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The Reformation: An Introduction

Many students approach the Reformation in much the same way as medieval travelers approached the vast dark forests of southern Germany – with a sense of hesitation and anxiety, in case what lay ahead should prove impenetrable, or in case they should find themselves hopelessly lost. They are often like explorers venturing into new terrain, unsure what there is to find, at times bewildered by the unmapped wilderness, at others exhilarated by unexpected vistas and valleys. Many find themselves longing for a guide who will lead them through what sometimes seems like a dense jungle.

It is tempting for such students to ignore the *ideas* of the Reformation altogether in order to concentrate upon its social or political aspects. The price of making the Reformation easier to come to grips with in this way, however, is to fail both to capture its essence as a historical phenomenon and to understand why it remains such an essential reference point for much contemporary debate in the religious world and far beyond.

It is understandably difficult for a student sympathetic to the secularism of modern western culture to come to terms with a movement that was so clearly motivated by religious ideas. It is tempting to marginalize these ideas and approach the sixteenth century with the worldview of the modern period. Like any historical phenomenon, however, the Reformation demands that its interpreters attempt to enter into *its* worldview. We must learn to empathize with its concerns and outlook, in order to understand how these affected the great flux of history. The Reformation in Switzerland and Germany was directly based upon religious ideas which demand and deserve careful consideration. Even in England,

where local conditions led to political factors having a greater influence than religious ideas, there was still a significant core of such ideas underlying developments. This book aims to explain as clearly as possible what the religious ideas underlying the Reformation actually were and how they affected those who entertained them.

The present introductory chapter aims to deal with some preliminary matters, preparing the ground for more detailed discussion of the thought of the Reformation in later chapters.

The Cry for Reform

The term “Reformation” immediately suggests that something – namely, western European Christianity – was being reformed. Like many other terms used by historians to designate eras in human history – such as “Renaissance” or “Enlightenment” – it is open to criticism. For example, the twelfth century witnessed a comparable attempt to reform the church in western Europe – but the term “Reformation” is not used by historians to designate this earlier movement. Other terms might be thought by some to be more appropriate to refer to the sixteenth-century movement we shall be studying in this work. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the term “Reformation” *is* generally accepted as the proper designation for this movement, partly because the movement was linked with the recognition of the need for drastic overhaul of the institutions, practices, and ideas of the western church. The term helpfully indicates that there were both social and intellectual dimensions to the movement which it designates.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century it was obvious that the church in western Europe was in urgent need of reform. The popular cry for “reform in head and members” both summed up the problem and pointed to a possible solution. It seemed to many that the lifeblood of the church had ceased to flow through its veins. The church legal system was badly in need of overhaul, and ecclesiastical bureaucracy had become notoriously inefficient and corrupt. The morals of the clergy were often lax and a source of scandal to their congregations.

Clergy, even at the highest level, were frequently absent from their parishes. In Germany, it is reported that only one parish in 14 had its pastor in residence. The Frenchman Antoine du Prat, archbishop of Sens, turned up for only one service at his cathedral: moreover, his presence and role at this service was somewhat passive, since it was his funeral. Most higher ecclesiastical posts were secured through dubious means, generally relying upon the family connections or the political or financial status of the candidates rather than their spiritual qualities. Thus Duke Amadeus VIII of Savoy secured the appointment of his son to the senior position of bishop of Geneva in 1451; if anyone had misgivings about the fact that the new bishop had never been ordained and was only eight years of age, they were wise enough to keep quiet about them. Pope Alexander VI, a

member of the Borgia family (famous for its lethal dinner parties), secured his election to the papacy in 1492 despite having several mistresses and seven children, largely because he bought the papacy outright over the heads of his nearest rivals.

Niccolò Machiavelli put the loose morals of late Renaissance Italy down to the poor example set by the church and its clergy. For many, the cry for reform was a plea for the administrative, moral, and legal reformation of the church: abuses and immorality must be eliminated; the pope must become less preoccupied with worldly affairs; the clergy must be properly educated; and the administration of the church must be simplified and purged of corruption. For others, the most pressing need concerned the spirituality of the church. There was an urgent need to recapture the vitality and freshness of the Christian faith.

Many looked back with nostalgia to the simplicity and excitement of the apostolic Christianity of the first century. Could not this Golden Age of the Christian faith be regained, perhaps by pondering anew the New Testament documents? This program of reform was the wistful pipe dream of intellectuals throughout half of Europe. Yet the Renaissance popes seemed more interested in secular than in spiritual matters, and managed between them to achieve a hitherto unprecedented level of avarice, venality, immorality, and spectacularly unsuccessful power politics. The words of Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola (not to be confused with his uncle, Giovanni), spoken in March 1517, sum up succinctly the thoughts which preyed on many educated minds at the time: “If we are to win back the enemy and the apostate to our faith, it is more important to restore fallen morality to its ancient rule of virtue than that we should sweep the Black Sea with our fleet.”

There were others, however, who added another demand to this list of long-overdue reforms – a reformation of Christian doctrine, of theology, of religious ideas. To critical observers such as Martin Luther at Wittenberg and John Calvin at Geneva, the church had lost sight of its intellectual and spiritual heritage. It was time to reclaim the ideas of the Golden Age of the Christian church. The sad state of the church in the early sixteenth century was simply a symptom of a more radical disease – a deviation from the distinctive *ideas* of the Christian faith, a loss of intellectual identity, a failure to grasp what Christianity really was. Christianity could not be reformed without an understanding of what Christianity was actually meant to be. For these men, the obvious decline of the late Renaissance church was the latest stage in a gradual process which had been going on since the early Middle Ages – the corruption of Christian doctrine and ethics.

The distinctive ideas which thinkers such as Luther and Calvin held to underlie Christian faith and practice had been obscured, if not totally perverted, through a series of developments in the Middle Ages. According to these and other reformers of that age, it was time to reverse these changes, to undo the work of the Middle Ages, in order to return to a purer, fresher version of Christianity which beckoned to them across the centuries. The reformers echoed the cry of the humanists: “back to the sources” (*ad fontes*) – back to the Golden Age of

the church, in order to reclaim its freshness, purity and vitality in the midst of a period of stagnation and corruption.

