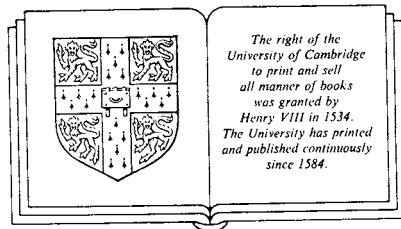# Lay theology in the Reformation

Popular pamphleteers in Southwest Germany 1521–1525

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The right of the
University of Cambridge
to print and sell
all manner of books
was granted by
Henry VIII in 1534.
The University has printed
and published continuously
since 1584.

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In order to facilitate comparisons in the theology of individual pamphleteers, graphic figures have been designed with a general uniformity. Triangles have been used as symbols for man and God. For God the triangle has broken lines, to symbolize an ideal, less perceptible, state of existence. The triangle used to symbolize man is solid, readily perceptible. Man created in the image of God has a tripartite soul, divided into memory, reason, and will, a mirror of the Godly soul. The spiritual soul is the reverse side of the physical soul, divided into conscience (the top of the soul), heart (where man can feel love), and *Gemüthe* (or loosely translated, 'might').

$C = Conscience$ DEUS $C = Conscience$ HOMO

$H = Heart$ $G = Gemüthe$ $H = Heart$ $G = Gemüthe$
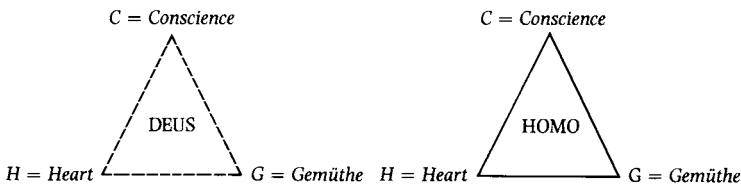
In each figure, God and man are juxtaposed in similar form; letters symbolize the parts of the spiritual soul: C = Conscience, H = Heart, G = *Gemüthe*. Just as man physically returns to God from dust to dust, birth to death, so man's life is a spiritual return to God. The figures in this work try to explain that return or economy of salvation, using these symbols. In the general medieval system, *Opera Pietatis* or pious works brought man back to God on the road to salvation. In the works of many of the pamphleteers in this study, *Opera Caritatis*, a narrow definition of pious

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works, is substituted for the medieval pious works. In the medieval economy of salvation, the sources of inspiration were varied. In the works in this study, the bible or word of God, written and read, or heard in sermons is the key to transforming man from a sinful state into a state of grace. The bible replaces the penitential system of the medieval church.

Introduction

This book is a study of lay theology in the pamphlets of a sample of eight lay pamphleteers with common education. That theology contains evidence of personal piety and political propaganda for the Protestant Reformation. The ideas and suggestions for reform in this theology are scarcely very original, but the interesting combinations of ideas and variations in the works of these pamphleteers demonstrate both consensus and individuality. Their theology is testimony to a spiritual depth and mystical orientation in some, political consciousness and a vision of a world about to end in others. The vigor of this theology consists in its independence of either Lutheran or Catholic dogma. Although inspired by Martin Luther, few of these pamphleteers are dependent on the reformer for their theological ideas. To unravel the complicated threads of their piety and theology, expressed in harsh, German polemic and copious biblical citation, it is necessary to use methods and principles of investigation from several areas of Reformation studies. Social history offers analytical lines of investigation that can help to focus on the 'common man' and his role in the Reformation.[1] Intellectual history can help us trace the roots of their ideas. Literary historians, who use mass communication methods for content analysis can offer a means to isolate and reconstruct important arguments and attitudes. Historians of medieval heresy and historians of the Anabaptist movement can provide important conclusions to help integrate the theology of these pamphleteers into a greater church-historical framework.

An understanding of the intellectual importance of this theology requires an examination of historiographical development. Pamphlet literature has only recently served as an important source for the study of Reformation history. The study of lay theology is scarcely ten years old. Few historians have been content with generalizations about the history of the Reformation, based on the higher theology of magisterial reformers, the activities of princes, or the decisions of city councils. Certainly the close relationship of the Reformation to the social upheavals in the Peasant Wars suggests that Protestantism had dimensions of peculiar social

importance that led to direct and defiant action.[2] The Marxist description
of the Peasant Wars as a form of early capitalist revolution suggests that
religious ideas were a less important motivation to direct action than
economic discontent.[3] Social historians have inherited the task of unlocking
the mystery of collective behavior among social groups in sixteenth-century
society, a society that seldom fits modern assumptions about social
organization. Our inability to view this complex society as a whole forces
us to focus our studies on smaller groups in a rapidly changing social
milieu. What one tries to define as collective culture or even urban–rural
distinctions in such research must be carefully qualified. Peter Burke's
solution to this problem is to speak of cultures and subcultures, creating
an even more complex picture of early modern society.[4]

