

Introduction

Bob Scribner

‘The Reformation’ is the general label historians use to describe the series of upheavals in the religious life of Europe during the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries. Its historical significance is assured because it touched not simply personal belief, but had a profound impact on the social, political and economic spheres. The church was shaken to its foundations, many of its institutionalised expressions were fatally weakened and even abolished in countries where the Reformation was most successful. It laid down patterns of religious allegiance which still persist today, dividing communities and nations, and provoking violent wars, confrontations and even revolutions as men and women of one religious mind set sought to impose their views on those holding another. The intensity and bitterness of conflict in Northern Ireland in our own age is a late echo of the religious confrontations of the Reformation period.

The Reformation began in Germany in the 1520s, with the ‘Luther affair’, the controversy precipitated by Martin Luther’s attack on indulgences and the indulgence trade in October 1517. The subsequent furore spilled over from being a disagreement among theologians and churchmen into the wider public sphere, quickly drawing into its wake questions of politics, social grievance, popular religious discontent, constitutional and legal issues from the level of the Empire down to the smallest communities. It quickly spread beyond the borders of Germany, first into German-speaking territories such as Switzerland and Austria, into lands such as the Low Countries, then across more substantial linguistic borders into England, Scandinavia, France, Italy and into Eastern Europe. Carried by the printed word, but more potently by personal, academic and economic networks, news of the German example quickly encouraged imitation in many other lands. However, local conditions and interests dictated that the Reformation did not develop everywhere in the same way and at the same pace. Although ideas, and especially religious ideas, find ways to penetrate even the most formidable political barriers, the patterns of development in the Reformation inevitably partook of the characteristics of the major states and territories in which it took hold. In Scandinavia, England and Scotland,

religious reform was initially hesitant but was helped along the path of Reformation by decisive royal action, imposing change from above. In France and the Netherlands, the movement for reform was initially repressed, only to break out with revolutionary force in a following generation. In Italy and Spain, attempts at religious reform seemed to be sickly growths, easily uprooted by the willing hand of authorities who perceived the dangers of strange plants in their own gardens. In Eastern Europe – Poland, Hungary, Bohemia – the story was different and more complicated because of the more complex nature of the societies and politics in those places.

The Reformation, therefore, is a subject which is pre-eminently suited for viewing ‘in national context’. Its many variations have given rise to multiple historiographies, each country in which it took substantial root developing an indigenous tradition of historical explanation, recounting how religious reform came about in that particular land and developing distinctive interpretative emphases. However, in the manner of older theories of the origins of mankind, all variants looked back to a moment of monogenesis in the ‘Luther affair’ and through the founding fathers of the German Reformation. The history of the Reformation as a European phenomenon has, therefore, oscillated between seeing it as a matter of local variants on a central theme, and emphasising the peculiarities and distinctiveness of local traditions. The difference in conceptualisation is sometimes captured in contrasting titles, for example, between the ‘The Reformation in England’ and ‘The English Reformation’.

The past couple of decades in Reformation historiography have seen substantial changes in interpretation of the phenomenon. There has been a conscious attempt to transcend the rigidities of confessional historiography, in which one’s interpretation of the Reformation was closely tied to the self-justification of one’s own religious creed. There have been many new impulses to wider understanding of the Reformation as a broader phenomenon by social and political historians, who have argued that it cannot be understood simply in terms of abstract ideas or idealist perceptions of historical change. Emphasis has shifted to exploration of the dissemination and reception of new religious beliefs, to study of implementation and institutionalisation of consequent changes in religious life, and to the limiting conditions imposed on even the most idealist religious reformer by the realities of daily life. Thus, there has been in many countries a resurgence of local studies of the Reformation within its national context, and detailed specialist works have proliferated to the point where any comparative general overview is almost impossible.

