

## THE HYBRID REFORMATION

Three basic forces dominated sixteenth-century religious life. Two polarized groups, Protestant and Catholic reformers, were shaped by theological debates over the nature of the church, salvation, prayer, and other issues. These debates articulated critical, group-defining oppositions. Bystanders to Catholic–Protestant competition formed a third force. Their reactions to reformers were violent, opportunistic, hesitant, ambiguous, or serendipitous, much the way social historians have described common people in the Reformation for the last fifty years. In an ecology of three forces, hesitations and compromises were natural, not just among ordinary people but also, if more subtly, among reformers and theologians. In this volume, Christopher Ocker offers a constructive and nuanced alternative to the received understanding of the Reformation. Combining the methods of intellectual, cultural, and social history, his book demonstrates how the Reformation became a hybrid movement produced by polarized Catholic and Protestant opponents, by bystanders to religious debate, and by the hesitations and compromises made by all three groups during the religious controversy.

**Christopher Ocker** is a Professor of Medieval and Early Modern Studies in the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry at the Australian Catholic University, and Assistant Provost, Interim Dean, and Professor of the History of Christianity at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, University of Redlands. He is the author of *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation*, *Church Robbers and Reformers in Germany, 1525–1547*, and *Luther, Conflict, and Christendom: Reformation Europe and Christianity in the West*.

THE HYBRID  
REFORMATION  
*A Social, Cultural, and  
Intellectual History of  
Contending Forces*

CHRISTOPHER OCKER  
*Australian Catholic University and the  
University of Redlands*



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*Cover image: Portrait of a man with a black cap in his hand. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.*

*Photo by Elke Estel/Hans-Peter Klut.*

*This strikingly individual, anonymous portrait has been variously ascribed over the years to several German Renaissance painters, for example, Hans Holbein the Younger, Johann Asper, Hans Burgkmair, Wolf Huber, and most recently the Nuremberg artist Bartel Beham. So, too, has the subject of the painting been called the Augsburg master weaver Martin Weiss, Martin Luther, Martin Luther's father, and simply, most confidently, an anonymous man. If a work of Bartel Beham, it could reflect the sensibility of an "Anabaptist" such as Hans Denck, with whom Beham was associated about the time of the portrait's creation. The figure's anonymity, individuality, enigmatic expression, and restrained suggestion of wealth and power (the mere hint of a fur collar, the gathered folds of a costly robe, and ruffled sleeves that are mostly hidden) suggest a person of multiple destinies and shifting identity, with perhaps a need or desire to maintain that position as best as he could (Maaz 2014, 50–52; Haag et al. 2011, 321; Müller et al. 2011, 8–12).*

*For my father, who taught me how to bind a book,  
among other things*

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## Preface

**T**HIS BOOK is a collection of essays framed by a question. How did hesitation, equivocation, compromise, and serendipity give shape to a Reformation driven by a handful of determined people?

In a previous book, I approached the Reformation as an unresolved conflict around Martin Luther, driven more by the mutating force of disagreement than by the designs of individuals.<sup>1</sup> In this book, I am searching for a way to recognize the constructive force of the Reformation's central figures – reformers, counter-reformers, and their supporters – in the light of more diffused expressions of human autonomy among, broadly speaking, ordinary people. By ordinary people I mean those who were subjected to religious and political authorities, but exercised their freedom in spite of or against oppressive limitations. Their variety, willfulness, and ingenuity are what keep me from approaching the Reformation as a simple matter of the reception of reforming ideas and practices, top-down or center to periphery. And yet I am not really describing a Reformation “from below.” Like some of the people at the center of this book, I resist choosing one vantage point over the other – theologian over layperson, common men and women over magistrates, scholars, and elites. I am looking for the comprehensive, interconnected, status-crossing mean created by religion.

In the story I am trying to tell, three basic forces dominated sixteenth-century religious life. There were the two polarizing forces of Protestant and Catholic reformers and counter-reformers, whose positions were shaped by their juxtaposed viewpoints on the church (e.g., pope or no pope), salvation (e.g., by means of good works or not), prayer (e.g., benefiting the dead or not), and so forth. In this polarization, theology and theologians were essential because they articulated and justified vital, group-defining oppositions, in the terms of a science – theology – indigenous to that time and place. A third force was typical of bystanders to Catholic–Protestant competition, my ordinary people, whose reactions to reformers were violent, opportunistic, hesitant, ambiguous, or serendipitous, much the way social historians have been describing common people in the Reformation for the last fifty years.

A third force was typical of bystanders, but not exclusive to them. It can also be detected in theologians. Detecting that third force involves a presupposition about that world and those many intellectuals in it who applied themselves to religious questions. I presuppose society as the tableau in which theologians must be understood: not as a scene painted by their practiced minds but as the ecology represented by the scene depicted by practiced minds. Society was an environment in which reformers participated. It was not the image of a society that they painted. This self-evident observation is violated every time a social

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ocker, *Luther, Conflict, and Christendom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).



