

Collison, P. The Reformation.

called "the autocracy of the believing person." That would have been a modern state of mind, and Luther was not a modern man. Luther's conscience, every conscience, was enthralled by the Bible as the Word of God, the only true foundation of the faith of the Church. It is the beginning of wisdom to understand that the Reformation was not, in its own eyes, a novelty. The novelties were those grave distortions of the truth that had passed for truth in more recent centuries, and which we know as medieval Catholicism. Yet Luther was himself some kind of late medieval Catholic. And even to say harsh things about the supreme pontiff was itself part of the late medieval legacy.

"Reform" was a somewhat shop-soiled mantra long before the Reformation. "Reformation" (another way of translating the Latin *reformatio*) was a distinctly different and rather more concrete formulation which, however, not even the sixteenth century invested with all the portmanteau meaning it would later have for historians. In the eleventh century, Pope Gregory had presided over what history knows as the Gregorian reforms, designed to rescue the Church from the corrupting influence of secularization by insisting on clerical celibacy and an end to the buying and selling of church offices ("simony") and lay control of the Church's affairs. In 1215 another reforming pope, Innocent III, convened in Rome the fourth of the Church Councils held in the Lateran Palace, which formulated what was to become the official doctrine of the Eu- charist and required all Christians to make an annual confession of their sins, a considerable landmark.

Pope Innocent and the Fourth Lateran Council also thought it a desirable reform to prevent the formation of new religious orders, so that the Franciscan and Dominican friars were the last under the wire, both of them expres-

sions of the vigorous reforming impulses of their founders St. Francis and St. Dominic. The early Franciscans, for whom the unworldly rule of complete poverty was always problematical, having split between a minority of hardliners, the so-called Spirituals, and the more conventional majority, later experienced a further rupture, which divided a new generation of strict Observants from the more lax Conventuals. One of many "reforms" in the early years of the sixteenth century itself was the regularization of the new, reformed Franciscan breakaway order, the Capuchins who went back to wearing the rough cloak of Francis, tied with a simple cord, and sandals. Almost every religious order in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries had its own "observant" (we might say "fundamentalist") tendencies, including Luther's own order, the Augustinian canons.

The world into which Martin Luther was born in 1483 was full of new religious things. There were new theological and intellectual fashions, which included a reappraisal of St. Thomas Aquinas among the Dominicans, and revived interest in St. Augustine and St. Paul, critical influences on Luther's own mind. There were newly rediscovered saints such as Mary Magdalene, a conflation of Martha the sister of Martha and Lazarus and the woman of easy virtue who washed Jesus' feet, who provided a model for the reform that required personal repentance for sin, as well as a way of addressing the "woman question." There was a new, or almost new, devotion to St. Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, who was popular among miners and metalworkers, and to whom the young Luther prayed when caught out in a violent thunderstorm, "St. Anne help me! I will become a monk," his first conversion. The Virgin herself had never been so popular, the Virgins of this and the place vying for the custom of pilgrims—in England, Ou-

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Lady of Willesden versus Our Lady of Ipswich. At Regensburg in southeast Germany, where a synagogue was being demolished to make way for a church (anti-Semitism was never far away), there was an industrial accident and a miraculous cure wrought by (who else?) the Virgin. In 1520, twelve thousand souvenir tokens were sold to pilgrims to "our lovely lady" of Regensburg, some of whom are shown in a contemporary woodcut lying around her image in various states of ecstatic collapse (or inebriation?).

Objects and centers of devotion of this kind were rarely planned and constructed by those who claimed to be in charge of the Church. Typically they arose from popular "devotion," often uncontrolled. Everywhere the church authorities were engaged in delicate balancing acts. Should they encourage or discourage such spontaneity? In late fourteenth-century Lincolnshire somebody (or perhaps a small syndicate) put up a wooden cross in a field and began to adore it and to report miracles. "They are preaching and ringing bells and holding processions, for the deception of the people and the increase of gain, and laymen are said to be converting the offerings to their own uses." The bishop decided that this was a holy racket and ordered the suppression of the instant cult. Six years later, however, the pope, presumably in response to lobbying, licensed the building of a chapel close to the miracle-working cross, which was now claimed to be a hundred years old. That the late medieval Church condoned so many practices that were over the fine line separating "religion" from "superstition" suggests that it was already familiar with the popular adage that if you can't beat them you might as well join them.

What might seem to us to have been higher and more debased forms of devotion could be coexistent within the

same individual. The elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise Luther's prince, was at one and the same time the patron of a modern university with a progressive faculty of theology and the proud owner of one of the largest collections in the world of sacred relics, which were held to have the power to reduce the time spent in purgatory by many thousands of years. The new technology of printing with movable type was employed to publish a catalog of his collection.

