

# The Reformation and rural society

The parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528–1603

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# Introduction

Writing in 1526, the Ansbach clergyman Johann Rurer encouraged his prince, margrave Casimir of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, to view the widespread support for the evangelical faith as proof of its divine provenance:

Your princely grace can witness [the truth of the faith] therein, that now the people everywhere want to have the Word of God preached to them, that they are so eager and anxious, stream and press with such frequency and urgency [*gewalt*] – often from great distances – to hear the Word preached, regardless of the fact that they are called Lutheran, heretical, or in other ways scolded and fiercely punished.<sup>1</sup>

As they hunger for bread, Rurer continued, now the people hunger for the Word of God, the teaching of the Gospel ‘clear and pure’. But was Rurer correct in his assumption that the margrave’s subjects longed to hear the Word of God, or was this just the hopeful projection of a pious man looking to convert an indifferent ruler to the faith? What was the reaction of the subject population to the religious movement radiating from Wittenberg? Did the margrave’s rural subjects in Ansbach and Kulmbach show an interest in the evangelical movement? Did they eventually embrace the Lutheran faith once it was officially introduced? And if Rurer’s judgement rings true – that the people hungered for the Word – what was the ultimate effect of Lutheranism in the years following Casimir’s death in 1527, when margrave Georg the Pious assumed rule and introduced the Reformation into Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach? Did religious reform extend to the rural parishes? Did it affect the lives of those in the smaller towns, in the villages and the forest hamlets? Western Christendom, scholars have long claimed, was deeply impressed by the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. But how was confessional change experienced by the subject population? What was the relationship between the Reformation and the long-term development of rural society? The following work is an attempt to answer these fundamental historical questions.

This study investigates the implementation of the Reformation in the German principality of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach and the implications of this event

<sup>1</sup> Johann Rurer, *Cristliche unterrichtung eins Pfarhern an seinen herrn/ein fursten des heyiligen Reychs/ auff vierzig Artickel und puncten gestellt/was eins rechten/waren/ Evangelischen Pfarhern oder Predigers/Predigen und lere sein soll/mit einfürung etlicher sprüch in heiliger geschriffte gegründet/das solch lere/das ware wort Gottes sey/Auch ableynung viler vermeinten einreden/ fast nützlich un[d] trostlich zu lesen unnd zuhoren* (1526), Dii.

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for the rural populace. The object of this investigation is the rural parishioner, the men and women who lived in the outlying towns, villages, and hamlets during the first century of reform. Unlike the 'articulate minorities', people who shaped the course of the Reformation either through their published works or their recorded actions, the rural parishioners have left little or no testimony behind. It is not possible, therefore, to analyse the effects of the Reformation on the rural populace as a historian of ideas might trace the development of an intellectual movement or as an anthropologist might observe the many subtle gestures behind a cultural disposition. The role played by the rural parishioner in the reform movement must be reconstructed out of source materials which portray, rather than directly represent, the thoughts and actions of the parishioners themselves (tithing disputes, parish visitation returns, parish litigation, feuds between the pastor and his congregation, witchcraft trials). Respecting the limitations, however, the historian can recreate the process of reform and intuit its effect on rural society. The Reformation in the rural parishes has its own story to tell.

A social history of the Reformation movement in its rural setting can make no claims to methodological innovation. Over the last thirty years scholars have grown sensitive to the charge that Reformation studies had become too ahistorical, too concerned with doctrine and rhetoric at the expense of the social milieu. Since the publication of Bernd Moeller's *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (1962) there has been an outpouring of works devoted to the social history of the Reformation, works concerned less with the development of theology or the clash of confessional politics in the Empire than the fate of the Reformation movement in specific social and temporal contexts. The Reformation has been placed in a much more complex dynamic; religious reform was frequently manipulated by the interests of different social classes and hostage to a type of religiosity bound up in, and inseparable from, the secular realm. No longer determined solely by the tracts and directives flowing out of Wittenberg, the Reformation movement, as it is described by social historians, followed different paths and separate destinies, so that no two models of its unfolding were exactly alike. Only one thing ties all of this scholarship together. Up to this point, the vast majority of this work has situated reform in urban centres.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> See the overviews by Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 213–66, 475–87; Hans-Christoph Rublack, 'Forschungsbericht Stadt und Reformation', in Bernd Moeller (ed.), *Stadt und Kirche im 16. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh, 1978), pp. 9–26; Kaspar von Greyerz, 'Stadt und Reformation: Stand und Aufgaben der Forschung', *ARG* 76 (1985), 6–64. The more significant works would include: Bernd Moeller, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Durham, 1982); Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Die Einführung der Reformation in Konstanz von den Anfängen bis zum Abschluß 1531* (Gütersloh, 1971); Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (London, 1975); Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Eine bürgerliche Reformation: Nördlingen* (Gütersloh, 1982); Lorna Jane Abray, *The People's Reformation: Magistrates, Clergy and Commons in Strasbourg 1500–1598* (Oxford, 1985); Thomas A. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg 1520–1555* (Leiden, 1978); Kaspar von Greyerz, *The Late City Reformation in Germany: The Case of Colmar 1522–1628* (Wiesbaden, 1980); R. Po-Chia Hsia, *Society and Religion in Münster 1535–1618* (New Haven, 1984).

