

# I

## Introducing the Age of Reformation

Many students approach the ideas of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century 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. They often feel like explorers venturing into an unfamiliar world, at times overwhelmed by the unmapped wilderness ahead of them, in which they could easily become lost. Many find themselves longing for a guide who will lead them through what sometimes seems like a dense and impenetrable jungle.

It is understandably difficult for a student who has been immersed in 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 view the sixteenth century through the lens of the modern period. Like any historical phenomenon, however, the Reformation demands that its interpreters attempt to enter into *its* world-view. 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 somewhat greater influence, a significant core of religious ideas and concerns shaped the development of the reforming programs of the age. This book aims to explain as clearly as possible what the religious ideas underlying the Reformation were and how these impacted on individuals and communities. So what do we mean by this idea of “Reformation,” or the phrase “An Age of Reformation”?

## The Concept of “Reformation”

Like many other terms used by historians to designate eras in human history – such as “Renaissance” or “Enlightenment” – the term “Reformation” 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.

The term “Reformation” does not designate a specific chronological period – such as “the sixteenth century” (a block of time that is easily demarcated) or “the Middle Ages” (which proves rather more difficult to define). Like the term “Renaissance,” it is an interpretative category – a way of mapping out a slice of history in which certain ideas, attitudes, and values were developed, explored, and applied. The present book uses the term “Reformation” in a restricted sense, engaging the leading individuals, ideas, and movements working for the reform and renewal of the church in western Europe over the period 1500–60. As the title of this work makes clear, its particular focus is on the *ideas* that lay behind the Reformation in its various forms. How did they arise? How were they understood? What was their appeal? And what were their consequences?

The term “Reformation” has achieved wide usage, and there are no persuasive reasons for ceasing to use it. It does, however, need to be used with caution. The historian John O’Malley makes an important point that needs to be taken seriously. Terms such as “Reformation,” “Counter Reformation,” and “Catholic Reformation” are not, he cautions, “simple ideas.” Rather, they “subtly directed attention to some issues and away from others, highlighted certain phenomena and cast others into the shadows, admitted some evidence but filtered out the rest.”<sup>1</sup> O’Malley’s point is that we need to be attentive to the historical evidence, and not allow ourselves to become trapped by preconceived ideas about what the Reformation *ought* to be, or whether it was a *good* thing or a *bad* thing.

The term “Reformation” has come to be generally accepted as the proper designation for reforming movements within church and society in the first half of the sixteenth century, partly because the movement was linked with the recognition of the need for a significant overhaul of the institutions, practices, and – though perhaps to a lesser extent – the *ideas* of the western church. The term, which has achieved wide acceptance, helpfully indicates that there were both social and intellectual dimensions to the movement which it designates. Christianity was woven into the social fabric of western Europe at this time, and the demands for reform included both a review of aspects of the Church which appeared to have become corrupt, and its ideas, some of which were called into question by the new biblical scholarship of the Renaissance. Reform was thus needed at the level of institutions and ideas; it was a demand for both social and theological change.

As it is used in the historical literature, the term “Reformation” is generally understood to enfold four basic components: Lutheranism, the Reformed church (often referred to as “Calvinism”), the “radical Reformation” (often referred to as “Anabaptism”) and what was once called the “Counter-Reformation” but is now generally known as the “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 multi-faceted movement, or a loosely connected set of distinct reforming movements, rather than a single coherent movement with local adaptations.

The term “Reformation” is often 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 form of reformation that was linked with the Lutheran and Reformed churches, rather than with the more radical Anabaptists. Although this work focuses on the ideas of the Protestant Reformation, it is attentive to the concerns and ideas of the Catholic Reformation, which clearly merit discussion and consideration.

The unusual phrase “magisterial Reformation” needs 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 some degree of authority within the church, just as the church could rely on the authority of the magistrate to enforce discipline, suppress heresy, or maintain order. In contrast, Anabaptism was opposed to recognizing any form of secular authority within the church. The 1534 Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster, which had to be ended by force, was widely seen as a threat to social stability throughout western Europe, and led to reforming movements throughout Europe being tainted by association with social anarchy – a concern explicitly noted by Calvin in the preface to the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), addressed to the king of France.

All these senses of the word “Reformation” will be encountered in historical and theological 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. enfolding Lutheranism and the Reformed church) taken together, and the term “radical Reformation” to refer to the third (i.e. Anabaptism). Although the present work is primarily concerned with the ideas of the magisterial Reformation, it includes discussion of all the components of this age of Reformation, including the Radical and Catholic reformations.

