



Peter Marshall

THE REFORMATION

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide in
Oxford New York

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Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece Guatemala Hungary
Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

ISBN 978-0-19-923131-7

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

In memory of Trevor Johnson (1961–2007)

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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.