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Author(s): Hans J. Hillerbrand

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Was There a Reformation in the Sixteenth Century?

HANS J. HILLERBRAND

Reflections on historiographical developments in the history of Christianity tend to be a rather dry matter. Though dry, however, such reflections are important, since historiographical emphases not only tell us where scholarship has been in the past, but also—since we are directed to look at the *longue durée*—why we are where we are. Historians tend to be, alas, a herd of independent minds, and there are vogues in scholarship no less than there are in haute couture. A generation ago, few historians used such terms as “discourse,” “construction,” “close reading,” “intertextuality” even as monographs—even splendid monographs—on a burgomaster’s daughter would have issued only from the pen of a secondary school teacher in Germany.¹

The question—was there a Reformation in the sixteenth century—was for centuries answered with aplomb and confidence. But, just as Joan Kelly Gadol asked, a generation ago, was there a Renaissance for women, at this juncture the question “was there a Reformation” deserves to be posed.²

Reformation studies have been alive and well ever since Martin Luther in 1545 contributed an autobiographical preface to his collected works (and that despite his earlier advice that at his death all his writings should be burned), and his colleague Philip Melanchthon provided the first biographical sketch of the reformer.³ These works provided inspiration for a long hagiographic line of succession, begun by two authors who set out to demonstrate the political and theological blessings of the Reformation—Johannes Sleidanus’s 940 page tome *Commentary on the Religious and Political Affairs during the Reign of*

1. My reference is, of course, to Steven Ozment’s splendid monograph *The Bürgermeister’s Daughter: Scandal in a Sixteenth-century German Town* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), which exemplifies, in my judgment, social history on the micro level at its finest.
2. See here Joan Kelly Gadol, “Was there a Renaissance of Women?” in *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly Gadol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
3. Luther’s self-appraisal of his writings is in WA 50, 657–61. Philip Melanchthon’s funeral oration is found in *Corpus Reformatorum* 11, 726–34.

Hans J. Hillerbrand is professor of religion at Duke University.

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Emperor Charles V, of 1559, a kind of bittersweet farewell present for the emperor who had just abdicated, and Matthias Flacius's thirteen-volume *Ecclesiastical History*, which, because it identified "per pios viros in urbe Magdeburgeniensis" as responsible for the publication, became known as the *Magdeburg Centuries*.⁴ Flacius's opus magnum was enriched by the arduous labor of what we would nowadays call his graduate assistant who was undoubtedly responsible for the plethora of citations of primary sources in his tomes. This assistance might well also explain why Flacius's publication list is so strikingly extensive—the catalogue of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel lists (with duplications) no less than 472 entries. Of course, this was neither the first nor the last time in the history of scholarly production that footnotes were added after the text had been written—none other than Ranke must be mentioned here, Anthony Grafton has told us.⁵ Flacius, for whom the world's shortest book would have had the title "Martin Luther's Theological Errors," saw Luther as the most authentic interpreter of the Christian faith since John the Divine perished on the Isle of Patmos. Therefore, for Flacius, the (Lutheran) Reformation had recovered Biblical religion, a perspective so ubiquitous in his thirteen volumes that even a child of seven could get it.

Sleidanus, in turn, weighed in with the argument that the Reformation had been about political freedom, about German liberation from foreign political exploitation, an argument hardly calculated to please the emperor who, if he ever saw the book, might well have concluded that his abdication had been the right decision. Of course, propaganda was the strong suit of the reformers, and as early as the mid sixteenth century the main trajectory of Protestant Reformation hagiography—that the Reformation had been a blessing for both throne and altar—had been set.

Catholics, for understandable reasons, were less disposed to make the Reformation an important object of scholarly (or, for that matter, theological) exploration, considering it a waste of time and energy to examine what they perceived to be a story of theological ignorance and personal shortcomings. Some Catholics, like Baronius and Bossuet, however, were very much concerned to show that the first six

4. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Ecclesiastica historia, integram ecclesiae Christi ideam . . . perspicuo ordine complectens: singulari diligentia & fide ex vetustissimis & optimis historicis studiosos & pios viros in urbe Magdeburgica*, 13 vols (Basil: Ioannem Oporinum, 1559–74).
5. Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

centuries of Christianity belonged to the old church rather than the new churches.⁶

Moreover, since the figures and groupings on the fringe of the larger Reformation phenomenon, mainly the Anabaptists and the Antitrinitarians, were such a motley crew that even George Williams's attempt to propose a convincing taxonomy remained terribly complicated, their story hardly got told at all, except the way Catholics told Luther's story, namely as a cautionary tale.⁷ It was not until in the late seventeenth century when Gottfried Arnold coined the phrase "impartial church history" that the traditional losers became the winners.⁸ But, alas, what Arnold called "impartial" was in fact partiality toward those who previously had been the losers, the heretics, the dissenters, and radicals.

