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## History, Historiography, and Interpretations of the Reformations

*We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were from death to renewed life.*

Peter of Blois (d. 1212)

### History and Historiography

Peter of Blois penned this famous aphorism almost exactly three centuries before Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" rocked Europe. A major study of the historiography of the Reformation (Dickens and Tonkin 1985: 323) concludes that it is "a window on the West, a major point of access to the developing Western mind through the last five centuries. ... By any reckoning, the Reformation has proved a giant among the great international movements of modern times." On its shoulders we can look farther and deeper in both directions; that is, we can peer into both the medieval and contemporary worlds.

History provides a horizon for viewing not only the past but also the present and the future. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975: 269, 272) argued that a person without a horizon will overvalue what is immediately present, whereas the horizon enables us to sense the relative significance of what is near or far, great or small. "A horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion." In other words, "far away facts – in history as in navigation – are more effective than near ones in giving us true bearings" (Murray 1974: 285). Even novice sailors know it is foolish to navigate by sighting your prow rather than by sighting the stars or land.

Historical distance, by providing a focus beyond what we take for granted, can be a surprising component of contemporary comprehension. The analogy of living in a foreign city illustrates this. If you live in a foreign city for a year, you will not learn a great deal about that city. However, when you return home you will be surprised by your increasing comprehension of some of the most profound and individual characteristics of your homeland. You did not previously "see" these characteristics because you were too close to them; you

knew them too well. Likewise, a visit to the past provides distance and a vantage point from which to comprehend the present (Nygren 1948; Braudel 1972). L. P. Hartley began his novel *The Go-Between* with the memorable sentence: “The past is another country; they do things differently there.”

Memory also illustrates perspective. “Memory is the thread of personal identity, history of public identity” (Hofstadter 1968: 3; Leff 1971: 115). Memory and historical identity are inseparable. Have you ever been asked to introduce someone and suddenly forgotten his or her name? At worst this common human experience is a temporary embarrassment. However, think what life would be like if you had no memory at all. We all have heard how terribly difficult life is for amnesiacs, and about the tragic effects of Alzheimer’s disease upon its victims and their families. The loss of memory is not just the absence of “facts;” it is the loss of personal identity, family, friends, and, indeed, the whole complex of life’s meaning. It is very difficult if not impossible to function in society if we do not know who we are and how we got this way. Our memory is the thread of our personal identity; our memory liberates us from what Melanchthon, Luther’s colleague, called perpetual childhood. Without our past we have no present and no future.

What about our national and religious community identities? Are we amnesiacs, are we children, when it comes to identifying who we are in relation to our communities? What if we had to identify ourselves as an American or a Christian? Suppose someone asked why we are Protestant or Roman Catholic. Beyond referring to our parents or a move to a new neighborhood, could we explain why we belong to Grace Lutheran by the gas station instead of St Mary’s by the grocery store?

I once asked a French friend to explain German–French relations. He began by referring to the ninth-century division of Charlemagne’s empire! Most of us do not go that far back to answer contemporary questions, but his response illustrates that if memory is the thread of personal identity, history is the thread of community identity. These tenacious threads of community identity also have a dark side when they are not critically examined. This is painfully evident in the eruption of historical ethnic conflicts such as those in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union as well as in the Middle East. If we do not know our personal and community histories we are like children who are easily manipulated by those who would use the past for their own purposes.

Memory and history are crucial to our identity, but they are not easily conceptualized in relation to their origins and goals. Here I take comfort in the comment of the great African theologian, St Augustine (354–430), who when discussing time wrote: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not” (*Confessions*, Book XI). This most influential Western theologian was struggling to relate to his Hellenistic–Roman culture the Christian conviction that the identity of the community is rooted in history rather than in philosophy and ethics. This conviction had already been clearly stated in the historical shorthand of the Christian creeds, which confess faith in the historical person of Jesus who was born, suffered, and died. Christians put a unique spin on history when they also confess that this Jesus was raised from the dead and will return to bring history to completion. Thus, from an insider’s perspective, the Christian community’s identity is formed by both the historical past and the historical future. Without sensitivity to this theological claim, it would be difficult for us to fully realize the power in the

Reformations of apocalyptic views of history or such works as John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. This sense of the historical past, present, and future identity of the church, expressed in the third article of the creeds by the phrase "communion of saints," was so palpable to the medieval that the English Roman Catholic historian John Bossy (1985) makes it the theme of his study of the Reformation. As we shall see, the historical identity of the communion of saints became a central controversial issue in the Reformation era.

Sociologists of knowledge make a similar point about historical identity rooted in community. Historical identity is passed on to us through our conversations with the mothers and fathers who have gone before us. In this sense, church historians take seriously the fourth commandment of the Decalogue: "Honor your father and mother." We know, of course, from even limited family experience that when we no longer talk to our parents and children we begin to forget who we are. This is not to say that conversation between generations is always pleasant, but to say that it is important for learning how we got this way. Without such conversation we are condemned to "presentism," a fancy term to describe the solipsism of a continuous "me generation." Thus the postwar German phrase *Welt ohne Vater* is shorthand for the loss of roots and the authority crises suffered by the generation whose fathers fell in the war. Lord Acton stated this elegantly: "History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe. It requires all historic forces to produce their record and submit it to judgment, and it promotes the faculty of resistance to contemporary surroundings by familiarity with other ages and orbits of thought" (Pelikan 1971: 150).

Until recently the collectors and tellers of the family conversations of Christianity were nearly all insiders. Thus the subject matter and the discipline of its telling fell under the rubric of "church history." For a variety of reasons today, persons outside the Christian churches are also interested in presenting the history of Christianity. There is, to paraphrase an old maxim, the sense that the telling of the story of Christian contributions to contemporary identity is too important to be left to the Christians. The field of Reformation studies is a marked example of this recent development.

