

Prologue: Prophecy

In 1523, two German professors at the university of Wittenberg published a short pamphlet about monsters. Philip Melanchthon wrote about a monster with a long, feminine body and an ass's head, Martin Luther about a deformed calf which stood upright (see Figure 0.1). The corpse of the ass-monster had surfaced in the Tiber in Rome in 1496; the calf had only recently been found in Saxony. Luther, the leading German reformer, stated that both 'gruesome figures' had been sent by God. The calf wore ragged friar's clothes and showed that God wanted monks and nuns to leave their convents in order for their souls to be saved.

Melanchthon likewise urged readers to take the curious creatures seriously. The Roman ass showed that the last days of the world had already begun. For just as an ass's head did not fit a human body, so the Pope could never be the spiritual head of the church. The head of the church was Christ alone.

The 'Pope-Ass' became an icon of Protestant propaganda. All parts of its body bore meaning. The female belly and breasts symbolised the papacy's belly, 'that is', Melanchthon explained, 'cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, students and such like whorish people and pigs, because their whole life consists of nothing but gobbling food, of drinking and of sex'. The monster's skin was like that of a fish: this symbolised the princes who clung to the papal order. The old man's head on the monster's buttocks signalled the decline of papal power and its left foot was like a griffon's because the canons grabbed all the wealth of Europe for the Pope.¹

By 1545, the Ass appeared in the first of a series of ten woodcuts issued by Luther entitled 'A True Depiction of the Papacy'.² It now sported sexy

¹ Philippus Melanchthon and Doct. Martinus Luther, *Deutung der zwo grewlichen Figuren Bapstesels zu Rom un Munckalb zu Freyberg in Meyssen funden* (Wittenberg, 1523), reprinted in *Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe [Weimar edition, hereafter *WA*], vol. XI (Weimar, 1900), pp. 357–85.

² On this series of woodcuts see R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 277–300.



Figure 0.1 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Pope-Ass*, 1520.

legs, pointed breasts and a firm body, a depiction which linked sexualised femininity and evil (see Figure 0.2). This equation of the papacy with a hybrid monster exploited the audience's fascination with and fear of



Figure 0.2 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Pope-Ass*, 1545.

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mixed categories, and a desire for clear codes of civilised male and female behaviour. Luther commented: ‘This terrible image depicts what God thinks about the papacy. Everybody who takes it to heart should be frightened.’

Through such drastic words and images, which were believed to shape powerful emotional responses such as fear, doubt and disgust, Luther and Melancthon changed the course of history. Their attacks on the corruption and hypocrisy of the institutions of the church had extraordinary results. Countless monasteries and convents were dissolved. Monks, nuns and priests were released from their vows of celibacy, and exhorted to marry and start families. Family life was encouraged as the norm for everyone. More Europeans than ever before refused to recognise the Pope as head of their church, and sought to give new moral and spiritual meaning to Christianity in their daily lives.

The reformers’ notion of Christian life was surprisingly strongly linked to a sense of the end of the world. It was integral to a conceptualisation of history which is alien to most of us nowadays. Time was marked by divine providence. Almost everything that happened was controlled by God. Hence it was a Christian’s duty to learn how to interpret signs that revealed God’s will and to understand true divine doctrine. The Antichrist – Christ’s eternal enemy – had been thrown into hell by the archangel Michael, but was to return during the last days of the world. Shockingly, Luther revealed not only that the papacy and Roman church themselves were mistaken in their views, but that they *were* the Antichrist!³ The end of the world had begun. The Antichrist and Satan were wielding their power in it with unprecedented fury.

This critique was radical, and it radically transformed Christianity. Luther’s reform movement spread from Wittenberg throughout Germany and many parts of Europe. From the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, Christians were divided into Catholics and those protesting against Catholic doctrine – so-called ‘Protestants’. Lutherans and Calvinists formed the most important Protestant confessional groups and found strong political support. Many smaller groups of believers, such as Mennonites and Quakers, established their religion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and eventually took their creed from Europe to America and other parts of the globe.

Yet Martin Luther never intended to form a new church. Like many contemporaries and most reformers after him, Luther wanted one Reformed Christian church for all. ‘Reformation’ aimed at improving

³ This theme is best explored in R. B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, 1988).

existing doctrine and institutional structures within the traditions of the early church. In addition, Luther's Reformation was about the prospect of eternal salvation. He regarded himself as a divinely sent reformer who was to prepare humanity for the end of the world. Instead, unwittingly, he helped to create a faith which for a long time in Western history has determined some of the most intimate aspects of many people's lives: whom they would marry, whom they would fight, what they thought of as good or evil.