So how does the term “Reformation” map onto the related term “Protestant”? The term “Protestant” began to be used in 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 fourteen cities protested against this oppressive measure, defending freedom of conscience and the rights of religious minorities. The term “Protestant” derives from the Latin term *Protestantes* (“those who protest”), which was used to refer to those who dissented from this suppression of religious minorities. 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 movements at Wittenberg and elsewhere (e.g. in France and Switzerland) prior to this date. The French term *évangélique* and the German term *evangelisch* were regularly used at the time within such early reforming movements to indicate their desire to return to forms of Christian life and thought in line with the New Testament. Both these words derive from the Greek word *evangelion* (“gospel”), indicating the need to return to the New Testament to rediscover the core themes of the Christian faith. Although the word “Protestant” is now often used to refer to individuals or ideas dating from this earlier period, this use is anachronistic.

In what follows, we shall consider the main elements of the Reformation. While it is important to note their distinct identities and agendas, these elements interacted with each other, creating a process of self-definition which often took oppositional forms. Although, for example, Lutheran and Reformed communities shared similar agendas, the growing need to distinguish between them for political and social reasons, particularly in parts of Germany during the 1560s, led to increasing pressure to identify their points of difference.

### 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). As we shall see, Luther was particularly concerned with the doctrine of justification by faith alone (Latin: *sola fide*), which became the central theme and focus 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 not a major university, and the reforms introduced by Luther and his colleagues within the theology faculty attracted little wider attention. It was Luther’s personal activities – such as his posting of the famous Ninety-Five Theses (October 31, 1517) and the Leipzig Disputation (June–July 1519) – which brought the reforming ideas in circulation 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 minister in Wittenberg from his enforced protective isolation in the Wartburg castle (see pp. 98–9). 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 had passed. (Luther used his enforced isolation to begin translating the New Testament into German.) In his absence, Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541), one of Luther’s academic colleagues at Wittenberg, began a program of reform at Wittenberg which threatened 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 wider program for the reform of German 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, 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 that 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, despite early interest in Luther’s distinctive ideas.

### The Reformed Church

The origins of the Reformed church lie with developments within the Swiss Confederation – a loose confederation of cantons, including Zurich. 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 main Swiss cities, including 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, early Reformed thinkers appear to have 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 moral and structural reform originating

from within the humanist movement. We shall consider the ideas of humanism in some detail presently (pp. 43–71); 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.

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 both 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 for service throughout Europe.

The term “Calvinism” is often used to refer to the religious ideas of the Reformed church. Although this practice is still encountered in the literature relating to the Reformation, it 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 – though not inappropriately – by his successors through a natural process of development and reflection. (We shall explore this development in relation to the doctrine of predestination on pp. 231–45.) The term “Reformed” is now preferred to “Calvinist,” 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 in Calvin's celebrated religious textbook *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* or to church documents (such as the famous *Heidelberg Catechism*) based upon it.

A study of the development of the term “Calvinist” suggests that it 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 using the Latin slogan *cuius regio, eius religio* (“your region determines your religion”). No provision was made for the Reformed faith, which was then a minority presence within Germany.

In February 1563, however, the *Heidelberg Catechism* was published (see p. 272), demonstrating that 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,” historians have searched for a more neutral term to refer to this movement. The term “Reformed” is widely used for this reason, and is to be preferred. However, some theologians continue to use the term “Calvinism.”

The Reformed wing of the Reformation has been of particular importance in shaping Christianity within 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, which underlie their social and political attitudes. It is hoped that this work will help with this process of familiarization.

### The Radical Reformation (Anabaptism)

Every intellectual movement has its conservatives and radicals. The New Testament’s demand to “test everything” and “hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) points to a critical process of sifting and refining, aimed at capturing and then preserving what was “good” about European Christianity and church life at this time. The British philosopher Roger Scruton puts his finger on two themes that lie at the heart of a conservative way of thinking: “the conviction that good things are more easily destroyed than created,” and a “determination to hold on to those good things” in the face of social and cultural change.<sup>2</sup> While Luther was clear that there were major issues with the church’s teaching on grace, he comes across as an essentially conservative thinker, determined to retain as much as he could of legitimate traditional Christian belief and practice.