Awareness of the distinct perspectives of church historians and historians of Christianity will be useful in terms of reading both contemporary textbooks and the historical sources. We shall get to other perspectives later, but for now we may remind ourselves that interpretations of the past are not value free. Indeed, Heisenberg's "indeterminacy principle" applies as much to historical studies as it does to subatomic physics: what is observed is influenced by the observer. "It is paradoxical, in fact, that nature seems more unambiguously susceptible to human understanding and control than is history which man makes and in which he is personally and intimately involved" (Spitz 1962: vii). In the words of the late English historian, G. R. Elton (1967: 13): "In truth, historians, like other people, tend to judge their world from their own experiences and practice, and it is disturbing to see how narrow in their sympathies even eminent men can be."

Some of the presuppositions that govern an author's collection and interpretation of events leap right off the page at us; others are more subtle. This is exemplified by the work of Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340), the "Father of Church History." In the introduction to his *The History of the Church*, Eusebius begins with a "truth in advertising"

statement, the candor of which is all too rare in modern historical works. “From the scattered hints dropped by my predecessors I have picked out whatever seems relevant to the task I have undertaken, plucking like flowers in literary pastures the helpful contributions of earlier writers to be embodied in the continuous narrative I have in mind.”

Historians are selective in choosing data. Until very recently this selection has been governed by religious and theological commitments. This is not surprising since church historians traditionally work with a double perspective: the history of the church and the contemporizing of the past as a critical measure of the church’s faithfulness. The latter critical point means that the focus of the church historian’s work is a community that is already existing but not yet completed. In theological terms, there is an eschatological dimension to church historical work because the community being studied believes it lives between the “now” of the historical activity and promise of Jesus, and the “not yet” of the full realization of the Jesus movement. The problem this poses for modern historical method is how to write a history of that which claims to occur in history but also claims to be the end to history. Such metahistorical claims to privileged insight into the course and goal of history are of course not limited to theologians; they may be seen in such disparate modern expressions as Hegel’s idealist conviction of the self-realization of the absolute world spirit, Marx’s materialist conviction of the realization of the classless society, and the American belief in the triumph of democracy, to name but a few.

The hegemony of theological and church historical studies of the Reformations of the sixteenth century has only recently been critically questioned, and the implications of this questioning are beginning to find their way into textbooks. How radical this change is may be seen by a review of the long predominance of the Eusebian model of historical writing, which normed the “true” church by the community of the first centuries of the Christian era. The norm of the first centuries led to the rationalization of historical change and development as expressions of the unchanging essence of early Christianity, and idealized the apostolic age, the time of origins. This norm was operative in all parties of the Reformation era, and is easily seen in the various Reformers’ appeals to Scripture and the apostolic faith to support their respective claims to be *the* continuation of the early church. Thus in the Leipzig debate (1519) over papal authority, Luther stated that papal claims to superiority are relatively recent. “Against them stand the history of eleven hundred years, the text of divine Scripture, and the decree of the Council of Nicea [325], the most sacred of all councils” (*LW* 31: 318).

Even though the Reformations of the sixteenth century split the church, all parties continued to hold to the Eusebian model of church history by claiming to be *the* faithful recovery or continuation of the early church, and by accusing other churches of innovation (i.e. heresy). The Reformers urged people to judge all doctrines by Scripture, so all the churches turned to history to legitimate and bolster their individual claims to be the faithful community. Those convinced that the medieval church was a total corruption of the early church developed martyrologies to support their view that in spite of corruption there continued to be faithful witnesses to the Jesus movement in history.

The ground for the Reformers’ critique of the recent past as degenerate was prepared by the prior generation of humanists. The term “Middle Ages” (*media aetas*, *medium tempus*, *medium aevum*) is first encountered in scattered references by fifteenth-century humanists.

They considered this segment of time an intermediate period between what they perceived as the ideal and glorified classical period (à la Eusebius) and their own time, which they termed “modern.” The humanists aspired and strove for a rebirth (Renaissance) of ancient and classical language, education, science, art, and the church. Humanists regarded the Middle Ages as barbaric, so, for example, its art was called “gothic.” This humanist characterization was driven not just by aesthetic and philological criteria but by theological and religious criteria as well. The men and women of the Renaissance projected back into history their own reactions to what they regarded as the superstitious and narrow-minded orthodoxy and authoritarianism of the church of their day. The influence of this humanist perspective continues to be evident in our use of pejorative labels such as “Dark Ages” and “scholastic.”

While it is sometimes said that contemporary culture is fascinated with innovation and the new, the motto of Renaissance culture was *ad fontes*, back to the sources. The Reformers, most of whom were strongly influenced by humanism, echoed this with regard to Scripture and the early church. Melancthon characterized the Reformation as the age “in which God recalled the church to its origins” (*in qua Deus Ecclesiam iterum ad fontes revocavit*: Ferguson 1948: 52). The sense that “older is better” characterized histories of the church stemming from the Reformations. Under the leadership of the Lutheran Matthew Flacius Illyricus (1520–75), a group of scholars developed a history of the church from its beginning down to 1400, titled *Historia Ecclesiae Christi*. Since this work divided the history of the church into centuries and was begun in the city of Magdeburg, it is also known as the “Magdeburg Centuries.” The Eusebian model remains effective in the “Centuries,” for Flacius argued that the Reformation was the restoration of the original purity of the early church. Not surprisingly for a Lutheran apologist, the key to the faithfulness of the church was seen to be the doctrine of justification by grace alone. The original purity of the church lasted to about 300, and with some reservations even up to 600, but then there was a fall away from the faith due to the expansion of the papacy. In terms of periodization, the “Magdeburg Centuries” present the three periods now familiar to us: the ancient church or time of origins up to the fourth century, the medieval period of decay up to the fifteenth century, and the new period of recovery of the gospel. The historical reality of this tripartite division into ancient, medieval, and modern was little questioned and passed into the schema of universal history by the end of the seventeenth century, as exemplified by the title of Christoph Cellarius’s work, *Historia tripartita* (1685).

Not to be outdone, the Roman Catholic church responded to the “Magdeburg Centuries” with the Herculean efforts of Caesar Baronius (1538–1607). After years of work in the Vatican archives, Baronius began publishing his study of the history of the church. Baronius proceeded year by year, and hence the title of his work is *Annales Ecclesiastici*. By the time of his death it had reached the year 1198. No less partisan than Flacius, and equally subject to the Eusebian model, Baronius focused his study on the institution of the papacy rather than the doctrine of justification. These two works illustrate the different understandings of Reformation by the Lutheran and Roman Catholic reform movements. The former focused on the reformation of dogma; the latter focused on renewal of the church as institution.