If the field of Reformation studies was thus lively, the cause of such liveliness was that the Reformation was institutionalized as Protestant sacred space. For Protestants, the Reformation was the defining event of their self-understanding. Since each of the new Protestant traditions claimed to be the sole purveyor of Christian truth, Reformation studies became a historical exposition of ultimate truth as understood by these traditions. No wonder, then, that Reformation scholarship developed along ecclesiastical lines, with systematic theologians ever ready (and eager) to participate in the scholarly discourse, at times pushing the historians to the side. The Protestant theological "greats" of the nineteenth century, or the "greats" of the twentieth century, uniformly saw themselves as scholars of the Reformation. Intriguingly enough, the tendency to see Reformation studies as an "auxiliary discipline" of theology continues.⁹

In addition, Reformation studies also were an important component of national historiography. Wherever the Reformation had been a national event, it received the attention not only of theologians and church historians but of secular historians as well. If theologians

6. Baronio, Cesare, *Annales ecclesiastici* . . . (Mainz: Ioannis Gymnici, 1601–8); Jacques B. Bossuet, *Historia doctrinae protestantium, in religionis materia: continuis mutationibus, contradictionibus, innovationibus, variatae, & fluctuantis* (Vienna: Typis Gregorii Kurtzböck, 1734–35).

7. George Williams's contribution is found in three places, his bibliographical survey in *Church History*, the introduction to his collection of primary sources in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster, 1957), and his *Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth-century Journal, 1992).

8. The best introduction to Gottfried Arnold is Dietrich Blaufuss and Friedrich Niewöhner, eds., *Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714): mit einer Bibliographie der Arnold-Literatur ab 1714* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995).

9. I am thinking of such Lutheran theologians as Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, and Wolfhart Pannenberg in Germany and Gustav Aulen in Sweden.

pursued their work *ad marjoram gloriam Dei*, secular historians followed suit by doing Reformation history *ad majoram gloriam patriae*. This focus was the case in countries in which the religious events of the sixteenth century had significant bearing on the course of national history or, at any rate, where it was so understood. Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and, in an intriguing way, England come to mind as illustrations. France, which had its share of turbulence in the sixteenth century, did not experience a dramatic break. French historians never exhibited much enthusiasm for the year 1517 as the year of a dramatic new beginning nor for that matter for Martin Luther. Leopold von Ranke, revered as the father of modern historical scholarship, played an important role in this regard. He not only posited the notion of "age of the Reformation" (and of the Counter Reformation) but also imbued that period with almost metaphysical significance.

Elsewhere, such as in Spain, or Italy, there were other defining moments and movements. In Germany the Reformation narrative held a privileged status, and one may well conjecture that the tedious (and bloody) pursuit of German national unity in the nineteenth century, which took until 1871 to be successful, explains why the invocation of defining events of the past was both important and emotional. The assessment was that the alliance of Prussian throne and Protestant altar, after all, had been successful until industrialization and urbanization had begun to challenge it.

In short, to talk about Reformation studies is to acknowledge their theological and political construction. And since Luther seemed to tower over everybody and everything else, the study of the Reformation became a trip up and down the Elbe River, with some recognition that John Calvin, while not German, had to be dealt with, and a cursory excursion to England, a place seen to offer little theological substance and much marital adventure.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Reformation historiography came under the spell of theological neo-orthodoxy, which promptly cast its pointed theological shadow over Reformation studies. Scholarship turned theological. Monographs on all theological aspects of the Reformation were published, on Luther's concept of the *deus absconditus*, for example, or on Calvin's understanding of providence or on the Anabaptist view of the church.¹⁰ Issues of piety, spirituality,

10. On Luther's notion of the *deus absconditus*, one does well to recur to Ferdinand Kattenbusch, *Deus absconditus bei Luther* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1920); Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence dans la prédication de Calvin* (Berne: P. Lang, 1978).

or popular religion, not to mention class or gender, were outside the parameters of scholarly interest, not to mention the absence of independent-minded secular historians from the discourse. Of course, there were—there always are—exceptions. Karl Brandi published a magisterial biography of Charles V, at that time, but that was about the extent of the historical/biographical preoccupation, other than, of course, an unending fascination with Luther, whose halo, firmly in place ever since the late sixteenth century, as Robert Kolb has reminded us, continued to shine with unmitigated brightness.¹¹

By the 1960's, scholarship on the Reformation was so theological that Bernd Moeller in his 1965 inaugural lecture at the University of Göttingen, entitled "Problems of Reformation Historiography," noted the retreat of nontheologically interested historians from Reformation studies. Moeller voiced concern about the theological orientation of Reformation research. He offered this verdict on Reformation scholarship at the time: "It may not be an overstatement to speak of a crisis of theological scholarship on the Reformation at present. It seems to consist in the fact that the Reformation is in danger of disappearing as a phenomenon of church history."¹² Moeller's point was simple. The Reformation had come to be understood one-sidedly as a theological phenomenon, while historical developments were ignored.