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detailed social histories of the Reformation and the patient investigations of religious change and its consequences have been studies of the Reformation in the cities.

In contrast to our understanding of the process of urban reform, the course of the Reformation in the countryside remains relatively unknown. The standard rejoinder to the preoccupation with the cities has been the interest in the Peasants' War of 1525.<sup>3</sup> But the 1525 uprising was an event located in a crosscurrent of unique circumstances, many peculiar to the war itself; the war was not necessarily representative of the relationship between the Reformation and rural society. Only quite recently, in response to this gap in Reformation scholarship, have scholars begun to pay more attention to the dynamic of religious change as it occurred in the countryside. The focus is still on the first decade of the movement, however, with the Peasants' War looming over events. There have been few systematic attempts (for the German lands) to analyse the influence of the Reformation in a rural environment using an approach that is sensitive to parish-level changes over the long term.<sup>4</sup> This need was made evident after the publication of Gerald Strauss's *Luther's House of Learning* (1978), a work which challenged the very essence of Lutheran claims to success (the realisation of their educational goals and the indoctrination of the faith) yet suffered the weight of very little

<sup>3</sup> See the overview by Tom Scott, 'The Peasants' War: A Historiographical Review', *The Historical Journal*, 22, 3 (1979), 693–720, 953–74.

<sup>4</sup> Most modern studies of the Reformation in the countryside still focus on the growth of the church and the extension of the state without paying much heed to events in the outlying parishes. See, for instance, Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt und Staatsbildung. Eine Fallstudie über das Verhältnis von religiösem und sozialem Wandel in der Frühneuzeit am Beispiel der Grafschaft Lippe* (Gütersloh, 1981); Günther Wartenberg, *Landesherrschaft und Reformation. Moritz von Sachsen und die albertinische Kirchenpolitik bis 1546* (Gütersloh, 1988). Recent works focusing on the reception of the Reformation in the rural parishes include: Peter Blickle, *Gemeindereformation. Die Menschen des 16. Jahrhunderts auf dem Weg zum Heil* (Munich, 1987); Franziska Conrad, *Reformation in der bäuerlichen Gesellschaft. Zur Rezeption reformatorischer Theologie im Elsass* (Stuttgart, 1984); Peter Blickle (ed.), *Zugänge zur bäuerlichen Reformation* (Zürich, 1987); Hans von Rütte (ed.), *Bäuerliche Frömmigkeit und kommunale Reformation. Referate, gehalten am Schweizerischen Historikertag vom 23. Oktober 1987 in Bern (Itinera)*, 8, 1988; Peter Blickle (ed.), *Landgemeinde und Stadtgemeinde in Mitteleuropa. Ein struktureller Vergleich* (Munich, 1991). All of these studies are limited in focus to the first few decades of the movement. See the overview by Tom Scott, 'The Common People in the German Reformation', *The Historical Journal*, 34, (1991), 183–91. The English Reformation has been rather better served in this respect. See the literature cited in Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 339–42; Ronald Hutton, 'The Local Impact of the Tudor Reformations', in Christopher Haigh (ed.) *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 114, n. 1; Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (London, 1986), pp. 133–65. The effect of the Counter-Reformation in the countryside has been examined by Marc R. Forster, *The Counter-Reformation in the Villages* (Ithaca, 1992). My own work went to press before I was able to consult Bruce Tolley, *Pastors and Parishioners in Württemberg during the Late Reformation, 1581–1621* (Stanford, 1995). I have, however, consulted Tolley's Stanford doctoral dissertation, which formed the basis of his book.

