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978-0-521-87103-7 - The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant
and Catholic Piety, 1500-1648

Bridget Heal

Excerpt

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Introduction

On the eve of the Reformation the Virgin Mary was, without doubt, the most frequently depicted, described and invoked saint in Germany. The proliferation of Marian images and devotional practices that occurred during the late Middle Ages testified to the deep attachment that people felt for the Mother of God. By 1500 most German churches had at least one altar dedicated to Mary and some, such as the parish church of St Laurentz in Cologne, had two or three.¹ Many of these Marian altars were adorned with splendid carved or painted retables showing scenes from the life of the Virgin, and some also bore richly decorated sculptures of the Virgin and Child. Mary also featured on façade sculpture, on stained-glass windows and on epitaphs. Small-scale paintings, mass-produced prints and cheap rosaries enabled the faithful to continue their Marian devotions outside the sacred confines of the church. Seven feast days commemorating the key events of Mary's life were observed with great solemnity: work stopped and people attended mass and heard sermons extolling Mary's virtues. Candles blessed on the feast day of the Purification and herbs blessed on the Assumption were valued by the populace not only for their spiritual significance but also for their alleged apotropaic power. Numerous other devotional practices also solicited Mary's aid and intercession. Through endowing Marian antiphons, through travelling to Marian pilgrimage shrines, through joining Marian confraternities and through reciting the rosary, both the clergy and the laity appealed to the mercy and authority of the Mother of God.

In 1500 a visitor to any German town or city would therefore have encountered numerous manifestations of Marian piety. While the importance of particular devotional practices varied from place to place, the invocation of Mary through images and rituals was a universal phenomenon. By the mid

¹ Bridget Heal, 'A woman like any other? Images of the Virgin Mary and Marian devotion in Nuremberg, Augsburg and Cologne, c.1500–1600', unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2001, pp. 91–2.

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seventeenth century, the end of the period covered by this book, after the turmoil of the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and Thirty Years War, the situation was very different. Given the evangelical reformers' condemnation of Mary's cult, we might expect to find that all Protestant churches had been cleansed of images and liturgy honouring the Virgin. The reality, however, was much more complex. A visitor to a Protestant church in the biconfessional city of Augsburg in southern Germany would indeed have seen few, if any, Marian images. In the church of St Anna, for example, which was a Lutheran stronghold, the only Marian images on display between the period of the Reformation and the late seventeenth century were a roof boss of the Virgin and Child and an organ wing painted with the Assumption. Both survived only because they were located in a chapel belonging to the city's most powerful Catholic family, the Fuggers. In Protestant Augsburg, moreover, the only remnant of the rich Marian liturgy of the pre-Reformation period was the feast day of the Annunciation, which was interpreted as a festival of Christ. Moving 130 kilometres north to the Franconian city of Nuremberg, however, the same visitor would have encountered numerous Marian survivals, despite this city's consistent allegiance to the Reformation cause. Nuremberg's churches were still filled with images, many of them Marian, a fact that certainly surprised some early modern observers.² Images of the Virgin also continued to adorn the city's streets and homes, Nuremberg's population still celebrated three Marian feast days and blasphemy against the Virgin remained a punishable offence.

Throughout Catholic Germany Mary was, of course, still venerated and invoked, as she had been in the pre-Reformation period. But just as a seventeenth-century traveller would have noticed differences between the Marian imagery and liturgy of Protestant Nuremberg and that of Protestant Augsburg, so he would also have seen that Catholic devotion to the Virgin was far from homogeneous. For a paradigm of Counter-Reformation Marian piety he had only to look to Augsburg's Catholic cult. In Catholic Augsburg, as in nearby Bavaria, Marian feast days were observed with great solemnity, public processions invoked Mary using the Litany of Loreto, pilgrimage to recently restored and newly constructed Marian shrines flourished, and many people joined the Jesuits' Marian sodalities. By 1629 most of the city's Catholic churches had at least one new Marian altarpiece that used the dramatic and visually engaging compositions characteristic of the baroque to depict Mary's exalted status and power. A visitor to Catholic Cologne, by contrast, would have encountered numerous traditional manifestations of Marian piety. Cologne's churches were still filled with late medieval images, and pre-Reformation devotional practices such as the clothing of statues and the holding of elaborate processions with numerous images persisted despite the objections of reforming clergy. During

² See chapter 2, p. 108.

