

Introduction: the scope of Reformation theology

DAVID BAGCHI AND DAVID C. STEINMETZ

Even in an age suspicious of grand narratives, the European Reformation has somehow maintained its status as ‘a decisive event’ in the history of the West. It remains a lively and fascinating subject of study: something of the vitality and variety of fairly current scholarship on the subject – to say nothing of its sheer bulk – can be gauged by English readers from the four volumes of the recent *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*. All students of the early modern period, from social and economic historians to historians of art to students of literature, have sooner rather than later to engage with the impact on their field of the Reformation, and especially of its religious ideas. But how does one get to grips with what might strike the beginner as the least concrete aspect of the Reformation? This *Companion*, with contributions from the leading authorities in the area, is designed to be not only a stimulating collection of essays for theologians but also an accessible and reliable introduction to Reformation theology for non-specialists.

Until recently, it would have seemed eccentric to publish a companion to the theology of the Reformation. Towards the end of the twentieth century, theology came to be seen by many as marginal to Reformation studies. This was in part a reaction to the ‘great man’ approach to the past. In the same way that history in general was no longer primarily about what kings and queens did or what parliaments enacted, so the motivating force of religious history was not to be found in the writings of the ecclesiastical elite. Attention turned instead to the ‘simple folk’. They were discovered to be not mere recipients of elite preaching and teaching, but active agents who took from the preachers what related to their own experience – the more egalitarian and iconoclastic part of the reformers’ gospel – and developed it in ways the mainstream reformers would never have countenanced. It was the social historian, not the historical theologian, who seemed better equipped to answer the real question about the Reformation, ‘What impact did it have on ordinary people?’

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Several factors have led to the rehabilitation of theology as an essential tool for the student of the Reformation. First, there has been the widespread (but not universal) acceptance of the 'confessionalization' thesis. This presupposes that the systems inspired by the 'great men' of theology, and implemented by the 'great men' of state, actually did have a decisive impact on the lives of ordinary individuals in the sixteenth century and beyond. Secondly, there has been the rise of cultural history, which takes an interdisciplinary approach and weaves theological factors, quite unapologetically, into the wider web of intellectual and social forces. Thirdly, the interest in popular religion, which initially seemed to disenfranchise the student of elite religion, has served rather to demonstrate the impossibility of separating 'popular' and 'elite' cultures in any meaningful way: Luther himself would have acknowledged no distinction between the 'superstitious' and 'higher order' elements of his theology, while the highly educated Melancthon shared an interest in astrology with many semi-literates of his day. At the other end of the expected educational scale, we find among the worldly goods of Tyrolean miners not just books but complex books of theology.

The result of these factors is that the theology of the Reformation has once again taken its place centre-stage. It cannot claim to be the queen of Reformation sciences – the field is now too diverse and too extensive for any one discipline to claim pre-eminence in it – but it is certainly a handmaid to all. However, the nature of Reformation theology is now different, or at least the approach taken to it is different in important respects, from its previous incarnations. First, it is *pluralist*. 'Reformation theology' is no longer synonymous with 'early Protestant theology' but includes in its scope the theologies of all sides, Protestant, Catholic, and Radical, as well as of those who do not fit neatly into these categories. This is not to deny that scholars, particularly Germans, still attempt to distil the essence of *reformatorisch* (by which they mean mainstream Protestant) thought; but the similarities and parallels between the different confessions are now given their due weight, alongside the very clear differences. Modern Reformation theology is therefore pluralist; but is it also ecumenical? The term is unsatisfactory in several ways, partly because it presupposes Christian belief on the part of present-day scholars of Reformation theology, partly because a strong tendency among ecumenically minded Christians is to minimize the importance of the Reformation and of confessional differences. The latter tend to regard the Reformation as an embarrassing relative who insists on producing snapshots of oneself as an infant, just when one is trying one's best to be grown up. It could even be said that, while in the 1970s and 1980s the severest critics of a theological approach to the Reformation were

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often social historians with no personal Christian sympathies, its greatest enemies today can be found among Christian ecumenists.