Such developments provide the occasion and justification for this collection of essays. On the one hand, it seeks to offer a summary overview of the best recent work in many countries of Europe where the Reformation made

a significant impact; on the other hand, it provides an opportunity for comparative reflections on the similarities and differences involved in local experiences of Reformation. It emphasises local context, indigenous pre-conditions and limitations, but still seeks to understand the different 'Reformations' as variations on an overall theme. Each author was asked to provide not a comprehensive factual account, but an interpretative essay emphasising local peculiarities and national variants on the broader theme of religious reform. The subject matter of most of the chapters that follow is self-evident, with the major theatres of reform claiming a chapter each: Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, England, Scotland, France and the Low Countries. Developments in Eastern Europe are represented by chapters on Poland, Bohemia and Hungary, while the chapters on Italy and Spain seek to explain why the Reformation never took off in either of these lands, apparently no less ripe for religious reform. Chapters were also planned on two cases of particular interest, Austria and Ireland, and on how the Reformation tradition established itself in the New World, but the intended authors were unable, for various reasons, to supply essays for this volume. Some account has been taken of these and other examples in a final chapter, which attempts a comparative overview. If no comprehensive synthesis seems to emerge, perhaps it is because Chairman Mao's dictum on the consequences of the Russian Revolution is equally applicable to the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century: it is still too early to say.

1 Germany

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The German Reformation began in 1520, when the ‘Luther affair’, the debate among churchmen, scholars and theologians provoked by Luther’s 1517 attack on indulgences, became a significant issue in the political agenda of the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire. The development of ‘Luther’s cause’ from an academic dispute into a major public confrontation was a gradual process, in which many elements were added consecutively to the initial conflict until they produced a chain reaction involving theological ideas, religious conviction, political interests, social grievance, economic repercussions and the tortuous manoeuvring of international diplomacy. From the very beginning, the German Reformation was not, as its propagandists (and subsequent confessional historians) were to claim, a clear, pure, invigorating stream from which one had only to drink to take refreshment, but a heady brew containing many compounds whose effects on those who imbibed it were not always calculable. Thus, the four or five years after 1520 were years of rapid change, confusing upheaval and dizzying leaps into the unknown, often described as the ‘wild growth’ of the Reformation, in analogy with the exuberance of a garden which has received too much heat and water all at once. It was driven forward not by cool-headed discussion and debate, but by passionate polemic and fevered propaganda, rather like a too enthusiastic application of growth hormones to already overlush vegetation.¹

In the years 1520–3 the growing demands for religious change developed into forms of direct action, challenging and then dismantling the old apparatus of religious worship and institutionalised forms of church life. This activity took on a new note from 1523, when social grievance came to dominate the public agenda, reaching its peak in the revolutionary upheaval of the German Peasants’ War. The defeat of the rebels of 1524–5 brought a calming of the fevered pace of reform, as secular rulers imposed their authority in the name of social order, either repressing reforming impulses or channelling them into more approved patterns of change. From 1526 there emerged the first forms of ‘reformation’ directed by secular princes, alongside a more wary attitude towards religious change on the part of

urban authorities. By 1529–30, these forms of reformation had become sufficiently cohesive for some authorities implementing change to assemble themselves as a political party, the ‘Protestants’, those asserting their right to take charge of religious reform within their own territories and professing allegiance to a set of theological principles justifying their actions. From this point, the German Reformation was well-established as a divisive and determining factor in the politics of the Holy Roman Empire, a position it was not to yield until the middle of the next century.

The features that stand out in this story are the suddenness of the upheaval, the radical and dramatic nature of the changes it initiated, and its far-reaching effects in every area of life. There are three central questions to be addressed in an essay of this kind, which seeks to determine the ‘national’ peculiarities of the German Reformation. First, why should the Reformation have broken out in Germany in the first place? Second, what were the characteristics, peculiar to Germany, once it had begun? Third, in what sense did Germany provide a model for the development of reform elsewhere? The third question will be discussed only briefly, since many of the issues involved will be addressed in the final essay in this volume.

Why Germany?

