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Introduction

It was in this small town that the Elector Friedrich founded a university, which has since become known to all the world. And it was in this university that the doctors began to sharpen their wits in matters of Holy Writ; they rejected the glossings and musings of interpreters and took the biblical writings to hand, preaching and writing thereof. However, there soon arose a great tumult between them and those who did not follow their religion. The abuses of several popes and bishops had contributed significantly to the rise of this unrest. The originator of this reformed religion was Martin Luther, a doctor of Holy Scripture, who converted many to his opinions, learned and unlearned, princes and kings, bishops, priests, and monks. However the others, who are greater in number, hold fast to their glossings and musings and ingrained traditions, and out of this, discord has arisen, much blood has been shed, and many books have been written, and indeed on both sides.¹

The quotation above appears under the entry for Wittenberg in the *Cosmographia* (1544) of Sebastian Münster (1488–1552), one of the most influential historical works of the early modern period. Münster's description is reminiscent of the short, sharp prose of a German fairy tale, replete with heroes, villains, battles, and wonder-working words. It even ends in blood. Yet Münster is not recounting a myth but the historical origins of the Reformation, and while it lacks the depth and breadth of analysis that we have come to associate with the modern discipline of history, in its essentials it is not far removed from the narrative of Reformation history that has

shaped the perception of these events up to and including the early decades of the twentieth century. In one form or another, this story has been told countless times.²

In the traditional account, the Reformation is thought to have originated with Martin Luther's act of heroic individualism – or more precisely, his two acts, the first being the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (traditionally dated to October 31, 1517) and the more dramatic public declaration at Worms in April 1521 when, before Emperor Charles V and assembled Estates of the Holy Roman Empire, he famously refused to renounce what he had written to that point because it would have contradicted the testimony of Scripture. And his conscience, he declared, was bound to Scripture. Not surprisingly, this speech, ending in his final words “Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen,” has since become a defining moment in histories of the modern age. According to the Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), for instance, “The Diet of Worms, Luther’s appearance there on the 17th of April 1521, may be considered as the greatest scene in Modern European History; the point, indeed, from which the whole subsequent history of civilization takes its rise.”³ But the drama did not end there. Having stood fast before the emperor, the German princes, and the papal authorities, Luther returned to Wittenberg and, in a flood of sermons and publications, as Münster wrote, “converted many to his opinions, learned and unlearned, princes and kings, bishops, priests, and monks,” and thereby laid the foundations for the rise of the Reformation. However, as Münster also noted, Luther’s reform initiatives soon faced opposition “greater in number” who condemned the teachings of Wittenberg and rallied in defense of the Catholic church. This division set the stage for the confessional age. “And out of this, discord has arisen, much blood has been shed, and many books have been written, and indeed on both sides.”

Until well into the mid twentieth century, histories of the Reformation that took in the European dimensions of the movement generally followed this plotline. Reformation history originates with Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg and then reaches out to the rest of Europe, where it was then formed and fitted by historical circumstance to become a series of autochthonous (that is, self-contained and self-sufficient) but ultimately derivative, reformation movements. To cite the words of the Göttingen church historian Bernd Moeller, one of the practitioners who has done the most to displace this approach, “to caricature the common description, Luther generally appears as a great sage, a kind of spiritual colossus, who attains his Reformation breakthrough, draws the broad consequences, and then drags people with him as he strides through history handing out his truths right and left.”⁴