Secondly, it is *chronologically fluid*. 'Reformation' as the description of an era is no longer limited to the sixteenth century but takes in the 'long' sixteenth century, from around 1400 to around 1650. This is, in part, a recognition of the tendency over the last four decades to see the Reformation as an organic unity with the later Middle Ages rather than as a break with them. (Put like that, the point seems obvious enough. But the previous emphasis on discontinuity too conveniently served the interests both of Protestant scholars who wanted to depict the Reformation as an act of God and as a condemnation of what had gone before, and of Roman Catholic scholars who wanted to exculpate the late medieval church from responsibility for spawning the reformers.) As Denis Janz notes in his essay, it is an insight that has transformed the study of the Reformation, and of Reformation theology, entirely. It is an insight that is, however, being challenged by a renascent progressive ('Whig') approach. The confessionalization thesis proposed by continental historians emphasizes the importance of theology in the Reformation period only as a means of state-building, concentrating on its forward-looking aspects. In a similar way, most modern accounts of the English Reformation emphasize the discontinuity of Protestantism with the late medieval tradition. Both approaches see the Reformation as a reaction to, rather than a continuation of, earlier tendencies. But the scope of Reformation theology has also been extended forwards in time, and this is a recognition that not even the immediate outworking of the Reformation as a historical or theological event was complete by the Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555), the traditional end-point of investigations. In particular, the full impact of Calvinism was not felt in German lands until the Thirty Years War.

Thirdly, it is *contextual*. Reformation theology today differs from its predecessors is that it is no longer solely the preserve of historical theologians. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, Reformation theology is as likely nowadays to be the concern of the historian and the literature specialist as of theologians. Although academic guilds do not normally welcome the introduction of free-market principles, in this case it is quite proper. All theology is done in a context. The theologians of the Reformation era were perhaps more conscious of their context than most. The theologizing in which they were involved was not pure or abstract (it never is), but applied. They were not for the most part concerned with revisiting the fundamental doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, which were not significantly at issue during the period. They were, however, concerned with practical questions that would have exercised many in late medieval Europe: What must

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I do to be saved? Where they disagree, do I follow the Bible or the church? How can I be a good Christian and a good subject, citizen, merchant, soldier, husband, or wife?

A point which can never be made too often is that the theologians of the Reformation were not ivory-tower academics. Their principal tasks were in most cases pastoral, and we derive their theologies from utterances from the pulpit, from spiritual advice given in letters, from rushed polemical outbursts, in the midst of persecution. Even the leisurely disquisitions that they have left turn out on further inspection to be occasional pieces in disguise, or else works that need to be supplemented by their other writings. It is from polemic that we get the offensive sense of the word 'theologian': one who is concerned with abstruse theorizing of no practical value to the ordinary Christian. Whether anyone has ever fitted this description is doubtful; but certainly the theologians of the Reformation period did not.

This *Companion* follows a roughly chronological, rather than thematic, structure: the chapters are devoted to movements and individuals, not doctrines. There are three reasons for this. First, it allows the different theologies to be set more coherently within their historical context without excessive repetition. Secondly, most scholars in the field tend to specialize in particular movements or individuals rather than in synchronic studies of doctrines, and this approach allowed contributors to play to their strengths. Thirdly, most university and college courses on Reformation thought take the approach adopted here, so it allows the volume to be an actual 'companion' throughout a term's or semester's work. But although the essays are not ordered thematically, the index should prove helpful to those readers who wish to compare for themselves different treatments of the same theological topics.

1 Late medieval theology

DENIS R. JANZ

If there is one thing that can be called a genuine breakthrough in the last half-century of Reformation studies, it would be the ‘discovery’ that the Reformation had a background. The reformers, all of whom were theologians, and a good number of whom had formal academic training in the discipline, emerged out of a theological landscape that profoundly shaped their horizons. Some elements from this late medieval theological bequest they rejected; some they appropriated; and still others they sublated by taking something old and fashioning from it something new. In other words, their ideas did not spring to life *ex nihilo*, or descend from above, or emerge full-blown from an ‘objective’ study of the Bible alone. They worked in the intellectual context of late medieval theology, and consequently, without some grasp of this context, there can be no adequate understanding of their theology. By today, this realization has had an impact on every area of Reformation studies.