Intriguingly, just when Moeller voiced this Cassandra call, the direction of Reformation scholarship began to change. The historical dimension of the Reformation was rediscovered. In a way, Moeller himself initiated this rediscovery with his study on *The Imperial Cities and the Reformation*.¹³ Even though this slender book included, especially toward the end, a heavy dose of theology, it directed scholarly attention to a historical question. Why had the overwhelming majority of the imperial free cities in Germany become Protestant in the course of the Reformation? Moeller's study, programmatic and lacking in detail as it was, made it embarrassingly evident that our knowledge of intricate theological points and issues of the Reformation was superior to our understanding of some fundamental historical questions—in this instance, why and how did so many of the cities turn Protestant?

11. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999).
12. Bernd Moeller, "Probleme der reformationsgeschichtlichen Forschung," originally printed in the *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 196 (1966), is found in English translation in Moeller's *Imperial Cities and the Reformation* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1972).
13. The essay was first published under the title "Reichsstadt und Reformation" at Gütersloh, 1962. The English translation appeared in Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress, 1972.

History re-entered Reformation scholarship. A flood of monographs and publications examined specific towns at specific times. It made the topic "the Reformation in the cities" the front burner of Reformation research in the 1970s prompting the late A. G. Dickens, who had a knack for discerning historiographical trends, to make the pronouncement "the Reformation was an urban event."¹⁴

Larger societal forces helped shape a new scholarly agenda. The turn to history that occurred in Reformation historiography in the 1960s was related to two phenomena. One was the fading of neo-orthodoxy, which seemed to have passed the zenith of its influence, with new theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, appearing on the scene, without certainty if they were to be equals to their masters. The other phenomenon was the explosive emergence of new societal issues. The theologians, who in the 1960s joined the marches against the war in Vietnam and against segregation in the South, had been nurtured by neo-orthodoxy, even as their fellow historians had been taught the eminence of diplomatic history, especially of Europe. But the 1960s social issues increasingly shaped the scholarly agenda of both historians and theologians—in their wake, of church historians as well. Ruminations on Calvin's understanding of predestination, or Melancthon's understanding of the third use of the Law, or Luther's conception of the church, paled against what was increasingly perceived as the clear mandate of the gospel for societal and political action. The word "liberation" became the quintessence of the gospel. While the seminal spirits of this new understanding of liberation were Catholic theologians in South America, their impact was quickly felt in Protestant circles in Europe and North America, particularly when the notion of who had to be liberated expanded into several additional categories, such as blacks, women, the poor, even as the war in Vietnam dominated the discourse on university and college campuses.¹⁵

14. A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

15. Still, theological topics continue to find attention, most of them focusing on Luther. During the last decade a number of studies have appeared on Luther's theology of the cross, have compared Luther's notes on his Romans lectures with the lecture notes of his students, have examined Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers and Luther's ecclesiology. This attention is particularly true of Finnish Reformation scholarship. I note a few outstanding monographs: Volker Stolle, *Luther und Paulus: die exegetischen und hermeneutischen Grundlagen der lutherischen Rechtfertigungslehre im Paulinismus Luthers* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002); Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, eds., *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers: Referate der Fachtagung des Instituts für Systematische Theologie der Universität Helsinki in Zusammenarbeit mit der Luther-Akademie Ratzeburg in Helsinki 1.–5.4.1992* (Erlangen: Martin Luther, 1993); Andreas H. Wöhle, *Luthers Freude an Gottes Gesetz : eine historische Quellenstudie zur Oszillation des Gesetz-*

If the turn to history marked the foremost characteristic of the past generation of Reformation studies, there were several other notable characteristics. One was the breaking down of barriers that had traditionally separated various strands of Reformation scholarship. This breakdown meant that Reformation scholarship ceased to be the more or less exclusive province of German and Scandinavian scholars of Lutheran persuasion (and their compatriots), with their concomitant value judgments. Reformation scholarship became both ecumenical and more comprehensive. Catholic Reformation scholarship began to make major contributions to our understanding of the sixteenth-century course of events. It entered into conversation with Reformation scholarship at large.