Moeller made this comment in a seminal article published in 1965, but things have changed quite a bit since then. Reformation historians no longer privilege Luther or the German Reformation in this way. Granted, accounts of origins still give pride of place to the events surrounding the Luther Affair. Philip Benedict, for instance, author of the definitive modern social history of the Reformed tradition, associates the “magnificent anarchy” of the early Reformation with the historical energies released after the Leipzig Debate of 1519, where Luther squared off against the Catholic controversialist Johannes Eck (1486–1543), and the Diet of Worms in 1521, both of which “galvanized intensifying aspirations for a reform of Christendom and inspired a tidal wave of treatises, broadsides, and sermons urging the rejection of the authority of Rome and a return to the purity of the Gospel.”⁵ But Luther as sage and Wittenberg as Jerusalem is no longer considered sufficient as an overarching paradigm, neither with reference to the ideas that shaped the movement nor with reference to the historical dynamic at its core. On the contrary, the central concern of more recent scholarship is to find the proper place for the Wittenberg story within a more expansive and, historically speaking, more accurate narrative of the Reformation as a mid-century movement that had (at least) a triangular sphere of radiation – that is, the area that takes in Zurich and Geneva as well as Wittenberg, not to mention the lesser points on the compass such as Strasbourg, Emden, or London.⁶ As a consequence, Luther and Wittenberg have had to give way to a more complex panorama, the result being that historians are now working to piece together a narrative that can accommodate the different trajectories and still provide a unified account of events. As Heiko Oberman urged, “the European phase of the Reformation, for most of Europe the *first* Reformation, will have to be brought to the centre of a truly grand narrative with a radical marginalizing of German political, cultural, and theological sentiment.”⁷

Of course, revisionist history brings problems of its own, for while it is certainly correct to downplay the role of Luther as the author and architect of a movement so deeply rooted in the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the social, political, and cultural world of its day, it has made it even more difficult for scholars to come up with frameworks that satisfactorily comprehend the movement as a whole. If not Luther, his heroic actions, and his inspired theology, then how *do* we piece together a meaningful picture of the Reformation?

For better or worse, there has been no shortage of scholars with alternative suggestions. The literature on the European Reformation is legion. No more than a quick glance at the annual survey in the specialist journal *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* is needed in order to

see how broad historiographical horizons have become. And while historiographical trends have waxed and waned, knowledge has mounted and become ever more specialist, and new methods, technologies, and preoccupations have transformed our perspective of the past and raised issues that had not occurred to former generations. It has now reached the stage, as Andrew Pettegree has remarked, that “geographically and thematically, it is almost impossible for one individual scholar to do it justice.”⁸ And the problem is not just the sheer weight of publications but the historiographical diversity. These days historians do not approach the movement in the manner of the scholars who preceded Moeller, that is in terms of a linear narrative anchored in political and religious turning points. Rather, they tend to cultivate particular fields or sub-fields of the Reformation, fenced off according to methodological, ideological, geographical, or thematic distinctions, where it becomes possible to raise rudimentary questions about the movement as a whole while working within historical or historiographical settings that can be managed by a lone researcher surrounded by secondary texts and caches of archival materials.

This is not to suggest that the modern approach is less ambitious or more modest in its claims. Peter Marshall can still open a recent short survey with the assertion that “The Reformation created modern Europe, and left an indelible mark on the history of the world,” but historians such as Marshall are now more aware that Reformation history tells an ambiguous story, that there is as much regress as progress, as much medieval as modern, and that it is a phenomenon that cannot be satisfactorily captured in a single narrative stream. The grand claims might still be made, and Marshall recounts some of most notable: “Modern individualism has its origins in the unfettered bible-reading the Reformation encouraged; modern capitalism in the industriousness and initiative of Protestant merchants; and modern science in the refusal of deference to ancient authorities. New and potentially liberalizing forms of political organization emerged from the revolt against Rome.”⁹ Alongside theories such as these, however, which have been keenly cultivated by historians searching for the origins of the modern western world, there are a like number of theories that seek to demonstrate the opposite, namely how the Reformation placed new fetters on the early modern mind, added little or nothing (aside from guilt) to an economic world that was experiencing the fruits of its late-medieval momentum, turned thoughts away from the raw truths of the natural world and bound them up in physico-theologies, and gave rise to a new type of confessional politics, which at its most transparent was little more than a species of theocracy.¹⁰ And this is just to mention the work that still sets out to tackle “the big questions.” The vast majority of research

is made up of smaller, more specialized concerns, though no less crucial for an understanding of the whole.

