

## Introduction

EUAN CAMERON

This volume takes up the story of the Bible where volume II left off, near the end of what is conventionally known as the Middle Ages in Europe. As that volume amply demonstrated, the Bible had saturated the intellectual, literary and artistic culture of Europe and the Near East for centuries, through its presence in Judaism, Christianity, and also in Islam. It had seen the rise of structures and systems that regulated the relationship between Scripture and people, and then the emergence of forces that challenged those systems. Progressively greater assertiveness on the part of the eleventh-century Roman papacy contributed to the mutual excommunications of 1054 and confirmed a long-standing trend for the cultures of the Greek East and the Latin West to diverge, though they never entirely lost contact. From the so-called Gregorian movement of the eleventh century in the Latin West, the clergy had distinguished itself from the laity by layers of sacramental and legal privilege. That separateness had contributed to an educational and scholarly system where the Bible was normally interpreted within cathedral, monastic and later university communities, all composed in one sense or another of ‘clergy’. The Bible remained the fundamental source text for both Christian theology and canon law in the Middle Ages. However, as both these disciplines developed their own superstructures of philosophical elaboration and circumstantial exegesis, the whole Bible had tended somewhat to recede into the background, reached through the filters and layers of tradition and authoritative interpretation rather than directly. That perceived ‘eclipse’ of the Scriptures helped to provoke movements of dissent and heresy by the end of the medieval period, though none of those offered a comprehensive replacement for the prevailing religious system. John Wyclif and Jan Hus challenged the academic mode of theology from within, to some extent in the name of Scripture and its authority. Similarly, movements of lay literacy and lay piety infringed or questioned the separation between the literate, Latin-reading clerical elite and the rest of the people. However, these challenges mitigated

EUAN CAMERON

and challenged the structural exclusiveness of medieval religion: they did not bring about decisive structural change.

Change would come in abundance with the sixteenth century. Many of the fundamentals of life in Europe were transformed from 1450 onwards. These processes are well known, and they are largely assumed in the chapters that follow. However, there is value in reflecting briefly on these developments, as they affected the relationship between the Bible and Europe's cultural and religious life. First, the Eastern Empire finally lost its autonomy as a political structure. Between around 1450 and around 1530 the Ottoman Empire rolled over the remains of East Rome, from Constantinople to Greece and the Balkans, until its advance was halted at the first siege of Vienna in 1529. The Austrian Habsburg city would remain a frontier town on the south-eastern edge of political Christendom until near the end of the seventeenth century. The Ottoman sultan's control over the former Eastern Empire, exercised from the old imperial capital of Constantinople, placed many, though by no means all, of the churches of the East under its hegemony. While Ottoman rule did not proscribe Judaism or Christianity in its territories, it did deprive the political structures of these religions of access to power, wealth, and a productive relationship with secular authority. That state of affairs allowed a measure of conflict, even at times of chaos, to break out within the churches of the eastern Mediterranean, and limited the opportunities for creative theological scholarship in those areas. (The relative neglect of the early modern period among scholars of Orthodoxy, even today, testifies to the difficulty of researching and writing about it.) Relations between Western and Eastern Christianity, problematic enough in the Middle Ages before the Ottoman advance, became even more difficult. In the early modern period 'Europe', as a religious, intellectual and cultural space, has often been taken to mean Latin, Western Europe, with all its divisions and problems. When Russia turned its gaze towards the west around 1700 to assert its European character, it would be in the name of secular trends in philosophies and the arts characteristic of the Western Enlightenment. The Russian Orthodox Church would assume the role that it has resumed in the present age, a bastion of distinctive national ethnic memory.

And yet Western Europe transformed its image of its place on the globe, as a consequence of the unexpected, and initially misunderstood, discovery of unknown or little-remembered countries in the rest of the world. The Portuguese first provided a stimulus for expansion by exploring and cornering the route to East Asia via the Cape of Good Hope. This route circumvented the costly and often interrupted trade routes through the Near East,