To seek reasons why a historical event occurs first in one place and not in another could be considered an idle enquiry, rather like asking why lightning should strike one tree in a forest and leave others untouched. We might be tempted to take such a view if we regarded the Reformation as a matter of pure contingency, as merely dependent on the providential whim that produces ‘great men’ in history. Yet once we begin to regard it as a complex process involving the interaction of many historical agencies – not just religious, but social, economic, political and ideological – we can approach it akin to the ways in which historians have explored phenomena such as revolts, revolutions or social movements. We can then speak of preconditions, of enabling or limiting structures within which events unfold, and of distinctive modes of thought and action which leave their imprint on such a phenomenon even as they are changed by it. Despite the danger of oversimplification, we can validly single out three broad areas of concern – political, cultural and religious – which played preconditioning roles in the development of the Reformation in Germany.

An important precondition is seen in the *political structures* prevailing in ‘Germany’ during the two or three generations before the Reformation.² German territories were characterised by fragmented politics under the limp hand of weak emperors, who had no significant institutions to provide a focus for unified political activity on an imperial level and who did not

possess the resources to create such institutions. Thus, German politics were determined by polycentrism and factionalism, as Machiavelli observed shrewdly in 1508, commenting that neither the cities nor the princes wished the emperor to be great or strong because he would dominate and reduce them to an obedience not dissimilar to that exercised by the King of France over his subjects. The comparison is illuminating. Although the role of Holy Roman Emperor was not lacking in charisma of office, it certainly lacked charisma of hereditary royal power comparable to that attached to the rulers of France. The emperors did wield a certain amount of power in Germany and could dispense patronage and status by grants of office or title, but the number of carrots they could offer was limited by their continual impecuniousness, while the stick they could wield to compel obedience was thin and fragile. The Habsburgs may have regarded the office as a family possession, but the mere fact that the Holy Roman Emperor was an elected ruler was a fatal weakness. An imperial election required the investment of a good deal of money, time and political energy to achieve a satisfactory result, and the necessary horse-trading often tied the hands of the successful incumbent. Machiavelli believed in 1508 that the Emperor was better placed than in the past, for there were no longer great princes who dared openly oppose his designs; on the other hand, however, the Emperor could easily be frustrated by the simple non-compliance or non-cooperation of the princes and effectively reduced to impotence.³

Although the Emperor's position as a ruling monarch was weak, there was among the German political nation a strong attachment to the idea of the Empire, understood as the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. The concept embodied a providential mission assigned to the German nation, and represented an enormous ideological force for unity for any ruler who could mobilise it for his political purposes. Maximilian I came close to doing so, using skilled propaganda to attach the ideals of empire to his own foreign policy, but ultimately he was unable to overcome the conviction of the German princes and cities that he was pursuing purely dynastic policies in the interests not of the 'German nation' but of the house of Habsburg. However, the potential remained, and was perhaps most effectively drawn upon by the nationalist elements of the early Reformation.

The role of *the church as a political entity* was a further distinct feature, most notably in the shape of the great prince-bishops, independent territorial rulers who necessarily involved the church in power politics. The same was true of the next level down the ecclesio-political hierarchy, the rich and powerful abbeys and imperial foundations, ruled by prince-abbots who were also major players in the game of imperial politics. This game was played out not only to preserve and extend their territories – bishoprics and abbatial lands – but in the struggles of various noble houses who sought

dynastic advancement by occupying these great offices of the church. Noble families not only provided the incumbents of bishoprics and abbasies, but also the bulk of the canons sitting in the chapters which elected these dignitaries. Throughout its higher offices, the German church was distinctively a nobles' church. It was one of the features that was both to provoke demands for reform and to set limits to the expansion of the Reformation impulse.