Others, however, were more radical, holding that it was necessary to start all over again, setting to one side what had been inherited from the past and reconstructing Christianity in a manner that liberated it from past cultural and political captivities. The movement that is now generally known as “the radical Reformation” was actually quite diverse, reflecting a series of theological, cultural, and political agendas. Some, such as the Socinians and other anti-Trinitarians and rationalists, believed that Christianity had become trapped in a series of irrational beliefs, such as the doctrine of the Trinity; it was time to extricate Christianity from such false turns. Others, such as Caspar von Schwenckfeld, pointed to the need for spiritualizing key Christian ideas. Given the diversity of this movement, it is difficult to survey it properly and fully. For our purposes, we shall focus on the section of the movement that is generally known as “Anabaptism.” Not all

radicals were Anabaptists in either the strict or broad sense of the term; nevertheless, this section of the radical Reformation perhaps had the greatest impact on the Reformation as a whole, and thus deserves special attention.

So what was “Anabaptism”? The term “Anabaptist” was invented by Zwingli (the word literally means “re-baptizers”) following the rise of the movement in Zurich, 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 centred on a group of individuals (notably 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 had made faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* (a Latin slogan meaning “by Scripture alone”: see pp. 126–8) principle a cornerstone of his ministry, Grebel argued that Zwingli was inconsistent in its application. Grebel criticized Zwingli for retaining a number of practices – including infant baptism, recognizing a close link between the church and the magistracy, and permitting Christians to engage in warfare – which were not sanctioned or ordained by Scripture. For Grebel and other radical thinkers, thinking and living *sola scriptura* demanded that reformed Christians should believe and practice only what was explicitly taught in Scripture. Zwingli was alarmed by this, seeing it as a destabilizing development which threatened to cut the Reformed church at Zurich off 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.” On this point, Zwingli and the Anabaptists seemed to be in fundamental agreement. 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 (c.1495–1556), and Menno Simons (1496–1561)). This failure partly reflects the forcible suppression of Anabaptism by the secular authorities, following the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster in 1534, which was widely seen as a threat to law and order throughout western Europe. Yet Anabaptism’s failure in this respect may also reflect the fact that the movement did not have any substantial shared 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 favour 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 have gained wide acceptance within Reformation scholarship.

Probably the most significant document to emerge from the Anabaptist movement is the Schleitheim Confession, drawn up by Michael Sattler (1490–1527) on February 24, 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 Schleitheim 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, which is often thought to begin in the period following the opening of the Council of Trent (1545). In older scholarly works, this movement is often referred to as the “Counter-Reformation”: this term refers primarily to the strategies that the Catholic church developed as a means of combating the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic church, however, countered the threat from Protestantism partly by reforming itself from within, in order to address and remove any legitimate 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, 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 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 this textbook primarily in relation to its teachings on Scripture and tradition, justification by faith, the church and the sacraments.

As a result of the Catholic Reformation, many of the abuses which 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 defuse or 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 English Reformation

There is intense scholarly interest in the English Reformation, reflecting its own distinct agendas and concerns. Although the sixteenth-century English Reformation under Henry VIII bore little relation to its German equivalent, Luther was a significant influence on the development of the English Reformation, even though it ultimately took a course which diverged significantly from that mapped out by Luther. The influential English historian F. W. Powicke (1879–1963) once remarked that “the one thing that can be said about the Reformation in England is that it was an act of State.” For Powicke, “the Reformation in England was a parliamentary transaction.”<sup>3</sup> There is enough truth in Powicke’s generalization to help us identify a key difference between the German and English Reformations.

In Germany, there was a protracted struggle between evangelical and Catholic writers and ecclesiastics during the 1530s, as each attempted to gain influence in a disputed region, and define its distinct identity. The situation in Germany became even more complicated during the 1560s and 1570s, as Calvinism began to make major inroads into previously Lutheran territory. Three major Christian denominations were now firmly established in the same area – Lutheranism, the Reformed churches, and Catholicism. All three were under major pressure to identify themselves. Lutherans were obliged to explain how they differed from Calvinists on the one hand and Catholics on the other. And doctrine proved the most reliable way of identifying and explaining these differences: “we believe *this*, but they believe *that*.”

