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The Reformation 1520-1559

Edited by G. R. Elton

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

THE first edition of this volume was written between 1953 and 1956, and the more than three decades since that time have witnessed an exceptional outburst of new research and fresh interpretations. Thus it has unquestionably become desirable to offer to readers and students a revised version of the Reformation story. Perhaps the volume should have been replaced by a totally new one, but so drastic a step was neither feasible nor yet, as it turned out, necessary. The revision was undertaken in part by the original contributors: all survivors have had the opportunity to review and where necessary rewrite their chapters. Several pieces contributed by authors no longer with us have been replaced or rewritten by living scholars. For one chapter (xviii), which the intended author's ill health had caused to be replaced by a short and sadly inadequate note from the editor's pen, an expert hand has now been found. In the course of the operation, it became apparent that the bulk of the volume has survived the accidents of ageing remarkably well: we feel able to put this moderately revised version before the reader with a good heart.

As a matter of fact – such things will happen – the passage of time and labour has helped to justify some of the interpretations which in between appeared to be called in much doubt. Thus work on Luther himself, while placing him more carefully within his medieval inheritance, has also re-emphasized his predominant concern with matters spiritual, contrary to occasional efforts to show that he was pursuing social and political ends.¹ A major break in Reformation studies looked likely to spring from the argument that it was the towns rather than the principalities that helped to advance the new churches and faiths;² another appeared on the horizon when it was suggested that so far from sweeping all before it the Reformation failed because it did not achieve the complete conversion of Europe and more particularly did not lead to a social revolution.³ Such

- 1 See the writings of Heiko A. Oberman, more especially *Werden und Wertung der Reformation* (1977; Eng. trans. 1981) and *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (1982).
- 2 Bernd Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation* (1962; Eng. trans. 1972); A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (1974).
- 3 Peter Blickle, *Die Revolution von 1525* (2 edn 1981; Eng. trans. of 1st edn 1981); Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Gescheiterte Reformation: frühreformatorische und protestantische Bewegungen in süd- und westdeutschen geistlichen Residenzen* (1978).

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extremes positions have by now had to be reconsidered, though they have unquestionably contributed to a much revised version of more traditional views (ch. vii). At the same time, it remains true that old notions of triumphant progress need to be further reconsidered, as important recent work on the circumference of the main story has urgently reminded us.¹ Quite possibly, the next recension of this volume, by hands not yet engaged in the work, will look very different, but the time for that has manifestly not yet come.

Two issues call for brief notice here. Despite the attention paid to cities and peasants, we lack at present a really formed understanding of the social structure, the economic setting and indeed the fortunes of the many political entities within the upheaval of the Reformation, both inside and outside the Holy Roman Empire. In these respects we feel less confident than at one time we did. The Marxist interpretation, discovering there a successful bourgeois revolution, has had to be altogether discarded, and the attempts to substitute a failed proletarian uprising have proved unconvincing: it is evident that we need to concentrate on studying the age by means of its own conceptual framework and avoid imposing anachronistic schemes upon it. Valuable indications are found in two new chapters in this volume (ii.1 and xviii), nor did two earlier contributions (chs. xvii, xix) altogether neglect such problems. Even so, we need to learn more, for instance, about the nobility of Europe to balance our supposed better understanding of middling and lower ranks. We need to restore comprehensibility to the story of the great inflation, once so simple (Spanish silver did it all) and now so complicatedly obscure. Administrative and political structures could do with more investigation, especially as earlier analyses have been followed up by argument only for England. The English debates on these topics, though confusing to the outsider, are a sign of life in historical studies of which one would like to see more. Commendable as is the return of Reformation scholars to a preoccupation with minds, souls and beliefs, the time has come for them once again to descend to those other realities – courts and offices, farmsteads and estates.

The other problem is perhaps more marginal but needs drawing attention to. At one time and for a brief period, it looked as though the familiar central themes of Reformation history might be put into the shadows by the so-called ‘radical Reformation’ – supposedly more sincere, more widespread, and more forward-looking. For a while it was believed that sectarianism, regarded as a cohesive movement, really rivalled the state-supported denominations in their hold on the people of the sixteenth century. Its appeal was supposed to be spiritual (a better way

¹ Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (1978); *Law, Resistance and the State: the Opposition to Roman Law in Reformation Germany* (1986).