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counter-evidence in return.<sup>5</sup> Our knowledge of events at the parish level during this century of religious change remains slight, even though this was the level at which the Reformation was experienced by the vast majority of the population. Local studies of the Reformation in the outlying parishes are crucial for a broader understanding of confessional change in the sixteenth century.

This book sets out to analyse the progress of religious reform in the former German margravate of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. Though it was of relatively modest dimensions, the margravate proved to be one of the most important territories in the Empire for the spread and consolidation of the Lutheran faith. Situated in south-west Germany, the northern principality of Kulmbach (Bayreuth) was the less developed of the two territories in the mid sixteenth century and was home to *circa* 60,000 subjects. Ansbach, to the south, was marginally larger than Kulmbach and more densely populated. (It is difficult to offer exact calculations, as both sections of the principality were beaded with multi-jurisdictional enclaves and lines of territorial interweave.) To the east of Ansbach were the lands of Nuremberg, to the south the dukedom of Pappenheim and the principality of Oettingen along with the Eichstätt bishopric, to the west Hohenlohe and the two imperial cities Schwäbisch Hall and Rothenburg. The bishopric of Würzburg sat to the north-west.<sup>6</sup> Kulmbach bordered the bishoprics of Bamberg and Würzburg to the west, while the imperial city of Nuremberg lay to the south. Nuremberg sat in the middle of the margravate and thus separated Ansbach and Kulmbach, precluding unification and extending its boundaries – up to twenty-five square miles – while it defended its jurisdictional claims.<sup>7</sup> Relations between the two powers were always strained, even in the early sixteenth century when the margravate and the imperial city worked together to effect religious change. Only a common devotion to Lutheranism gave cause for cooperation; and even during the period of their collaboration Nuremberg

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (London, 1978); Gerald Strauss, 'Success and Failure in the German Reformation', *Past & Present*, 67 (1975), 30–63. For a critique of Strauss's work, see James Kittelson, 'Successes and Failures in the German Reformation: The Report from Strasbourg', *ARG* 73 (1982), 153–74; James Kittelson, 'Visitations and Popular Religious Culture: Further Reports from Strasbourg', in Kyle C. Sessions and Phillip N. Bebb (eds.) *Pietas and Societas: New Trends in Social History* (Kirksville, 1985), pp. 89–102. For the latest overview of the 'success or failure' debate, see Geoffrey Parker, 'Success and Failure During the First Century of the Reformation', *Past and Present*, 136 (1992), 43–82.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Endres, 'Die Markgraftümer,' in M. Spindler (ed.), *Handbuch der bayerischen Geschichte* (Munich, 1971), III, part 1, pp. 398–9; Gottfried Stieber, *Historische und Topographische Nachricht von dem Fürstenthum Brandenburg-Onolzbach, aus zuverlässigen archivalischen Documenten, und andern glaubwürdigen Schrifften verfaßt* (Schwabach, 1761), pp. 5–16; Johann Bernhard Fischer, *Stätistische und topographische Beschreibung des Burgraftums Nürnberg unterhalb des Gebürgs; oder des Fürstentums Brandenburg-Anspach* (Ansbach, 1790), First Part, pp. 111–19.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Dannenbauer, 'Die Entstehung des Territoriums der Reichsstadt Nürnberg', *Arbeiten zur deutschen Rechts- und Verfassungsgeschichte*, 7 (1928), 1–258; G. Pfeiffer, 'Der Aufstieg der Reichsstadt Nürnberg im 13. Jahrhundert', *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg*, 44 (1953).



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remained suspect and fearful of its powerful neighbour. And not without good reason: Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach was not a marginal territory, nor its rulers inconsequential lords.