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the seventeenth century distinctively Counter-Reformation expressions of Marian piety could certainly be found in Cologne, but there, unlike in Augsburg, Jesuit sodalities and baroque altarpieces never entirely displaced more traditional forms of Marian veneration.

This diversity of Marian devotional practice demonstrates that we need to eschew generalizations when considering the ways in which the Reformation and Counter-Reformation transformed the traditional cult of the Virgin. There has been a widespread assumption that the Virgin Mary disappeared from Protestant devotional life, and became, during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a weapon in the Counter-Reformation's campaign of reconquest. This assumption originates in part in the polemical writings of the Protestant reformers. As Jaroslav Pelikan writes, 'the most obvious characteristic of the picture of Mary in the Protestant Reformation was its critique and rejection of what it took to be the excesses of medieval devotion and teaching'.³ For the evangelicals Christ was the only mediator between man and God. Luther described the invocation of Mary as 'abominable idolatry', and more radical reformers expressed their disapproval by destroying Marian images and shrines.⁴ Given this polemic, it is perhaps not surprising that Hans Düfel, in his 1968 study of Luther's teaching on Mary, asked 'do not Marian veneration and Protestantism mutually exclude one another?'⁵

Our picture of Marian veneration in Catholic Germany, on the other hand, has been coloured by studies of the Counter-Reformation cults promulgated by the ruling dynasties of Bavaria and Austria, the Wittelsbachs and Habsburgs. Under Duke Maximilian I of Bavaria, devotion to Mary became a state programme. Maximilian promoted Marian pilgrimages, introduced new Marian feast days and required that all his subjects must own a rosary. During the Thirty Years War he invoked Mary as the champion of the Catholic cause. His army fought under banners depicting the Virgin, and the great Catholic victory at the Battle of the White Mountain (1620) was attributed to her intercession.⁶ For the Habsburgs too, Mary served as a symbol of Catholic renewal and reconquest. Anna Coreth's 1982 study demonstrated that under Emperors Ferdinand II and Ferdinand III devotion to the Virgin became a key element of the 'dynastic political myth' that

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: her place in the history of culture* (New Haven and London, 1996), p. 153.

⁴ *WA*, vol. 52, p. 689 (*Hauspostille*, 1544). On the destruction of Marian shrines see Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Mary and sixteenth-century Protestants', in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson, *Studies in Church History* 39 (Woodbridge and Rochester, 2004), p. 198.

⁵ Hans Düfel, *Luthers Stellung zur Marienverehrung* (Göttingen, 1968), p. 26 n. 33.

⁶ On Maximilian's Marian veneration see Peter Bernhard Steiner, 'Der gottselige Fürst und die Konfessionalisierung Altbayerns', in *Um Glauben und Reich: Kurfürst Maximilian I.*, ed. Hubert Glaser (Munich, 1980) and Andreas Kraus, *Maximilian I. Bayerns großer Kurfürst* (Graz etc., 1990).