    Among the more important challenges for social historians of the
sixteenth century is the understanding of the nature of change. The
frequent use of 1517 as the dividing point in history, marking the end of
the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern world, still burdens
historians with an intellectual problem unique to historians of this
century. Social historians must understand the nature of demarkation
between the age of 'childlike faith' and an age of political consciousness,
of a world where the church was first in the mind of the 'common man,'
but soon after the state replaced the church. The sheepish follower became
the politically motivated citizen. Although the problem just described is
over simplified, the necessity to denote change in the lives of common
people forces social historians to study religion as pious practice (both
public and private) in hope of documenting historical change.

    The nature of this historical change lies in the acceptance of Protes-
tantism by different social groups. Since it is difficult to speak of Protestant
'dogma' before 1530, the historian tends to rely on artificial general
formulas in the place of codified theology to study the early Reformation.
Jean Delumeau in his *Naissance et Affirmation de la Réforme* (Paris, 1965)
reduces Protestantism to three dogmatic principles: salvation *sola fide*,
revelation *sola scriptura*, and a universal priesthood of all believers. He tries
to link these principles to actual pious practice. Delumeau notes that in
the fifteenth century the faults of the Roman church were not enough
to provoke a split in the church. By the beginning of the sixteenth century,
a 'mauvaise conscience dans la mentalité collective' characterized late
medieval religion. For this 'mauvaise conscience' Protestantism had the
ideal antidote, salvation by faith alone. Universal priesthood, Delumeau
discovered, was the result of a great surge of individualism and lay activity,
that resulted in the intervention of a powerful bourgeoisie in the life of
the church. The Catholic priesthood was devalued as the result of a
subsequent confusion of the sacred and the profane in religious practice
of both clergy and common people. Revelation *sola scriptura* in Protes-

tantism was caused by Humanist preaching and the new importance of the printed book in the sixteenth century.[5] In a later work, Delumeau outlines a sociological method for further investigation of popular piety. He separates religious systems, conceptualizations, organizations, and practices calling for new studies in all four areas.[6] Social historians of popular culture have eagerly followed his lead.

The 'mauvaise conscience' of pre-reformed people has provided a theme for several studies, most important of which is Steven Ozment's *The Reformation in the Cities* (Yale, 1975), where Ozment elaborates on the new freedom of Protestants from a religion that was anxiety-causing to a new religion that compensated for the failure of the penitential system of the Catholic church.[7] More recently Ozment remarked 'that the Reformation relieved perceived religious burdens of a psychological and financial nature for thousands of people from every identifiable social group.'[8] Thomas Tentler's *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977) examined the importance of confession manuals for confessors and for common people to show how anxiety was created by the old confessional system and how it was supposed to be resolved.[9] Both Ozment and Tentler examine one aspect of pious practice as carrying the key to understanding the decision made by large numbers of common people to become Protestants. For both historians, Protestantism became popular in Northern Europe because it provided needed psychological compensation the old church could no longer provide.

Researching 'la mentalité collective' has been an important theme in French scholarship since Braudel. More recent interest in popular culture reflects this search for the foundations of a collective mentality, certainly presupposed by the ideology of revolution. If the Reformation is to be considered among the more important revolutions in history, then the collective mentality of common people can provide clues to the reasons for its acceptance. Robert Muchembled's *Culture Populaire et Culture des Elites dans la France Moderne* (Paris, 1978) searches for 'la vision du monde populaire.' Muchembled argues convincingly for cultural distinctions between rural and civic communities in Europe, suggesting that cities, more dynamically and economically oriented than rural areas, demanded a different kind of piety, a more personal form of religion, certainly more suited to the exigencies of urban life. A world full of magic, demons, and witches fits a rural economy more appropriately. Muchembled sees the Reformation as an urban phenomenon. He highlights the urban processes of rejection and integration, the restriction of pagan beliefs (formerly tolerated) and integration of all classes of people into the urban order, including priests, beggars, and vagrants, who once stood outside the urban corporation. He notes that before 1520, there were no boundaries between the sacred and the profane. After 1520, both Protestant and Catholic

reformations redefined the sacred apart from the secular, influenced by the new morality of Europe's bourgeoisie. City authorities could no longer tolerate the pagan extravagances of *les fêtes populaires*. The number of feast days was reduced, carnival celebration controlled, begging defined as criminal. Priests and ministers needed to be above moral reproach. For Muchembled, the acceptance of the Reformation was the result of a triumph of a 'mentalité urbaine' as the new capitalist economy of cities rechanneled energies to production and a new morality. Historians of this school of thought even suggest that the majority of the population of Europe was never really very Christian. Pagan rituals survived the missionary efforts of the church and the real Christianization of Europe took place at the Reformation.[10]

