



Peter Marshall

THE REFORMATION

A Very Short Introduction

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The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction

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Introduction

The Reformation created modern Europe, and left an indelible mark on the history of the world. But what was the Reformation, and was it a force for progress, liberty, and modernity, or for conflict, division, and repression? Is it history's premier example of religion's ability to inspire selfless idealism and beneficent social change, or a cautionary tale of fanaticism and intolerance in the name of faith? Was it actually about religion at all, or should we see it as the historical instance par excellence of spiritual motivations being cynically invoked to legitimate economic and political changes?

Scholars used to know the answers to these questions, though different scholars knew quite different answers, the Reformation having been as divisive for subsequent historians as it was for those who lived through it. This is because it has always seemed a foundational moment, raising questions of origins and parentage, the culturally and politically contentious issues of who we are and where we come from. Millions of Protestants across the world still look to events in the 16th century as inspiration, as the beginning of their story. It is a story of spiritual liberation, of people casting aside the shackles of theological and moral servitude. The movement initiated by the renegade German friar Martin Luther brought an end to corrupt and oppressive rule by

the clergy of an institutional Church, a Church that had maintained its power by imposing superstitious and psychologically burdensome beliefs on ordinary (lay) worshippers. It was also a return to the pure sources of Christianity, after centuries in which the stream was polluted by the dripping pipe of man-made traditions. The bible, the Word of God, was restored to its rightful place as the rule and arbiter of Christian life. In vernacular translations of scripture, lay readers met the person of Jesus Christ, bypassing the clerical mediators who, like officious secretaries, had kept medieval petitioners from direct contact with the boss.

There is a related version of this story, allowing secular liberals to claim the Reformation as part of their heritage too. Luther's protest was a first strike against authoritarianism in many areas of social and intellectual life, a hammer blow against the kind of religion that 'tells you what to think'. Modern individualism has its origins in the unfettered bible-reading the Reformation encouraged; modern capitalism in the industriousness and initiative of Protestant merchants; and modern science in the refusal of deference to ancient authorities. New and potentially liberalizing forms of political organization emerged from the revolt against Rome. The 'problem' with contemporary Islam, newspaper pundits often solemnly assure us, is that it can't produce an Enlightenment, having never had a Reformation. Less fashionable now, though still sometimes touted, is a Marxist view that the Reformation was an example of an 'early bourgeois revolution' to overthrow feudal aristocracy – a vital historical precondition for the later revolution of the proletariat.

There are alternative versions. The 1520 papal bull condemning Luther likened him to a wild boar crashing around in the vineyard of the Lord, and that is how he, and the movement he unleashed, have seemed to many Catholics over the centuries. The Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins echoed the papal condemnation in his masterpiece *The Wreck of the Deutschland*,

where Luther appears as the 'beast of the waste wood'. Wherever the Reformation triumphed, it ruthlessly destroyed a priceless artistic and cultural inheritance. It also brought down precious structures of community. No longer sustained by a communal, interconnected world of guilds, brotherhoods, and collective rituals, the individual now stood alone as an adherent of the Church and a subject of the state. There are secular variants of this story too. Was the Protestants' insistence on the plain, unvarnished truth of scripture, and on the literal meaning of its text, not the foundation stone of modern fundamentalism and illiberalism? Some modern feminists, in unholy alliance with regretful Catholics, have suspected the Reformation of being bad news for women, reinforcing patriarchal authority in the home, and closing off the career path represented by convents. Meanwhile, modern Christian ecumenists suggest that the whole thing may have been an unfortunate mistake, that Luther and his opponents were really saying the same thing in the course of their ferocious debates about salvation.