The period 1559–1622, characterized by a new emphasis on the need for purity of doctrine, is generally referred to as the “period of orthodoxy.” Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic churches found it necessary to define and defend themselves *theologically*, a process which inevitably led to the construction of theological definitions of identity. For example, the doctrine of double predestination (pp. 240–1) came to be a boundary marker between the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

The situation in England from 1530 onward was very different. Henry VIII simply declared that there would be only one national church within his realm. By royal command, there would be a single Christian body in England, with the monarch as its head or “supreme governor.” In the absence of any other viable

Christian body within the realm of England, the reformed English church was under no pressure to justify or define itself in relation to any other Christian body in the region. The Act of Uniformity ensured that there was only one national church, whose unity was symbolized and maintained by the monarch as its “supreme governor.”

The manner in which the English Reformation initially proceeded under Henry VIII thus did not make doctrinal self-definition necessary, in that the church in England was defined socially in precisely the same way before the Reformation as after – whatever alterations may have been introduced. This is not to say that no theological debates took place in England at the time of the Reformation; it is simply to note that they were not regarded as fundamental to establishing the identity of the English national church.

The situation remained much the same under Elizabeth I. The Elizabethan “Settlement of Religion” (1559) laid down that there would be only one Christian church in England – the Church of England, which retained the religious monopoly of the pre-Reformation church, while recognizing royal, rather than papal, supremacy. The phrase “Church of England,” as defined legally in Halsbury’s *Laws of England*, makes no reference to its doctrine: the “Church of England” is regarded as continuous with the church established in England during the period 597–686. Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism – the three Christian churches fighting it out for dominance of the continent of Europe – would not be permitted to operate in England.

The social pressures which made religious ideas so important in the German context never really developed during the period of the English Reformation. There was thus no particular reason for the Church of England to pay much attention to doctrinal questions. Elizabeth ensured that it had no rivals in England. One of the purposes of doctrine is to divide – and there was nothing for the Church of England to divide itself from. England was insulated from the factors which made doctrine so significant a matter on the mainland of Europe in the Reformation and immediate post-Reformation periods.

Indeed, the need to ensure that all English Christians (whether personally inclined toward some form of Protestantism or toward Catholicism) felt reasonably at home in the Church of England led to the necessity of doctrine being played down: an emphasis on doctrine might lead to divisions within the new church, and hence internal weakness at a time when English faced significant external threats. As Elizabeth tried to ensure England’s safety in the dangerous world of the late sixteenth century, the last thing she wanted was an England torn apart by doctrinal differences. A divided English church would mean a divided England; and a divided England would be a weak and vulnerable England.

The social context of the Reformation thus has a significant influence on the extent to which religious ideas affected events. In Germany, such ideas proved to be enormously important; in England, their influence appears to have been of less significance. Many scholars suggest that the rise of Puritanism as a significant religious and political force in England toward the end of the sixteenth century led to

specifically theological issues being given a high profile in discussions of the shape and identity of the English church.

From what has been said thus far, it will be clear that the “Age of Reformation” was not homogenous, but involved a complex pattern of interactions between leading reformers, local concerns and opportunities, and local rulers – whether these took the form of monarchs or city councils. These issues will be explored in greater detail as this analysis proceeds in later chapters. In what follows, we shall present an overview of the factors that led so many to conclude that some kind of reform was needed in the early 1500s. While there was divergence on precisely what needed to be reformed, and who ought to carry out such reformations, there was widespread agreement that something needed to be done.

### **The Call for Reform**

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was obvious that the church in western Europe was in urgent need of “reform of head and members.” It seemed to many that the life-blood 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 fourteen had its pastor in residence. The Frenchman Antoine du Prat, archbishop of Sens, turned up for only one service at his cathedral throughout his ten years in the archdiocese: moreover, his presence and role at this service were somewhat passive, in that it was his funeral.

Many senior ecclesiastical posts were secured through questionable means on dubious grounds, 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 not to mention them in public. 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.

### **The Growth of Anti-Clericalism**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, anti-clericalism became a significant phenomenon in the late Middle Ages, reflecting a number of social concerns about the elevated social status and unimpressive intellectual caliber of the clergy. The tax breaks enjoyed



**Figure 1.1** Erasmus of Rotterdam in the print shop of his friend Johannes Froben of Basle. Corbis PL279.

by clergy were the source of particular irritation, especially in times of economic difficulty. In the French diocese of Meaux, there was considerable local resentment because the clergy were exempted from all forms of taxation. In the diocese of Rouen, there was popular outcry over the windfall profits made by the church by selling grain during a period of severe shortage. Irritated by the low intellectual stature of many parish clergy in the early sixteenth century, an increasingly educated Christian laity turned to writers such as Erasmus of Rotterdam (Figure 1.1) to find an intelligent articulation of their faith.