As in other lands in the Holy Roman Empire, the Reformation in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach was introduced in stages, periods of progress followed by terms of regression lasting the entire sixteenth century. When Luther first posted his theses in 1517, margrave Casimir (1515–1527) ruled over both Ansbach and Kulmbach. Thus the evangelical movement first penetrated the Franconian lands during Casimir's reign; but as will be shown, Casimir did little to promote the Reformation. True to the Hohenzollern philosophy of rule – that policy which had raised the Zollern castellans of Nuremberg to princes of the realm, margraves over the Franconian lands of Ansbach and Kulmbach, and ultimately Electors of the Mark Brandenburg – Casimir remained a devoted servant of the imperial cause. He died, as his son observed, in the service of the Empire, true to the Catholic faith.<sup>8</sup>

Not until margrave Georg the Pious (1527–1543) returned to his Franconian inheritance in 1528 was the reform movement actually introduced in the principality. Famous above all for his gesture before Charles V at Augsburg (1530), where he vowed he would sooner lose his head than forgo the Word of God, Georg's belief was always the final logic of his public actions. 'A man must render greater obedience to God than man', was how he answered those who would question this policy.<sup>9</sup> Immediately upon his return to Ansbach in 1528 he began preparing his domain for a full conversion to the evangelical faith, and he remained committed to the movement until his death in 1543. His work was not in vain. The son of Georg the Pious, Georg Friedrich (1556–1603), consolidated the work begun by his father in the religious realm. Ansbach and Kulmbach were divided up into a system of chapters ruled by a clerical elite. Annual synods monitored ecclesiastical affairs, while a consistory enforced the margrave's directives. Together with the clergyman Georg Karg, Georg Friedrich built an order for the church in the principality which has remained valid to this day. The reigns of Georg the Pious and Georg Friedrich – the period from 1528 to 1603 – witnessed the introduction and the consolidation of the Lutheran church in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach and therefore provide the timescale for this study.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Christian Meyer, *Geschichte der Burggrafschaft Nürnberg und der späteren Markgrafschaften Ansbach und Bayreuth* (Tübingen, 1908), p. 106, n. 3.

<sup>9</sup> M. J. H. Schülin, *Leben und Geschichte des weyland Durchlauchtigsten Marggraff Georgens, zugenannt des Frommen* (Frankfurt, 1729), p. 108; Wilhelm Löhe, *Erinnerungen aus der Reformationsgeschichte von Franken, insonderheit der Stadt und dem Burggraftum Nürnberg ober und unterhalb des Gebirgs* (Nuremberg, 1847), pp. 112, 115.

<sup>10</sup> Individual histories of the margraves are provided by Günther Schuhmann, *Die Markgrafen von Brandenburg Ansbach. Eine Bildokumentation zur Geschichte der Hohenzollern in Franken* (Ansbach, 1980).

## *Introduction*

This work is divided into five main sections. The first chapter offers a narrative summary of the introduction of the Lutheran religion into Ansbach and Kulmbach. In order for the faith to take root the prince had to supply the appropriate guidance and support, while his subjects had to be receptive enough to allow the movement to take hold. Chapter 1 examines the Reformation's spread and reception in the principality. The second chapter traces the development of the Lutheran church in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach; it outlines the emergence of a Lutheran clerical estate, the offices, the territory of the new church, the ordinances and mandates issued to define the structure of the church, the emergence of the consistory, and the significance of the visitation process for the implementation of reform. Chapter 3 investigates the quality of the Lutheran clergy and the nature of anticlericalism in Ansbach and Kulmbach. This chapter examines the state of clerical maintenance – often a motive for grievances against the clergy – especially the changes in income and wealth distribution introduced by the process of reform. Parish-level resistance to changes in income and distribution is explored in a final section. The fourth chapter looks at the impact of the Reformation on village culture. A survey of parish customs and pastimes illustrates the extent to which religious change actually affected village life and whether it is fitting to claim that the Reformation represented a 'disciplining' activity at the level of the parish. The Reformation is thus addressed at the point where injunction and practice met: the problems confronting reform are revealed in a detailed study of the political dynamic between the parish and the pastor. The final chapter addresses parish religion – or popular religion – and whether the outlook of the average parishioner was in fact modified by the Reformation process. Popular beliefs and customs are placed in two categories: Those thought to represent the continuance of a Catholic mentality are dealt with in a section on sacraments and sacramentals; the second section investigates popular magic, popular religion, witchcraft, and the local traditions of parish beliefs that continued to thrive throughout the century, despite the intervention of the Lutheran authorities. A concluding look at a witchcraft trial assesses the influence of the Lutheran faith on the parish mind during the first century of reform and thus offers some answers to the question uniting the work: how was the Reformation experienced in the rural parishes?