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ascribed faith and Christian merit to Austria's ruling house.⁷ The Wittelsbachs' and Habsburgs' militant use of Mary, especially during the era of the Thirty Years War, has encouraged historians to see a significant break between the Marian piety of the late Middle Ages and that of the early modern period. Johannes Burckhardt writes, for example, of the 'selective' reconstruction of Mary's cult in the aftermath of the Reformation that exalted the Virgin as Queen of Heaven, as patron of Catholic dynasties and as military helper.⁸

On the Protestant side, this bipolar model has been modified somewhat by works of historical theology that demonstrate Mary's continued significance for the leading evangelical reformers.⁹ As Pelikan points out, we should not emphasize the negative aspects of Reformation Mariology 'at the expense of the positive place the Protestant reformers assigned to her in their theology'.¹⁰ Luther's writings provide the clearest evidence of Mary's abiding importance. In his *Commentary on the Magnificat*, for example, which was published in 1521, he asserted that Mary could reasonably be called 'Queen of Heaven', and even sought her intercession.¹¹ Such statements enabled Protestant scholars writing during the middle of the twentieth century to claim Luther for the ecumenical cause. In her 1952 history of Protestant Marianism Reintraud Schimmelpfennig argued, for example, that Luther's Marian piety was as strong and as warm as that of the medieval venerated of the Virgin.¹² In 1962 Walter Tappolet produced an anthology of statements about Mary drawn from the writings of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Bullinger. The title of this anthology, *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren* [The Marian Praise of the Reformers], suggests that Tappolet, like Schimmelpfennig, was motivated by an ecumenical desire to develop some Marian devotion within twentieth-century Protestantism. Indeed, he explicitly stated that his collection was necessary because of 'the present situation of the churches'.¹³

While Tappolet's source collection is still of value, Schimmelpfennig's assertion that Luther venerated Mary to the same extent as his late medieval predecessors does not stand up to scrutiny. Already in 1968 Hans Düfel provided a more balanced account of Luther's attitude towards Mary, pointing out that

⁷ Anna Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca: österreichische Frömmigkeit im Barock*, 2nd edn, Schriftenreihe des Instituts für Österreichkunde (Munich, 1982); R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 1979), p. 73.

⁸ Johannes Burckhardt, *Das Reformationsjahrhundert: deutsche Geschichte zwischen Medienrevolution und Institutionenbildung, 1517–1617* (Stuttgart, 2002), p. 109.

⁹ For a useful survey of the writing on this topic see Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: changing images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran sermons of the sixteenth century*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford and New York, 2004), pp. 6–11.

¹⁰ Pelikan, *Mary*, p. 157.

¹¹ WA, vol. 7, pp. 573, 601.

¹² Reintraud Schimmelpfennig, *Die Geschichte der Marienverehrung im deutschen Protestantismus* (Paderborn, 1952), p. 12.

¹³ Walter Tappolet, ed., *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren* (Tübingen, 1962), p. 5.

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the Wittenberg reformer condemned the excesses of Mary's cult and invoked her primarily as an example of grace and faith.¹⁴ Writing in 1994, Heiko Oberman reiterated that Luther's warm praise of Mary was based not on a Catholic notion of her own merit but rather on an evangelical view of her privileged status as a recipient of God's grace.¹⁵ It is generally acknowledged that the other mainstream reformers were less vocal in their praise of Mary: more than half of Tappolet's anthology, for example, is dedicated to the writings of Luther alone. But Oberman and others have pointed out that Zwingli and Calvin also continued to accord her respect. For Zwingli, as for Luther, Mary was a model of grace and faith, as well as a witness who taught Christians how to follow God.¹⁶ Calvin's visceral hatred of idolatry caused him to be much harsher in his condemnation of all remnants of medieval Marian devotion, but even he invoked Mary as a model of faith, and argued that because God had granted her honour we should do the same.¹⁷

Most recently Diarmaid MacCulloch has highlighted the ambiguous nature of the reformers' position with regard to Mary. On the one hand, they sought to demolish Mary's cult and to eradicate idolatrous devotions such as pilgrimage to the Fair Virgin at Regensburg. On the other, the threat of radical Protestantism led them to defend certain Marian teachings despite their non-scriptural origins.¹⁸ Both MacCulloch's article and Beth Kreitzer's book, *Reforming Mary: changing images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran sermons of the sixteenth century* (2004), also assess the historical evolution of Protestant attitudes towards the Virgin. MacCulloch suggests that after the early stages of the Reformation there was a 'general Protestant silence' about Mary. In England at least this silence was not broken until the seventeenth century. Kreitzer also observes a turning point around the middle of the sixteenth century: although Luther and his colleagues spoke warmly of the Virgin, later preachers were 'much more willing to criticize Mary and to suggest that she erred, or even sinned, in some of her behaviour'.¹⁹ Both authors suggest that this shift in attitude was in part at least a response to the Tridentine church's aggressive promotion of the cult of the Virgin.