Modern Christians may find it easier to identify with reform in the shape of the intense Christocentrism of the early sixteenth century, and to recognize this as something that nourished the religion of the reformer Martin Luther. In England, the cult of the Holy Name of Jesus was popular, and many of the churches built or reconstructed in this period are studded with the monogrammatic emblem of the Holy Name, IHS. Both before and after the Reformation it was thought to be the business of preachers to "preach Christ." In Alsace, Matthias Grünewald painted a triptych for a convent south of Colmar, now in the museum of Unterdenlinden, which has at its center a crucified Christ so tortured that it is hard to look upon it without emotion. Albrecht Dürer not only depicted a poignantly suffering Christ in his two woodcut series of the Passion but in more than one self-portrait iconographically identified himself with the Man of Sorrows. Just as Christ on the cross uttered the words of one of the most somber of the Psalms ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") so Luther, lecturing on the Psalms, invited participation in the experience of the suffering Christ: "As in Christ, so let it be in me."

Mysticism was a constant source of renewal, especially in the fourteenth century; its more notable English practitioners including the woman called Julian of Norwich, he

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was his call to be an Apostle, and Paul (for he, too, changed his name) went on, in the opinion of many, to invent and construct Christianity itself.

This at least superficially repetitive factor recurs throughout the history of Christianity. The conversion of St. Augustine, thanks to his *Confessions*, became a paradigm consciously or unconsciously imitated and replicated. Francis of Assisi renounced all worldly goods and the very clothes he stood up in in order to reinvent the *vita apostolica*. Ignatius Loyola, a soldier recovering from his wounds, was converted by reading religious books (there being nothing else to read) and this was followed by a series of intense religious experiences out of which the Society of Jesus was born. What if he had been killed in that battle, or had found some novels to read? John Wesley's "heart was strangely warmed" on May 24, 1738 (moments of conversion are supposed to be that precise), when he heard Martin Luther's *Preface to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* read in a chapel in Aldersgate Street in London. The consequence of that event was the thick strand of Protestant Christianity known as Methodism. Elie Halévy thought that without Methodism there might have been an English Revolution along the lines of 1789. England had a religious revolution instead, which bred self-help, trade unionism, and a non-revolutionary but sturdy popular politics.

It is, of course, that same Luther with whom everyone who attempts to write a history of the Reformation must engage. For without Luther, we can be reasonably certain that there would have been no Reformation, or not the same Reformation. Thomas Carlyle went further. His history was the story of heroic individuals, and he thought that if Luther had not stuck to his guns at the Diet of Worms, where he stood before the Holy Roman emperor

and refused to recant ("Here I stand"), there would have been no French Revolution and no America: the principle that inspired those cataclysmic events would have been killed in the womb. No one would now make such a claim. But we can still ask the question: was the Reformation, or was it not, a kind of midwife to the modern world?

Luther on more than one occasion told the story of his own conversion. The different accounts are not entirely consistent with one another or with what we otherwise know about his life and career around the time it is supposed to have happened, when he was in his early thirties and a professor of theology in one of the new German universities. We know that the experience arose from a strenuous engagement with the theology of Paul to the Romans the sufficiently technical, but for Luther thoroughly existential, problem of how *justitia Dei*, the punitive righteousness of God, was to be satisfied. Luther knew that Christ had already made satisfaction, as Christians had always affirmed, "for the sins of the whole world." But how was that satisfaction to be applied to the individual Christian believer? Only, Luther discovered, by faith in Christ's sacrifice. Human moral striving was actually counterproductive, turning the soul ever more in upon itself. That was as much as to say that God, who is merciful, makes us righteous by a faith that God himself works in us. This has been called a kind of Copernican revolution in thinking about God. God, not man, is the center and prime mover of all things, including human salvation. Theologically, that had never been in doubt. In practice, however, the system of medieval Christianity emphasized moral effort, in effect a journey toward a God who, Luther insisted, is actually reaching out to us. According to other references to that moment that Luther made from time to time around the

dinner table, it happened in a tower where he had his professorial study in the monastic house of the Augustinian canons, Luther's religious order: the so-called *Turnerlehnis*, or "tower experience."

According to Luther, this was indeed an experience, not simply an intellectual process: "I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered, through the open gates into paradise itself." But that was only the beginning, and he went on to explain that he told the story, "as Augustine said of himself," so that it should not be thought that he "had suddenly from nothing become supreme," or "with one glance at scripture exhausted the total spirit of its contents." Indeed, Luther did not come from nothing but out of the rich resources of late medieval theology.