## Introduction

dominated by the Italian maritime city-states of Venice and Genoa, and by the Ottomans. Portuguese navigators spread the (quite false) impression that the Cape route was narrow and defensible. That rumour stimulated other explorers to attempt a route to Asia by the west. In the course of that attempt the islands of the Caribbean (to be mistakenly and definitively known as the ‘Indies’) entered the European consciousness. Gradually awareness grew, at least among those involved in trade, exploration or cartography, that a whole new continent, or a set of continents, existed in the west between Europe and Asia. These had been unknown to the ancient geographer Ptolemy and – more disturbingly – apparently unknown also to the Christian evangelists whose ‘voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world’ (Rom. 10:18, paraphrasing Ps. 19:4). The peoples of these places either had not heard the message of the gospel or had mysteriously lost or abandoned it, and that would pose a whole other set of dilemmas. The discoveries did not tend, as they might have done later, to discredit the Scripture that failed to show awareness of them. The European mind with elastic flexibility absorbed them somehow into a view of the world shaped by religious imperatives. The newly expanded world must be absorbed into the European world system, remade into places called ‘New ... [Spain, Netherland, France, England]’ where the social mores and, of course, the religion of Europe would be confirmed and spread as widely as possible. Alternatively, the supposedly empty wildernesses could offer a living-space where marginal groups – or those who felt themselves marginalised – could play out their biblical destinies in all their fullness. In sum, the opening up of new worlds initially stimulated the affirmation rather than the abandonment of a worldview shaped by Scripture.

One other historical development is both obviously important and yet controversial in its impact. For centuries the Bible, like every other written text, had relied on the patience and accuracy of scribes for making new copies. From the 1450s, the printing press using movable type became available, and its first substantial product was a Latin Bible. The press by no means eliminated scribal error: indeed, it might contribute to making errors permanent, by reproducing them many hundreds of times. However, when combined with the trends in textual scholarship that emerged in the late Renaissance, the printing press offered enticing and nearly infinite possibilities. In principle the learned could produce stable, identical, affordable copies of the masterworks of European literature, in editions that would allow conversation to take place around an agreed and identical text. In

EUAN CAMERON

practice, the new technology spread more randomly, and was dominated by the concerns of businesspeople with money, far more than by the expectations or the visions of scholars.<sup>1</sup> Initially it tended to produce the same kinds of books as the scribes had made, but in greater numbers and at less cost in time and effort. As time went by the potential that we take for granted in printed books, to make standard information readily accessible through accurate referencing and indexing, began to be realized. For biblical scholarship the press would be a transformative tool. Its shadow can be detected, and its presence taken for granted, throughout the story of this volume.

### A new attitude towards texts

Something fairly dramatic happened, towards the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, to the way that scholars viewed historic texts, including the Bible. To the high medieval mind texts served as repositories of statements and propositions that could be evaluated against each other according to the principles of logic, of dialectic. Sacred or otherwise canonical texts stood as authorities, as storehouses of transferrable wisdom. ‘Authorities’ could be applied, according to the rules of dialectic, even some way out of context if need be. This approach to language, reason and truth helped to generate the medieval genre of the compilation, the digest, the *florilegium*, where texts from different periods in history, written for different purposes, were combined into large composite works. Inevitably also, the gathering of texts in this manner generated apparent contradictions. So it made sense that Gratian of Bologna’s great digest of canon law carried the formal title of *A Concord of Discordant Canons* (*Concordia Discordantium Canonum*). An agile and well-trained medieval mind could reconcile apparent contradictions between authorities through logic or ‘subtlety’, that is, the making of appropriately fine distinctions that would show how what appeared contradictory was not truly so. For example, Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, where it discusses the seven sacraments, offers a range of spurious reasons, many grounded in authorities, why there should be fewer or more than seven sacraments – before offering logical reasons for the number of seven and disproving all the arguments to the contrary.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), and his Chapter 7 herein.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 65, pt. I.