¹⁴ Düfel, *Luthers Stellung*. Düfel concluded that because Luther had gradually developed into a 'Mariological minimalist' (p. 250), Marian veneration had no place in the twentieth-century Lutheran Church. For another discussion of the evolution of Protestant attitudes towards Mary see Stephan Beissel, *Geschichte der Verehrung Marias im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1910), pp. 100–11.

¹⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, 'The Virgin Mary in evangelical perspective', in *The Impact of the Reformation*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 241.

¹⁶ Emidio Campi, *Zwingli und Maria: eine reformationsgeschichtliche Studie* (Zurich, 1997).

¹⁷ Oberman, 'The Virgin Mary in evangelical perspective', p. 244; Peter Meinhold, 'Die Marienverehrung im Verständnis der Reformatoren des 16. Jahrhunderts', *Saeculum* 32 (1981), 56 and MacCulloch, 'Mary and sixteenth-century Protestants', pp. 203–4.

¹⁸ MacCulloch, 'Mary and sixteenth-century Protestants', p. 213.

¹⁹ Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, p. 24.

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While studies based on the writings of the reformers enable us to reconstruct changes in the way that Mary was described by literate male clerics, we should be careful not to separate theology from piety, from religious devotion expressed in the form of ritual duties and observances. Piety was articulated through texts – sermons, hymns and prayers – but also through the religious practices of individuals and groups, from liturgy and pilgrimage to the donation and veneration of images.²⁰ As Scott Dixon observes, in early modern Europe most people experienced religion not in terms of ‘abstract doctrine’, but rather ‘in the practical realities of ritual and custom’.²¹ In 1939 Robert Lansemann published an extensive study of feast days during the era of the Reformation, in which he documented the survival of Marian liturgy using ecclesiastical ordinances.²² The extent of this survival – most Lutheran churches retained three Marian feast days and some retained as many as five – suggests that even if, as MacCulloch and Kreitzer suggest, the reformers themselves de-emphasized Mary during the second half of the sixteenth century, some Protestant congregations still honoured her on a regular basis. Similarly Robert Kolb concludes, on the basis of his study of sermons, liturgy and devotional literature, that Lutherans abandoned the veneration of saints but not their commemoration. Lutheran church calendars, for example the ones produced by Caspar Goldtwurm in 1564 and by Andreas Hohndorff in 1587, continued to list saints’ days, though they presented the saints as worthy examples of Christian piety rather than as powerful intercessors.²³ Kolb, MacCulloch and others also remark the survival of Marian imagery in some Lutheran areas, which is a central theme of this book.

On the Catholic side, the assumption that the militant Virgin invoked by the Wittelsbachs and Habsburgs typifies early modern Marianism needs to be re-examined in the light of recent studies that point to devotional diversity within the post-Tridentine church. German Catholicism has, as Marc Forster points out, often been regarded as homogeneous, in contrast with the obvious variety within the Protestant tradition.²⁴ Richard van Dülmen writes, for example, that ‘unlike the Protestant Church, the Catholic Church was universally orientated, i.e. not shaped by regions or by territorial churches’. The life of Catholics in

²⁰ For a useful discussion of the concept of piety see Hansgeorg Molitor, ‘Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter und früherer Neuzeit als historisch-methodisches Problem’, in *Festgabe für Ernst Walter Zeeden zum 60. Geburtstag am 14. Mai 1976*, ed. Horst Rabe, Hansgeorg Molitor and H.-C. Rublack, Reformationsgeschichtliche Studien und Texte, supplementary volume 2 (Münster, 1976).

