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0521379849 - War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin -  
Carlos M. N. Eire

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

IN 1509, when John Calvin was born, Western Christendom still shared a common religion of immanence. Heaven was never too far from earth. The sacred was diffused in the profane, the spiritual in the material. Divine power, embodied in the Church and its sacraments, reached down through innumerable points of contact to make itself felt: to forgive or punish, to protect against the ravages of nature, to heal, to soothe, and to work all sorts of wonders. Priests could absolve adulterers and murderers, or bless fields and cattle. During their lives, saints could prevent lightning from striking, restore sight to the blind, or preach to birds and fish. Unencumbered by the limitations of time and space, they could do even more through their images and relics after death. A pious glance at a statue of St. Christopher in the morning ensured protection from illness and death throughout the day. Burial in the habit of St. Francis improved the prospects for the afterlife. A pilgrimage to Santiago, where the body of the apostle James had been deposited by angels, or to Canterbury, where St. Thomas à Becket had had his skull split open by knights of King Henry II, could make a lame man walk, or hasten a soul's release from purgatory. The map of Europe bristled with holy places; life pulsed with the expectation of the miraculous. In the popular mind and in much of the official teaching of the Church, almost anything was possible. One could even eat the flesh of the risen Christ in a consecrated wafer.

Fourteen years later, as Calvin began his studies at the University of Paris, it was no longer possible to take this intermingling of spiritual and material for granted. Among the many changes brought about by the Reformation, none was more visible, or tangible, where it triumphed, than the abolition of this kind of religion. Although a sharp critique of medieval piety spearheaded by the great humanist Erasmus had begun to capture hearts and minds in learned circles since the early years of the century, the impact of this critique was limited by its appeal to a rather narrow audience, and also by the fact

that it considered such piety only as something improper, not false or damnable. In the second decade of the sixteenth century, however, medieval Catholic piety suddenly began to be attacked in some places as "idolatry," or false religion. Wherever those who held these views acquired enough power, churches were sacked, images smashed and burned, relics destroyed, sanctuaries desecrated, altars overturned, and consecrated hosts fed to dogs and goats. The religion of immanence was replaced by the religion of transcendence; Reformers and their congregations exulted in the beauty of a newly stripped, white-washed cathedral. The "half-hearted" critique of the humanists was left smoldering among the ashes with the images. Even Erasmus, the great critic, left Basel when the images had all been burned. As the nature of the sacred was redefined, and one holy place after another vanished from the map, first in Germany and Switzerland, later in France, the Netherlands, and England, the unity of the European religious vision was forever shattered. Within one generation, the image donors had become the image smashers.<sup>1</sup>

But this was not all. While some Protestants cast down the "idols" of Rome, Luther cast out the image breakers from Wittenberg. The redefinition of the sacred, then, became the watershed that separated not only Protestant from Catholic, but Lutheran from Reformed as well. By the time Calvin came to Geneva in 1536, to run his own crusade against "false religion," the streams of piety were flowing, inalterably, along three different courses. The Catholic stream continued to flow as it had for centuries, suffused with the immanence of the divine. The Lutheran stream, for all its protests, meandered close to these waters. Though they opposed much in medieval piety, Lutherans, for the most part, were not too interested in separating the material from the spiritual, or in promoting a radical change in worship. Stressing instead an opposition to "works-righteousness," they steered a middle course between transcendence and immanence, and remained open to the use of material objects in worship as long as they were regarded with indifference. The Reformed stream flowed hard and fast in a different direction, surging with transcendence. The central focus of Reformed Protestantism was its interpretation of worship – more specifically, of the relationship between the spiritual and the material. The aggressive rejection of the Catholic cult, which became the hallmark of the Reformed tradition, and reached its fullest and most enduring expression in Calvinism,

<sup>1</sup> Herman Heimpel, "Das Wesen des Deutschen Spätmittelalters," in *Der Mensch in Seiner Gegenwart* (Göttingen, 1957), p. 134.