## Introduction

This somewhat granular method of handling texts prevailed in theology and canon law for much of the Middle Ages, and great skill was deployed in using it. However, towards the end of the medieval centuries an alternative way of looking at texts began to come into fashion. Teachers of persuasive rhetoric in medieval Italy, known as *dictatores*, sought to produce style manuals for the writing of elegant letters and speeches in Latin. The purpose of this quest was worldly: how to win, impress or reassure a patron; how to cut a dash in politics or the law; how to impress the delegation of a rival city-state. In the nature of things, concern for style tended to become inflated as time went on. Good, grammatically correct Latin was not enough. Rhetorical Latin should follow the canons of style cultivated by the great rhetoricians of antiquity. That most subtle of quintessences, good taste, called for close acquaintance with far more of a body of literature than the propositional requirements of authorities and dialectic. By the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, scholars were seeking out not the most modern digest, but the most ancient complete text of an exemplary author. Many of these texts, forensic orations of Cicero or poems of Catullus, had not been 'lost' to Europe in any absolute sense: they were simply lying discarded in great libraries like the monastic library of St-Gallen, since they served no purpose for the intellectual exercises favoured in the Middle Ages. The hunters for the most ancient, most primitive text of a cherished author grew more skilful as time passed. Enthusiasts for antique texts developed methods of discerning what might be the oldest and most authentic reading. Texts were compared with texts; attempts were made (often dramatically mistaken) to ascertain the true age of the most ancient manuscripts available. Scribes began to imitate the style of the scripts in what were thought to be late antique manuscripts. As a consequence there revived in fifteenth-century Europe the 'Roman' style of writing, which in reality was a form of Carolingian minuscule dating from a previous classical revival in the court of Charlemagne. The type in which this book is printed derives directly from that change in fashion.

So an ancient text was, for the rhetoricians, grammarians and stylists of the fifteenth century, something to be restored and conserved in its entirety and integrity, to be understood for its style as much as its contents. Such conscious antiquarian interest in text became the hallmark of what would become called 'good letters' or the 'humanist' movement. 'Humanist' was originally a somewhat minimalist term, to denote someone who taught good grammar: it came to be freighted with greater significance as the movement gained momentum, encompassing attitudes to ethics, politics and the right way to live. Knowledge of classical literature in Latin could not fail to stimulate curiosity about the

EUAN CAMERON

Greek language and literature, from which so much of ancient Roman culture drew its models and its inspiration. While knowledge of Greek had never entirely disappeared from the medieval West, it had become an exceptional ability rather than something routine. From the early fifteenth century, scholars of Greek, often of Byzantine origins, began to take formal or informal teaching positions in Western Europe, spreading knowledge of Greek where they went, in Italy, then in France and elsewhere through their pupils and their writings.<sup>3</sup> The initial impulse for learning Greek in the West was literary, rather than biblical or patristic. By the early sixteenth century François Rabelais's *Gargantua* could claim, with slight exaggeration, that it was a disgrace to call oneself learned without a knowledge of Greek.<sup>4</sup> Two consequences followed. First, since the pressure to learn Greek came initially from the students of literature and rhetoric, theologians had no direct interest in guiding, let alone restraining this development. Secondly, the learned of Europe, but not necessarily the theologically learned at first, acquired competence in one of the ancient biblical languages. As Jill Kraye demonstrates in her chapter below, it proved an irresistible temptation for literary scholars such as Lorenzo Valla and Giannozzo Manetti to deploy their Greek scholarship in the service of what became known as 'sacred philology'. Coincidentally, such scholars confronted the fact that the New Testament was written in a Greek stylistically far inferior to that of the great orators or historians of ancient Greece.

The ripples of the new philology did not of course stop at Greek. Classical scholars, admittedly in much smaller numbers, sought out knowledge of Hebrew, and in due course Arabic and other more exotic languages.<sup>5</sup> An interesting piece of evidence reflects this enthusiasm for exotic philology in Renaissance literature. One of the most mannered and self-indulgent cultural products of the high Renaissance, the fantasy novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, first published in 1499, featured an illustration of three doorways representing three life choices, each labelled in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic.<sup>6</sup> Here, however, the implications of learning new (but very old) languages could

<sup>3</sup> See Jill Kraye's Chapter 2 herein.

<sup>4</sup> See Gargantua's letter to Pantagruel in *Pantagruel* (1532): 'Maintenant toutes disciplines sont restituées, les langues instaurées: grecque, sans laquelle c'est honte que une personne se die sçavant, hébraïque, caldaïque, latine ... J'entens et veulx que tu aprenes les langues parfaitement. Premierement la grecque comme le veult Quintilian, secondement, la latine, et puis l'hébraïque pour les saintes lettres, et la chaldaïque et arabique pareillement.' François Rabelais, *Les Cinq livres de F. Rabelais*, 2 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1906), vol. 1, pp. 163–4.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 1 herein.

<sup>6</sup> [Francesco Colonna], *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, ed. and trans. Joscelyn Godwin (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 135.