²¹ C. Scott Dixon, ed., *The German Reformation: the essential readings* (Oxford, 1999), p. 27.

²² Robert Lansemann, *Die Heiligtage besonders die Marien-, Apostel-, und Engelstage in der Reformationszeit* (Göttingen, 1939). Unfortunately the only copy of Lansemann’s unpublished second volume, containing the footnotes, was destroyed during the Second World War.

²³ Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: changing perceptions of martyrdom and sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA, 1987) and Robert Kolb, ‘Festivals of the saints in late Reformation Lutheran preaching’, *The Historian: a Journal of History* 52 (1990).

²⁴ Marc Forster, ‘With and without confessionalization: varieties of early modern German Catholicism’, *Journal of Early Modern History* 1 (1997), 340.

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northern Germany, he suggests, was not substantially different from the life of Catholics in the Tirol.²⁵ This tendency to regard Catholicism as monolithic has been fostered by the confessionalization paradigm. In 1993 Wolfgang Reinhard claimed that confessionalization – the parallel processes by which distinct Lutheran, Calvinist and Catholic ideologies and institutions were brought into existence – produced a new type of Catholic Church. The Catholicism created during confessionalization was, according to Reinhard, ‘something totally different to the one church of the Middle Ages’. Through propaganda and censorship, through education and social discipline and through the use of rituals such as Marian pilgrimage, Catholic authorities created a new sense of Catholic confessional identity.²⁶

Walter Ziegler and others have pointed out, however, that although in some Catholic areas, most notably Bavaria, church and state did, as Reinhard suggests, work together to enforce religious uniformity and to promote specific types of piety from the mid sixteenth century onwards, elsewhere ‘confessionalization’ occurred at a much slower pace. In the archbishopric of Cologne, for example, there were few significant reform initiatives and as a result Catholicism in the Rhineland retained its ‘pre-confessional’ character for many years.²⁷ Ziegler’s proposal of two types of Catholic reform – early starting and Roman, as in Bavaria, or late starting and less Roman, as in Cologne – is too schematic, but his recognition that there was diversity within Catholicism as well as within Protestantism is important. Marc Forster’s work confirms this, and does much more to elucidate the nature of early modern Catholic piety. In opposition to proponents of the confessionalization thesis, who tend to see religious identity as imposed from above by secular and ecclesiastical authorities, Forster argues that after 1650 local populations played a crucial role in shaping baroque piety. Even before 1650, however, Catholic devotion was far from uniform. The Tridentine reforms and the activities of the Jesuits helped to create a distinct Catholic culture amongst some of Germany’s elite, but were not received equally well everywhere. We need to recognize, Forster suggests, that ‘institutional reforms, new spiritual movements, and new forms of religious expression were filtered through local institutions and religious traditions as they spread’.²⁸ The result

²⁵ Richard van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 3: *Religion, Magie, Aufklärung 16.–18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1994), p. 59.

²⁶ Wolfgang Reinhard, ‘Was ist katholische Konfessionalisierung?’, in *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung: wissenschaftliches Symposium der Gesellschaft zur Herausgabe des Corpus Catholicorum und des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 1993*, ed. Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling (Gütersloh, 1995), especially p. 437.

²⁷ Walter Ziegler, ‘Typen der Konfessionalisierung in katholischen Territorien Deutschlands’, in *Die katholische Konfessionalisierung*, ed. Reinhard and Schilling, p. 406.

²⁸ Forster, ‘With and without confessionalization’, 318. See also Marc Forster, *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque: religious identity in southwest Germany, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 2001).

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was a multiplicity of religious styles, manifested not only in organizational variation but also, as this book will show, in differences in religious practice.