Yet despite such valid concerns, the extent and significance of anti-clericalism should not be exaggerated. While there were undoubtedly areas in which such hostility was particularly pronounced – particularly in cities – the clergy were often valued and esteemed, especially in rural areas. Many of the great monasteries of western Europe were respected on account of their social outreach and their significant contributions to the local economy. Yet when all this is taken into account, a rumbling discontent remained, often expressed in what is known as “protest literature” (also known as “grievance literature” or “complaint literature”). Nor should the importance of anti-clericalism for the emergence of the Protestant Reformation be overstated. The Reformation may have reduced the number of clergy through a process of decentralization and the reallocation of

some roles traditionally associated with clergy to the laity. Nevertheless, Protestantism retained clergy, even if it may have redefined their responsibilities, and recalibrated their relationship to the laity.

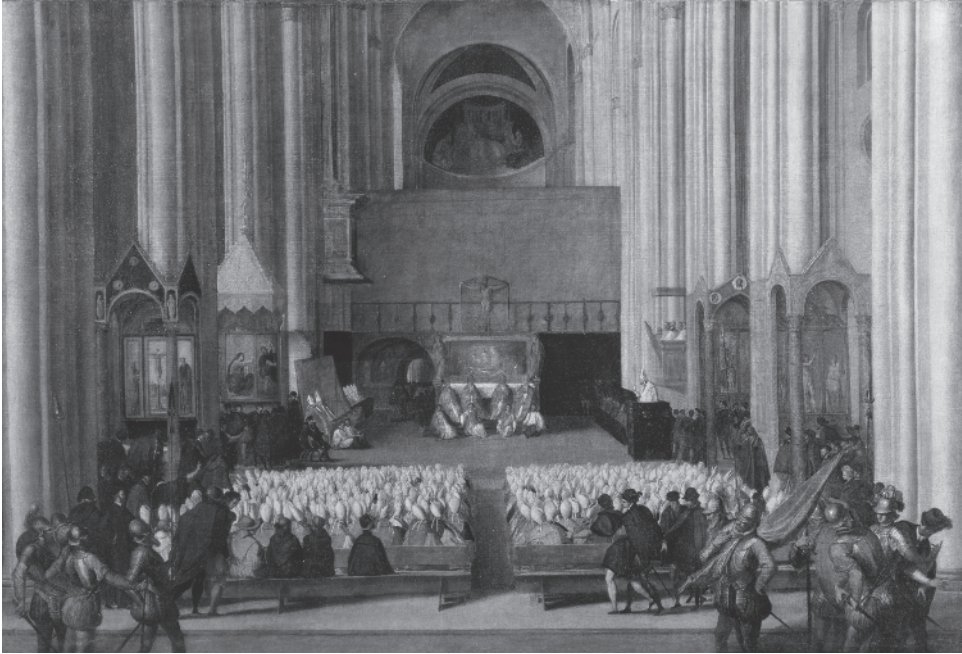
The growth of an educated and literate laity – one of the more significant aspects of the cultural history of Renaissance Europe – led to the publication of an increasing number of criticisms of the church on account of the obvious disparity between what the church *was* and what it *might be* or what it *was meant to 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. It is true that many religious works of the fifteenth century – often known as a “protest literature” (but sometimes as a “grievance literature” or a “complaint literature”) – paint a picture of growing irritation and protest concerning ecclesiastical corruption and inefficiency. Yet, this might point to levels of expectation of change within the late medieval church as much as declining levels of performance.

However, the reforming movements of this age were not driven purely by a negative discontent. Many reforming movements of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century took positive inspiration from the institutional simplicity and spiritual integrity of apostolic Christianity. Could not this Golden Age of the Christian faith be regained, perhaps by trying to recapture the simple vision of the church found in the New Testament? Such a program of institutional and moral reform seems to have been the wistful pipe dream of intellectuals throughout half of Europe.