The dissident movements of the Reformation era were more interested in personal renewal than in either dogma or institution. In terms of church historical writing this tendency came

to the fore in the so-called “impartial” history by Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714): *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (the full title translates as “The Impartial History of the Church and of Heretics from the Beginnings of the New Testament to the Year of Christ 1688”). To Arnold, the essence of the Christian faith was not dogmatic, ecclesiastical, juridical, or cultic, but rather the personal piety of individuals. From this point of view those whom the churches (Protestant and Catholic) had persecuted as heretics were now seen as the true Christians who had faithfully followed Jesus in opposing the “Babel” of both the established church and the world. The key to the critical reading of the history of the church was seen to be the “rebirth” of individuals. While Arnold’s concept of a “nonpartisan” or “impartial” reading of history should not be equated with more modern attempts at “objectivity,” it is sometimes seen as foreshadowing this effort. Furthermore, the concern with individuals and their conversion experiences foreshadows later interest in biographical and psychological studies of historical figures, such as Erik H. Erikson’s *Young Man Luther* (1958).

However, even with these contributions, Arnold and the dissident reform movements before him, remained in debt to the Eusebian model of church history. For them the consummate epoch of the church was the first three centuries, which they saw as filled with the spirit of freedom, living faith, and holy living. The corruption and decay of the early church began under the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (d. 337), with the legitimizing of the church in the Roman empire and its consequent participation in Roman power and wealth. Here, too, the Middle Ages were seen as a long period of decline.

The Eusebian model of church history set the stage for the various Reformers’ understandings of their own contexts, and it also illustrates that reflections on history are colored by value judgments. It is all too easy for us today as we stand upon the shoulders of those who went before us to criticize them for being unaware of what now appears self-evident to us. However, every age is marked by what it takes to be self-evident, and hence uncritically takes for granted. This is equally true of us. Thus a recent study of twentieth-century medievalists is titled *Inventing the Middle Ages*. The author writes that our own anxieties, hopes, loves, and disappointments interact with our reading and writing of history. “The ideas of the Middle Ages articulated by the master medievalists vary substantially one from another. The libretto and score they are working from – the data of historical fact – are the same. The truth, therefore, is ultimately not in the textual details but in the interpretations” (Cantor 1991: 45).

## Interpretations of the Reformations

To cite Cantor (1991: 367) again: “We tend to discover the past we set out to find. This is not because the past is a willfully imagined fiction but because it is such a complicated and multifaceted reality.” Without a perspective, without a horizon, the selection, arrangement, and interpretation of historical data would be helter-skelter. The multiplicity of interpretations may contribute to our understanding as well as to our confusion. Given the existence of varying horizons among historians, it is helpful to both the historian and his or her audience when the horizon is indicated. Mine is that religion and theology are central to understanding the Reformations. I hasten to add that they must be seen in their cultural contexts.

An initial move to control the complicated and multifaceted reality of the Reformation is to define the terms used for it and the era it covers. Until recently that was briefly and simply done. The widely used textbook for undergraduate “Renaissance–Reformation” history courses of the prior generation in America, Harold J. Grimm’s *The Reformation Era 1500–1650*, quickly disposed of the temporal parameters and the problem of definition: “In these pages the word *Reformation* is used in its conventional sense, that is, involving the rise of an evangelical Christianity, called Protestantism, that could not accommodate itself to the old theology and ecclesiastical institutions” (Grimm 1973: 2; cf. Cameron 1991: 2).

In more recent scholarship this “conventional sense” of the Reformation has given way to recognition that there was a plurality of Reformations that interacted with each other: Lutheran, Catholic, Reformed, and dissident movements. These multiple reforming movements are not fully understood if explained *only* in terms of religious reform without account being taken of their historical, political, social, and economic contexts and influences. If we lose sight of the Reformations’ complex network of historical relationships we may oversimplify our conception and evaluation of Reformation theology itself. “After all, this theology had such a great impact in history precisely because it was intricately interwoven into history” (Moeller 1982: 7).

The word “Reformation” has a long, involved history that on the one hand goes back to classical times (cf. Strauss 1995: 1–28) and on the other hand in contemporary undergraduate curricula is almost always associated with the “Renaissance,” as in “Ren–Ref” courses. The medieval use of *reformatio* may generally be understood in terms of the Eusebian rubric that older is better. Technically, the term was used in relation to the re-establishing of universities in their original condition (e.g. *reformatio in pristinum statum*). The fourteenth-century conciliar movement used the phrase “reformation of the church in head and members” (*reformatio ecclesiae in capite et in membris*), meaning by this an ethical appeal to self-reform by individuals. Thus ethical renewal appeared more important than the reform of the church as an institution. This theme is continued in the widely circulated *The Reformation of the Emperor Sigismund* (ca. 1438), which calls for the restoration of the lost proper order of things through ethical renewal and the re-establishment of God’s order. Similarly, the “Prophecy of Johann Lichtenberger” (1488) spoke of a new reformation, a new law, a new kingdom, and a change among the clergy and the common people. The observance of the law of Christ and of the natural law were to return church and society to their original God-willed condition. In the sixteenth century, “reformation” developed further meanings of improvement and renewal in both ecclesiastical and profane usage.

It is of interest that Luther himself seldom used the term “reformation” apart from his successful effort to create a new curriculum at his own university. The English translation of his significant outline for reform, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), suggests Luther’s use of the term, but the title in German denotes “improvement” (*Besserung*). When Luther does use the term “reformation,” he gives it a new sense: he ties it to doctrine rather than ethical renewal. The crux of genuine reform, he said in an early sermon, is the proclamation of the gospel of grace alone. This requires the reform of theology and preaching but is ultimately the work of God alone. Here Luther differs from all the so-called “forerunners” of the Reformation.

“For Luther man could not be reformed – that is, restored to an earlier condition – but only forgiven” (Bouwsma 1980: 239).