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had its foundation in Scripture, but its hermeneutic was determined by certain metaphysical assumptions. Although the Reformed were every bit as concerned with exegesis and theology as the Lutherans, and also championed the principles of *sola fides* and *sola scriptura*, they paid much more attention to the way in which the divine ought to be approached. Stressing the transcendence of God and of the spiritual realm, they adhered to a third principle: "Finitum non est capax infiniti" (the finite cannot contain the infinite). Guided by this battle-cry, the Reformed focused on piety and changed much more in the outward expression of worship than the Lutherans. Aiming to do away with any practice that compromised the "spiritual" worship commanded by God, the Reformed launched a vigorous attack on all external objects of devotion that had previously been charged with religious value. Chief among their targets were the cult of saints, with its images and relics, and the Catholic Mass, with its belief in transubstantiation and its reverence for the consecrated host. Their posture became uncompromising and disruptive: It led to a crusade against idolatry that manifested itself in iconoclasm, civic unrest, and eventually even in armed resistance against legitimate rulers.

When Calvin took control of this stream, it was already far from the watershed; but as it fanned out through lands where it was hard to wash away the "idols," such as France, it ran the risk of losing its definition and purity. It was Calvin's task to channel the flow through Geneva, shore up embankments, dig new waterways, and build new dams. His labors would allow this stream to run clear and strong, even through bad terrain, so it could relentlessly irrigate Europe with the uncompromising waters of transcendence, and thus wash away all the "idols" from the map.

This study calls attention to the centrality of the idolatry issue for the Reformation. It traces the development of the Reformed attitude, provides a survey and synthesis of its unfolding from Erasmus through Calvin, and lays a foundation for understanding the Protestant ideology that stood in conflict with Catholicism outside of Lutheran territories. The central thesis of this work is that John Calvin, in defending the heritage of the Reformed attitude toward idolatry, forged a new, scripturally based, theological metaphysics in which the boundaries between the spiritual and the material were more clearly drawn than ever; and that his reaffirmation of the centrality of "spiritual" worship, with its consequent denial of compromise, provided a solid ideological foundation for much of the social and political unrest that accompanied the spread of Calvinism. This is an attempt to trace the development of an idea, to chronicle the way

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in which theology became a sociopolitical ideology, and gave rise to action, conflict, and, in some cases, change.

This work is primarily intellectual history, but not of the sort that can afford to disregard the social matrix in which ideas function. Since the ideas being studied here were of the type that called for very specific social changes, and were in and of themselves concerned with the practical aspect of religious reform, it would be impossible to consider them in isolation. This work is the history of an idea and its application: Its overarching purpose is to analyze the interrelationship between circumstances and ideas, and to probe the practical, political dimensions of one of the central concepts of the Reformed tradition. Yet, any study that aims at a broad synthesis, such as this one, needs to have clearly defined limits, and needs to have them clearly explained.

It is not my intention to chronicle the entire history of Reformation iconoclasm – or to quantify its various social components – but rather to lay bare its ideology, and to show through specific examples that a certain kind of theology, which was itself developed as a response to a particular set of circumstances, helped shape, produce, and support immediate changes in sixteenth-century society. Though concerned with explaining the process of change occasioned by the war against the idols, this study does not pursue a detailed analysis of the actual composition of the changes. The question posed here is not so much how Reformed Protestants altered the way in which late medieval society worshiped in some places, as why they came to think that certain reforms were needed. By accepting this agenda I am not arguing for the intrinsic superiority of one question over the other, but am merely defining some limits. These thematic boundaries are based on practical and theoretical considerations.

On a practical level, the current state of research on Reformation iconoclasm set the natural boundaries within which attention needed to be focused. Certain aspects of the phenomenon demand the use of very different kinds of approaches, different types of research, and different modes of presentation. For example, questions regarding such matters as the social status of the iconoclasts, or the relation between economic hardship and the rejection of Catholicism, or the symbolic content of religious violence cannot be successfully answered except on a case-by-case basis, as the result of limited, localized research. Much has already been done along these lines. Studies of this sort, which are fortunately quite numerous and generally of high caliber, have greatly increased our understanding of iconoclasm beyond the hackneyed stereotypes that were for so long maintained

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by confessional polemicists and shortsighted historians. In spite of the advances made by these studies, however, a certain symmetry and sense of comprehensiveness was still missing: The emphasis placed on the strictly quantitative and social-scientific approaches (intended as a corrective to the simplistic explanations of the past) had not allowed much room for a synthetic understanding of the ideological framework of iconoclasm.