These are all myths, which is not to say they are completely untrue. Myths are not lies, but symbolically powerful articulations of sensed realities. It is probably safer to believe that all the myths about the Reformation are true, rather than that none of them are. The goal of producing a totally unmythologized account of the Reformation may be an unachievable, or even an undesirable, one. Nonetheless, this little book – drawing on the best, not always impartial, modern scholarship – will attempt to explain what sort of phenomenon the Reformation was, to assess its impact across religious, political, social, and cultural areas of life, and the character of its legacy to the modern world.

First off, a pretty basic question: was there actually such a thing as 'the Reformation', an expression nobody used in our commonly accepted sense until long after the events it was meant to describe? The call for 'reform' within Christianity is about as old as the religion itself, and in every age there have been urgent attempts to

bring it about. Historians have identified a '10th-century reformation' in the English Church, associated with the renewal of Benedictine monasticism, as well as a 12th-century reformation, directed by the papacy, that succeeded in imposing clerical celibacy across the Christian West. The 'Great Schism' of the later 14th century, which produced two (and at one point three) rival claimants to the papal throne, produced an intense desire for *reformatio* in the following century. Reformation in the 15th century had both an official and an unofficial face. Leading churchmen sought to end the crisis of leadership and prevent the scandal of disunity by regularizing the government of the Church through General Councils. Such august bodies met at Pisa (1409), at Constance (1414–18), at Pavia and Siena (1423–4), and at Basle and other sites (1431–49). This 'conciliar' approach to reform died out once the papacy was again strong enough to impose its authority. But in the meantime still more far-reaching reform movements had been set in motion. In England, the theologian John Wyclif (d. 1384) formulated an astonishingly radical critique of the Church of his day, substituting the supreme authority of scripture for that of the pope, and arguing that clergymen should exercise no worldly authority. Wyclif's followers were driven out of the universities, but managed to lay the foundations for an underground heretical movement (the 'Lollards') in the country at large. At the other end of Europe, in the kingdom of Bohemia, another radical priest, Jan Hus, inspired a national revolt against foreign overlordship and Roman jurisdiction. The Hussites also demanded that lay people should receive wine, as well as bread, in the communion at mass. The aims and priorities of reform movements were not always compatible – Hus was burned as a heretic by the Council of Constance – but collectively they give the lie to any suggestion that torpor and complacency were the hallmarks of European religious life in the century before Martin Luther. In the light of so many previous attempts at reformation, why does the one associated with Luther deserve the definite article and the capital letter?

There are strong arguments for saying it shouldn't. Older textbooks on the Reformation typically began the story with Luther's protest in 1517 and wrapped it up not much more than a decade after his death in 1546. The Reformation seemed a fundamentally German event (though there were important reverberations in off-stage places, like England), and it had a neat and clean narrative shape: causes and progression of Luther's break with the Roman Church, and subsequent establishment, against the wishes of the Catholic German emperor, of Protestant state churches. The Reformation was Protestant, it was political, and (given the disordered state of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church) it was predictable.

Neither the chronology nor the geography of this Reformation seems convincing any more. And the assumption that the Reformation was 'inevitable' looks, at the very least, debatable, in the light of new research emphasizing the flexibility and spiritual vigour of late medieval Catholicism. Most significantly, there is now a widespread acceptance that what once seemed the alpha and omega of 16th-century Reformation – the Lutheran movement in Germany – was only one part of a much greater whole. Reformation is giving way to plural reformations: multiple theological and political movements with their own directions and agendas. There were distinct national, regional, and local reformations, not all Lutheran, and not all successful. Dogging the steps of Lutheranism was an ambitious rival brand of Protestant Christianity, often called in theological short-hand 'Calvinism', though 'Reformed' Protestantism is the more correct label. It is sometimes also referred to as the 'Second Reformation', though many places in Europe experienced it as the first alternative to the old faith of Catholicism. Not all the religious experimenters of the age followed the lead of Luther, Calvin, or other 'magisterial' reformers, who taught from a position of authority and allied themselves with secular magistrates. There was also a disparate, bottom-up 'Radical Reformation' of groups and individuals who imagined an entirely different social order, and dared to rethink