## Introduction

not fail to engage the attention of religious professionals. Almost inevitably, learning the sacred languages of Judaism and Islam meant working either with believers or with converts from those faiths. Those Christians who did not have roots in either of those traditions but who nevertheless learned Hebrew found themselves, initially at least, somewhat suspect in the eyes of the over-sensitively orthodox. Over the preservation of post-biblical Hebrew literature the most notorious cause célèbre of early sixteenth-century scholarship broke out, the Reuchlin–Pfefferkorn affair of the 1510s. That recondite dispute over the preservation of Hebrew talmudic and other literature, little understood by most observers at the time, allowed those who so wished to caricature traditional, Latin-only theologians as immoral and lazy obscurantists. Trivialised as many responses to the episode may have been, the Reuchlin affair had a discernible impact on what followed in the Western European church. Those shortly to be entrusted with the defence of orthodoxy found themselves figures of ridicule.

The revival of classical and ancient languages in the early modern period was always a work in progress. Given the continuing estrangement of Eastern and Western churches, and worsening relations between Christianity and Judaism in most of Europe in the sixteenth century, Christian scholars had to establish their own traditions of linguistic teaching and textual as well as literary scholarship. There was much to learn, and it took longer than the period covered by this book. The early propaganda for Renaissance ‘sacred philology’ sometimes betrayed an overly optimistic view of the challenges ahead.

## The fracturing of Western Christendom

One challenge could neither have been foreseen nor prepared for. From the early 1520s Western Christianity began to break into fragments to a degree and in a way not seen before. There had been schisms before, where the polity of the church was divided between rival claimants for power. There had been religious disagreement and dissent, more easily identified once the concept of ‘heresy’ acquired a legal and theological definition from the early thirteenth century onwards. Calls for ‘reform’, usually meaning a greater conformity between the ideals and the performance of ecclesiastics, had been made repeatedly through the Middle Ages. However, through all these conflicts two assumptions about the medieval church had persisted despite challenges and criticism. It was believed that the places, the people and the things of Christian worship, above all the sacraments and the material around them, were holy, set apart and special. Secondly, the way for human beings

EUAN CAMERON

to overcome their sinful and creaturely natures was to acquire a transferable quality called ‘grace’, which could be increased by regular contact with the holy. The religious life of medieval Christians was largely built around the winning of grace through participation in the holiness channelled and purveyed through the Catholic Church.

In 1500 there was no sign that so fundamental a way of thinking about the Christian religion would change radically across much of Europe in the coming decades. Yet so it proved. No glib summary can do justice to the complexity of the story. One part of the story revolves around the spiritual and theological struggles of Martin Luther (1483–1546). Like many another serious monastic, he found himself oppressed by a sense of sinfulness, and questioned whether all the religious acts that he carried out could possibly make up for his fundamental deficiencies. Unlike others affected by the familiar monastic disease known as ‘scruples’, he responded by thinking through the problem theologically. He did so in passionate engagement with the texts of Scripture that he expounded in the classroom, as a newly minted professor of theology in the new university of Wittenberg. Luther, as he reflected on the process in later life, told how he had resolved his doubts through some very bold and creative exegesis of biblical texts. He decided that the ‘righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel’ (Romans 1:16–17) could not mean what conventional exegesis said that it meant, the ‘justice’ of the just God who punished sinners: or else no one could be saved.<sup>7</sup> Rather, he concluded that ‘righteousness of God’ meant what he called the ‘passive righteousness’, the acquittal, the ‘state of being judged to be guiltless’ which belonged properly only to Christ, but which God offered to human beings as a gift for Christ’s sake. ‘Righteousness of God’ was, he claimed, a phrase like others in Scripture, where ‘the work of God ... is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God’.<sup>8</sup> The ‘righteousness of God’ was the righteousness with which God makes righteous those who are not essentially righteous at all. That was what the prophet Habakkuk had meant when he had written ‘the righteous person shall live by his faith’.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The words ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ are both expressed by the Latin *iustitia*, so the term was ambiguous and susceptible of diverse interpretations.

<sup>8</sup> Luther offered these reflections in the preface to the 1545 edition of his collected works, the so-called ‘autobiographical fragment’: see *LW*, vol. xxxiv, pp. 323–38, based on *WA*, vol. lrv, pp. 179–87.

<sup>9</sup> Habakkuk 2:4: the Vulgate reads ‘iustus autem in fide sua vivet’.