Some historians who followed Delumeau and Muchembled study popular religion in specific social organizations and practices in order to understand the nature of religious behavioral change. Natalie Davis investigated journeyman printers in Lyons to discover that the attraction of these lower-level artisans to Protestantism was not based on convictions that the Protestants offered a superior form of religious solution to human problems, but that Protestantism was a convenient means to express general social discontent. When the Protestant Consistory of Lyons objected to artisans' strikes and protests, they found their way back to a more tolerant Roman church.[11] Lionel Rothkrug studied pilgrimage patterns in the North and South of the German speaking part of the empire to discover that the pilgrimage tradition was more firmly rooted in rural areas of Bavaria, where the power of the *ministeriales* had been solidly established. Northern cities displayed a more sober, 'feminine' piety, that even before the Reformation was more mystical in inspiration. Christians in Northern cities rejected the cult of saints and endorsed a more personal, private piety, according to Rothkrug.[12] William Christian examined the swearing of vows to saints in early modern Spain, to note that the Catholic Reformation succeeded to some extent in cities, but not at all in the countryside, where local religious traditions were more tenacious, due to the nature of the rural economy.[13] All of these historians point to a vigorous and thriving lay piety, institutionally creative and potentially defiant. Yet each of these attempts falls somewhat short of effective generalizations about the acceptance of Protestantism because neither pilgrimage, nor vows, nor *fêtes*, can be entirely representative of popular piety. One wonders whether people were ever moved by hope or charity! Certainly the differences between city and countryside are important, but these were so often obscured by geographic mobility in the sixteenth century. Closer to an effective study of religious motivation is the recent work of Donald Weinstein and Rudolf Bell. In their important and convincing *Saints and Society* (Chicago, 1982), the basic premise 'is that

pursuit as well as the perception of holiness mirrored social values and concerns.'[14] This focus on the pursuit and perception of holiness rather than social organization or individual practices may more appropriately explain changes in popular piety. It is important that the social values and concerns are reflected by, but do not dominate religious expression, or determine the nature of piety.

Steven Ozment in a recent essay on the importance of pamphlets for the study of the Reformation, indicates the dangers of historical reductionism, either for ideological reasons (Marxists and *Annalistes*) or for sociological reasons by historians of popular culture. He notes that these historians fail to mediate the gap between intellectual historians of the Reformation who study the ideas and aspirations of magisterial reformers, and the historians of popular culture who 'run the risk of romanticizing the lives of ordinary people.'[15] He suggests that a 'preoccupation with material structures...limited their penetration of the intellectual and religious dimension of historical reality.'[16] Ozment calls for a look at pamphlets as a new source that can offer particular advantages in hope of closing the gap created by diversion of study from the framework of popular piety. In order to close or at least bridge this gap between the new ideas produced by magisterial reformers and the recent interest in the popular reception of the Reformation, one needs a particular kind of source, namely pamphlets.

A pamphlet is defined as 'a printed work consisting of more than one page [to distinguish them from broadsheets], not produced as a periodical and unbound, which was designed to influence readers as propaganda, addressed to the general population.'[17] According to Richard Cole, 'the brief, blunt, vulgar Reformation tract (pamphlet) intended for a wide, but often unsophisticated and sometimes confused audience, became a major tool of those who sought change in the religious loyalties of large numbers of people.'[18] Thus the pamphlet literature of the Reformation period provides an ideal source for understanding why people made the decision to join the Protestant cause. But why have these pamphlets, common in many libraries since the sixteenth century, so long been overlooked? The problem is one of collection and perspective.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, historians of the Reformation have been interested in the corpus of pamphlet literature published during the Reformation. Hans-Joachim Köhler estimated that about four hundred works have been written about pamphlets, mostly related to the early Reformation and the Peasant Wars, based on pamphlet literary sources.[19] Until very recently, a scholar's ability to collect individual pamphlets or to travel to libraries to read selected pamphlets determined the scope of conclusions. Widely scattered in private and public collections, often bound together with unrelated materials (sometimes protected from dust but not

from worms by a folded jacket of illuminated medieval manuscript!) these
tiny treatises presented scholars with an enigmatic puzzle. Pamphlet
collecting was neither systematic nor in any way representative of the
great variety of published pamphlets. Even the variety of these pamphlets
defied attempts to generalize from them as sources.