This is where the practical considerations shade off into the theoretical. Convinced of the intrinsic value of intellectual history, and of the fact that a full, synthetic analysis of the ideology of the Reformed Protestant attack on Catholic worship did not need to seek its ultimate verification in an exhaustive analysis of all the material ramifications of iconoclasm, I chose a methodological approach that focused principally on what had been previously neglected, namely, the theology of idolatry. On this point I am in agreement with the historian who recently remarked that, although he did not believe that history is moved by minds alone (or any other isolated factor), he did believe that "current preoccupations with material factors and subverbal behavior have obscured the force and relevance of individual emotion, thought and discourse in the complex process of history."<sup>2</sup>

To study the Reformation debate over idolatry is to peer into the eye of the storm. "Idolatry" is a fighting word. It presupposes a definition of what is true and what is false in religion, for an idol cannot be universally recognized as such. Idolatry is not simply the worship of a physical object, but rather any form of devotion that is judged to be incorrect. Thus, the Reformed concern with idolatry extended not only to the use of art in worship, but also to the behavior displayed in liturgical and social settings. The concept of idolatry existed among Catholics as well as Protestants, but its meaning was very different in each camp. In the sixteenth century, one man's devotion was another man's idolatry. It is good to keep in mind that at just about the same time that the soldiers of Charles V replaced the "horrible idols" of the Aztecs with "beautiful" crosses and images of Mary and the saints in the New World, Protestant iconoclasts were wreaking havoc on these Catholic objects in lands nominally ruled by him in Europe. The grisly cult of human sacrifices led by bloodstained priests inside the Wall of Snakes in Tenochtitlán inspired the same kind of reaction among the Conquistadores as the celebration of the

<sup>2</sup> Donald Kelley has recently attempted to refine the concept of "ideology" in the study of the Reformation. *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation* (Cambridge, 1982), esp. pp. vii–viii, 1–10.

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Mass in the richly decorated cathedral of Basel did among Protestants.<sup>3</sup> To deal with this issue, then, is to deal with the way in which the truth claims of religion are defined. The Reformed Calvinist attack on idolatry is an attack on the "corruption" of religion, a defense of a certain interpretation of Scripture against its antithesis. In studying this phenomenon, therefore, one is able to determine the axis around which the Protestant polemic was arranged.

To study the issue of idolatry in the Reformation is to realize that there is a very concrete social and political dimension to the theology of the Reformers, and that one needs to look beyond the purely theoretical aspect of their thought. In this period, the very use of the word "idolatry" inspired conflict. "Idols" are made to be cast down. One who identifies an idol, by virtue of pointing to some object of devotion as wrong or evil, is also calling for its removal. Wherever there are idolaters, there, too, lurk some iconoclasts. The theologians who pointed the finger at idols might have been iconoclasts in principle, but few of them actually knocked down an image or gouged out its eyes. There is some truth in the observation made long ago that, in the times of the Reformation, "the doctors attacked the pope and the people the images."<sup>4</sup> Protestant theologians attacked Catholic piety vigorously, but the success of their polemic depended largely on its acceptance by the laity. The war against Catholic worship was as much a layman's struggle as a theologian's. In fact, the war proclaimed from the presses and the pulpit by the doctors was carried out by the laity in the streets, squares, and churches. If, as has recently been said, "the original Protestant vision was of a society of religiously enlightened laymen who were no longer burdened by traditional superstition and tyranny," then the attack on idolatry may be seen as one of the most daring attempts to fulfill this vision.<sup>5</sup> By attacking the images, the people were also attacking the pope. When children in Geneva stormed the cathedral in 1536 – and, as one account has it, later threw pieces of the broken images at people on the street, chanting "here we have the gods of the priests, would you like some?" – they innocently laid bare the nature of the attack on idolatry: The cultic objects represented not only false religion, but also subjection to an ecclesiastical system that was resented.<sup>6</sup> To the icon-

<sup>3</sup> Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, C. Saenz de Santa Maria, ed. (Madrid, 1982), p. 97; *Aktenammlung zur Geschichte der Basler Reformation*, E. Durr and P. Roth, eds. (Basel, 1937), vol. 3, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Merle D'Aubigné. *History of the Great Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1846), p. 767.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven, 1975), p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Fromment, *Les Actes et Gestes Merveilleux de la Cité de Genève* (1544), reissued by J. G. Fick (Geneva, 1954), p. 144–5.

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oclasts, the idols were not just false gods, but the gods of the Church of Rome, as represented by the priests. Protestants knew that to rid a city of "idols" was to rid it of Rome, that in destroying the images and abolishing the Mass they were also destroying the priests. Few other aspects of the Reformation lend themselves as well for studying the way in which theology inspires action, as this war on idolatry.