It was not until the end of the seventeenth century, in Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff’s *Commentarius historicus et apologeticus de Lutheranismo sive de reformatione religionis ductu D. Martini Lutheri in magna Germaniae parte aliisque regionibus* (1694), that the concept Reformation was applied to the history of the church. Seckendorff understood “Reformation” as the key word for the clarification of events in Germany in the first half of the sixteenth century. His work is not a history of the Reformation in a comprehensive sense, for it is limited to religion and ends with Luther’s death; nevertheless, with his work, Reformation as a concept for an era or epoch entered the vocabulary and concepts of historical studies.

The early characterization of the Reformation as an era or epoch linked it to the career of Luther. The dictionaries and encyclopedias of the eighteenth century characterized the Reformation as an epoch defined by Luther’s divinely motivated work of cleansing the church of abuses and doctrinal errors. For all practical purposes the Reformation was identified with Luther. This illustrates Protestantism’s paradoxical tendency to make saints of those who rejected the veneration of saints (Bouwsma 1988: 2). Hence the Reformation as an epoch was bracketed by the date of the “Ninety-Five Theses” (1517) as the beginning and the Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555) as the end. “The whole period 1517–1555 was canonized as a self-sufficient phase of history, which tended to make people overlook the Bohemian Reformation of the fifteenth century and to undervalue not only the radical sects, but also the Reformed churches of Switzerland, France, and England” (Dickens and Tonkin 1985: 9). Such periodization also neglects the reforming movements within Catholicism as well as non-ecclesiastical events.

A comprehensive cultural sense of this era was first expressed in Leopold von Ranke’s *Deutscher Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (1839–), which presented church, historical, and political events as inseparable and mutually interactive. The “Epoch of the Reformation” (*Zeitalter der Reformation*) is paradigmatically expressed in the title of the second half of his study, “Die Anfänge Luthers und Karls V,” which juxtaposes Luther and the Emperor Charles V.

Ranke also popularized the term “Counter-Reformation.” He initially used this term in the plural (*Gegenreformationen*, Counter-Reformations). Roman Catholic historians took umbrage because this implied – and frequently stated – the historical and theological priority of the Protestant Reformation to which Catholicism then reacted. “The expression seemed to interpret the recovery of the Catholic Church merely as a counteraction to the schism and seemed to imply the use of force in religious matters” (Iserloh et al. 1986: 431). The Catholic scholar John Bossy (1985: 91) would just as soon drop the term Reformation altogether because “it goes along too easily with the notion that a bad form of Christianity was being replaced by a good one.” Indeed, earlier Roman Catholic historians generally used the term “religious schism” (*Glaubensspaltung*) rather than Reformation to designate this period. In short, terms are not always innocent of values and problems. Yet without terms and periodizations it would be impossible to provide a coherent drama of complex changes.

More recent terminology, sensitive to contemporary ecumenical relationships as well as to historical accuracy, focuses on “Catholic Reformation” or “Catholic Reform” to indicate that Catholic reform or renewal movements pre- as well as postdated Luther and were not

merely reactive. Nevertheless, confessional commitments aside, it is a historical mistake to ignore the reality of a “Catholic Counter-Reformation, which, springing from a preexistent, theologically conservative reformism, arose in force well within Luther’s lifetime and set bounds to Protestant expansion” (Jedin 1973: 46–81; Dickens and Tonkin 1985: 2). “Counter-Reformation” thus locates and characterizes much of the Catholic Church’s reaction to Protestantism. “But the term Reformation for Catholicism ... unwittingly implies a substantive reformation of doctrine, which was, in fact, programmatically resisted by the Council of Trent” (Williams 1992: 3, 5). The Jesuit Reformation scholar, John O’Malley (1991: 177–93), argues, however, that there was far more to Catholicism in this period than the council of Trent. Although “Catholic Reform” and “Counter-Reformation” are coextensive in this period, the terms may divert our attention from the more comprehensive reality of sixteenth-century Catholicism concerned with the care of souls beyond reform of abuses and institutions. In a substantive review of this historiography, O’Malley (2000) cogently argues that the phrase “early modern Catholicism” better designates both change and continuity than the older terms. In addition it is a phrase that encompasses the varieties of Catholicism of the time and thereby helps to liberate us from the long-standing bias that medieval and early modern Catholicism was a monolithic, authoritarian, papal institution. “‘Early Modern Catholicism,’ as a more open term, has space for the new roles played by Catholic women, lay and religious. Because it is not as susceptible to reductionism as the others [i.e. terms], it more easily allows that important influences on religious institutions and mentalities were at work in early modern culture that did not originate with religion and church as such but that nonetheless helped refashion them” (O’Malley 2000: 142). A recent Festschrift in O’Malley’s honor furthers this perspective (Comerford and Pabel 2001). Yet, the debates continue as Hillerbrand (2007: 461 n. 5) states: “The reason for such preference [“Early Modern Catholicism”] would seem rather obvious; it is to disconnect the history of sixteenth-century Catholicism from the Protestant Reformation.” I shall use the shorthand label “Roman Catholicism,” although it is anachronistic for this time period, because phrases such as “adherents of the old faith,” “adherents of the new faith,” “sixteenth century Catholicism,” and “early modern Catholicism” are awkward. Also, the Reformers believed they were faithfully representing the Catholic church. Technically, the modification of “Catholic” by “Roman” is appropriate only after the council of Trent (1545–63).

The term “Reformation” is frequently modified by “magisterial” and “radical.” Magisterial Reformation denotes the evangelical reform movements that were supported and enabled by magistrates, whether on the level of kings, princes, or town councils. Thus, for example, Luther won the support of the prince of Electoral Saxony, Zwingli the support of the town council of Zurich, and Calvin that of the councils of Geneva. Magisterial also refers to the authority of a teacher (*magister*); hence the teaching authority in the Roman Catholic Church, located in the pope and bishops in council, is termed the *Magisterium*. Among Protestants the teaching authority of Luther and Calvin was so great that reforming movements used their names, Lutheranism and Calvinism. “Thus the classical Magisterial Reformation was ‘magisterial’ not only in the primary sense that it allowed for a large role on the part of the state in implementing Reformation and even in assessing doctrinal, liturgical, and ecclesiological issues but also in the subsidiary sense that it accorded extraordinary authority to an individual teacher” (Williams 1992: 1281).