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[More information](#)*Introduction to the Second Edition*

ix

to God), social (the teaching of equality between the classes and the sexes), economic (resistance to upper-class exploitation), and moral (emphasis on amity and meekness). The widespread persecution suffered by the sects could thus be supposed to be the deplorable reaction of an order which had good reason to feel threatened by this upheaval from below. However, research less inspired by political predilections or ancestor-worship has left little of this standing. On closer inspection, the sects do not appear to have swept more than a small minority even of the lower orders into their embrace; they never formed a movement because brotherly co-operation was more commonly replaced by recriminations and dislike; their internal organisation remained hierarchical and especially conceded nothing to women. The sects never got a firm foothold in any region in which either Catholicism or Protestantism was well organised, and not even the failure of the Peasants' War drove the commonalty of Germany into sectarian ranks. The 'radicals' of all kinds – Müntzerian eschatologists, Schwenckfeldian pietists, Hutterite communists, Mennonite separatists – formed a fringe phenomenon quite familiar from earlier phases of the Christian church, exploiting the extremes of popular spirituality on the one hand and available social discontents on the other, without providing for either a really significant place in the history of religion or politics. It was truly unfortunate that the sectaries had an unhappy knack of using the most incendiary language to be found in the Bible in support of their pacifist convictions, and the outburst at Münster was naturally hard to live down for people to whom the imagery of the Apocalypse made so abiding an appeal. There should be no doubt that the authorities had little need to be as frightened as they were, especially in Catholic territories, for under Protestant rule the sects survived in penny packets; that the pitiful men and women they punished and so often slaughtered provoked those fears by their exaltation is also clear.¹

In this edition, then, many details have been altered. The Reformation in England looks today less like a revolution produced by the conscious labours of Thomas Cromwell, though I remain convinced that it constituted a major break in the history of English society, law and government as well as religion, and that Cromwell's contribution to this outcome stood central to affairs (ch. x). Developments within both the great powers of the day – Charles V's empire and royal France – have gained greater complexity and occasionally better definition, though the outlines of the story remain reasonably familiar (chs. XI, XIII). Necessary changes and corrections will be found in just about every chapter. Nevertheless, in the upshot it looks as though the major effects of this half-century identified in

1 E.g. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962) and E. G. Rupp, *Patterns of Reform* (1968); but Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: a Social History, 1528–1618* (1972) and James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (1972); and see ch. v.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

x

Introduction to the Second Edition

the original (ch. 1) still seem convincing. The end of the universal church and the emergence of national states took their force from the backward-looking explosion touched off by Luther, and the age witnessed the unmistakable beginnings of European ascendancy over the habitable part of the globe.

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CHAPTER I

THE AGE OF THE REFORMATION

THE concept of the Reformation as a significant and self-contained period, with characteristics and central events and even perhaps a particular ethos of its own, has had a long life as such historical categories go. Even those who disagree with the traditional interpretation of the early sixteenth century have commonly concentrated their attack on the notion that it marks the beginning of modern times. Some historians of thought trace the middle ages right through the sixteenth century and see nothing novel in yet another controversy within the church; they would put their marker at a point where predominantly religious thinking is replaced by secular (scientific) attitudes of mind. Authors of such reappraisals do not deny the special character of the years 1520–60 looked at by themselves, but others – partisans of either Catholicism or Protestantism – are willing to do even that. If one is prepared to treat the Reformation as a temporary aberration (a chapter which even after 400 years might still be closed) or as a mere return to the true way – analyses which, though historically invalid, may be denominationally necessary – one will rob the period of much of its cohesion by doubting its spiritual and intellectual content. It is also possible to argue that the Counter-Reformation and the religious wars which extended into the next century are properly part of the same story. But historians, so ready as a rule to revise the periods into which for convenience sake they divide the subject-matter of their study, have on the whole allowed the ‘age of the Reformation’ to survive. It must be the purpose of this chapter to discover how far this acquiescence in an established convention is justified. What is it that gives coherence and meaning to those forty years?

In the first place, the age marked the break-up of western Christendom. The point, which might appear obvious, must be stressed because reasonable doubt has been cast on the once unquestioned uniqueness of the Reformation. It is plain enough that, long before the Lutheran attack demonstrated its unreality, the so-called community of the Latin church would not have borne investigation. Diversity, sometimes reaching the extreme of heresy, was endemic in the medieval church, and from the later years of Boniface VIII (d. 1303) onwards the papacy had been progressively less able to assert a unifying control. The previous volume described the trends of the later fifteenth century towards national churches and papal weakness, towards the secularisation of church lands and the