Contemporary writings unquestionably paint a picture of growing ecclesiastical corruption and inefficiency, indicating how much the late medieval church was in need of reform. It is necessary, however, to enter a note of caution on the manner in which these sources are to be interpreted. It is quite possible that they document growing levels of expectation within the late medieval church as much as declining levels of performance.

The growth of an educated laity – one of the more significant elements in the intellectual history of late medieval Europe – led to increasing criticism of the church on account of the obvious disparity between what the church *was* and what it *might be*. The growing level of criticism may well reflect the fact that more people were, through increasing educational opportunities, in a position to criticize the church – rather than any further decline in the ecclesiastical standards of the day.

But who could reform the church? By the first decade of the sixteenth century, a fundamental shift in power within Europe was essentially complete. The power of the pope had diminished as the power of secular European governments had increased. In 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was established, with power over clergy and religious orders (and eventually also over bishops). Yet this was an instrument of the Spanish state, not the Spanish church. Control of this system of courts rested not with the pope, but with the Spanish king. The Concordat of Bologna (1516) gave the king of France the right to appoint all the senior clergy of the French church, effectively giving him direct control of that church and its finances.

Across Europe, the ability of the pope to impose a reformation upon his church was steadily diminishing. Even if the will to reform had been there in the later Renaissance popes (and there are few indications that it was), their ability to reform the church was gradually slipping away. This diminishment in papal authority did not, however, lead to a decrease in the power of local or national churches, which continued to exercise major influence over nations. It was the ability of the pope to control such local or national power that declined during our period. The German, Swiss, and English reformations illustrate this point well.

It is therefore important to notice the manner in which Protestant reformers allied themselves with regional or civic powers in order to effect their program of reform. Luther appealed to the German nobility and Zwingli to the Zurich city council for reform, pointing out the benefits which would accrue to both as a consequence. For reasons we shall explore presently (pp. 223–5), the English Reformation (in which political factors tended to overshadow theological issues, which were generally treated as being of secondary importance) is not typical of the European movement as a whole.

The continental Reformation proceeded by a symbiotic alliance of reformer and state or civic authority, each believing that the resulting Reformation was to

their mutual benefit. The reformers were not unduly concerned that they gave added authority to their secular rulers by their theories of the role of the state or the “godly prince”: the important thing was that the secular rulers supported the cause of the Reformation, even if their reasons for doing so might not be entirely straightforward or praiseworthy.

The mainstream reformers were pragmatists, people who were prepared to allow secular rulers their pound of flesh provided the cause of the Reformation was advanced. In much the same way, of course, the opponents of the Reformation had little hesitation in calling upon the support of secular authorities which felt that their interests were best served by a maintenance of the religious status quo. No study of the Reformation can overlook its political and social dimensions, as secular authorities in northern Europe saw their chance to seize power from the church, even at the cost of thereby committing themselves to a new religious order.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that certain distinctive religious ideas achieved widespread circulation and influence within western European society in the sixteenth century. The Reformation was about theology, not just social and political change. These theological ideas cannot be ignored or marginalized by anyone concerned with the study of the Reformation. It is hoped that the present work will introduce, explain, and contextualize them.

The Concept of “Reformation”

The term “Reformation” is used in a number of senses, and it is helpful to distinguish them. As used in the historical literature, the term “Reformation” generally refers to four elements: Lutheranism, the Reformed church (often referred to as “Calvinism”), the “radical Reformation” (often still referred to as “**Anabaptism**”), and the “Counter-Reformation” or “Catholic Reformation.” In its broadest sense, the term “Reformation” is used to refer to all four movements. Some recent studies of this age have used the plural form “Reformations” to suggest that the Reformation was a multifaceted movement – perhaps even that it was a loosely connected set of distinct reforming movements, rather than a single coherent movement with local adaptations.

Anabaptism Literally, “re-baptism.” Used to refer to the radical wing of the Reformation.

The term “Reformation” is traditionally used in a somewhat more restricted sense to mean “the Protestant Reformation,” thereby excluding the Catholic Reformation. In this sense, it refers to the three Protestant movements noted above. In some scholarly works, the term “Reformation” is used to refer to what is sometimes known as the “magisterial Reformation,” or the “mainstream Reformation” – in other words, the type of reformation that was linked with the Lutheran and Reformed churches, rather than the Anabaptists.

The unusual phrase “magisterial Reformation” needs a little explaining. It highlights the way in which the mainstream reformers developed a generally

positive relationship with secular authorities, such as princes, magistrates, or city councils. Whereas the radical reformers regarded such authorities as having no rights or authority within the church, the mainstream reformers argued that the church was, at least to some extent, subject to the secular agencies of government. The magistrate had a right to authority within the church, just as the church could rely on the authority of the magistrate to enforce discipline, suppress heresy, or maintain order. The phrase “magisterial Reformation” is often used to draw attention to this close relationship between the magistracy and the church, which lay at the heart of the reforming program of writers such as Martin Luther or Martin Bucer.

All four senses of the word “Reformation” will be encountered in the course of reading works dealing with the sixteenth century. The term “magisterial Reformation” is increasingly used to refer to the first two senses of the term (i.e., covering Lutheranism and the Reformed church) taken together, and the term “radical Reformation” to refer to the third (i.e., covering Anabaptism). The present work is primarily concerned with the ideas of the magisterial Reformation.

The term “Protestant” also requires comment. It derives from the aftermath of the Second Diet of Speyer (February 1529), which voted to end the toleration of Lutheranism in Germany. In April of the same year, six German princes and 14 cities protested against this oppressive measure, defending freedom of conscience and the rights of religious minorities. The term “Protestant” derives from this protest. It is therefore not strictly correct to apply the term “Protestant” to individuals prior to April 1529 or to speak of events prior to that date as constituting “the Protestant Reformation.” The term “evangelical” is often used in the literature to refer to the reforming factions at Wittenberg and elsewhere (e.g., in France and Switzerland) prior to this date. Although the word “Protestant” is often used to refer to this earlier period, this use is, strictly speaking, an anachronism.