We should therefore not expect to find either that Mary disappeared entirely from Protestant devotional life or that the Jesuits succeeded in imposing their own form of the cult of the Virgin throughout Catholic Germany. In order to provide a fully nuanced account of the nature and functions of Marian devotion we need to abandon this crude, bipolar model, and look beyond generalized theology and polemic to the realities of daily life and worship within specific historical contexts. While doctrinal debates are, of course, key to understanding Mary's significance, we need to acknowledge that for the majority of the population of early modern Germany transformations in devotional practice were probably of more immediate import. In an age of widespread illiteracy, images, feast days and rituals such as pilgrimage had traditionally been the most obvious manifestations of Marian piety. The fate of these images and rituals – whether they were appropriated or destroyed by Protestants and preserved or replaced by Catholics – therefore provides the historian with an excellent means of assessing how people actually experienced and understood changes in Marian teaching.

The value of studying ritual has been widely recognized by early modern historians. An extensive literature on Marian pilgrimage, for example, testifies to the perceived importance of this particular rite, while Susan Karant-Nunn has explored the reordering of 'cultic observances' that occurred at the Reformation.²⁹ Such studies are vital to our understanding of popular culture, for, as Ed Muir has observed, 'unsophisticated Protestants and untutored Catholics identified themselves more by the rituals they observed than by the dogmas they asserted'.³⁰ On the visual side, historians of iconoclasm have highlighted the extent to which transformations in the environment of worship determined people's experiences of religious change. In her study of English iconoclasm Margaret Aston observed that 'the fabric of worship, its setting, circumstance and manner . . . was more striking, more unavoidably perceptible to most worshippers than specific or subtle alterations in the content of belief'.³¹ It was,

²⁹ On Marian pilgrimage see, for example, Ludwig Hütl, *Marianische Wallfahrten im süddeutsch-österreichischen Raum*, Kölner Veröffentlichungen zur Religionsgeschichte 6 (Cologne and Vienna, 1985); Werner Freitag, *Volks- und Elitenfrömmigkeit in der frühen Neuzeit: Marienwallfahrten im Fürstbistum Münster* (Paderborn, 1991); Bayerisches Nationalmuseum and Adalbert Stifter Verein, *Wallfahrt kennt keine Grenzen: Ausstellung im Bayerischen Nationalmuseum, München, 28. Juni bis 7. Oktober 1984* (Munich, 1984). Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: an interpretation of early modern Germany* (London and New York, 1997), p. 4.

³⁰ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge, 1997), p. 181.

³¹ Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, vol. 1: *Laws against Images* (Oxford, 1988), p. 12. On iconoclasm see also Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basle* (Cambridge, 1995); Cecile Dupeux, Peter Jezler and Jean Wirth, eds., *Bildersturm: Wahnsinn oder Gottes Wille?* (Munich, 2000); and P. Blicke et al., eds., *Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder*, Beihefte der Historischen Zeitschrift 33 (Munich, 2002).

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however, Bob Scribner who did more than any other scholar to incorporate the evidence of the images themselves into the story of religious reform. Scribner developed the concept of the ‘sacramental gaze’, an act of seeing that could produce sanctification and healing, in order to explain the role of the visual in late medieval devotion.³² Despite the Reformation critique of the veneration of images, their importance persisted into the sixteenth century, as his 1981 monograph, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation* demonstrated. Protestantism had traditionally, of course, been seen as the religion of the word, but the first generation of Lutheran reformers recognized the didactic value of images and, Scribner argued, assigned them an important role in communicating religious reform.³³