Those reforming movements which dissented from the so-called magisterial Reformers and stressed autonomy from political authorities have been labeled the “left wing” of the Reformation or, more recently, the “radical Reformation.” Although the latter term has been widely used in Reformation studies since George H. Williams’s major study, *The Radical Reformation*, “there has prevailed considerable uncertainty about its precise definition” (Hillerbrand 1986: 26). At the very least, it is clear that Luther was “left” of the Catholic establishment and there is a consensus that Luther’s position was “radical” up to the early 1520s. Thus “radical Reformation” is a problematic term associated with theological value judgments which “cannot be adjudicated by scholarly criteria” (Hillerbrand 1993: 416–17). Alternative terms for the so-called radicals are nonconformists and dissidents.

Indeed, it may be argued that “radical” in its fundamental sense of going to the roots (*radix*) equally applies to Luther’s conviction that Scripture alone is the norm of Christian faith. This is a sober argument when it is realized that it was the medieval clergy who were custodians of the predominant social myth and hence the legitimators of social structure and political organization, not to mention controllers of a good deal of property and wealth. “A challenge to the clergy thus had to be a radical challenge, calling for a revolutionary change in European society ... the Protestant Reformation was such a challenge” (Kingdon 1974: 57). “Together with the Italian Renaissance, the German Reformation has traditionally been viewed as the first of the great revolutions that created the modern world” (Ozment 1992: xiv). However, as with the other terms mentioned above, there are also many nuances and outright differences in how “revolution” is understood, including the Marxist view of the Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution.” In so far as the Reformation “can fairly be called ... an anticlerical revolution” one may speak of “the people’s Reformation” or “the Reformation of the common people” (Kingdon 1974: 60; Abray 1985; Blicke 1992).

In this brief survey of the definitions and periodization of the Reformation we have moved from a theological norm that judged sixteenth-century movements in relation to Luther (right – Catholicism; left – radicals) to social history. This latter, recent historiographical development does not necessarily conflict with the earlier approaches of intellectual historians concerned with biography and theology. “Rather, it asserts that the religious changes of the sixteenth century were fundamentally important in shaping the history of Europe and the wider world up to the modern age, and it defines as territory for exploration that area in which religious ideas and rituals impinged upon the structures of everyday life” (Hsia 1988: 8). The period has been extended back into the Middle Ages through increased awareness of the role of Catholic reforming movements and stretched into the eighteenth century in relation to its confessional, economic, and social effects. Some scholars refer heuristically to these centuries as “the long sixteenth century” or the “early modern” period to distinguish it from the modern period associated with the American, French, and Industrial Revolutions. Recent titles suggest this fluidity in characterizing the Reformation (e.g. Ozment 1971, 1980; Bossy 1985; MacCulloch 2003; Wiesner-Hanks 2006; Eire 2016). The editors of the *Handbook of European History* (Brady, Oberman, and Tracy 1994–5, 2: XIX; cf. also 1: XIII–XXIV) provide another reason: “The very choice of the chronological perimeters 1400–1600 raises a significant barrier to the confessional canonization of one isolated phase, privileging either the Late Middle Ages, the Renaissance,

or the Reformation.” In short, the definitions various scholars give to the word Reformation and its periodization are endeavors to clarify and sort out the presuppositions and value judgments that create a kaleidoscope of views of the Reformation, coloring one’s perspective according to the turns one makes. It remains for us now to survey the history of these turns.

Interpretations of the Reformations of the sixteenth century are so legion that there are numerous large studies of the history of these interpretations. For the sake of simplicity, interpretations of the Reformation may be grouped under two basic headings: intellectual history and social history. The players in the former are mainly church historians and theologians, whereas the players in the latter are social historians and secular historians.

Until very recently the predominant interpretive position was located in terms of intellectual or cultural history, what the Germans call *Geistesgeschichte*. The major concern in this orientation is with the ideas of the Reformation. In some cases, the pursuit of these ideas was narrowly conceived in terms of Reformation theologies; in other cases the interpretations broadened to biography, psychohistory, political ideology, and, especially after the second Vatican council, ecumenical theology.

The predominant figure in the church historical and theological interpretations of the Reformation continues to be Martin Luther, about whom, it is said, more has been written than about any other figure in the history of the church. Even today in Germany, Luther looms larger than life. A recent German public television survey of the most famous Germans ranked Luther behind the post-war chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, but ahead of Karl Marx; in 2003 Luther appeared on the cover of *Spiegel*, a major German weekly; in a recent account of major events, his reform was characterized along with the discovery of America as one of the two great events of early modern history; and he has been the subject of a number of recent movies and television shows (Boettcher 2004; Hendrix 2004b; Jones 2004; Fuchs 2006: 171). In addition, the commercial usefulness of Luther has not been lost in the former Communist East Germany. The Wittenberg Tourist Office sells socks imprinted with Luther’s famous words at the Diet of Worms – “Here I Stand” – and the city itself puts on an annual pageant celebrating Luther’s marriage, when sales spike of the town’s “Original Luther-Bier” (the label features Luther saying: “A small jug of beer defies the devil”). In a more serious vein, the English literary scholar Cummings (2002: 58) states: “While history is now wary of sweeping statements of the influence of any single individual, it still appears that modern religion in the West begins with Luther. Luther is the most spectacular symptom both of the processes of religious division and of the religious interiorization which comes to be identified with all religious movements, catholic as much as protestant. As such, he is still frequently cited as one of the authors of modern identity.” Since Luther has long been at center stage, a survey of interpretations of the Reformation is simplified by remaining within the boundaries of the history of Luther interpretation. The historiography of other Reformers and movements will be mentioned in other chapters.