Germany was also distinctive for its *developed urban life*, such that even the Florentine Machiavelli marvelled at the riches and power of its cities. Germany was covered by a dense network of almost two thousand towns, constituting an elaborate web of urban interests and influence, spread more or less uniformly across the countryside, but with regions of greater urban density in south-west and in central Germany. The sixty-five 'imperial cities', those subject only to the Emperor, have often been accorded a disproportionate amount of attention in the story of the Reformation, inviting comparison with great urban republics elsewhere. Yet it is somewhat misleading to compare the most powerful imperial cities such as Nuremberg or Augsburg with the urban republics of Italy, since the German imperial cities were certainly not republics and fear of the Emperor's intervention was a continual factor in their political decision-making. However, they did enjoy a high degree of political independence, as did certain other great towns nominally subject to the rule of a territorial prince but which had gained considerable autonomy of political and economic action. It was this which made not just the imperial cities but many territorial towns the seedbeds of the Reformation: independent or semi-independent politics, flourishing communal life and a vibrant civic political culture. German towns of all kinds may have had greater freedom of movement than their Italian counterparts, which were more avowedly republican in their constitutions but were faced increasingly with external limitations on their freedom of political action. We can say, therefore, that constitutional form was less of a deciding factor in the Reformation than political opportunity. Neither in Italy nor in France, where there were strong ties between the Crown and the 'bonnes villes', was there comparable freedom of urban action. The towns of the Low Countries in some respects enjoyed political independence akin to that of their German sisters. However, they too found themselves under increasing pressure from their sovereign lord at the beginning of the sixteenth century, which meant that urban defiance of princely authority was purchased dearly, at great economic, political and social cost.

Just focussing on these three major entities within the Holy Roman Empire, without taking account of minor princes, independent nobles or the peasantry, reveals an important structural feature that allowed movements

of religious dissent to grow and flourish. At the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, the Empire experienced enormous problems of order and public peace, expressed in its inability to deal with a complex range of issues on which firm action across its territories would have benefited all: control over banditry and feud, the lack of a uniform coinage or excise system, the absence of an efficient and effective legal system capable of resolving numerous political, economic and social conflicts. The problem of order was attested by cases of disputed princely succession, by contested elections in ecclesiastical foundations, by instances of princely or noble lawlessness and by internal upheavals in more than three dozen towns in the decade before the Reformation. In all such cases, there was no legal authority strong enough to compel immediate assent to a negotiated settlement, and political disputes often dragged on for many years at great cost to rulers and subjects alike. Thus, maverick princes could only be pulled into line by the investment of a good deal of time and money in forming coercive alliances and raising military force, while towns facing internal disputes fell prey to the predatory instincts of outside powers, whether secular or ecclesiastical princes, who offered to mediate at a price. The Swabian League had been created in 1488 in the south-west as a trouble-shooting alliance to settle disputes among its members and to enforce compliance to the law if necessary, but its workings were slow and cumbersome and its response uncertain, given the strong element of self-interest involved in its operations. Its most notable success, the expulsion of the lawless Duke Ulrich of Württemberg from his territories in 1519, was a unique achievement, and the 1520s were cruelly to expose its inadequacies. The significance for the emergence of the Reformation is self-evident: breaches in legality, as church structures were dismantled, pious foundations ignored, cloisters sequestered and incumbents ejected from clerical benefices, could take place without fear of rapid legal retribution, subject only to the constraints of political expediency.

Such features explain the ease with which religious dissent and heterodoxy spread in the early 1520s, especially given the conviction that there was legitimate disagreement about whether Luther and his supporters should be repressed or supported. Charles V was unable to mobilise the enormous wave of idealistic fervour for the concept of the Empire that arose on his accession, since this was attached more fervently to the idea that Luther's struggle against the papacy was a means of asserting the rights of the German nation. The Emperor remained dependent on cooperation of various subordinate authorities to carry through his condemnation of Luther, but where they chose to sit on their hands and to be uncooperative, the new ideas were allowed free rein to develop. Significantly, it was largely within the boundaries of prince-bishoprics, those powerful territories that

so aroused the ire of reforming critics, that the movements were inhibited and checked in the long-term. The Reformation was never able, through massive dissent and disobedience, to capture a major bishopric or, more than temporarily, a major residential episcopal city. It was also effectively checked in principalities whose rulers took a firm repressive line, as in Albertine Saxony up to 1539 or in Bavaria. Low levels of urbanisation may have played a part in the latter territory, but scarcely in the former, where it was decisive action by the ruling prince that denied the Reformation movements any political and legal freedom to unfold.