One of the most prominent features of this landscape was its pluralism. The major theme of sermons preached at the papal court on the eve of the Reformation was that ‘Peace now reigns in Christian doctrine’. The research of the last half-century has made it increasingly apparent that nothing was further from the truth. The achievement of a *pax theologica*, proclaimed for whatever reason by these hand-picked sacred orators, was a chimera. The reality was that theological faculties at virtually all universities in Europe, from the venerable older institutions of Paris and Oxford to the newer German ones, were deeply divided into factions or ‘schools’ that differed not only on specifics but often also on fundamental approaches to the discipline.

This meant that theology, as it was practised in universities, was more often than not enveloped in an atmosphere of debate, contention, and rivalry. Deep disagreements were often exacerbated by the narrow loyalties of religious orders to particular masters. Arguments between the schools could at times degenerate into sheer rancour and name-calling. Thus a Thomist, for instance, buttressed his argumentation by adding that his opponent was a ‘huge, boorish dog, an infernal worm, a delirious wasp,

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and a dung-eating pig'. Theological discussion did not often descend to this level of acrimony, but the point is that disagreements were deep and debates were heated. This essay attempts to sketch the major contours of this landscape. In doing so it takes its cue from Martin Luther and other reformers who regularly named the 'scholastic sects' as 'Thomists, Albertists, Scotists, Occamists', and so on. Who were they, and what did they represent?

THOMISM

A good number of late medieval theologians took as their task the defence, interpretation, and development of the thought of Thomas Aquinas OP (d. 1274). To begin with, though, the shadow of heterodoxy had hovered over the teaching of Thomas. By 1323, the date of his canonization, these questions had effectively been laid to rest. But even then, for the remainder of the fourteenth century, the fortunes of the Thomist school were dismal. Among the various theological schools represented at Paris, for instance, the Thomists seem to have had the least capable adherents. Furthermore, in 1387, the low point was reached: the Thomists were expelled *en masse* from the citadel of academia, the University of Paris, for their denial of the immaculate conception. Only in 1403, when concessions were made, were the Thomists allowed to return. And this development signalled a reversal in their fortunes.

For the first time, major thinkers now began to take up the development and defence of Thomas' teaching, so much so that scholars today feel justified in speaking of a fifteenth-century 'renaissance' of Thomism. Capable individuals such as Antonius of Florence OP (d. 1459), John of Ragusa OP (d. 1443), John Tinctoris OP (d. 1469), John Werd OP (d. 1469), and Henry of Gorkum (d. 1431) joined the cause. By mid-century, prominent theological faculties offered courses of study 'in the way of St Thomas'. Moreover, the school's centre of gravity was now shifting from Paris to the new German universities, most especially Cologne. Thomism had clearly been reborn as a prominent school in the intellectual world of the fifteenth century.

This rebirth was led above all by John Capreolus OP (d. 1444), by far the most imposing representative of the late medieval Thomist school. Known as the '*Princeps Thomistarum*' ('prince of the Thomists'), Capreolus offered a comprehensive and cogent defence of Thomas against rival schools which had attacked almost every facet of his theology. He also established reasoned norms and principles for the historical-critical interpretation of Thomas' texts, thereby eliminating substantial confusion over what Thomas had really held. The renewed interest in the theology of Thomas which Capreolus' work inspired meant that by the eve of the Reformation, almost

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all theological faculties including Erfurt and Wittenberg, had professors lecturing *in via sancti Thomae*.

What positions, then, were the hallmarks of Thomism? No doctrine can be cited as the single, infallible litmus test, unless it be simply the intention of a thinker to resolve all questions *ad mentem sancti Thomae* (according to the mind of St Thomas). Nevertheless, one can name several tendencies and emphases that were typical of this school, theological signposts that were regarded as 'Thomist' on the eve of the Reformation.

First, Thomists posited a fundamental harmony between faith and reason. What is known by faith comes ultimately from God by way of revelation. Likewise, what is known by reason comes ultimately from God, since the structure of the mind was established by God. The two can therefore, in principle, never contradict each other. Furthermore, reason can demonstrate some of the prolegomena to faith (such as the existence of God), but not the saving truths of revelation.