It would seem that the portraits and interpretations of a person about whom we have so much information should be unambiguous and uncomplicated. Not so. As Heinrich Boehmer remarked in 1914: “There are as many Luthers as there are books about Luther.” Luther has been called the offspring of the devil, the precursor of Hitler and antisemitism

on the one hand and the “Fifth Evangelist” on the other hand. Such extremes of vilification and glorification were especially rife during the immediate generations following the Reformation but have also echoed down to today. Thus, for example, the well-known Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz (1991: 107) continues to blame Luther for setting in motion modern antisemitism: “It is shocking that Luther’s ignoble name is still honored rather than forever cursed by mainstream Protestant churches.” The opposite extreme is summarized by Hillerbrand’s (1993: 418) comment that Reformation scholarship has been dominated “for the better part of our century by Germanophiles disposed to see Germany as the navel of the universe, and by theologians, especially Lutheran theologians, for whom Luther’s theology was the epitome of Christian perfection.”

The favorable interpretations by Luther’s contemporaries viewed him through the biblical parallels of Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, the angel of Revelation 14, and Moses. Melancthon, Luther’s colleague, announced his death with the words: “*Ach!* The Charioteer and chariot Israel died, who guided the Church in this last age of the world: for the doctrine of the Remission of sins and the pledge of the Son of God was not apprehended by human sagacity, It was revealed by God through this man” (Vandiver et al. 2002: 38–9). The radical Reformers, however, criticized Luther for his authoritarian binding of the Spirit of God to the Bible and also for his personal life of reputed ease, complaining that Luther lived in a handsome room, enjoyed drinking and laughing with his colleagues, wore a golden ring, and was paid for his sermons. The extreme example of Roman Catholic defamation of Luther is the work by his contemporary Johann Cochlaeus (1479–1552) who characterized Luther as a seven-headed monster whose “evil poisons” have rent asunder the *corpus Christianum* (Vandiver et al. 2002: 240). Furthermore, Cochlaeus claimed, Luther was a person totally without morals; he was arrogant, presumptuous, boastful, deceitful, and a liar. Cochlaeus’s “Commentaries on the Acts and Writings of Martin Luther” was published at Mainz in 1549. Cochlaeus appealed to the anxieties of his Catholic contemporaries that Luther’s theology, once unleashed, would bring chaos not only to the church but to society at large, just as a century earlier Hus had created trouble for Bohemia. Such social chaos, he averred, is evident now in the brazenness of women. “The Lutheran women, with all womanly shame set aside, proceeded to such a point of audacity that they even usurped for themselves the right and office of teaching publicly in the Church ... Luther himself ... taught that women too were true Christian priests...” (Vandiver et al. 2002: 106–7). Cochlaeus perceived Luther to be an active promoter of the moral decline of the times. Thus he did not hesitate to pass on some of the legends of the day concerning Luther’s “incestuous” marriage with a nun (a monk, i.e. “brother,” marrying a nun, i.e. “sister”); Luther’s pact with the devil; and that Luther was the offspring of his mother’s liaison with the devil (Dickens and Tonkin 1985: 21–5). The view of Luther as a psychopathic “deformer” and rebel to be explained by recourse to his religious psychology continued to influence Roman Catholic scholarship into the twentieth century and received new vitality in the works of Denifle and Grisar (Stauffer 1967; Wiedermann 1983). While few scholars today would repeat the anti-Luther diatribes of Cochlaeus, Denifle, and Grisar, the old Roman Catholic trope that Luther and the Reformation initiated and fueled the decline and fall of modern civilization has recently been reiterated by Brad Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation* (2012; cf. Wendebourg 2019).

The idolizers of Luther shared Cochlaeus's tendency to explain the Reformation by recourse to supernatural explanations. Ironically, Luther, as the critic of relics, became after his death the source of relics and miracles (Scribner 1987: 312–13, 323–53). For Luther's champions, it was God who spoke through him; for his detractors, it was the devil; for both, however, the Reformation was the agency of supernatural or spiritual forces. It appears that only Johannes Sleidanus (1506–66) rose above the extremes of confessional partisanship. His "Commentaries on Religion and the State in the Reign of Emperor Charles V" (1555) focused on source materials rather than private inspiration and was a forerunner of the modern approach to history inaugurated by Leopold von Ranke that focused on politics and institutions (Dickens 1982: 537–63).

Between Sleidanus and Ranke, however, church historians and theologians interpreted the Reformation in the light of their respective theological commitments. Orthodox Lutherans were impelled to create truly scholastic systems of dogma designed to be impregnable by enemies of the true faith, ranging from Catholics to Calvinists. This edifice complex was ruled by a monomaniacal concern for correct doctrine. Hence it was assumed that this too was Luther's basic concern. What Luther taught was regarded on nearly the same level as the Word of God and Luther was regarded as the compendium of the truth of salvation and right belief. These convictions found expression in such jingles as "Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr, wird vergehen nimmermehr" (God's Word and Luther's teaching shall never perish) and "Gross war er in Leben, grosser im Reden, der Grosste aber im Lehren" (He was great in life, greater in speech, but greatest in teaching). Luther became a "prophet, teacher, and hero" (Kolb 1999).

The Pietists of the seventeenth century and later saw the orthodox emphasis upon correct doctrine and its systematic exposition in classroom and pulpit as a rationalistic head trip that shriveled the hearts of the faithful. To the Pietists, Luther's great contribution was the recovery of faith as trust in God's mercy. Pietism saw itself as the continuation of the Reformation or as the second Reformation – i.e. the reform of life following upon the initial reform of doctrine (Lindberg 1983: 131–78, Lindberg 2005: 1–20, Lindberg 2017). There was a tendency, however, in the Pietist emphasis on personal spiritual regeneration or rebirth to associate sin (against which it urged constant battle) with nature or the "world." In this regard Pietists were disturbed by Luther's earthy interpretations of the Bible, not to mention his personal earthiness. The Pietists rationalized his joy as a gift of God, and covered his toleration of dancing with the cloak of his unending merit, but they could not excuse his reputed comment that if God does not have a sense of humor he did not want to go to heaven.