The Lutheran Reformation

The Lutheran Reformation is particularly associated with the German territories and with the pervasive personal influence of one charismatic individual – Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther was particularly concerned with the doctrine of **justification**, which formed the central point of his religious thought. The Lutheran Reformation was initially an academic movement, concerned primarily with reforming the teaching of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Wittenberg was an unimportant university, and the reforms introduced by Luther and his colleagues within the theology faculty attracted little attention. It was Luther’s personal activities – such as his posting of the famous Ninety-Five Theses (31 October 1517) and the Leipzig Disputation (June–July 1519: see p. 54) – which brought the reforming ideas in circulation

justification by faith Section of Christian theology concerning how the individual sinner is able to enter into fellowship with God.

at Wittenberg to the attention of a wider (though not always appreciative) audience.

Strictly speaking, the Lutheran Reformation really began in 1522, when Luther returned to Wittenberg from his enforced isolation in the Wartburg. Luther had been condemned by the Diet of Worms in 1521. Fearing for his life, certain well-placed supporters removed him in secrecy to the castle known as the “Wartburg,” until the threat to his safety ceased. (Luther used his enforced isolation to begin translating the New Testament into German.) In his absence, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), one of Luther’s academic colleagues at Wittenberg, began a program of reform at Wittenberg which seemed to degenerate into chaos. Convinced that his own presence was needed if the Reformation was to survive Karlstadt’s ineptitude, Luther emerged from his place of safety and returned to Wittenberg.

At this point, Luther’s program for academic reform changed into a program for reform of church and society. No longer was Luther’s forum of activity the university world of ideas – he now found himself regarded as the leader of a religious, social, and political reforming movement which seemed to some contemporary observers to open the way to a new social and religious order in Europe.

In fact, it should be noted that Luther’s program of reform was actually more conservative than that associated with his Reformed colleagues, such as Huldrych Zwingli. It also met with rather less success than some anticipated. The movement remained obstinately landlocked within the German territories, and – the kingdoms of Scandinavia apart – never gained the foreign power bases which had seemed to be like so many ripe apples, ready to fall into its lap. Luther’s understanding of the role of the “godly prince” (which effectively ensured that the monarch had control of the church) does not seem to have held the attraction which might have been expected, particularly in the light of the generally republican sentiments of Reformed thinkers such as Calvin. The case of England is particularly illuminating: here, as in the Lowlands, the Protestant theology which eventually gained the ascendancy was Reformed rather than Lutheran.

The Reformed Church

The origins of the Reformed church lie with developments within the Swiss Confederation. Whereas the Lutheran Reformation had its origins primarily in an academic context, the Reformed church owed its origins more to a series of attempts to reform the morals and worship of the church (but not necessarily its *doctrine*) according to a more biblical pattern. Although most of the early Reformed theologians – such as Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) – had an academic background, their reforming programs were not academic in nature. They were mainly concerned with reforming the practices (such as the worship) of the churches in the Swiss cities, such as Zurich, Berne, and Basle.

Whereas Luther was convinced that the doctrine of justification by faith was of central significance to his program of social and religious reform, the early Reformed thinkers had relatively little interest in doctrine, let alone this one specific doctrine. Their reforming program was institutional, social, and ethical, in many ways similar to the demands for reform emanating from the humanist movement. We shall consider the ideas of **humanism** in some detail presently (pp. 36–45); for the moment it is important simply to note that all the major early Reformed theologians had links with the humanist movement which were not shared by Luther, who regarded it with some suspicion.

humanism Complex movement involving a new interest in the cultural achievements of antiquity.

The consolidation of the Reformed church is generally thought to have begun with the stabilization of the Zurich reformation after Zwingli's death (in battle, 1531) under his successor, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75), and to have ended with the emergence of Geneva as its power base and John Calvin (1509–64) as its leading spokesman, in the 1550s. The gradual shift in power within the Reformed church (initially from Zurich to Berne, and subsequently from Berne to Geneva) took place over the period 1520–60, eventually establishing the city of Geneva, its political system (republicanism), and its religious thinkers (initially Calvin, and after his death Theodore Beza) as predominant within the Reformed church. This development was consolidated through the establishment of the Genevan Academy (founded in 1559), at which Reformed pastors were trained.

The term “Calvinism” is often used to refer to the religious ideas of the Reformed church. Although still widespread in the literature relating to the Reformation, this practice is now generally discouraged. It is becoming increasingly clear that later sixteenth-century Reformed theology draws on sources other than the ideas of Calvin himself. To refer to later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thought as “Calvinist” implies that it is essentially the thought of Calvin – and it is now generally agreed that Calvin's ideas were modified subtly by his successors. (We shall explore this development in relation to the doctrine of predestination on pp. 202–4.) The term “Reformed” is now preferred, whether to refer to those churches (mainly in Switzerland, the Lowlands, and Germany) or religious thinkers (such as Theodore Beza, William Perkins, or John Owen) which were grounded on Calvin's celebrated religious textbook *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* or to church documents (such as the famous *Heidelberg Catechism*) based upon it.

The term “Calvinist” presents some difficulties for the intellectual historian. The term dates from the 1560s, when a significant alteration in the political situation in the German territories took place. Germany had been seriously destabilized in the 1540s and early 1550s by conflicts between Lutherans and Catholics, and it was widely recognized that such conflicts were damaging to the Empire. The Peace of Augsburg (September 1555) settled the religious question in

Germany by allocating certain areas of Germany to Lutheranism and the remainder to Catholicism – the famous principle often referred to as *cuius regio, eius religio* (“your region determines your religion”). No provision was made for the Reformed faith, which was effectively declared to be “nonexistent” in Germany.

In February 1563, however, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was published (see p. 246), indicating that the Reformed theology had gained a firm foothold in this hitherto Lutheran region of Germany. This catechism was immediately attacked by Lutherans as being “Calvinist” – in other words, foreign. The term “Calvinist” was used by German Lutherans to attempt to discredit this new and increasingly influential document by implying that it was unpatriotic. Given the original polemical associations of the term “Calvinist,” it would seem appropriate for the historian to use a more neutral term to refer to this movement. The term “Reformed” is widely used for this reason, and is to be preferred.