some basic premises of Christianity that magisterial reformers still took for granted. One of the most important reformations took place within not outside of the Catholic Church, or, as we can begin to call it after serious rivals emerged, the Roman Catholic Church. It has long been recognized that Rome rallied its forces and reordered its ranks in the face of Luther's and Calvin's challenges. In a formula popularized by German Protestant historians of the 19th century, this was dubbed the 'Counter-Reformation', a negative and essentially reactive response. Earlier histories of the Reformation (and a surprising number of current ones) either omit this view from the Tiber or squeeze it into an appendant chapter at the back of the volume. Yet what is increasingly coming to be known as 'The Catholic Reformation' or 'Catholic Renewal' was much more than retrenchment in the face of the enemy. New spiritual and reforming energies within Catholicism predated the Protestant revolt; some were diverted into it, but others not. Catholic reform was naturally shaped by an ongoing confrontation with Protestantism, just as Protestantism defined itself throughout its history in relation to a Catholic, or 'papist', other. It makes little sense to consider the Catholic and Protestant Reformations separately from each other, and their contrasting, and sometimes converging, trajectories are treated side-by-side in this book.

The doctrinal teachings of Protestant and Catholic reformers were inimical and anathema to one another. But their broader aims and aspirations could at times look remarkably similar. Both hoped to create a more spiritual Church, and a more godly, disciplined, and ordered society. And both confronted similar obstacles, in the ignorance, apathy, or sheer bloody-mindedness of local communities who might see little reason to change their ways at the behest of high-minded idealists. Perhaps the most significant change in the study of the Reformation over the past few decades has been the realization that the subject encompasses more than changes in theology and the consolidation of new church structures. Or, to put it another way, church history is too important to leave to the church historians. An expansive 'social

history' of the Reformation now grapples with questions of both cause and consequence in relation to the experiences and expectations of ordinary folk. Asking why lay people rallied to the Reformation, abandoning traditional and inherited beliefs, is to open a crucial historical window on their deepest priorities and concerns. Unsurprisingly, investigators have found that these concerns were not identical to those of educated reformers. Common folk in 1520s Germany selected and adapted aspects of the reforming programme that spoke to their needs, demonstrating in the process a capacity for 'agency' which an older tradition of scholarship was not always prepared to allow them. The Reformations affected everyone's eternal destiny – the rules for getting to heaven were revised, refined, or reinforced, and people were expected to know what they were. But they also impacted on virtually all aspects of existence in the meantime, from the political structures under which people lived to the small rituals of everyday life. The artistic and cultural landscape of Europe was reconfigured, as was the intimate environment of marriage, the family, and gender relations. One result of this broadening vision of the Reformation's impact is that a quick sprint from the indulgences controversy of 1517 to the closing of the Council of Trent in 1563 is hardly an adequate frame for making sense of the phenomenon. The forces which the Reformation set in motion were working themselves out for decades, even centuries. No two historians' reformations will be exactly the same length, but my perception is that *circa 1700* is an appropriate point to pause and take stock.

A long Reformation is by necessity a wide one. The stone may have dropped in Luther's Germany but its ripples were felt much further afield. The Reformation was not quite ubiquitous in the Christian world. Half a millennium earlier, Christian Europe had divided along the fault-line between the Eastern and Western halves of the old Roman Empire. Western 'Latin' or Catholic Christendom acknowledged the authority of the pope; the Eastern or 'Orthodox' churches sought leadership from a variety of patriarchs, the