The Enlightenment, in many ways the successor to Pietism, perceived Luther as mainly the great German liberator from authoritarianism, the hero of freedom not only in the area of religion but in all areas of life. The nineteenth-century French sociologist Louis Blanc stated: "Whoever teaches the people to question the pope will irresistibly also lead them to question the king." That Luther's contribution to human liberty is perceived as universal and not just national is seen in the Prussian philosopher Fichte's prayer of 1793 (the year of the Jacobin ascendancy in Paris): "O Jesus and Luther, holy patron saints of liberty, who in your times of humiliation seized and with titanic power smashed the chains of humanity, ... look down now from your heights upon your descendants, and rejoice at the sprouting grains now waving in the wind" (Brady 1987: 234).

A predominant image in the Enlightenment is that of Luther defying pope and emperor at the diet of Worms in 1521. This displacement of Luther's theology by his person dovetailed the "great man" theory of history, which viewed historical developments in terms of pivotal individuals and the Pietist interest in conversion experience. In our day this has taken the form of psychohistory, a more scientifically sophisticated but formally comparable effort to explain Luther and the Reformation by recourse to his psyche. To a lesser degree psychohistory has also been used with other reformers such as Calvin (Selinger 1984: 72–91; Bouwsma 1988), Karlstadt (Bubenheimer 1981b), and Loyola (Meissner 1992).

The best-known example of psychohistory is Erik H. Erikson's (1958) *Young Man Luther*. For Erikson, the key to understanding a person's development is how he or she resolves fundamental identity crises, in Luther's case those with his father. Since fathers are crucially important (where would we be without them?) and since everyone has one, Erikson proceeds to relate Luther's personal problems to the problems of Luther's society. Both problems participated in the same "ideological crisis." This crisis concerned "the theory and practice, the power and responsibility of the moral authority invested in fathers: on earth and in heaven; at home, in the marketplace, and in politics; in the castles, the capitals, and in Rome" (Erikson 1958: 77). Luther, and consequently the Reformation, is understood as the consequence of personal projection of basic doubts of paternal justice and love upon God. Conversely, Luther's concept of God is inferred from his early psychosocial crises. The difficulty such inferences present to historians is that the historical evidence for them is both meager and contradictory (Johnson 1977; Edwards 1983: 6–9; Scharfenberg 1986: 113–28).

A far more colorful effort to explain the Reformation is the study by Norman O. Brown (1959: 203), which depicts Luther as an anal personality whose experience in the privy "inaugurated Protestant theology." Put more crudely, Luther's conversion experience (located by dubious reference in the medieval outhouse) may be compared to a giant dose of theological laxative that purged Luther of his religious constipation. This neo-Freudian interpretation was given dramatic form in John Osborne's play *Luther*, which opened at the Nottingham Royal Theatre in 1961 and then played Broadway. As Luther prepares for his first mass, he responds to a fellow priest's exhortation to faith by saying, "I wish my bowels would open. I'm blocked like an old crypt." As he later describes his conversion experience in the privy, Luther says: "And I sat in a heap of pain until the words emerged and opened out. 'The just shall live by faith.' My pain vanished, my bowels flushed and I could get up. I could see the life I'd lost" (Osborne 1963: 32, 76).

Erikson and Brown interpreted the Reformation by reducing it to the pathologies they respectively perceived in its initiator, Martin Luther. Scott Hendrix (1994), a Reformation scholar and a family therapist, suggests a more constructive and potentially more fruitful psychohistorical approach to Reformation studies through the use of contextual family theory. Hendrix uses contextual family theory to analyze the human behavior of historical figures in terms of historical, political, economic, and family systems and thereby avoids the tendency to reductionist and pathological explanations present in other psychohistorical methods. In his case study of the north German duchy of Lüneburg, Hendrix argues that its ruler, Duke Ernest, adopted the Reformation from a complex of motives which interwove religious and political integrity with loyal affirmation of his family's values and



**Figure 1.1** “Dr Martin Luther’s Glorification,” by Johann E. Hummell, 1806. Luther, walking on the clouds, is followed by the allegorical figure of Religious Freedom carrying a cross on which is perched the so-called “Liberty Cap,” symbol of the French Revolution. She is led by female figures carrying the Bible and Luther’s catechism. Luther is being offered the palm of victory by the allegory of Mercy, behind whom are women dressed as Greek goddesses symbolizing faith, hope, and love. Border scenes represent major events in Luther’s career. *Source:* Lutherhalle, Wittenberg.

commitments. In short, Duke Ernest’s support of the Reformation in his territory may not be reduced to either political opportunism or personal piety alone.

About the same time that some Catholic scholars and analysts were attempting to understand Luther as a rebel with (or without) a cause, there began to develop studies that strove to avoid both hagiography and demonology. In the words of one book title, Luther was “neither heretic nor saint” (Geisser et al. 1982), but rather a genuinely religious person. Joseph Lortz led the way among Roman Catholic scholars with a two-volume study on the Reformation in Germany. To Lortz (1968), Luther was a religious genius who initiated the Reformation on the basis of a misunderstanding. This tragic misunderstanding was due

both to his training in late medieval nominalism (*via moderna*) rather than in Thomism, and to his association of widespread late medieval corruption in the institutional church with the Catholic faith as a whole. In one of his last essays, Lortz wrote: “Luther’s ‘No’ to the papal Church is both in content and intensity such that one could hardly imagine it more radical. But this ‘No’ needs sober re-examination. For it was directed against a Church whose sub-Christian reality would deserve the strongest condemnation, if one took the sub-Christian elements as the essence of the Church. This is precisely what Luther did. His religious and pastoral zeal seemed to leave him no other way” (Lortz 1970: 33). Although Lortz initiated a fundamental revision in Roman Catholic Reformation scholarship by forcing attention to historical context and development, he himself continued to retain a meta-historical Catholic theological position that finally displaced historical analysis by a theological norm. Nevertheless, Lortz’s legacy includes development of excellent Roman Catholic Reformation scholarship with a commitment to ecumenical dialogue and awareness of the deep medieval roots of the Reformations.