Now thanks to more modern methods of pamphlets collecting and
cataloguing, a more complete picture of the corpus of pamphlet literature,
authors, and publishers is beginning to emerge. In our own time, by using
computers, photocopiers, and cameras, the catalogue of pamphlets editions
is growing. A project in the special research division at the university of
Tübingen, West Germany has been funded by the German Research
Foundation to collect editions of all the published pamphlets in Central
Europe in German and Latin between the years 1500 and 1530.[20] One
presently estimates that about 4,000 different pamphlets were published
in several editions.[21] The subjects addressed in this early and affordable
form of printed propaganda vary from prophetic prognostica to imperial
reform proposals. The circulation of such works was as broad as their
varied contents. Because pamphlets were brief (usually under twenty
quarto-pages) they could be quickly published and sold at an easy profit.
Princes and paupers alike read them or had pamphlets read to them. Kings
wrote them, scholars studied them, even shoemakers dabbled in pamphlet
publishing. Pamphlets were the first broadly based form of popular
literature after the invention of printing: the woodcuts that illustrated
them can be considered, according to one scholar, as the 'primitive comic
strip'![22] Pamphlets are particularly important as a source for social history.
At a recent symposium on pamphlet literature research sponsored by the
Tübingen project, the director of that project noted: 'The pamphlets of
the early Reformation period are an historical source, which unlike any
other allows for a detailed examination of opinions, convictions, and
values of an epoch. Because of their propagandistic intentions and their
agitating effect on a broadly distributed readership in particular political
situations, these pamphlets provide insights into the social dynamics of
sixteenth-century society.'[23] Although past historians were aware of the
importance of pamphlets, they were seldom able to use pamphlets very
effectively as historical sources, beyond the limited objectives of illustrating
local history. They did not have representative collections of pamphlets
beyond local archives and personal collections. The more recent availability
of systematic catalogues and national surveys has already produced
interesting and intriguing works that approach the social history of the
Reformation with new vigor. This rich corpus of pamphlet literature now
provides an important source for national and soon international Refor-
mation history in Europe.

Now that Michael Pegg's *Catalogue of German Reformation Pamphlets*,

1516–1546 in the Libraries of Great Britain and Ireland (Baden-Baden, 1973) and the important publications of the Tübingen project available on microfiche as *Sixteenth Century Pamphlets in German and Latin, 1501–1530* (Zug, Switzerland, 1978f.) have eclipsed many earlier catalogues and collections, new and important works on printing in the Reformation have appeared. These works are directly concerned with the effect of printed pamphlets on the social history of the Reformation.

Bernd Balzer's *Bürgerliche Reformationspropaganda* (Stuttgart, 1973), examines the printed works of Hans Sachs, written between 1523 and 1525. Balzer rejects methods used by social scientists, who study contemporary propaganda, because sixteenth-century people reacted to an entirely different systematic code of symbols.[24] By means of literary analysis, Balzer sought to uncover important signals that were linked to a system of stereotypes in order to rediscover the images that motivated Hans Sachs. He noted that Sachs presented nothing original in his arguments, but relied on familiar themes, echoed in countless other pamphlets. As a propagandist, Sachs articulated the moral failure and corruption of the church in antithetical forms, easily understood by less-educated common people. Sachs did this consciously, according to Balzer, in hope of exploiting the fears of his readers to drive them into the Lutheran camp. By late 1524, Sachs changed the direction of his works to criticize the left wing of the Reformation who misused their newly gained Christian freedom. In doing so Sachs proved himself to be a devout subject of the Nuremberg city council and a devotee of his major mentor, Martin Luther, who began preaching against left-wing enthusiasts in 1524.[25]

In 1977, Joseph Schmidt pioneered a work of major importance; *Lestern, lesen, und lesen hören* (Bern, 1977) using Harold D. Lasswell's 1948 formula for communications analysis – Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect? – to interpret a group of satirical pamphlets written by Humanists for consumption by the common man. By employing terminology from Marshall McLuhan's works, Schmidt supplements the Lasswell formula with a sequence for the transfer for the information, streamlined to fit the kind of mass communication represented by sixteenth-century pamphlets: Information Source – Coder – Communication Channel – Decoder – Recipient.[26] Schmidt is practically the first to recognize the importance of the listener as recipient, acknowledging the role of the reader of pamphlets to illiterate friends. This methodology helps to understand the transfer of coded information in the pamphlets. Schmidt presents the German sermon of the late Middle Ages as a model for the pamphlets so often described as 'formless, colloquial, and rude' in character. He traces frequent repetition and biblical quotes to methods commonly used by preachers to convince an audience. He noted that