## Introduction

This bold and highly creative piece of exegesis might have remained merely a spiritual solution to a personal dilemma, but for a whole set of coincident factors, and Luther's own genius as a theological expositor and publicist. The theological implication was this: if righteousness was something offered by God, despite the intrinsic unworthiness of the human recipient, then all the religious acts done to acquire 'grace' were not just insufficient but radically misguided. Human beings were rushing around to try to make themselves holy through religious exercises, when God neither asked nor required such things of them. Theologians had for centuries been asking 'How can human beings become holy enough to be saved?': it now appeared that they had been asking quite the wrong question. Human beings were saved despite their radically insufficient holiness.

It is by no means easy to see how and why this interpretation gained so much traction in sixteenth-century Europe. For Luther it remained a doctrine of comfort, suited to a former monastic tormented by his sense of unworthiness. For others, almost certainly, it resonated with philosophical doubts about the church's claims to purvey its material 'stuff' for the good of souls. There is no doubt that the Renaissance provoked in many religious people a yearning for the spiritual above and beyond the material. The idea that contact with 'holy' physical objects could make anyone more inwardly holy had taken a beating from some Neo-Platonising humanists, before the Reformation theologians assaulted it further. While Luther himself resisted philosophising in matters of faith, others, from Erasmus to the theologians of Zurich, were not so restrained.

A furious row broke out from 1517 onwards, which crystallised the abstract theology around a specific practice, and brought these issues to a level of public perception and attention that they might otherwise never have gained. Luther issued a strident but, in terms of its content, quite conservative protest against the issuing of 'indulgences' in the neighbouring province of Mainz. These indulgences traditionally relieved living penitents of the burden of penitential exercises imposed since their last confession. However, by this stage they were also being advertised as available to assist the souls of the departed from purgatory to heaven. Officially, they did not do this with quite the same certainty as they could assist the living; but that subtlety was lost on the preachers who advertised them. Those who marketed them engaged in a fairly transparent effort to raise money for various ecclesiastical causes. Luther argued that the way these indulgences were being marketed posed a danger to souls: those who purchased them, in search of an easy way to salvation for themselves or their loved ones, would almost certainly not gain what they hoped. Despite

EUAN CAMERON

the complexity of the reformer's arguments, the notion that the clergy was exploiting the people with spurious and costly token services caught the imagination of a sceptical public. The clumsy efforts of the hierarchy to silence or suppress Luther's views made him a popular hero, while his highly effective pamphleteering won him ever greater celebrity. From the early 1520s onwards the prestige of the old church suffered irretrievable reverses across much of northern Europe. A new understanding of the role of the church itself, based on the theological principles of the Reformation, undergirded drastic changes in the public practice of Christianity. New statements of belief were adopted. New, simpler and less burdensome forms of worship took the place of the old order. The clergy ceased to be a legally separate caste of celibates protected by walls of privilege, and became married citizens. The reformed 'churches' were distinct local polities: they were administered by the lay community, directly or indirectly, even where the church remained autonomous and was not subsumed in civil government.

This seismic shift in religious belief and practice both depended upon and profoundly affected the use of Scripture. Previously, laypeople had been expected obediently and munificently to carry out the religious acts and purchase the religious services provided by their clergy. Now they were called to a new form of religious life, which rested first of all on understanding and accepting the grace promised in the gospel. They were expected to listen, read and learn the contents of their faith. This shift from ritual acts to learning texts changed the relationship between people and the Bible, though in a subtle way. Laypeople were encouraged to have the Bible in their own language, and to learn to read it: men and women and children alike found this new expectation thrust upon them. That in turn meant that a whole new generation of translations had to be written, which did not (as the previous vernacular translations had done) presuppose familiarity with the Vulgate Latin version as a starting-point. Especially in the early days, the rhetoric was sometimes heard that people should read Scripture for themselves, and make their own choices from their reading. In practice that option barely survived the mid-1520s in those reformed churches that became formally established institutions. The Word was not so transparent in its meaning that people might not discover the wrong things if left to themselves. Indeed, many of the translations themselves roused controversy, since in a climate of disputed interpretations the choice of a single word could make a great difference. Instead of a free-for-all based on reading a bare or putatively neutral text, the Reformation provoked the writing of a vast corpus of explanatory literature, much of which is discussed in the following chapters. Confessions of faith and catechisms distilled the key