Of the three constituent elements – Lutheran, Reformed (or Calvinist), and Anabaptist – of the Protestant Reformation, it is the Reformed wing that is of particular importance to the English-speaking world. Puritanism, which figures so prominently in seventeenth-century English history and is of such fundamental importance to the religious and political views of New England in the seventeenth century and beyond, is a specific form of Reformed Christianity. To understand the religious and political history of New England or the ideas of writers such as Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), for example, it is necessary to come to grips with at least some of the theological insights and part of the religious outlook of Puritanism that underlie their social and political attitudes. It is hoped that this work will help with this process of familiarization.

The Radical Reformation (Anabaptism)

The term “Anabaptist” owes its origins to Zwingli (the word literally means “re-baptizers”), and refers to what was perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Anabaptist practice – the insistence that only those who had made a personal public profession of faith should be baptized. Anabaptism seems to have first arisen around Zurich, in the aftermath of Zwingli’s reforms within the city in the early 1520s. It centered on a group of individuals (among whom we may note Conrad Grebel, c.1498–1526) who argued that Zwingli was not being faithful to his own reforming principles. He preached one thing and practiced another.

Although Zwingli professed faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”: see pp. 98–100) principle, Grebel argued that he retained a number of practices – including infant baptism, the close link between church and magistracy, and the participation of Christians in warfare – which were not sanctioned or

sola scriptura Phrase summarizing the theory that the practices and beliefs of the church should be grounded in Scripture.

ordained by Scripture. In the hands of such radical thinkers, the *sola scriptura* principle became radicalized (see pp. 100–1): reformed Christians came to believe and practice only those things explicitly taught in Scripture. Zwingli was alarmed by this, seeing it as a destabilizing development which threatened to cut off the Reformed church at Zurich from its historical roots and its continuity with the Christian tradition of the past.

The Anabaptists had good reason to accuse Zwingli of compromise. In 1522, Zwingli wrote a work known as *Apologeticus Archeteles*, in which he recognized the idea of a “community of goods” as an authentic Christian ideal. “No-one calls any possessions his own,” he wrote, “all things are held in common.” But by 1525, Zwingli had changed his mind and come round to the idea that private property was not such a bad thing, after all.

Although Anabaptism arose in Germany and Switzerland, it subsequently became influential in other regions, such as the Lowlands. The movement produced relatively few theologians – the three most significant are generally agreed to be Balthasar Hubmaier (c.1480–1528), Pilgram Marbeck (died 1556), and Menno Simons (1496–1561). This failure partly reflects the forcible suppression of Anabaptism by the secular authorities. Yet it may also reflect the fact that the movement did not have any substantial common theological basis.

A number of common elements can be discerned within the various strands of the movement: a general distrust of external authority, the rejection of infant baptism in favor of the baptism of adult believers, the common ownership of property, and an emphasis upon pacifism and non-resistance. To take up one of these points: in 1527, the governments of the cities of Zurich, Berne, and St Gallen accused the Anabaptists of believing “that no true Christian can either give or receive interest or income on a sum of capital; that all temporal goods are free and common, and that all can have full property rights to them.”

It is for this reason that “Anabaptism” is often referred to as the “left wing of the Reformation” (Roland H. Bainton) or the “radical Reformation” (George Hunston Williams). For Williams, the “radical Reformation” was to be contrasted with the “magisterial Reformation,” which he broadly identified with the Lutheran and Reformed movements. These terms are increasingly being accepted within Reformation scholarship, and the reader is likely to encounter them in his or her reading of more recent studies of the movement.

Probably the most significant document to emerge from the movement is the Schleithem Confession, drawn up by Michael Sattler (1490–1527) on 24 February 1527. The Confession takes its name from the small town of that name in the canton of Schaffhausen. Its function was to distinguish Anabaptists from those around them – supremely from what the document refers to as “papists and antipapists” (that is, unreformed Catholics and magisterial evangelicals). In effect, the Schleithem Confession amounts to “articles of separation” – that is to say, a set of beliefs and attitudes which distinguish Anabaptists from their opponents inside and outside the Reformation, and function as a core of unity, whatever their other differences might be.

The Catholic Reformation

This term is often used to refer to the revitalization of Catholicism in the period following the opening of the Council of Trent (1545). In older scholarly works, the movement is often designated the “Counter-Reformation”: as the term suggests, this refers to the strategies that the Catholic church developed as a means of combating the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic church countered the Reformation partly by reforming itself from within, in order to remove the grounds of Protestant criticism. In this sense, the movement is to be seen both as a reformation of the Catholic church, as well as a critique of the Protestant Reformation.

The same concerns underlying the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe were channeled into the renewal of the Catholic church, particularly in Spain and Italy. The Council of Trent (see Figure 1.1), the foremost feature of the Catholic Reformation, clarified Catholic teaching on a number of confusing matters, and introduced much-needed reforms in relation to the conduct of the clergy, ecclesiastical discipline, religious education, and missionary activity. The movement for reform within the Catholic church was greatly stimulated by the reformation