pre-eminent of whom was based in Constantinople, a city falling under the sway of Muslim Turks in 1453. The Reformation was an episode within Latin Christianity; the Orthodox were present as neighbours, and occasional objects of conflict and conversion, rather than as full participants. Nonetheless, the Reformation was a far from narrowly West European event. Since the Iron Curtain came down, and the archives of former Eastern bloc countries have opened up, the extent of religious ferment in Hungary, Bohemia, the Baltic states, and Poland has become clearer. It was by no means a certainty in the 16th century that the latter would end up a citadel of Catholicism. And at almost exactly the same time that the Catholic Reformation was getting its act together in Poland, the foundations for another 21st-century bastion of Roman Catholicism were being laid – in the Philippines. The two centuries of Reformation ferment in Europe saw the first significant European expansion beyond Europe. The connection was partly fortuitous, partly not. The discovery of a ‘New World’ in the Americas, and the intensification of European contacts with the ancient civilizations of Asia, offered undreamt-of opportunities for evangelization. At the very moment its unity was cracking in its European heartlands, Christianity was able to become a truly world religion for the first time in its history. Conflict in Europe drove that process forward, and in due course its religious divisions were exported globally, with profound consequences for the modern world.

All of this serves to make the point that, contrary to the way it is sometimes taught in schools and universities, the Reformation was much more than an event in ‘religious’ history. Yet it should not become an exercise in the historical ordering of carts and horses. Traditional ecclesiastical historians insist on the primacy of ideas, the real transformative power exercised by new theologies and ways of seeing the world. By contrast, Marxists, as well as subscribers to trendy sociological and literary theories, instinctively want to ‘deconstruct’, to discern the ‘real’ political, class-based or economic motivations behind assertions of religious

principle or forms of ritual action. The truth is that any approach which begins with a rigid – and fundamentally modern – distinction between the religious and the secular is unlikely to get us very far. For most people in the 16th and 17th centuries, daily life was heavily sacralized and religion was thoroughly secularized – it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to strain off ‘religion’ from separate notions of ‘social’, ‘political’, or ‘economic’ behaviour and motivation. Indeed, it is the interaction between all these categories that makes the Reformation a crucial transformative moment in history.

But – to return to an earlier niggle – if Reformation was multiple interlocking reformations, and the sum of political, social, and religious interactions in Europe and the wider world over the course of two centuries, does the concept of ‘The Reformation’ really stand up? Has the label simply become a cover-all blanket for a convenient era of history, an alternative to that still woollier historical coverlet, ‘early modern’? This book stands by the usefulness of the term, for a simple but crucial reason. ‘The Reformation’ designates both the period and the process through which a key principle established itself at the heart of European culture: the formation of identity by means of division and conflict. During this era, markers of religious difference sprang up across innumerable aspects of life. For the moment, one example, though an important one, will suffice. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII drew on the latest scientific advice to decree a reform of the ancient Julian Calendar, which had made the year slightly too long. Catholic Europe quickly adopted the ‘Gregorian’ Calendar, but Protestant states were deeply suspicious, most only abandoning the Julian reckoning around 1700, and Britain and Sweden holding out till the 1750s. The Reformation had politicized time itself.

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Chapter 1

Reformations

A German event

It starts in a thunderstorm in the summer of 1505. On the road near Erfurt, in the Germany principality of Saxony, a young law student is caught in the downpour, and fears for his life amidst the ferocious strikes of lightning. He prays to St Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, offering a bargain: if she will spare his life, he will become a monk. A fortnight later, he bangs on the door of the Erfurt house of the reformed Augustinian friars, one of the strictest of all the religious orders.

Martin Luther told the story about himself, decades later, and it may not have happened that way. But everything about the tale is significant: the intensity of the medieval cult of the saints, the combined quest for material and spiritual salvation, the setting in Germany. Asking why the Reformation started in Germany is a bit like asking why the Communist Revolution started in Russia, or the telephone was invented in America – it happened there because it happened there. Some important ‘preconditions’ seem absent. In contrast to Hussite Bohemia, or Lollard-flecked England, Germany was pretty much a heresy-free zone in the decades around 1500, with little formal challenge to the authority of the Church. What was distinctive was its political structure. Unlike the emergent national monarchies of France, England, and

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