### The Need for Doctrinal Reform

Yet there were others who added another demand to this list of long-overdue reforms of morals and practice – a reformation of Christian doctrine. The core religious ideas of the church seemed to have become muddled and unfocused. Many Catholic writers agreed. One of the most interesting developments at the Council of Trent, which set in place the reforming program of the “Catholic Reformation,” was its call for the simplification of the vocabulary and conceptualities of Christian doctrine. There was a concern that scholastic theology, predominant during the Middle Ages, was inaccessible to ordinary people. It was important to use simpler and clearer language to express core Christian beliefs. Trent also appreciated the importance of religious education, and initiated a process of catechization, in which ordinary believers would be helped to grasp the basic themes of the Christian faith.

Yet this demand for the simplification of theological language was not accompanied by any program of review or revision of the prevailing doctrinal consensus of the church. Many Italian bishops at the Council of Trent (Figure 1.2), perhaps influenced by the general dislike of many Renaissance humanists for the technicalities of theology, felt that there was no need for such a review. Reform was



**Figure 1.2** The 23rd Session of the Council of Trent, 1563. Bridgeman XIR 33245. The Council of Trent, 4th December 1563 (oil on canvas), Italian School (sixteenth century), Louvre, Paris, France. Formerly attributed to Titian (1488–1576).

restricted to institutional, moral, and pastoral matters – all of which mattered profoundly, of course, but did not engage the concerns expressed by writers such as Luther and Calvin.

To critical observers such as Martin Luther at Wittenberg and John Calvin at Geneva, the medieval church seemed to have 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 Luther, in particular, the morbidity of the late Renaissance church was simply the latest stage in a gradual process of degeneration which had been going on since the early Middle Ages – the corruption of Christian doctrine and ethics.

Thinkers such as Luther and Calvin held that the core ideas that lay at the heart of Christian faith and practice had been obscured, if not undermined, 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 fountainhead (*ad fontes*),” a call to return to or learn from 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.

### A Failed Attempt to Reform: Conciliarism

But who could reform the church? It was not a new question. Many medieval thinkers, frustrated at the apparent inability of the papacy to initiate a process of review and reform of the church, urged secular rulers to convene a reforming council and force reform upon an institution which seemed unwilling to reform itself. Leading advocates of this approach, often known as “Conciliarism,” included Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson. The matter seemed to have been resolved at the Council of Constance (1414–18), which declared that only a General Council had the necessary authority to reform the church. However, in the end, this attempt to reform the church became mired in procedural wrangling, and power reverted to the papacy.

Important through these developments were, they do not adequately explain the rise of Protestantism. The root and branch reform demanded by so many in the later Middle Ages could easily have taken the form of an internal review of the church’s teachings and practices, not unlike the great Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century. What really needs to be explained is why and how a group of movements working for renewal and reform within the church at the opening of the sixteenth century solidified as an entity *outside* the church structures of its day, and somehow managed to survive.

### The Growth of Regional and National Power

Part of the explanation of this development lies in the localization of power in regional rulers, which became significant at this time. By the first decade of the sixteenth century, some fundamental shifts in power had taken place across Europe. 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.

Protestant reformers often allied themselves with regional or civic powers in order to achieve their programs of reform. Luther appealed to the German nobility and Zwingli to the Zurich city council to support their reforming projects, pointing out the benefits which would accrue to both as a consequence. For reasons we shall explore presently (pp. 261–3), 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 through a symbiotic (and occasionally opportunistic) local alliance of theological reformers and state or civic authorities, 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 and England 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 Religious Agendas of the Reformers

The fundamental conviction motivating the magisterial reformers, though to different extents, 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. There was some divergence within the movement over which early Christian writer offered the best intellectual foundation for such a program

of doctrinal reform, with Augustine of Hippo being recognized as especially significant by many.

The great vision of many sixteenth-century reformers was summed up in the Latin slogan *Christianismus renascens* – “Christianity being born again.” 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, enabling a return to the original ideals of Christianity.

The production of the first Greek New Testament and reliable editions of the works of Augustine (regarded by most reformers as *the* patristic writer) during the first two decades of the sixteenth century were thus seen as milestones in the sixteenth-century program of reform and renewal, and became widely available throughout Europe. The great eleven-volume edition of Augustine’s works published by the two Amerbach brothers at Basle in 1506 is widely seen as a landmark in this process of retrieving and recalibrating his thought, especially in relation to the doctrine of grace. 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.

Having explored some preliminary issues relating to this “Age of Reformation,” we shall now turn to consider some specific elements of the cultural backdrop to the Reformation, which help us understand its emergence and development.

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