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doctrine is taken as a reflection of social order, and not an attempt by a certain professional class to find or create order in a far more dynamic system. In my view, hesitations and compromises were natural to this ecology, especially among ordinary people, but also, if more subtly, among reformers and among theologians. I hope to show that we can detect “third forces” in the entire gamut of hesitations about, and accommodations within, the emerging confessional identities that appeared in the sixteenth century, not only among reluctant bystanders, not only in the extreme claims of the resolutely heterodox, but also in the thinking of partisan reformers themselves. In this manner, the Reformation becomes a hybrid movement produced by all three forces, a binary of Catholic and Protestant self-definition and the hesitations and compromises that accompanied religious controversy. My examples are mostly from the Holy Roman Empire, whose medieval and early modern history I know best, where the Reformation began, and whose reformers had remained a constant touchstone of Protestant and, by way of contrast, Catholic self-understanding ever since the sixteenth century. Although the bulk of the Holy Roman Empire comprised German-speaking lands, it is good to remember that it included Francophone states, such as Geneva, whose bishop was a prince of the Empire, and Geneva’s neighbors the duchies of Savoy and Burgundy, and polyglottal regions in the Empire’s Dutch northwest and Slavic and Hungarian east. As a confederation of princes and cities, thick cultural borderlands rimmed the Empire’s political patchwork.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I looks for opportunities to understand religious ambiguity in social life, in a woman’s struggles after the Peasants’ War and among other people trying to avoid religious polarization at the height of the Reformation in Germany. Part II explores the relationship of the Reformation to the intellectual culture of late medieval schools. Part III looks at scholars walking intellectual tightropes in biblical interpretation, without necessarily knowing it.

Embedded in the substrate of each part of this book is a recontextualization of common categories of Reformation history. In Part I, it is Anabaptism. Anabaptism is usually seen as a set of sectarian movements or a “radical” version of Protestant doctrine. I view Anabaptism as an umbrella term applied to what one scholar has called “extreme piety” and as a strong indicator of religious feeling among ordinary people unconvinced by Protestant–Catholic debate.<sup>2</sup> In Part II, the recontextualization is of late medieval theology. Late medieval theology is, today, usually viewed as a complex set of doctrinal and philosophical positions that set up Reformation debates and “breakthroughs,” such as Luther’s doctrine of passive justification. I view late medieval theology as an element of a school culture that prized experiment and intellectual play, modified but not overcome by Reformation debates. In Part III, the category is the Bible. The Bible’s literal sense is usually viewed as the source of a distinctly Protestant view of religious authority. I view the Bible as a central element of late medieval theology and its Catholic and Protestant offshoots, and I argue that all scholars found ways to read the Bible as historically complex literature governed by a religious design and purpose, whose meaning was simultaneously literal and figurative, historical and spiritual. In the concluding chapter I begin with an observation about Martin Luther, survey historical writing, and recapitulate conclusions from the book to describe the Reformation as a hybrid produced by third forces.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 and the section “Presumed Anabaptists.”

Christianity, like many religions, has schools, and schools have their own distinctive cultures that stand alongside practices and beliefs. Schools try to interpret everyday life, and they add an intricate, complex, discursive layer to the organizations, emotions, and perceptions that people spontaneously learn and intuitively form. Religious schools, like religious people, try to channel and control their religiosities, but they will never completely succeed: there is something elusive and unpredictable about religious experience, despite the doctrines, habits, and rituals that occasion it. It is hard and perhaps impossible to master the diverse sources that could yield an *histoire totale* of religion in a time and place, but in Christianity, both schools and popular culture must belong to that history. More people should try to study theology and popular religion in tandem. The mixture of folklore and philosophy, social accident and discipline, spontaneous feeling and carefully informed choice and performance is what renders the history of religion a magnificent field. The historian makes choices when rummaging through the crowded cabinet of material and intellectual histories. One must choose the scenes and backgrounds one will paint. They are necessary choices, and I feel the ones I have made are inadequate. Yet one should try.

The story I am trying to tell is for readers who recognize the unavailability of conflict and division in human society but are impatient with it. The partisans of moderation can see happenstance where others see destiny and unavoidable choices, prudence where others see hesitation and cowardice, and a promise of reconciliation where others see compromise and retreat. We lament a world where third forces go into hiding, giving way to absolute positions that thrive on confrontation and invite violence. We may be drawn to one or another side of a debate, but we look for every glimmer of temperate disposition. We mourn the silent victims of fixed polarities. And some of us believe that the history of religion in Europe can help us understand not just how people collided in a distant time and place, but how they might have overcome their differences. We listen for faint signals of potential compromise, transgressions of dogma and intolerant conviction, reaching us from a deeply hidden past. And we count hope as faith, studying history for the sake of a humane future.

Earlier versions of Chapters 1–4 and 7 have appeared before.<sup>3</sup> I completed the book as a senior fellow in the Research Center for Comparative Monasticism at the Technical University of Dresden, where the hospitality and insights of its director, Mirko Breitenstein, its director emeritus, Gert Melville, and its fellows, especially Michael Haenchen, have kept me properly grounded in the twelfth century, where so much that is distinctive about Europe as a civilization and its reformations began. While preparing these essays over the last fifteen years I have been inspired by the insights of Charles Zika, Tom Scott, Susan Broomhall, and Tom and Kathy Brady; and by critical comments on various parts of the project from Miekske van Poll-van de Lisdonk, Greta Kroeker, Mark

<sup>3</sup> “After the Peasants’ War: Barbara (Schweikart) von Fuchstein Fights for Her Property,” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, special issue on the early Reformation, edited by Robert Bast and Andrew Colin Gow 40 (2017): 141–159 (Chapter 1). “Between the Old Faith and the New: Spiritual Loss in Reformation Germany,” *Enduring Loss in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Lynn Tatlock (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010), 231–258 (Chapters 2 and 3). “The German Reformation and Medieval Thought and Culture,” *History Compass* 10 (2012): 13–46 (Chapter 4). “Biblical Poetics in Scholasticism and the *Ratio*,” *Erasmus on Literature: His Ratio or ‘System’ of 1518/1519*, trans. Robert D. Sider, ed. Mark Vessey (Buffalo: University of Toronto, 2021), 63–79 (Chapter 7).

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