In recent decades the “cutting edge” of Reformation studies has been social history. Like intellectual history, social history covers a multitude of perspectives, but unlike intellectual history it focuses primarily on local histories, social groups, economic and urban history, power relationships, cultural anthropology, and popular culture. The church historical and theological orientation in Reformation studies views European society in terms of its struggles with religious issues, which led to social and political change. The social historical perspective reverses this orientation and emphasizes the centrality of communal political and social goals, which stimulated collective behavior. Theology is only one role among others in the social construction of reality. A leading social historian of the Reformation, Thomas A. Brady, Jr. (1982: 176, 1979: 40–3), suggests that “perhaps the time has come for a new approach ... the Reformation as an adaptation of Christianity to the social evolution of Europe.”

Historians of ideas and of the church caution that the emphasis upon social history may give the impression that religious motivation was merely a private affair unrelated to the so-called real issues. The explanation of the Reformation in terms of its perceived political usefulness to princely or communal powers misses the fact that religious commitments could clearly be counterproductive to social and political self-interest. For example, the inheritance practices of Protestant princes were formed by Lutheran teaching on family responsibility to love and care equally for all their children. In dividing their wealth among all their sons, the Protestant princes fragmented their lands and power in comparison to Catholic princes who concentrated their power through primogeniture, which conferred all on the eldest son (Fichtner 1989: 22–3; Ozment 1992: 28–9; Hendrix 1994). Religious commitment, however, went far beyond inheritance rights. All parties in the Reformation understood martyrdom. Without a grasp of the profound early modern conviction that salvation was at stake in religious commitment, we shall remain baffled by early modern history (Gregory 1999: 344–50). It is easier for Western culture – or at least American culture – to understand giving one’s life for “democracy” than for God.

Although the theological and sociological approaches to understanding the Reformations are not mutually exclusive, the practitioners of each orientation have tended to polemicize the other. This is illustrated in brief by Lewis W. Spitz’s textbook *The Protestant Reformation 1517–1559*, where he wrote that “social historians who are disdainful of all but statistical

evidence and the condition of the masses are in grave danger of producing hoministic rather than humanistic history (reminding one of Disraeli's comment that there are three kinds of lies – lies, more lies, and statistics)" (1985: 2). The reviewer of this book, a prominent scholar of the social history persuasion, wrote: "Spitz treats all social and economic topics like a child gagging on his spinach, which shows that he stands far outside that broad spectrum of intellectual and social historians ... who insist – whatever else they may argue about – on the complementarity [*sic*] of events and structures, ideas and social forces, and theology and popular religion" (Brady 1985: 411). Silvana Menchi (1994: 183) provides one of the sharper critiques of social historians: "In their most explicit assertions, social historians of the Reformation dismiss *homo religiosus* as a fiction. ... To put the matter in what may be slightly oversimplified terms, one can say that during the last thirty years a secularized historiography, addressed to an audience of agnostics, has tended to shelve the theological-religious interpretation of the Reformation. For these historians, religion supplies the ideology for social forces mature enough to come into their own." "The study of the Reformation," as Steven Ozment (1989: 4) remarks, "still awaits a Moses who can lead it through the sea of contemporary polemics between social and intellectual historians and into a historiography both mindful and tolerant of all the forces that shape historical experience."



**Figure 1.2** This sign outside the Allstedt Castle, where Müntzer delivered his famous "Princes' Sermon," juxtaposes lines from the Constitution of the German Democratic Republic and from Müntzer to suggest their direct connection. The former reads: "All political power in the German Democratic Republic is exercised by the workers." The latter reads: "Power shall be given to the common people." *Source:* Carter Lindberg.

Such ideological partisanship – sharply illustrated by the title of a volume in the “Problems in European Civilization” series: *The Reformation: Material or Spiritual?* (Spitz 1962) – has roots in the stimulus provided by Marxist historiography, which emphasized theology as only a religious cover for the fundamental material and economic causes of the Reformation. Friedrich Engels’s *History of the German Peasant War* provided the basic Marxist model of the Reformation as primarily a social phenomenon in which religious attitudes and expressions were arrayed in the struggle of declining feudalism against the new capitalism. Since in this view Luther is seen as a significant voice in the defeat of the revolution’s goals in the Peasants’ War (1524–6). Marxist historians posited that the radical Reformer Thomas Müntzer is the real hero of the period. The Marxist motive was to prove that there was a revolutionary tradition in Germany in spite of the defeats of 1525 and 1848, and that it could be related to the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian October Revolution of 1917. In 1973–4, the government of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) resolved to erect a memorial to the peasants defeated at Frankenhausen that is dedicated to the revolutionary work of Müntzer. The building, begun in 1974, houses an amazing panorama by the Leipzig artist Werner Tübke (see [www.panorama-museum.de](http://www.panorama-museum.de)) and was completed and opened in 1989 – the same year as the fall of the East German government. The more recent thesis (Blickle 1992) of a communal Reformation both replaces Marxist class analysis and continues its interest in a populist–communal Reformation. The historiographical, paradigms of “confessionalization,” “popular Religion,” “Gender,” and success are summarized with examples in Watt 2006, and that of “Christianization” in Johnson and Maxfield (2012) (cf. also Wendebourg 2014).

The following study of the Reformations does not equate the period with any one particular Reformer, but it does take seriously the religious character of particular persons as well as events and decisions. There is a reciprocity and mutuality between religion and culture, so that we may certainly say that, for example, Luther’s discovery of justification by faith occurred under the historical–cultural, linguistic, and personal conditions of his context while yet not being contained by these conditions. In the words of Bouwsma (1988: 4), we are “as much concerned to scrutinize the man in order to understand the time as to scrutinize the time in order to understand the man.” Without continuity and mutuality with their age the Reformers would have been providing answers to unasked questions, but without their rephrasing of the questions in at least some discontinuous sense, the Reformers’ answers would have been no different from those of their predecessors.

These questions and answers of the Reformers, as well as their reception, will be pursued over the course of the “long sixteenth century,” beginning with its late medieval context and concluding with the process of Protestant and Roman Catholic confessionalization. The storyline will set the evangelical movement initiated by Luther in the context of the late medieval challenges to the ancient Augustinian aspiration for a *corpus Christianum*, and then discuss how this evangelical movement differentiated itself through a series of internal crises into various streams, some of which gained specific contours through confessional formulations.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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