These broadly structural features were complemented by *the nature of German politics*, by which we understand the goals, tactics and strategies pursued by the main independent actors in German public life, whose relatively broad-meshed and informal nature allowed scope for a wide range of political activity. This encompassed, for example, the petty, creeping expansionism by lords such as successive Abbots of Kempten, who sought to enlarge their territorial control by exchange of serfs and by imposing servile status on their peasant tenants; and the calculating policy of princes such as Magnus I of Saxony-Lauenburg (1507–43) who ruthlessly pursued his goal of mediatising the bishopric of Ratzeburg, first by rigging an episcopal election and then by imprisoning and coercing his uncooperative nominee. It included the machiavellian politics pursued by the city fathers of Erfurt, who sought to play the town's overlord, the Archbishop of Mainz, off against its contractual protectors, the Dukes of Saxony, or the ambitious plans of some towns for territorial expansion which led them to acquire serfs and act as feudal landlords.⁴ All the acquired skills of political chicanery, duplicity, manoeuvring, opportunism, calculation and risk-taking played their part in the ability of towns and princes successfully to introduce and maintain religious heterodoxy and innovation.

A major goal of German politics at all levels well before the Reformation was to submit the church and its agencies to secular control. This ranged from the attempts of princes such as the Dukes of Saxony to gain rights of presentation to bishoprics and important canonries and to place their offspring in the highest church offices, over the nakedly coercive policies of Magnus of Saxony-Lauenburg, to the desire of towns to take charge of ecclesiastical institutions such as hospitals or to control the appointment of their parish clergy. The great point of dispute in this regard was the struggle over legal jurisdiction, secular authorities seeking to submit the clergy to secular courts and denying the rights of church courts to cite lay people before them in non-spiritual matters. We must note the relative backwardness of Germany in this regard. There was no uniform privilege *de non evocando*, of not being cited before foreign courts, gained in England since the fourteenth century as a means of preventing legal disputes being

referred outside the country to papal jurisdiction; there was no mortmain legislation comparable to that in England and France, which restricted the alienation of secular property into clerical hands; and there were no consistent agreements limiting to German patrons the rights of presentation to important benefices.

In the wake of the fifteenth-century conciliar movement, many lands established national churches, either through exploiting papal weakness in the wake of the Great Schism, as did England and France, or by rebellion and assertion of the rights of an independent national church, as occurred in Bohemia. But Germany had nothing similar to the Concordat of Bologna of 1516, which formally conceded to the King of France the right to nominate to nearly all the bishoprics, abbeys and major benefices in the kingdom. Instead, German lands were a rich picking ground for foreigners seeking ecclesiastical benefices, especially Italian favourites at the papal court or those able to tap into the network of patronage whose centre was Rome and the Curia. Everyone in German public life was aware of what was involved in securing a national church: this much had been learned from the Hussite upheavals in Bohemia. Concerted national action based on ethnic allegiance could assert local control against foreign rights and privileges, even achieve the virtually autonomous status of the Bohemian church. However, many Germans were also aware of the negative aspects of the process: protracted internal upheaval, invasions by marauding Hussite armies and the fanaticism of religious militants, reviving memories of the bloody campaigns required to uproot heresy in earlier centuries.

No one who played any part in public life was unaware of the potential dangers of religious schism, yet the gains of ecclesiastical independence were seen to outweigh the losses, and numerous voices were raised throughout the latter part of the fifteenth century demanding the bridling of Rome and the creation of a truly national German church. What was lacking was opportunity and a leader, and in the search for the latter many chose to fix their hopes on a mythical figure, the prophetic emperor, the 'Third Frederick', who would revive religion and chastise Rome and the Roman clergy. Desire for reform was thus powerfully bound up with desire for a national church. It is singularly ironic, therefore, that it was the very lack of a national church and the very weakness of central authority that allowed the development of the polycentric Reformation movements which became the bearers of reform, rather than the more centralised reforms instituted elsewhere, in England or Scandinavia. At the same time the German reform movements inherited the anti-Roman and anti-papal religious and cultural nationalism of the fifteenth century – a historic combination of two different kind of centrifugal force, which so easily tore the thin fabric of the 'imperial church' (*Reichskirche*), that pale shadow of the national churches elsewhere.