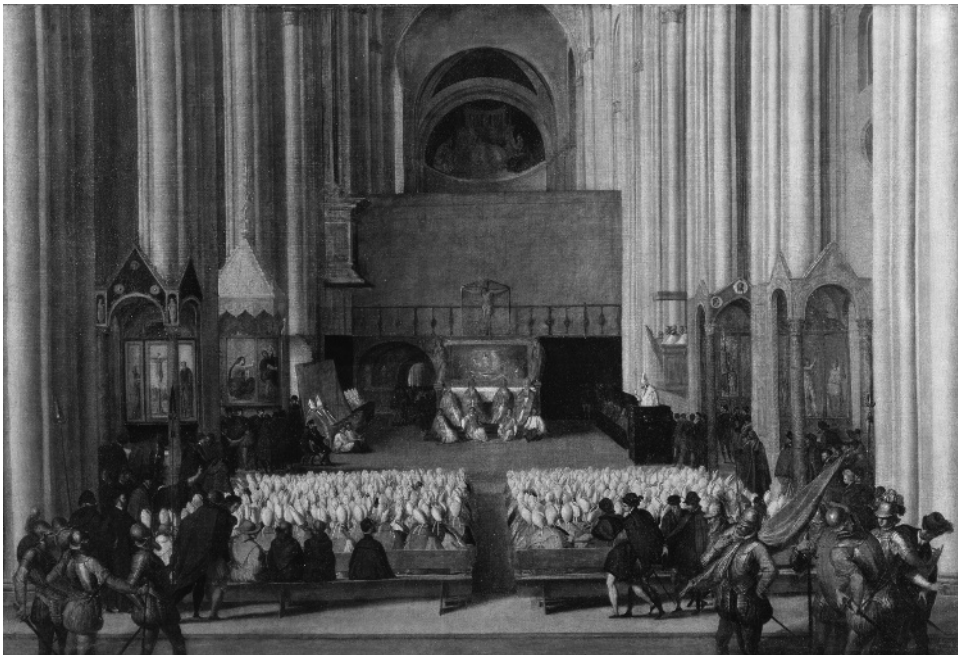


Figure 1.1 The Council of Trent, 4 December 1563 (oil on canvas), Italian School, (sixteenth century), Louvre, Paris, France. Formerly attributed to Titian (1488–1576); 23rd session of the Council. Louvre, Paris, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library

of many of the older religious orders and the establishment of new orders (such as the “Society of Jesus,” often referred to as “the Jesuits”). The more specifically theological aspects of the Catholic Reformation will be considered in relation to its teachings on Scripture and tradition, justification by faith, the church, and the **sacraments**.

sacrament Church service or rite held to have been instituted by Jesus Christ himself.

As a result of the Catholic Reformation, many of the abuses that originally lay behind the demands for reform – whether these came from humanists or Protestants – were removed. By this stage, however, the Protestant Reformation had reached a point at which the mere removal of malpractices and abuses was no longer sufficient to reverse the situation: the demand for the reformation of doctrine, religious ideology, and the church was now regarded as an essential aspect of the Protestant–Catholic controversies. This point highlights the need to consider the religious ideas lying behind the “magisterial Reformation,” which became of increasing importance to the Protestant–Catholic debate as the sixteenth century progressed.

The Importance of Printing

Recent technological developments in the field of data processing and transfer – such as the Internet – have revolutionized many aspects of modern life. It is important to realize that a single technological innovation destined to have an enormous influence over western Europe was developed on the eve of the Reformation. This innovation was, of course, printing. It would have a very substantial impact on the development and propagation of the ideas of the Reformation.

Although originally developed centuries earlier by the Chinese, the first European printed documents which can be dated reliably originate from the press of Johann Gutenberg (c.1398–1468) at Mainz around 1454. In 1456, the same press produced a printed Latin Bible. This was followed in 1457 by the so-called Mainz Psalter, which established the custom of identifying the printer, the location of the press, and the date of publication on the title page of the work. From Germany, the technology was taken to Italy, presses being established at Subiaco (1464) and Venice (1469). Caxton set up his printing shop at Westminster, London, in 1476. The famous Aldine Press was established at Venice in 1495 by Aldus Manutius Romanus. This press was responsible for two important developments: “lower case” letters (so called because they were kept in the lower of two cases containing type) and the sloping “italic” type (so called in English-language works on account of Venice being located in Italy; Aldus himself called the type “Chancery”).

Why would printing have such a major impact upon the Reformation? The following points should be noted. First, printing meant that works advocating the agenda of the Reformation could be produced quickly and cheaply. The tedious process of copying manuscripts by hand was no longer necessary. Further,

the errors introduced by the copying process were eliminated; once a work was set up in type, any number of error-free copies could be run off. Anyone who could read and who could afford to pay for books was in a position to learn of the sensational new ideas coming out of Wittenberg and Geneva. For example, in England it was the literate and financially advantaged classes who knew most about Lutheranism in the third decade of the sixteenth century. Lutheran books, banned by the authorities as seditious, were smuggled in through the Hanseatic trade route to Cambridge via the ports of Antwerp and Ipswich. There was no need for Luther to visit England to gain a hearing for his ideas – they were spread by the printed word (see pp. 242–3).

This point is of interest in relation to the sociology of early **Protestantism**. In both England and France, for example, the first Protestants were often drawn from the upper strata of society, precisely because these strata possessed the ability to read and the money to pay for books (which, as they often had to be smuggled in from abroad, were generally rather expensive). Similarly, the greater influence of Protestantism at the University of Cambridge than at Oxford partly reflects the former's proximity to the continental ports from which Protestant books were being (illicitly) imported.

Protestantism Term used to designate those who “protested” against the practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic church.

Second, the Reformation was based upon certain specific sources: the Bible and the Christian theologians of the first five centuries (often referred to as “the Fathers,” or “the patristic writers”). The invention of printing had two immediate effects upon these sources, of considerable importance to the origins of the Reformation. It was now possible to produce more accurate editions of these works – for example, through the elimination of copying errors. By comparing the printed text of a work with manuscript sources, the best possible text could be established and used as the basis of theological reflection. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, humanist scholars rummaged through the libraries of Europe in search of patristic manuscripts which they could edit and publish.

As a result, these sources were made much more widely available than had ever been possible before. By the 1520s, just about anyone could gain access to a reliable edition of the Greek text of the New Testament or the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), a patristic writer particularly favored by the Reformers. The 11 volumes of the collected works of Augustine were published at Basle by the Amerbach brothers, after an editorial process lasting from 1490 to 1506. Although only 200 copies of each volume seem to have been published, they were widely used to gain access to the most reliable text of this important writer.