The new Catholic historiography did away with many of the traditional blanket Catholic judgments about the Reformation, such as the insistence that the Protestant heresies of the sixteenth century had been old heresies in disguise. Catholic historians found much fault with both theology and life of the church in the immediate Pre-Reformation period and acknowledged the theological insights and personal piety of Luther and the other reformers. Joseph Lortz, the prominent figure of his new Catholic scholarship, was empathetic with Luther's religiosity and penned the famous sentence that Luther might have become a Catholic saint had he only known Catholic theology better.¹⁶

This Catholic historiography had two ramifications. On the one hand, it reflected on the theological issues of the Reformation in order to understand where the theological issues and controversies of the sixteenth century had actually joined. Undoubtedly, there was a predisposition to minimize the genuine theological differences that separated the two parties in the sixteenth century, and an interest also to extend ecumenical concerns back into the time of the Reformation. Also, the Second Vatican Council, with its dramatic demonstration of openness and willingness of self-scrutiny, undoubtedly influenced Catholic scholarship. The case was made that the sixteenth-century

esbegriffes Martin Luthers im Licht seiner alttestamentlichen Predigten (Frankfurt am Main: Haag and Herchen, 1998).

16. Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*. Freiburg, 1940; the English translation, *The Reformation in Germany* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968). Other Catholic scholars to be mentioned are Hans Küng (at least in his early work), notably his *Justification; the doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection. With a Letter by Karl Barth* (New York: Nelson, 1964). Other names are Otto Pesch, Erwin Iserloh, Vincent Pfnürr, Harry McSorley as Catholic scholars who worked on Protestant theological topics. See also Johann Heinz, "Martin Luther and his Theology in German Catholic Interpretation before and after Vatican II," *Andrews University Studies* 26 (1988): 253ff.; Michael Lukens, "Lortz' View of the Reformation and the Crisis of the True Church," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990): 20ff.

controversies should be viewed far more as exercises in misunderstanding and miscommunication than as unambiguous manifestation of theological disagreement.

At the same time, Catholic scholars examined the theology and life of the church during the later Middle Ages in order to understand the setting of the Protestant Reformation. They dissented from the prevailing Grisar-Denifle portrayal of thoughtful theology and vibrant church life in the fifteenth century, admitted that some things had indeed gone awry, and that fifteenth-century theologians were not always clear about the distinction between their own opinion and official church teaching.¹⁷ At the same time, they insisted that there was considerable vitality in the latter decades of the fifteenth century and that much of what had been taken to be original insights of the Protestant reformers could already be found in the fifteenth century.

The influence of this new Catholic historiography on our understanding of the Reformation was profound, even though it took a long time in coming. Apart from diffusing traditional confessional antagonisms, this Catholic historiography helped force a revision of the traditional Protestant understanding of the fifteenth century. Catholic historians found kindred spirits, notably Heiko Oberman, then a young Dutch church historian, who weighed in with steadfast determination, and a number of important publications, to rehabilitate the late Middle Ages.¹⁸

This coming of age of ecumenical scholarship also brought intense interest in an aspect of the Reformation, which through the centuries had been somewhat ignored. It is what nowadays is variously called the "left wing" or the "Radical Reformation."¹⁹ Over the years the adherents of this aspect of the Reformation had not fared particularly well in theological historiography. Luther had called them

17. The two important books are Hartmann Grisar, *Luther*, Engl. Trans. (St. Louis, Mo.: Herder, 1913–17), and Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung* (Mainz: F. Kirchheim, 1904–9). Grisar's biography was republished in Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1950!

18. There are many splendid tributes to the contribution of Heiko Oberman to the field, notably the Festschrift *Continuity and Change: the Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History: Essays Presented to Heiko A. Oberman on his 70th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

19. George H. Williams introduced the terminology "Radical Reformation," after Roland Bainton had coined the term "left wing of the Reformation." Williams meant to refer to reformers who sought to return, without governmental support and assistance, to the "roots" (*radix*) of Christianity. The problem with such a definition was, of course, that all reformers claimed to be doing precisely that, so that conceding that some so succeeded represents a value judgment. By the same token, to understand "radical" in our customary usage as "extreme," "consequent," and so on, similarly represents a value judgment. I, therefore, find the term too complicated to be of much use and insert quotation marks to express my misgivings.