Religious World-views

Beliefs in monsters or the Antichrist seem to have little to do with the perhaps more familiar image of Luther as a 'rational', enlightened reformer. But writing Reformation history means engaging with the mindset of people whose very notions of time, space and existence were generally different from ours. Consider that before Copernicus published his main book on the heavens in 1543, and often for much longer, Europeans imagined the earth to be at the centre of the cosmos. Maps showed Jerusalem as the centre of the world. By Luther's time people were hearing about the 'New World' discovered by Columbus. Christian cultures asserted their difference from other ethnicities, and often violently so.⁴ Thus, between 1450 and 1550 Jews were increasingly accused of murdering Christian boys and desecrating hosts. They were either integrated in such a way as to show the superiority of Christians, or were converted or banished. In Spain, Muslims had been converted since the end of the fifteenth century. During the sixteenth century all their customs were forbidden and Christian churches were imposed on their settlements. They were forcibly resettled and then banished altogether. Turks were often imagined as slaughterers of innocent Christian children and successful ruler-warriors. Western politics continually faced the problem of how to counter Ottoman advances, which made the 'Turkish danger' manifest and the end of Christianity imaginable.

Then as now Christianity gave meaning to existence by means of a mythical narrative that connected the stories of both earth and cosmos. Building on Jewish tradition, this astonishing narrative began with God's creation of the world, the living together of man and animals, the expulsion from paradise through the Fall of man, the birth of a divine son by a virgin, his life, crucifixion, ascension, and the possible prospect of a similar assumption of all dead either at the end of their lives or at the end of the world.

Luther followed Augustine in his view that Adam and Eve's original sin powerfully disabled reason and amplified desires (see Figure 0.3). Piety

⁴ Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2013).

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Figure 0.3 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*. Cranach's workshop disseminated many depictions of the Fall and original sin. Luther believed that humankind lived in the shadow of Adam's Fall from paradise and in the 'common sickness of the world'. Humans could not fundamentally improve and better themselves through good works – believers therefore completely depended on their faith in Christ and God's grace to be granted eternal life in heaven. Lutheran commentators maintained that sexual intercourse after the Fall was tainted by illicit passion, but that its sinfulness could be controlled to some extent by marriage.

could therefore only express itself through desperate belief in God's grace and was always going to be marked by a struggle with the devil, who spread error and disbelief. Marriage and work provided a Christian way of life; a spiritual path marked by poverty, good works and chastity was no longer sanctified. This different approach to how the divine could be honoured and known through everyone's struggle in everyday life constituted a momentous break, not only with medieval traditions, but with many world religions.

Time was structured by the extremes of sin and salvation; past, present and future could never be experienced as fully separate. There had been important prophecies about the future in the past. The acts of the Antichrist perhaps rendered them present already. Everyday behaviour either pleased or offended God and had consequences for one's eternal life. A host of unsettling questions ensued as a result of these views. How were sins judged? Could penalties be paid on earth? How close was the end of the world?

God revealed his truth and updated his judgements on the state of the world not just through a sole prophet and 'his church', but through the Bible, cosmic signs, such as comets, and worldly signs, such as floods, miracles and visions. These notions of divine action raised persistent debates about which human beings – popes, cardinals, saints, learned theologians or ordinary virtuous Christians – and which institutions – such as church councils or universities – were appointed to reveal God's messages.

Early modern Christianity became even more complex through its belief in mighty spiritual powers. The devil was given his power by God, but he seemed also able to counter some of God's plans. Nobody knew for sure whether certain things happened because of divine or evil intervention. Belief in demonically possessed witches rapidly spread during the sixteenth century. The persecution of witches and the learned debate about how to deal with them testify to the anxieties which ensued about the workings of evil in the world.

Early modern culture and existence therefore pondered the relationship between human action and the 'macro-cosmos' with utmost intensity and urgency. To what extent was human action autonomous and to what extent was it determined by God, evil powers, angels, or even the stars, fortune, luck and destiny? Could these forces be questioned and influenced in such a way that one knew how to act to avoid misfortune and fulfil one's wishes, or God's laws, in order to gain eternal life? John Dee, the English scholar and astrologer, conducted conversations with angels as good spirits. The Hungarian king Stephen was intrigued. Queen Elizabeth I remained sceptical.⁵

⁵ Deborah Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge, 1999).