Erasmus of Rotterdam produced the first published text of the Greek New Testament in 1516 (see Figure 1.2). Entitled *Novum Instrumentum omne*, the work had three main sections: the original Greek text of the New Testament; a new Latin translation of this Greek text, which corrected inadequate existing translations, especially the **Vulgate** (see pp. 94–5); and, finally, an extended

Vulgate Latin translation of the Bible upon which medieval theology was largely based.



Figure 1.2 Erasmus of Rotterdam in the print shop of his friend Johannes Froben of Basle. © Bettmann/CORBIS

commentary on the text in the form of annotations. The work was widely used by those sympathetic to the cause of the Reformation. For the reformers – especially Luther and his colleagues at Wittenberg – the religious ideas of the Reformation drew largely on the Bible and Augustine. The advent of printing, linked with increasingly effective bookselling methods, meant that accurate and reliable texts of both these sources were widely available, thus facilitating both the initial development and the subsequent spread of these ideas.

The importance of printing in spreading the ideas of the Reformation cannot be overstated. Surveys of the personal book collections of French bourgeois families point to the religious implications of this trend. Jacques Lefèvre’s French New Testament of 1523, pointedly addressed “to all Christian men and women,” along with his French Psalter of 1524, were read widely throughout France, and were even distributed free of charge within the reforming diocese of Meaux. Copies of these works, along with the New Testament commentaries of Erasmus, Melancthon, and Lefèvre himself, are frequently to be found jostling for space on the shelves of bourgeois libraries in the late 1520s. If these books were ever read by their owners – and the evidence strongly suggests that they were – a considerable head of pressure for reform would have developed.

The Use of the Vernacular in Theological Debates

Luther had learned from Erasmus the importance of the printing press in projecting intellectual influence within society. In 1520, he began to advance the cause of his reformation by appealing directly to the German people, over the heads of clerics and academics, through the medium of print. It was a tactic that would be imitated throughout Europe, as the power of the pamphlet became obvious to all. Luther now began to have the popular impact that he knew was essential if he was to change the shape of the church, rather than tinker with academic niceties. He would do this by using the vernacular as a means of theological communication.

Why was this development so important? The language of the academy, the church, and the state in western Europe throughout the Middle Ages was Latin. There was an obvious need for a common language to allow communication across this vast and diverse region of the world. Latin was the language of the great Roman poets, rhetoricians, politicians, and philosophers, and of highly influential Christian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose of Milan, and Tertullian. Luther knew that anything he wrote in Latin would be understood by the educated elite across Europe.

Yet Luther wanted to reach beyond an academic readership and touch the hearts and minds of ordinary people. The decision to publish in German was iconic, making a statement about the inclusive nature of the reformation that Luther proposed to pursue. To publish in Latin was to exclude the ordinary people. To publish in his native German was to democratize the debate about the future of the church by including those who were traditionally marginalized by the use of the ancient scholarly language. From that moment onward, one of the hallmarks of Protestantism would be its use of the vernacular at every level. Most importantly of all, the Bible would also be translated into the language of the people.

An example will illustrate the importance of both printing and the use of the vernacular to the propagation of the ideas of the Reformation. A crucial turning point in the French Reformation was marked by the publication of the French-language edition of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1541. Suddenly, coherently expressed and carefully justified radical reforming doctrines were available within France in a language which most could understand (see pp. 247–50).

There was something approaching panic in official circles in Paris. On 1 July 1542, the Parisian *parlement* directed that all works containing heterodox doctrines, especially Calvin's *Institutes*, were to be surrendered to the authorities within three days. Calvin's *Institutes* were thus seen as the spearhead of a Genevan assault upon the French Catholic church, mediated through the printed word in French. The reaction from the booksellers of Paris was immediate: they protested that they would face financial ruin if they were prohibited from selling such

books. It seems that there was a major market for works which were considered to be dangerously unsound by the authorities – further evidence of the importance of a literate and affluent laity in promoting the ideas of the Reformation. Indeed, Laurent de Normandie, Calvin's friend and bookseller, found the contraband book trade so profitable that he emigrated to Geneva, in order that he might publish such books rather than just sell them.

This is not to say, however, that the Reformation was wholly dependent upon a technological innovation, or the use of the vernacular. The social context of the Reformation helps us understand something of its appeal at the time.

The Social Context of the Reformation

The northern European Reformation was based largely in the cities. In Germany, more than 50 of the 65 "imperial cities" responded positively to the Reformation, with only five choosing to ignore it altogether. In Switzerland, the Reformation originated in an urban context (Zurich), and spread through a process of public debate within Confederate cities such as Berne and Basle and other centers – such as Geneva and St Gallen – linked to these cities by treaty obligations. French Protestantism began as a predominantly urban movement, with its roots in major cities such as Lyons, Orléans, Paris, Poitiers, and Rouen.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the success or failure of the Reformation in these cities was dependent in part upon political and social factors. By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the city councils of the imperial cities had managed to gain a substantial degree of independence. In effect, each city seems to have regarded itself as a miniature state, with the city council functioning as a government and the remainder of the inhabitants as subjects.

The growth in the size and importance of the cities of Germany is one of the more significant elements in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century history. An extended food crisis, linked with the ravages of the Black Death, led to an agrarian crisis. Wheat prices dropped alarmingly in the period 1450–1520, leading to rural depopulation as agricultural workers migrated to the cities in the hope of finding food and employment. Denied access both to the trade guilds and to the city councils, discontent grew within this new urban proletariat.

The early sixteenth century thus witnessed growing social unrest in many cities, as demands for broader-based and more representative government gained momentum. In many cases, the Reformation came to be linked with these demands for social change, so that religious and social change went together, hand in hand. We must not think that religious concerns swamped all other mental activities – they simply provided a focal point for them. Economic, social, and political factors help explain why the Reformation succeeded, for example, in Nuremberg and Strasbourg, yet failed in Erfurt.

A number of theories have been advanced since about 1970 to explain the appeal of the Reformation to the cities. The German church historian Berndt

Moeller has argued that the urban sense of community had been disrupted in the fifteenth century through growing social tension within the cities and an increasing tendency to rely upon external political bodies, such as the imperial government or the papal curia.¹ By adopting the Lutheran Reformation, Moeller suggested, such cities were able to restore a sense of communal identity, including the notion of a common religious community binding inhabitants together in a shared religious life. Significantly, Moeller drew attention to the social implications of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (see pp. 210–12), which broke down certain traditional distinctions within urban society and encouraged a sense of communal unity.