Secondly, there is a parallel continuity between nature and grace. Both have their origins in God, and grace builds on rather than subverts or destroys human nature. Thus the concept of merit is affirmed, but on the understanding that grace is always the principle of merit with respect to eternal life. Some Thomists emphasized this last point more than others, thereby distancing themselves further from the Pelagian error (the view that the human will is the decisive factor in salvation).

Besides these, the following positions can be regarded as Thomist. First, the final end and ultimate happiness of the human person consists in the intellectual vision of God. Secondly, God would not have become incarnate had Adam not sinned. Thirdly, The doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception compromises the universality of Christ's redemptive act, and therefore it is rejected. Fourthly, especially after the Council of Constance (1414–17), Thomist ecclesiology tended in an increasingly papalistic direction. Most Thomists embraced most of these views most of the time, and thus they can be regarded as indicators (not litmus tests) of late medieval Thomism.

ALBERTISM

An alternative within the *via antiqua*, albeit a minor one, was to build one's theology on the foundation laid by Albert the Great OP (d. 1280). Albert had been Thomas' teacher in Cologne and had outlived his student, producing a vast corpus of works in theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences. This body of writing, while uncommonly rich, nevertheless set forth views which were ambiguous if not downright inconsistent. Thus, for instance, while Albert's thought was in many respects Aristotelian, it was

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also at times heavily coloured by Neoplatonic tendencies (inherited above all from Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius).

Already in the fourteenth century, Albert had a scattered following, especially, it seems, at Paris. Early in the next century, these few disciples coalesced into a 'school' at Paris under the leadership of Johannes de Nova Domo (fifteenth century). Besides holding to certain philosophical views that were at odds with the Thomists, this school's thought can be characterized as follows. First, the style of thought is thoroughly hierarchical, with all beings graduated according to their perfections. Secondly, a doctrine of 'cosmic sympathy' is common: the life of God somehow permeates the whole universe. Thirdly, the deductive method is favoured, but is not used exclusively. And finally, there is a certain propensity for somewhat obscure imagery that hampers clarity of expression.

In 1410 a young Flemish student, Heymeric de Campo (or Heymeric van de Velde) (d. 1460), began to study under Johannes de Nova Domo in Paris. In 1422 Heymeric moved to Cologne, where he joined other Albertists, eventually becoming the most prominent among them. Here the simmering antagonism between Albertists and Thomists broke into the open in 1425. For the remainder of the century, German Albertism was defined by its opposition to Thomism. And its centre was Cologne, where lectures *secundum modum Albertistarum* were a regular part of the curriculum. Thomists continued to dominate at Cologne, but Albertists constituted the most significant alternative.

In lesser ways Albertism's influence also eventually made inroads at other universities: Louvain, Cracow, Heidelberg, Ingolstadt, Tübingen, Basel, Prague, Copenhagen, Uppsala, Padua, and others. A few important thinkers were heavily indebted to the Albertist approach: Wessel Gansfort (d. 1489) and Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) are examples. Perhaps most importantly, Albertist perspectives penetrated deeply into the tradition of German Dominican mysticism, from Meister Eckhart OP (d. 1327) to Henry Suso OP (d. 1366), Johann Tauler OP (d. 1361), and the *German Theology*. Thus, while late medieval Albertism could not begin to challenge the dominant position of other schools, it was not without its own sphere of influence.

SCOTISM

If any religious order dominated the intellectual landscape in the centuries preceding the Reformation, it was certainly the Franciscans. And yet theologians of the Franciscan order were split in their loyalties. Most thirteenth-century Franciscans initially followed the lead of Bonaventure OFM (d. 1247). Very quickly, though, his influence was largely supplanted by the work of Johannes Duns Scotus OFM (d. 1308). Soon thereafter, many

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Franciscans found themselves drawn to the theology of William of Occam OFM (d. 1349). Thus Franciscan theologians in the late Middle Ages were divided between Scotists and Occamists.

Of the two, the greater number of Franciscans explicitly identified themselves with the school of Occam. But the number of self-proclaimed Scotists was not negligible. And when Franciscan theologians were not explicit about their loyalties, it is extremely difficult to differentiate them into Scotists or Occamists. This is because many 'Scotist' ideas, emphases, and positions were absorbed wholesale by Occam and his followers.

