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978-0-521-34536-1 - The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume II Secondary Edition:

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 Perhaps the volume should have been replaced by a totally new one, but so drastic a step was neither feasible nor yet, as it turned out, necessary.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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[More information](#)

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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Excerpt

[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. i) 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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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ascendancy of temporal rulers.¹ These are the features which, with the addition of the religious and spiritual upheaval associated with Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, make the Reformation; and it is then to be noted that movements like those of Wycliffe and Hus came near to supplying that missing ingredient, while the inclination of the fifteenth century to mystical practices and beliefs anticipated to some degree the denial of universal authority. It is therefore sometimes held that there was nothing novel about the Reformation, nor anything definitive, and that its importance has been overrated.

Now there is truth in these arguments, and they deserve particular attention as against the view, still sometimes encountered, that down to the early sixteenth century a genuine Christian community stood embodied in a united church under the hegemony of Rome. But the revision would go too far if it supposed that the discovery of trends towards the Reformation robbed this event of its surpassing importance. The addition of the religious controversy – so fundamental and so widely supported – changed the whole character of the ancient troubles. Secularisation, princely ascendancy over the church, religious diversity, may all have been present before 1517; but thereafter they became effective, general and predominant. The character of European politics, thought, society and religion was made over by that great outburst against the powers of the papal monarchy and the claims of the priesthood, an outburst which should not be regarded as any less revolutionary because it happened to be directed against enfeebled enemies and productive of results neither envisaged nor welcomed by the leaders of the spiritual revolution. All that will hereafter be said in this volume will testify to the overwhelming impact of the Reformation. Uniqueness is properly its hallmark, just because it shared so many features with earlier troubles in the church and yet produced so different an outcome. Despite earlier movements with similar aims and inspirations, only the Protestant Reformation resulted in a lasting division within the church that had looked to Rome.

The 'age of the Reformation' should be defined as that period during which the new churches were on the offensive. It therefore begins properly (and traditionally) with the date of Luther's ninety-five theses (1517) and extends in general to the later 1550s. The third session of the Council of Trent, which began in 1559, terminated the papacy's retreat; henceforth the Church of Rome was on the attack. Not that the Counter-Reformation had waited for this moment; as the history of the attempt to call a general council for the restoration of unity made plain, the attacker from the first provoked a resistance which grew gradually more confident and vigorous (pp. 188ff.). Resistance was helped by the continued loyalty to

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The Reformation 1520-1559

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The age of the Reformation*

3

the old religion of Europe's premier prince, the Emperor Charles V. The movement against the new churches gained experience and some success in preliminary suppressions, especially in Italy and Spain; the latter was to provide not only secular leadership but also the ecclesiastical influence and example of an experienced persecuting church with a well-trained body of inquisitors. The rise of new orders proved that the old church was very far from dead (ch. XII). A dress-rehearsal for the counter-attack was staged in the England of Mary Tudor. But despite all this, despite the defeat of the German Protestant princes in 1547, the real dynamic of the age lay with the Reformation. Its German phase ended in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg; its first English phase with the Elizabethan restoration of Protestantism in 1559. The Scandinavian kings who had established the Lutheran faith died in 1559 (Christian III of Denmark) and 1560 (Gustavus I of Sweden). In France the death of Henry II (1559) marked a period too, but its effect ran oddly counter to general experience: the suppression of Protestantism was well under way until the chaos in government after 1560 gave its chance to militant and military Huguenot power. But if the Counter-Reformation met great difficulties in France, it was none the less a good deal more selfconscious and energetic under the Guises than under Henry II. The older historians had the right of it: the period of some forty years which this volume covers can justly be defined as the age of the Reformation.

In those forty years the Reformation achieved an extraordinary spread, both rapid and wide. No part of western Christendom remained altogether unaffected by it, even though Spain, and Italy to a smaller degree, managed a measure of aloofness. Elsewhere Protestantism in one of its forms grew overnight from the fervour of a few preachers into a wide and popular movement. What gave it so general an appeal remains up to a point uncertain; no one would today be willing to list 'the causes' of the Reformation. So complex a phenomenon sprang from so many things that only a general analysis of some hundred years of history comes near to answering the question. There existed a widespread dislike of the clergy, which played its part; often it went with hostility to Rome and with fervent nationalism. Greed and envy no doubt entered into it, as did policy. But that the reformers' message answered a savage spiritual thirst, which the official church (not for the first time in its history) was failing to satisfy, cannot be denied; nor can the fact that the stages reached by the Reformation itself did not always content all those who had looked to it for nourishment, so that extremist groups soon began to develop by the side of the more acceptable revolutionaries. The preachers of the Reformation did not need political support to attract followers wherever they went, however necessary such support may have proved in the consolidation which followed the first prophetic onrush. It must never be

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

forgotten that in its beginning and in much of its essence the Reformation was a movement of the spirit with a religious message.

On the other hand – and this should be stressed – the Reformation was not a movement for liberty, except in a very specialised sense. Protestantism in all its forms came to reject one particular authority – that of the church and the popes – but nearly all its forms substituted some other authority and avoided the thoroughgoing individualism which has at times been associated with the movement. The Bible formed the overriding authority, its interpretation carried out by attention to the text itself without the intervention of the mediating church. The results were naturally very mixed, ranging from a genuine recovery of the Christian message to all the absurdities associated with a rigorous and uncomprehending fundamentalism. In politics, the leading reformers tended to support the secular arm; though Luther was not the subservient tool of princes and enemy of the people that he is sometimes made out to be (with quotations from his writings against the peasants), he, like most Protestants, had a healthy respect for the magistrate provided he was godly. Perhaps the last liberty to be promoted by the Reformation in the sixteenth century was that of the mind. Movements of missionary passion are not given to tolerance and scepticism, nor do they provoke such reactions in those they attack; among the first victims of this new age of religious controversy were the spirit of free enquiry and the patience extended to the nonconformist. Luther could be highly obscurantist at the expense of intellectuals of Erasmus's type; the fate of the so-called Catholic reformers of Italy (ch. XI) shows how under the pressure of the great heresies toleration of reasonable diversity changed into fierce hostility; Thomas More developed from the speculative humanist of *Utopia* (1516) into the persecuting lord chancellor of 1530.