A second explanation was advanced by the American cultural historian Thomas A. Brady, based largely upon his analysis of the city of Strasbourg.² Brady argued that the decision to adopt Protestantism at Strasbourg was the outcome of a class struggle, in which a ruling coalition of patricians and merchants believed that their social position could be maintained only through alignment with the Reformation. The urban oligarchs introduced the Reformation as a subtle means of preserving their vested interests, which were threatened by a popular protest movement. A similar situation, Brady suggested, existed in many other cities.

A third explanation of the appeal of the Reformation to sixteenth-century urban communities centers on the doctrine of justification by faith (an idea explored in detail in Chapter 7). In a study published in 1975, the American church historian Steven Ozment argued that the popular appeal of Protestantism derived from its doctrine of justification by faith, which offered relief from the psychological pressure of the late medieval penitential system and an associated "semi-Pelagian" doctrine of justification.³ As the weight of this psychological burden was greatest and most evident in urban communities, he argued, it was within such communities that Protestantism found its greatest popular support.

Ozment argued that Moeller had vastly exaggerated the differences between Luther and the theologians of the southwest. The early reformers shared a common message, which could be summarized as the liberation of individual believers from the psychological burdens imposed by late medieval religion. Whatever their differences, the magisterial reformers – such as Bucer, Zwingli, and Luther – shared a common concern to proclaim the doctrine of justification by faith through grace, thereby eliminating the theological necessity of and diminishing the popular concern for indulgences, purgatory, invocation of the saints, and so forth. This theory is of importance to this work because it illustrates the role of ideas in generating pressure for reform and change: the pressure for social change is, according to Ozment, the *outcome*, not the *cause*, of the new religious ideas of the age.

Each of these theories is significant, and together they have provided an important stimulus to the more detailed study of the development of urban Protestantism in the first phase of the Reformation. Equally, each has been shown to have obvious weaknesses, as one might expect from ambitious global theories. For

example, in the case of Geneva, as we shall see, the social tensions which eventually resulted in alignment with the Protestant city of Berne and adoption of the Zwinglian Reformation did not arise from class differences, but from division within a common social class over whether to support Savoy or the Swiss Confederacy. The pro-Savoyard Mammelukes and the pro-Bernese Eiguénots were both drawn from a single social group, characterized by a range of identifiable shared economic, familial, and social interests. Similarly, Ozment's suggestion of a universal concern for the doctrine of justification finds little support in the case of cities within or linked with the Swiss Confederacy – such as Zurich, St Gallen, and Geneva – and overlooks the obvious hesitations concerning the doctrine on the part of many Swiss reformers.

Nevertheless, some common features emerge from a study of the origins and development of the Reformation in major northern European cities such as Augsburg, Basle, Berne, Colmar, Constance, Erfurt, Frankfurt, Geneva, Hamburg, Lübeck, Memmingen, Ulm, and Zurich. It is helpful to explore them.

In the first place, the Reformation in the cities appears to have been a response to some form of popular pressure for change. Nuremberg is a rare instance of a city council imposing a reformation without significant preceding popular protest or demand. Dissatisfaction among urban populations of the early sixteenth century was not necessarily purely religious in character; social, economic, and political grievances were unquestionably present, to varying extents, within the agglomerate of unrest evident at the time. City councils generally reacted in response to this popular pressure, often channeling it in directions appropriate to their own needs and purposes. This subtle manipulation of such pressure was an obvious way of co-opting and controlling a potentially dangerous popular protest movement. Existing urban regimes were often relatively unchanged by the introduction of new religious ideas and practices, which suggests that city councils were able to respond to such popular pressure without radical changes in the existing social orders.

Second, the success of the Reformation within a city was dependent upon a number of historical contingencies. To adopt the Reformation was to risk a disastrous change in political alignment, in that existing treaties or relationships – military, political, and commercial – with territories or cities which chose to remain Catholic were usually deemed to be broken as a result. A city's trading relationships – upon which her economic existence might depend – might thus be compromised fatally. Thus the success of the Reformation in the city of St Gallen was partly due to the fact that the city's linen industry was not adversely affected to any significant degree by the decision to adopt the Reformation. Equally, a city (such as Erfurt) in close proximity to a Catholic city (Mainz) and a Lutheran territory (Saxony) could risk becoming embroiled in military conflict with one or other of these interested parties, with potentially lethal results for the independence of that city.

Third, the romantic, idealized vision of a reformer arriving in a city to preach the gospel, with an immediate ensuing decision on the part of the city to adopt

the principles of the Reformation, must be abandoned as quite unrealistic. Throughout the entire process of reformation, from the initial decision to implement a process of reform to subsequent decisions concerning the nature and the pace of reforming proposals, it was the city council who remained in control. Zwingli's Reformation in Zurich proceeded considerably more slowly than he would have liked on account of the cautious approach adopted by the council at crucial moments. Bucer's freedom of action in Strasbourg was similarly limited. As Calvin would discover, city councils were perfectly able to evict reformers from their precincts if they stepped out of line with publicly stated council policy or decisions.

In practice, the relationship between city council and reformer was generally symbiotic. The reformer, by presenting a coherent vision of the Christian gospel and its implications for the religious, social, and political structures and practices of a city, was able to prevent a potentially revolutionary situation from degenerating into chaos. The constant threat of reversion to Catholicism, or subversion by radical Anabaptist movements, rendered the need for a reformer inevitable. Someone had to give religious direction to a movement which, unchecked and lacking direction, might degenerate into chaos, with momentous and unacceptable consequences for the existing power structures of the city and the individuals who controlled them.

Equally, the reformer was someone who was under authority, one whose freedom of action was limited by political masters jealous for their authority and with a reforming agenda that generally extended beyond that of the reformer to include consolidation of their economic and social influence. The relation between reformer and city council was thus delicate, easily prone to disruption, with real power permanently in the hands of the latter.