But how is a sophisticated, sardonic critique of medieval piety transformed into a crusade from a pulpit, or a riot in a church, or even a civil war? How does an abstract metaphysical concept about the structure of reality first articulated by learned humanists, and later applied to scriptural exegesis by theologians, ever come to have any relation with a young Swiss artisan who spit in a holy water font, or with thousands of Frenchmen who felt compelled to leave their homeland?

It is not my intention here to venture any new theses on the vexing problem of the relation between high culture and popular behavior. Instead, what I want to show is that one needs to consider the intricate correlation between ideas and situations, and that, in the writing of history, one can no more easily dismiss theology than politics, or economics. In saying this, I am far from implying some simple cause-and-effect relationship that would make all behavior depend ultimately on theological ideas, as if each and every iconoclastic act was a conscious reaction produced by the Reformed concept of idolatry. Neither am I implicitly accepting some sort of trickle-down theory proposing that the elites always and everywhere predetermine the behavior of the common people by doing their thinking for them. Yet, even when one takes into account the complexities of human behavior, and the almost infinite sets of interrelated motivations that form ideologies and produce social changes, one is struck by the fact that Reformation iconoclasm became the earmark of a movement that consciously promoted itself as a religious reform, and that the very principles of reform were at bottom theological. What concerns us here is the development and application of these principles, and it is to the unfolding of this phenomenon that we now turn.

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## CHAPTER 1

*The state of lay devotion  
in the late Middle Ages*

GUILLAUME Farel, leader of the Reformation in France and Switzerland, and friend and mentor to John Calvin, was deeply impressed by a pilgrimage he made as a child. As is often the case with religious converts, he could remember what life was like in the “vortex of perdition” all too clearly, and he described the event in detail years later with a certain sense of horror. The pilgrimage symbolized everything that he despised in the worship of the Roman Catholic church: He saw its objective as the misdirected veneration of material objects, and its foundation as a web of fraud, deceit, and priestly avarice.<sup>1</sup>

Farel reports that when he had not yet even learned to read, his family went to the Shrine of the Holy Cross at Tallard, which was not far from his native village of Gap in Dauphiné. This shrine, like countless others throughout Europe, claimed to have some fragments of the true cross of Jesus. It was not a very impressive-looking relic. The two fragments, rough and uneven, had been fashioned into a cross and were trimmed with copper. The metal trim was also an object of veneration, since it was believed to be part of the basin in which Jesus had washed the feet of the apostles. A small crucifix was also attached to the reliquary that housed these ancient, holy reminders of Jesus’s life on earth, to serve as a concrete visual representation of the event of salvation in which those very same objects had played a part. But the pilgrims were not too interested in the outward appearance of the relics: They were there to seek contact with the power of God.

As soon as they reached the shrine, the pilgrims prostrated themselves in prayer before the relic. While they prayed, a priest came out and explained how the small crucifix that was attached to the reliquary also shared in their power. It was an awesome story about cosmic

<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Farel, *Du Vray Usage de la Croix* (1560), J. G. Fick, ed. (Geneva, 1865), pp. 146–9.



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battles on a local level, which must have reinforced belief in relics as necessary weapons in the struggle against nature and the devil. Farel remembered the priest as saying:

Whenever the devil sends hail and thunder, this crucifix moves so violently that one would think it wanted to get loose from the cross to go running after the devil . . . and all the while it keeps throwing out sparks of fire against the storm. Were it not for this, the whole country would be swept bare.<sup>2</sup>

When the priest had finished, a disfigured attendant also came out to make even greater claims for the power of the relic. His stories culminated in a pitch for donations to the shrine. Farel says he was terrified by all this, and it is not hard to imagine the small boy having nightmares afterward. But Farel says that his parents, too, and the other pilgrims were equally frightened, and that they believed these miracle stories. He also lamented that their understanding of religion was not much better than that of unreasoning beasts.<sup>3</sup>

Within the last half century a great deal has been written about lay piety in the later Middle Ages, and much continues to be written. In many ways, Farel's narrative serves as a convenient point of reference for what has been said.

In order to explain how Farel and countless others rejected the religion of their forebears in the sixteenth century, it is first necessary to make a few observations about late medieval piety. Not to do this would be as foolhardy as trying to pinpoint the cause of an earthquake without knowledge of the way in which the earth's crust moves over its molten interior. Like some impressive city perched on a quivering fault line, the edifice of late medieval religion rested on shaky ground. Beneath the deceptively calm and firm exterior, a complex series of imperceptible movements were building up pressure, mounting strain to the breaking point. Though some contemporaries may have felt minor tremors, or suspected that a major quake was long overdue, no one could predict when and where disaster would strike, or how much damage would be done.