The aim of *Contesting the Reformation* is to provide the reader with an overview of this literature from the standpoint of the historians who have contributed to the debates. Necessarily, some sort of order has been imposed on the analysis; necessarily, as well, the themes that have been chosen reflect my own sense of what is important. No doubt a theologian or a church historian would have structured the book differently. But I have tried to situate the works in the proper place and let the authors speak for themselves. Where I have imposed myself, however, in so far as it falls within the reach of my own competence, is in my efforts to get them to speak to each other. For although it is out of keeping with the historical phenomenon they study, many Reformation specialists tend to work within distinct national and linguistic parameters. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from realistic assessments about how best to write lasting works of history to the appeal of established traditions and associated convictions about the singularity of national characteristics. And there is the rather more straightforward reluctance to branch out beyond the familiar. As one scholar has noted, the global dominance of the English language “has ensured a plentiful supply of anglophone historians who find learning languages tiresome and who therefore choose to work on British material.”¹¹ Of course, there are scholars who move between the communities, but in general, in view of the international complexion of the phenomenon itself, the dialogue is fairly limited. Similarly, while some books of importance have assumed an international standing, for the most part each community has its own set of standard works and its own fields and subfields of research. One of the aims of *Contesting the Reformation* is to gather together some of these related works in order to give the reader a sense of how similar themes have been addressed by different scholarly traditions – or, to be more precise, by the Western European traditions, English, German, Swiss, French, and Dutch. Much of this analysis has been relegated to the endnotes, but I have tried to fit it into the main text when space allows.¹²

Finally, a few words about the selection of literature. A comprehensive survey of Reformation historiography would not be feasible in a book of this size. Nor would it be of much benefit to squeeze in as many references as possible in the body of the text, as this would disrupt the flow of analysis. Moreover, given that only a sentence or two could be spared for each book, it would not really amount to much more than an extended bibliography. Thus, instead of crowding the paragraphs with authors and texts, *Contesting the Reformation* highlights a selection of exemplary books and arguments in order to demonstrate how historians have wrestled with the issues at the

heart of the discipline. Related works are then cited in the endnotes, and there is a bibliography of core texts divided by chapter at the end of the book. Necessarily, the analysis privileges English-language texts. This is somewhat misleading given the preponderance of literature from mainland Europe, but as the aim is to provide English-language readers with a sense of the field and, hopefully, to encourage them to follow up some of the debates, it makes the most sense to cite those books that are the most readily accessible. On those occasions when important Continental works are cited or discussed, I have tried to make reference to an associated body of English literature where the themes can be chased up.

Notes

- 1 Translation mine.
- 2 See the discussion in Robert Scribner and C. Scott Dixon, *The German Reformation* (Basingstoke, 2003)², 1–5.
- 3 *Thomas Carlyle's Collected Works* (London, 1896), xii, 158. Like many of the defining moments in Luther's personal history, these words are a later interpolation, having been scribbled on the margin of the imperial recess by a sixteenth-century hand.
- 4 Bernd Moeller (trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards Jr.), *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Durham, NC, 1982), 13; first appeared as "Probleme der Reformationsgeschichtsforschung," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 14 (1965), 246–57; Moeller's articles have been gathered together in Bernd Moeller, *Luther-Rezeption* (Göttingen, 2001); Bernd Moeller, *Die Reformation und das Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 1991).
- 5 CC, 1, 15.
- 6 On the importance of London for the English Reformation, see Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1991).
- 7 Heiko A. Oberman, *The Two Reformations* (New Haven, 2003), 20; for a grand narrative along these lines, see now Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700* (London, 2002).
- 8 Andrew Pettegree, "Introduction: the Changing Face of Reformation History," in *RW*, 5.
- 9 Peter Marshall, *The Reformation* (Oxford, 2009), 1, 2.
- 10 For a recent rethinking of traditional narratives, see Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge, 2011).
- 11 Alec Ryrie, "Britain and Ireland," in *TER*, 124. Historians of the English Reformation now regularly refer to what Diarmaid MacCulloch has termed "the complacent insularity that has particularly afflicted the historiography of the Church of England" (*Reformation*, xxiv) and there is growing interest in, and awareness of, Continental scholarship. Recent attempts at historiographical dialogue include Dorothea Wendebourg (ed.), *Sister Reformations*

- (Tübingen, 2010); Polly Ha and Patrick Collinson (ed.), *The Reception of Continental Reformation in Britain* (Oxford, 2010).
- 12 For those readers interested in how features of the historiographical traditions discussed in this book might be tied together into a synthetic narrative, my own recent work is one such attempt. See C. Scott Dixon, *Protestants: A History from Wittenberg to Pennsylvania, 1517–1740* (Oxford, 2010).