If we identify Scotism with those who explicitly defined themselves in this way, the school was quite limited and its representatives could hardly be designated as major thinkers. Franciscus de Mayronis OFM (d. 1325), Antonius Andreas OFM (d. 1320), William of Alnwick OFM (d. 1333), John of Bassolis (d. 1347), and Francesco Licheto (d. 1520) were hardly household names, even within the household of late medieval theology. If we identify Scotism with a complex of theological ideas which found its origins (more or less) in Scotus, however, then we have to recognize that these ideas had enormous currency among thinkers who did not call themselves 'Scotists', foremost among them the Occamists. Seen in this light, Scotism was one of the most important intellectual currents on the eve of the Reformation.

The Scotist thought complex is most often associated with 'voluntarism', the doctrine of the primacy of will in God and in the human person (as opposed to Thomist 'intellectualism'). Accordingly, the emphasis in Scotism falls on the object of the will, namely the good (as opposed to the object of the intellect, the true), and on the proper act of the will, namely loving (as opposed to the proper act of the intellect, knowing). This starting point meant that for Scotists, theology was a practical, not a speculative discipline: the ultimate end for which humans were created was not the intellectual vision of God but rather loving God.

Because God is defined as will, and because his will is absolutely free, he initially had an infinite number of possibilities open to him. He could have created worlds radically at odds with the existing one, and he could have established a way to salvation for humans entirely different from the one in effect. This perspective on God's absolute power (referred to as the *potentia Dei absoluta*) takes the force out of any metaphysical arguments from causality. The world did not have to be the way it in fact is, nor did the order of salvation. Both are radically contingent. As one interpreter puts it, 'God is no longer tied to creation by "deterministic" causation, but related to it by volition.'

Yet all talk about the *potentia Dei absoluta* remains speculative, and all thought on alternative possible worlds is hypothetical. Theology deals with the actual world God has in fact chosen to create and with the order

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of salvation he actually willed to establish. This existing order is that of God's ordained power (referred to as *potentia Dei ordinata*). While it is metaphysically contingent, it is nevertheless utterly reliable, since God has committed himself to it unalterably. It was on this voluntarist foundation, whether radical or moderate, that Scotists constructed their alternative to Thomism.

Other typically Scotist doctrines and emphases can be listed briefly. First, in Christology, Scotists held that the Son, as a manifestation of God's love, would have become incarnate even if Adam had not sinned. The distinction of the two natures in Christ, rather than their unity, was emphasized, as was the real humanity of Christ. The doctrine of the immaculate conception was defended on the grounds that Mary's redemption was most fittingly accomplished by preserving her from original sin. Secondly, in the area of soteriology, Scotists stressed what they called the *acceptatio divina*: no human can truly merit eternal life, but God in his mercy decided to accept and reward works which, by the standard of strict justice, would be unworthy of such reward. These are called 'merits', but only in an extended sense, *merita de congruo* (congruent merits) as opposed to *merita de condigno* (condign merits). Thus, for instance, attrition (sorrow for sins based on fear) rather than contrition (sorrow for sins based on love) was held to be a sufficient disposition for a valid reception of the sacrament of penance. God has decided to accept this, even though, strictly speaking, it falls short. Thus the *acceptatio divina* functions as a safeguard against the Pelagian heresy. The typical Scotist understanding of predestination also undercuts Pelagian tendencies: election is *ante praevisa merita* (prior to foreseen merit), while reprobation is *post praevisa demerita* (subsequent to foreseen demerit).

While these positions can be designated as 'Scotist', it must be emphasized that Scotists were not unanimous on all points. And their voice, as a school, was relatively weak. This does not mean, however, that their views were unimportant. Indeed, these teachings had enormous currency on the late medieval theological scene. But this was not owing to the prominence of individual self-designated Scotists. Rather it was due to the fact that many of their positions were adopted wholesale by the next school to be described here, the one towards which especially Franciscans increasingly gravitated, namely Occamism.

OCCAMISM

The vexed question of the name of this school cannot detain us here. 'Occamism' is preferred here only because it is somewhat less problematic