By the same token, just as one need not become an expert geologist to recognize a photograph of the San Andreas Fault where it surges above ground, stretching like a scar across the face of the earth, so is it not necessary to delve into all the details of late medieval piety to

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 149: "De moy i'estoye fort petit, et à peine ie savoye lire. Mon pere et ma mere croyoyent tout . . . De savoir qui sont les vrais miracles, et à quoy ils sont faits, et qui sont les faus, et à quoy ils servent, nous y entendions tous autant que des povres bestes."

become aware of the trouble that was brewing at the Shrine of the Holy Cross. A brief glance at the subsoil of the Reformation reveals enough uneven ridges and cracks, enough pressure and gradual movement of seemingly fixed structures, to convince anyone that the strain was overwhelming along those spots where the devastation was most severe. In the same way that the trail of destruction left aboveground by a quake leads a seismologist toward the epicenter, the shattered images and altars left behind by Protestant iconoclasts point a historian to disturbances beneath the ground on which they stood.

Though scholarly opinion varies concerning the quality of late medieval religion, there is little disagreement about its intensity.<sup>4</sup> In his essay, "Piety in Germany Around 1500," Bernd Moeller points out that the principal characteristic of the late fifteenth century was its consistent churchliness, and says it was "one of the most churchly-minded and devout periods of the Middle Ages."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Lucien Febvre observes that this age was marked by an immense appetite for the divine,<sup>6</sup> and Johan Huizinga remarks that there was "an enor-

<sup>4</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven, 1975), p. 21. Ozment provides an excellent survey and analysis of the secondary literature dealing with late medieval lay piety. Ozment contrasts the work of Bernd Moeller, "Piety in Germany Around 1500," ARG 56 (1965) and Johannes Janssen, *History of the German People since the End of the Middle Ages*, vol. I (1876), who describe the late fifteenth century as one of the most spiritually sound and profound periods in German history, with that of the Roman Catholic ecumenicist Joseph Lortz, who finds true piety lacking and corruption and abuse abounding ["Probleme des kirchlichen Lebens in Deutschland vor der Reformation," in H. Jedin et al., *Probleme der Kirchenspaltung im 16 Jahrhundert* (Regensburg, 1970)]. Also discussed are works of Jacques Toussaert, *Le Sentiment Religieux en Flandre à la Fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1963) and Etienne Delaruelle, *L'Eglise au Temps du Grand Schisme et de la Crise Conciliaire (1378-1449)*, vol. 14 of the *Histoire de l'Eglise*, A. Fliche and V. Martin, eds. (Paris, 1964). Toussaert and Delaruelle find an intense and materially inclined piety that, to their opinion, was superficial. Other major works dealing with pre-Reformation piety are W. Andreas, *Deutschland vor der Reformation*, 6th ed. (Stuttgart, 1959); J. Klapper, *Deutsches Volkstum am Ausgang des Mittelalters* (Breslau, 1930); V. Hasak, *Der Christliche Glaube des Deutschen Volkes beim Schlusse des Mittelalters* (Regensburg, 1868); Francis Rapp, *L'Eglise et la Vie Religieuse en Occident à la Fin du Moyen Age* (Paris 1971); H. Schaller, *Die Weltanschauung des Mittelalters* (Munich-Berlin, 1934); G. Schnürer, *Kirche und Kultur im Mittelalter*, vol. 3 (1929); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971); L. Veit, *Volksfrommes Brauchtum und Kirche im Deutschen Mittelalter* (Freiburg, 1936), and *Volkskultur und Geschichte: Festgabe für Joseph Dünninger* (1970); and Raoul Manselli, *La Religion Populaire au Moyen Age* (Paris-Montreal, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Translated in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, S. Ozment, ed. (Chicago, 1971); and also in *Pre-Reformation Germany*, G. Strauss, ed. (New York, 1972). I have used the Ozment edition.

<sup>6</sup> Lucien Febvre, "Une Question Mal Posée: les Origines de la Réforme Française," in *Au Coeur Religieux du XVIe Siècle* (Paris, 1957), pp. 1-70, originally published in *Revue Historique*, 161 (1929). English translation in Peter Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History from the Writings of Lucien Febvre* (New York, 1973), pp. 44-107.