Humanist pamphleteers in the Reformation directed their works toward
common people, a group not interested in new and original ideas, but
tradition-bound and relatively stable. Common people understood things
painted in colors of opposition and blasphemous in tone. They could
generalize but seldom differentiate. Thus, pamphlets appear monotonous,
gossipy, and formless because they were aimed at a half-educated audience
and emphasized already accepted opinions. He suggests that a sub-culture
existed in the sixteenth century among common people, which was out
of tune with the language of official publications, hence pamphlets written
for them are composed in rude, primitive, German.[27] Schmidt's work is
important because it aims at a contemporary understanding of the
language of pamphlets, something Monika Rössing-Hager would take
further in her essay on the illiterate recipients of information from
pamphlet literature. She discovered that more learned 'people conscious'
preachers, like the Franciscan Eberlin von Günzburg considered and used
syntactic structures common people would more easily understand.[28]

   Robert Scribner's most recent work, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular
Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, 1982) breaks through
the frontiers of pamphlet research to consider the effect of pamphlets as
visual propaganda. Using both illustrated broadsheets and pamphlet
illustrations, Scribner notes that one cannot assume that the Reformation
took hold by the printed word. The audio-visual aspects of pamphlet
communication – listening and looking – were equally important, if not
more so than the written word. Like Schmidt, he describes the importance
of ideas in opposition and particular 'root paradigms,' understood by most
common people: anti-clericalism, socio-economic grievances, biblical
images, and common proverbs, as the channel through which most
reformed ideas had to be communicated.[29] Scribner finds this audio-visual
communication part of an older spiritual and cultural tradition. He sees
the most important effect of pamphlets in their motivation to action,
particularly acts of defiance. He concludes that printing was not a very
effective means of spreading reformed ideas, because most people could
not read. The 'side-effects' of the pamphlets sparked people to support the
Protestant cause more than the written message.

   Berndt Hamm's recognition of the uniqueness of the theology of the
layman Jörg Vögeli, secretary to the city council in Constance, is an
important milestone in the study of Reformation pamphlets. In his essay
'Laientheologie zwischen Luther und Zwingli...,' Hamm dissected three
pamphlets and two unpublished works by Vögeli in 1523–24 to discover
what he calls a 'theology of the alternative,' explained in a list of
juxtaposed and contrasting alternatives: 'the prison of human teaching
vs. true Christian freedom..., trust in the efficaciousness of good works
vs. trust in Christ's infallible promise..., the sacrificial mass vs. the true

mass, the true Christian veneration of the saints,' etc.[30] These alternatives can be equated with Balzer's discovery of antithetical forms used by Sachs to communicate with the less educated, the root paradigms understood by common people, described by Scribner, and the colors of opposition noted by Schmidt. Hamm observes these contrasts being woven into something new, a lay theology that was distinct, because it used both Lutheran and Zwinglian theology to produce an individualistic, if not original theology. Hamm recognized, too, the importance of the old communal vision of the city in determining Vögeli's emphasis on practical Christian life.[31] Hamm's investigation was the first to recognize the contributions of a layman, whose theology was distinct and not simply propaganda taken from magisterial reformers. He was also among the first to note the importance of the city and its influence on the theology of the Reformation. He helped to dispel the old theory that Zwingli's theology dominated everything in the areas of Southwest Germany nearest to Zürich.

Each of these works indulges in what communications researchers call content analysis, 'a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication,' and further, 'any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within text.'[32] Balzer indicates the changes in Hans Sachs' attitudes as the Reformation progressed. Joseph Schmidt and Monika Rössing-Hager use language analysis to clarify meanings of words and expressions transformed since the sixteenth century.[33] Robert Scribner suggests the importance of 'hearing, looking, reading, discussion and action,' motivated by pamphlet propaganda.[34] Few of the above works are particularly concerned with the sort of analysis Steven Ozment has called for, to address those 'ideological forces that moved the Age of Reformation, (that) were also the work of intellectuals and reformers...who spoke to an informed laity unusually sensitive to the societal consequences of religious issues.'[35] Ozment cites Thomas Tentler's *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* as a good example of the use of literary sources to demonstrate the way in which the church used the creation and absolution of guilt as a means of social control. Tentler has shown how the higher culture of intellectuals had a direct effect on the lives of common people.[36]

My own study uses Tentler's general methodology to examine literary sources for the patterns Scribner identifies as 'root paradigms,' or the genre of propagandistic expression in pamphlets. I am interested in reconstructing the content of pamphlets written by common people for common people (or an even wider audience) to note the form of piety expressed and recommended, the nature of the propaganda, and to what extent these authors were influenced directly by the theology of magisterial