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Along with humanism and its interest in antiquity, printed ideas and an expanded university education, the Reformation movements helped to provide yet more possible answers to these vexing issues. Many debates had been prefigured during the Middle Ages. But now they were opened more widely, led to different conclusions and resonated with contemporary social and political change.⁶ Reformers campaigned for the centrality of the Bible for faith and endorsed that sacred texts should be substantially mediated in non-classical languages, for the benefit of the majority of people, who were illiterate and only knew their own tongue. Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament in 1522 and the complete Wittenberg Bible in 1534 were landmark achievements. The idea of purgatory was abolished, being viewed as greedy invention. In major Protestant faiths this went along with the reduction in the number of sacraments from seven to two (baptism and the Eucharist) and an insistence that the Eucharist must be offered to the laity in 'both kinds' through bread and wine. Those confessing their sins were not required to enumerate individual sins; there was no concern about degrees of contrition and no penance was imposed. Preaching and communion gained a new centrality in church services alongside vernacular singing by the congregation. Ordered families began to be regarded as microcosms of the perfect state and thus given great political relevance. Convents, monasteries and confraternities were abolished to make heterosexual family life and men's superior authority the norm. The sheer size of the clergy was thus dramatically reduced. Clerical learning was controlled through university education in which the contents of learning substantially changed. As Protestantism argued that the papacy as *institution* was heretical and corrupt, it briefly empowered lay people as legitimate interpreters of the faith and then forged new church hierarchies. These continued to allow access only to men, but their social background began to matter less than their education, and scholarship systems for expanding schools and universities allowed for some social mobility even from the lower middling classes. High-ranking clergymen were no longer appointed by Rome and required to be theologians. Feast days were gradually reduced to Sundays and key holidays, while pilgrimages and processions were abolished, as were indulgences and the official sanctification of individuals. Clerical marriage became the norm. Church property was taken over by secular authorities, offering them new sources of wealth. In some areas, the power of church courts was reduced, helping to centralise secular power in the process of state formation. Religion, in

⁶ For the following passage see my 'Introduction' in Ulinka Rublack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations* (Oxford, 2016).

short, was no ‘opium of the people’ during the early modern period. Reforms had the potential to change the order of the world.

Politics

The Reformations were successful because by 1517 it seemed as though such a change was urgently needed. The papacy constituted an important political, military and territorial power and popes had little theological training (see Figure 0.4). Monasteries and bishops owned land throughout Europe, and they and the urban clergy enjoyed extensive legal rights and privileges. These were continually contested by peasants and burghers, rival noble families and rulers, and even by large sections of the clergy, who themselves campaigned for a poorer and purer life. France established a national church to assert some autonomy from papal power during the fifteenth century. Spain and Portugal similarly fought for independence from Rome, their rulers preferring to nominate their own rather than papal favourites as bishops. While the powerful French, Spanish and Portuguese monarchies had chosen to maintain some independence from Rome within a unified Catholic church, the many different political agents in the German-speaking lands could not agree to form a national church.

A simple reason why Luther’s movement found initial political support in Germany and finally led to the formation of a new church rests in the ‘polycentric’ structure of that strange political entity, the ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’. The make-up of this Empire can be sketched as follows. It mainly consisted of territories governed by a prince or by a bishop who simultaneously acted as a secular prince, and of cities which were not ruled by princes. Around 1500, several ‘free’ Imperial cities in the southern territories, like Augsburg and Nuremberg, were important centres of trade, while around 1600 the northern Hanseatic cities, such as Hamburg and Lübeck, once more grew in importance as the North Atlantic trade took off. Representatives of free Imperial cities and territorial lords decided collectively about common concerns, while the Emperor was elected and his powers negotiated by a body of princes.⁷

Since 1440, only members of the House of Habsburg had been elected as Emperors, and they turned into a strange species of ‘elected hereditary’ rulers. Their hereditary lands were mainly in Austria. German princes thus avoided electing one of their own as Emperor, who then might have

⁷ Excellent introductions in English are Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire: a Thousand Years of European History* (London, 2015); Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire, 1493–1806*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2012); Thomas A. Brady Jr., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650* (Cambridge, 2009).



Figure 0.4 Raphael, *Pope Leo X*. Luther claimed that popes were the 'Antichrist' – Satan's allies who would bring about the end of the world.

been able to extend his power over other German territories. They opted for a foreign power, and, after each voting prince had been substantially bribed, for a family whose increasingly manifold possessions seemed to guarantee financial resources and a restricted interest in German politics.