We may be still more cautious about Luther's sudden *Durchbruch* (breakthrough) if we consider what happened at about the same time to an Englishman, the Cambridge scholar Thomas Bilney, who had probably never heard of Luther. Reading, in the elegant Latin of a new translation of the New Testament by Erasmus, the words that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," Bilney tells us, "immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness, inasmuch that my bruised bones leaped for joy." That was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in Cambridge, which led the way in all of England and, after that, North America.

There is a tension here between event and process that, projected onto a larger screen, is the tension between the Reformation as part of the continuum of history and the Reformation as an extraordinary historical moment—as it were, a meteor strike at history. For Max Weber such interruptions in history represented the operations of what he called charisma, something that, as a so-

cial scientist, he did not presume to explain. Such figures as Moses, or Isaiah, or Luther, were "charismatic."

What happened to these deeply religious Catholics and children of the later Middle Ages was no doubt compressed in their imaginative recollections into an almost conventional scenario, biblical and Augustinian, of blinding revelation and a total overturning of what they had always believed and taken for granted. In Jesus' words, they had indeed been born again. The historian who wants to measure the watershed separating the medieval world from what overtook and overturned it must take seriously the perception that those living through these events had of an almost total transformation. Another Englishman expressed the wish that God would bless an elderly uncle, "and make him now to know which in his tender years he could not see, for the world was then dark, and we were blind in it." For him, the Catholic Church was not merely defective but actually antichristian, its pope Antichrist himself, the great deceiver. So the landscapes of both time and space were subject to a radical and seismic reconstruction, and a series of aftershocks would be experienced for a century and more to come.

Whole communities, churches, and states shared in both the initial upheaval and the aftershocks. As Luther's theology was systematized as Lutheranism, large areas of Germany, which is to say the governments of princes and cities on behalf of their subjects, formally adopted what became known as the Evangelical confession. Other governments promoted a variant form of Protestantism, more thorough in its departure from traditional Catholicism and developed in the cities and cantons of southwest Germany and Switzerland, above all in Geneva where John Calvin was intellectually and spiritually dominant. These were the Re-

formed churches, the title indicating their claim to be the "best reformed." Faithful to the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, the principle that the ruler determines the religion of his state, the Rhenish Palatinate in southwest Germany was successively Evangelical, Reformed, briefly Evangelical again, Reformed, and ultimately, somewhat brutally re-Catholicized. The principle was defied in France, where a sizable Protestant (and Reformed) minority enjoyed strong political and military support, which plunged the country into decades of (partly) religious war. In the Netherlands it was turned on its head, religion sustaining a revolt against the legitimate government of Spain and helping to give birth to a new kind of politics, that of the independent republic. England, which at the beginning of the sixteenth century seems to have been one of the most Catholic countries in Europe, became, by the seventeenth century, the most virulently anti-Catholic, and the almost dominant ideology of anti-Catholicism fueled the civil wars that engulfed all parts of the British Isles in mid-century and later provoked the Bloodless Revolution, from which what passes for a British constitution derives.

This, however, is not where the inquiry should end. Nobody doubts that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time of change, confusion, and conflict for countless individuals, local communities, and whole states and nations. It is not wrong to call this an era of religious wars, comparable in scale to the revolutionary, nationalistic, and ideological wars of the subsequent centuries. The only question is whether these circumstances were so different from the experience of earlier and later centuries as to make this a major turning point in European civilization, at least as important as the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, or the Age of Revolu-

tions that began in 1776 and 1789. Making some of those comparisons, a distinguished historian of the last generation, Sir Herbert Butterfield, called both the Reformation and the Renaissance, which was its necessary precondition, merely internal displacements in European history. Others have doubted whether the Reformation represented a kind of radical departure from the mentalities, politics, or social structures of medieval Europe or had anything to do with the shaping of the modern world. We may not find it helpful to speak of the medieval Church and its Reformation. Martin Luther, a medieval rather than a modern man, offered new answers to old questions. He asked no new ones.

A receding view alters in perspective; mountains no longer tower, and sharp and bold outlines are softened and blurred. It has become fashionable to demote the Reformation to lowercase and to pluralize it: many reformations, both before and since what was once regarded as *the* Reformation, and in other places and other cultures. A recent textbook puts the Reformation into global perspective, placing this European event alongside the revival of the Confucian philosophy in China after a thousand years by the brothers Ch'eng-i and Ch'eng-hao (in the late eleventh century), or with the reconstruction of Islam by Muhammad ibn 'Abd-al-Wahhab (1703-1791), which, as Wahabite Islam, became the state religion of Saudi Arabia. Another author, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, sticking to Christian parallels, makes "reformation" a principle of world religion from 1500 to 2000, not a decisive, divisive event but "a continuing story, embracing the common religious experiences of Christians of different traditions worldwide." He takes us to the shores of a lake in Guatemala, the scene of a rich mixture of religions, Catholic,