The age was passionate, partisan and narrow. In trying to assess its achievements fairly it does not help that the passions of a time of conflict tend to baffle understanding when the content of the conflict has gone. It is sometimes argued that the twentieth century, familiar with ideological struggles and persecution, should – and does – comprehend the sixteenth century from a fullness of knowledge. It is, however, fatal to overlook the differences between secular ideologies and transcendental religion, concentrating only on their likenesses; the result (seen too often) is to read the twentieth century into the sixteenth. In some ways the Reformation is more remote from the present day than the century or so that had preceded it. The fundamental intellectual attitude of the Reformation involved the doctrine of a decline from an ideal in the past and a devoted attachment to theology and ecclesiology at the expense of other studies; neither of these is a characteristic element in western thought after 1700.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The age of the Reformation*

5

Admittedly it will be well to remember that besides the stream directly issuing from the Reformation there flowed a sizeable river of writings concerned with secular things and increasingly 'scientific' in its methods of analysis and interpretation. As one might expect, there are both traces of established modes of thinking and faint hints of great changes to come. Substantially, however, the Reformation was conservative – even backward looking – in thought: since it was avowedly intent on restoring a lost condition, it could hardly be anything else.

The desire for spiritual nourishment was great in many parts of Europe, and movements of thought which gave intellectual content to what in so many ways was an inchoate search for God have their own dignity. Neither of these, however, comes first in explaining why the Reformation took root here and vanished there – why, in fact, this complex of anti-papal 'heresies' led to a permanent division within the church that had looked to Rome. This particular place is occupied by politics and the play of secular ambitions. In short, the Reformation maintained itself wherever the lay power (prince or magistrates) favoured it; it could not survive where the authorities decided to suppress it. Scandinavia, the German principalities, Geneva, in its own peculiar way also England, demonstrate the first; Spain, Italy, the Habsburg lands in the east, and also (though not as yet conclusively) France, the second. The famous phrase behind the settlement of 1555 – *cuius regio eius religio* – was a practical commonplace long before anyone put it into words. For this was the age of uniformity, an age which held at all times and everywhere that one political unit could not comprehend within itself two forms of belief or worship.

The tenet rested on simple fact: as long as membership of a secular polity involved membership of an ecclesiastical organisation, religious dissent stood equal to political disaffection and even treason. Hence governments enforced uniformity, and hence the religion of the ruler was that of his country. England provided the extreme example of this doctrine in action, with its rapid official switches from Henrician Catholicism without the pope, through Edwardian Protestantism on the Swiss model and Marian papalism, to Elizabethan Protestantism of a more specifically English brand. But other countries fared similarly. Nor need this cause distress or annoyed disbelief. Princes and governments, no more than the governed, do not act from unmixed motives, and to ignore the spiritual factor in the conversion of at least some princes is as false as to see nothing but purity in the desires of the populace. The Reformation was successful beyond the dreams of earlier, potentially similar, movements not so much because (as the phrase goes) the time was ripe for it, but rather because it found favour with the secular arm. Desire for church lands, resistance to Imperial and papal claims, the ambition to create self-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

contained and independent states, all played their part in this, but so quite often did a genuine attachment to the teachings of the reformers.

There was, however, one aspect of the Reformation which owed nothing to princes and little to the great reformers, a truly popular and very widespread movement to which it became customary to attach the name of Anabaptism (ch. v). The so-called Anabaptists turn up in many places and guises, a convenient term covering a motley collection of beliefs and behaviour which range from mad millenarianism to pietism, from the reckless use of force to pacifism, from the extremes of personal egotism to humble piety and devotion. All these men and women have one thing in common: they do not fit in with any of the established religions and thus offend the principle of uniformity wherever they go. But the persecution which they so regularly encountered arose from yet another shared quality: the movement spread among the lower orders. It contained strong elements of social protest and (or so it was thought) danger of revolution. The terror of Münster (pp. 136–7) remained a standing warning to governments, as did the *Bundschuh* uprising of the German peasants in 1524–5 in which religion joined with economic grievance. We shall not go far wrong if we see in the protean spread of Anabaptist and similar doctrines a sign of an age-old, usually obscure, social antagonism to the powers that be, an antagonism to which the Reformation, by producing an upheaval in the higher reaches of the social order, gave a chance of coming into the open. The fact that Anabaptism drew its following from the unprivileged is significant enough.

One can understand the authorities' reaction. This was an age of inflation and social unrest, expressing itself in riots and risings everywhere – especially in Germany in the 1520s and in England between 1536 and 1558. Even those who accepted the Reformation did not as a rule wish to promote social revolution; there was nothing democratic about the leaders of reform, nor would it have been particularly sensible if there had been. Anabaptism suffered terrible things, but it would be to misunderstand the movement if one were to deny that even among its moderate exponents its social implications were revolutionary. The repression which it provoked did not score anything like a complete success; not only did Anabaptist communities and their descendants survive in places, but the unrest which they represented came out later in other ways. The movement gives a glimpse beneath the usual surface of recorded history; if the manifestations were relatively few and scattered, the underlying body of hatreds and dissatisfactions may reasonably be guessed at as enormous. The repressive governments knew what they were fighting.

The complex of movements which we call the Reformation provides one unifying factor in the period under review; another, equally obvious,