. Paul says, and repeat with him: ‘Beatus, cui non imputavit Dominus peccatum, sine operibus.’ Now I see both in myself and in others that whenever a man thinks to have acquired

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1 Only to write about it. In 1517 he published De Officio episcopi, discussed in Gilbert, ‘Religion and Politics,’ pp. 105–10.
2 Contarini to Giustiniani, 22 September 1511. (‘Contarini und Camaldoli’, p. 69.)
3 Ibid. pp. 75, 77.
4 Ibid. p. 89.