In the case of Geneva, a delicate relationship developed between the city's reformers (initially Guillaume Farel and Calvin, subsequently Calvin alone) and the city council. Conscious and jealous of its hard-won authority and liberty, the city council was determined not to substitute the tyranny of a reformer for that of a Catholic bishop. In 1536, the city had just gained its independence from Savoy, and had largely retained that independence, despite the attempts of Berne to colonize the city. Geneva was in no mood to be dictated to by anyone, unless they were in a position to bring massive economic and military pressure to bear. As a result, severe restrictions were placed upon Calvin's activities. He was someone whose options were very limited.

The expulsion of Calvin from Geneva in 1538 demonstrates that political power remained firmly in the hands of the city council. The notion that Calvin was the "dictator of Geneva" is totally devoid of historical foundation. Nevertheless, the city council found itself unable to cope with a deteriorating religious situation in Calvin's absence. In a remarkable act of social pragmatism and religious realism, the council recalled their reformer, and allowed him to continue his work of reform. Geneva needed Calvin, just as Calvin needed Geneva.

An important difference may be noted at this point between Lutheran and Reformed thought. Luther was the product of a small Saxon town under the thumb of the local prince, but the great Reformed thinkers Zwingli and Bucer were the product of the great free cities of Zurich and Strasbourg. For these latter, the Reformation involved the identification of “citizen” with “Christian,” with a great emphasis upon the political dimension of life quite absent from Luther’s thought. Thus Zwingli laid great emphasis upon the need to reform and redeem a *community*, whereas Luther tended to concentrate upon the need to reform and redeem the *individual*. Luther, through his doctrine of the “Two Kingdoms,” effectively separated religious ideas from secular life, whereas Zwingli insisted upon their mutual integration. It is therefore significant that the Reformed church gained its most secure power bases in the cities of southern Germany and Switzerland, which were more advanced socially, culturally, and economically than the northern cities destined to become Lutheran strongholds.

The social context of the Reformation is a fascinating subject in itself, but is noted here primarily on account of its obvious influence upon at least some of the religious ideas of the reformers. For example, there are excellent reasons for suggesting that many of Zwingli’s ideas (especially his ideas concerning the societal function of the sacraments) were directly conditioned by the political, economic, and social circumstances of Zurich. Equally, some of Calvin’s ideas about the proper structures of a Christian church seem to reflect institutions already in existence at Geneva prior to his arrival in that city. We shall consider this issue at a number of points in the course of this work.

The Religious Concerns of the Reformers: A Brief Overview

It is appropriate to introduce the religious ideas of the reformers at this point. These ideas will be amplified and developed throughout this study, and the present section is intended to give the reader a preliminary overview. Just as a sketch map provides a broad survey of an area in order that fine detail may be mapped in later, so the present section is intended to introduce the reader to the ideas to be encountered as this work progresses.

The fundamental conviction motivating the magisterial reformers was that Christianity could best be reformed and renewed by returning to the beliefs and practices of the early church. The first five centuries – often designated “the patristic period” – tended to be regarded as the Golden Age of Christianity. The great vision of many sixteenth-century reformers was summed up in the Latin slogan *Christianismus renascens* – “Christianity being born again.” How could this rebirth take place?

The reformers pointed to the vitality of Christianity in the apostolic period, as witnessed by the New Testament, and argued that it was both possible and necessary to recapture the spirit and the form of this pivotal period in the history

of the Christian church. It was necessary to go back to the New Testament and its earliest interpreters, in order to learn from them. These were the title deeds of Christendom, the fountainhead of Christian belief and practice.

Standing in the great tradition of the Old Testament prophets, the reformers laid down a challenge to the religious leaders of their day. They saw the latter as guilty of condoning additions to and distortions of the Christian faith – alterations which reflected the interests of ecclesiastical fund-raisers and which fed popular superstition. The doctrine of purgatory and the related practice of selling indulgences were singled out as representing sub-Christian cults, exploiting the hopes and fears of the ordinary people. It was time to eliminate such corruptions through the consistent appeal to the beliefs and practices of the early church, which was held up as a model for the kind of shake-up and clean-out that the church so badly needed.

This emphasis upon early Christianity as resource, a norm, and point of reference for the sixteenth-century vision of *Christianismus renascens* allows us to understand why the reformers placed such great emphasis upon the New Testament and the early Christian writers usually known as “the Fathers” or “the patristic writers.” It was in these writings that a blueprint for the reformation and renewal of the church was to be found. Here could be found the original ideals of Christianity.

Thus the production of the first Greek New Testament and the first edition of the works of Augustine (regarded by most reformers as *the* patristic writer) were milestones in the sixteenth-century program of reform, and became widely available throughout Europe. For Martin Luther, the program of reform at the University of Wittenberg around 1519 could be summed up in a simple phrase: “the Bible and St Augustine.”

The rise of Renaissance humanism was widely regarded as providential, in that the great advances made in Hebrew and Greek studies in relation to classical texts in western Europe paved the way for the direct engagement with the scriptural text, in place of the unreliable Latin translation of the Vulgate. The new textual and philological techniques pioneered by the humanists were regarded as holding the key to the world of the New Testament, and hence authentic Christianity. As the sixteenth century entered its second decade, there were many who felt that a new era was dawning, in which the voice of authentic Christianity, silent for so long, would be heard once more.

Simple though this program of reform might seem, it was nevertheless accompanied by formidable difficulties, which we shall be exploring in the course of this work. The agenda for the Reformation had been set, and the tools by which it might be achieved were being prepared. But we must plunge into the heady waters of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century thought if we are to understand the backdrop to this drama in human history.

Having explored some preliminary issues, we are now in a position to engage with the Reformation. The most appropriate place to begin this encounter is by exploring the world of late medieval Christianity, to which we now turn.

Notes

- 1 B. Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1972).
- 2 T. A. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg, 1520–1555* (Leiden, 1977).
- 3 S. E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (New Haven, 1975).

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