It is one thing to decode, as Scribner masterfully did in *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, images’ iconography and explain their visual allusions. It is another, as Scribner himself acknowledged, to assess the impact that they had on their viewers.³⁴ The conviction that Lutheranism, in its attitude towards images and liturgy, made too many concessions to traditional religion was, of course, voiced first of all by sixteenth-century Reformed Protestants. Reformation historians have tended, with some justification, to follow these Reformed Protestants in regarding the retention of visible elements of the saints’ cults – altars, altar-pieces, statues and paintings – as ‘Catholic survivals’, and as evidence of the Lutherans’ failure to transform traditional beliefs and practices.³⁵ But as Robert Kolb has pointed out, it is in fact very difficult to determine what impact these survivals had on evangelical congregations.³⁶ In Nuremberg’s rural hinterland, as we shall see, a few statues of the Virgin did indeed continue to attract idolatrous offerings from pilgrims.³⁷ But we need to acknowledge that unless images are peppered with inscriptions, in the manner of Lucas Cranach’s *Law and Gospel*, their meaning is always ambiguous. Placed in a new devotional context, and given a new interpretative gloss, a painting or statue of the Virgin and Child could be transformed from an object of idolatrous prayer into a proper commemoration of grace and faith.

Images’ ambiguity – the difficulty of interpreting them and of assessing their impact – explains in part, perhaps, why relatively few historical studies make

³² Robert W. Scribner, ‘Perceptions of the sacred in Germany at the end of the Middle Ages’, in *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden, 2001).

³³ For a recent discussion of this topic see Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 102–27.

³⁴ Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1994), pp. 9–10, 248–9.

³⁵ On Catholic survivals see, for example, Ernst W. Zeeden, *Katholische Überlieferungen in den lutherischen Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Münster, 1959) and Robert W. Scribner, ‘The impact of the Reformation on daily life’, in *Mensch und Objekt im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft (Vienna, 1990).

³⁶ Kolb, *For All the Saints*, p. 147.

³⁷ See also C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation and Rural Society: the parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528–1603*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History (Cambridge, 1996), p. 172.

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extensive use of visual sources. Moreover, once the historian moves beyond Scribner's 'cheap, crude and effective' woodcuts, he or she enters into the traditional domain of the art historian.³⁸ Here, the analysis of 'high art' – of painting and sculpture – requires an appreciation of style as well as of subject matter. As Michael Baxandall compellingly argued, to understand such images we need to acquire a 'period eye'. We need an awareness of the interpretative framework through which they were originally viewed, and this must include an understanding of the possible connotations of artistic style. Baxandall points, for example, to the Italianate (*Welsch*) and Germanic (*Deutsch*) styles that co-existed in sixteenth-century German sculpture, and to the negative associations that the former had for Germany's nationalist humanist historians.³⁹ In this study, the significance of style emerges in the context of Catholic images of the Virgin produced during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Augsburg, and to a lesser extent in Cologne, gothic and renaissance gave way to mannerist and early baroque. What is the historian to make of this shift? Can it legitimately be seen as a reflection of contemporary religious, social and political change? Mannerism was primarily a visual reaction to perfect forms of the renaissance rather than, as Theodore Rabb suggested, a symptom of a profound unease within European society.⁴⁰ Yet we should be aware that a patron's choice of artist, and an artist's choice of style, may have historical as well as aesthetic meaning. In early modern Augsburg, for example, confessional politics played an important part in establishing the new styles within the city, as we shall see in chapter 4.

Although it is always going to be difficult to pinpoint the meaning of images, in terms of both their subject matter and their style, historians of religion cannot afford to ignore visual evidence. Real devotion was always physically engaging – a sensual experience – whether it was conducted in a whitewashed preaching hall or in a baroque cathedral. The visual environment shaped everyone's experiences of religious worship and of religious change. Images may have been commissioned by the wealthy elite, but they were, to a much greater extent than texts, accessible to all. In an age of limited literacy few people could read, but everyone could see. Moreover, the importance of images was widely recognized by sixteenth-century commentators themselves. As Luther argued, in a sermon preached in 1533, 'without images we can neither think nor understand anything'.⁴¹ Albrecht Dürer, who echoed Luther's defence of religious

³⁸ Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, p. 5.

³⁹ Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1980), pp. 135–42. On the concept of the period eye see also Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1988). For another discussion of the meaning of artistic style see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (London, 2004), p. 226.

⁴⁰ Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1975).

⁴¹ WA, vol. 37, p. 63.