Schwärmer, which prompted a naïve English seventeenth-century divine to assume that a Dr. Swermerius had been one of the reformers. Theologians and church historians had found these “radicals” splendid case histories of theological ignorance and personal perversion. After all, Thomas Müntzer had been a revolutionary, and the Anabaptists at Münster had practiced polygamy. Thus, the “radicals” were the stepchildren of Reformation historiography, even though intermittently a prominent or not so prominent voice sought to offer rehabilitation.²⁰

The center for this vibrant Anabaptist scholarship was, not surprisingly, North America, where the guild of church historians was not characterized by the same kind of confessional orientation as their European colleagues (in other words, they did not have a copy of the *Book of Concord*, or the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, on their night tables).²¹ The stimulus behind this dynamic surge in Anabaptist scholarship was Harold S. Bender, a Mennonite historian, who indefatigably focused attention on the Anabaptists as the sixteenth-century epitome of authentic Christianity. The fact that Bender had a publishing outlet, the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, helped a great deal. The articles in the *M.Q.R.* were not uniformly of high quality, but they were always vibrant. What is most important—and is, I believe, often overlooked—is the fact that the dynamics underlying this lively endeavor were primarily not at all scholarly concern. Rather, what drove this lively scholarship was what had driven Luther and Calvin scholarship through the centuries—the concern to bring sixteenth-century insights to bear on Christian existence in the twentieth. It was Reformation studies as vehicle for church affirmation and renewal.

The picture painted was a bit too idyllic, a feature that permeated George H. Williams’s immensely learned magnum opus, *The Radical Reformation*. Not surprisingly, a “revisionist” school of Anabaptist historiography appeared on the scene in the early 1970s, which insisted that Mennonite scholars and their compatriots had painted an all-too-neat picture of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, and they had done this by offering a delimiting definition of Anabaptism that conveniently denied some elements, such as Münster, the right to be included in the fold. The revisionist historians made a point that Anabaptism in the sixteenth century was rather heterogeneous, was

20. Two of these exceptions were C. A. Cornelius, *Geschichte des Münsterischen Aufbruchs* (Leipzig: T. O. Weigel, 1855–60), and—most importantly—Ernst Troeltsch, in his famous *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Engl. Trans. (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

21. Of course, there were exceptions, notably in the Netherlands.

intimately related to the phenomenon of social and economic unrest of the 1520s, and not at all as attractive as Bender and his colleagues had made it out to be. It seems worth noting that the revisionist scholars, such as James Stayer, were secular rather than church historians.²²

A third aspect of this new ecumenical Reformation scholarship was its broadened geographic perspective. All along, German scholars had virtually dominated Reformation studies, which understandably made Germany the focus of scholarly interest. The new scholarship of the past decades pointed out persuasively that the Reformation, in whatever definition, was more than a trip up and down the Elbe, that significant events and dynamics characterized England and France and Spain, and that it was problematic to use German or Lutheran criteria to understand the course of events everywhere in Europe. American Reformation historians, such as Robert Kingdon, Carlos Eire, or Elisabeth Gleason, deserve note for having put this broader geographic perspective into publishing practice.²³ Linguistic hurdles have prevented some of this scholarship—particularly that in Poland and Finland—from becoming widely known among Western European and North American scholars. George H. Williams translated the seminal seventeenth-century history of the Polish Reformation by Stanislas Lubieniecki (1623–75) into English.²⁴ The rich studies by Polish historians of the anti-Trinitarian and Socinian movements in Poland (the Minor Reformed Church) remain generally unknown. Thus, of the remarkable work of Lech Szczucki, only his *Socinianism and Its Role in the Culture of the XVIth to XVIIIth Centuries* is available in a Western language.²⁵

This European picture must be properly understood. Even though, in the end, every last European political entity had to make a decision whether to stay formally aligned with the Church of Rome or embrace one or the other “Reformation” religions, this decision was reached in individual countries in different ways and with different intensity. France may be said to have been on one end of the spectrum, Italy on the other. Thus, for the various national historiographies, the Refor-

22. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*.

23. Robert Kingdon has been a major voice in calling attention to the Calvinist-French aspects of the Reformation, while Carlos Eire directed our attention to the Iberian peninsula, theretofore a prerogative of Spanish scholars, for example his *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

24. Stanislas Lubieniecki, *History of the Polish Reformation: and nine related documents*. Translated and interpreted by George Huntston Williams (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1995).

25. Warsaw, 1983.

mation, as commonly understood, was of differing significance, as we have already noted. The most obvious illustration for a country with a minimum of religious turbulence is Sweden, while France suggests itself as a place of great turbulence in the second half of the century but without the pointed significance of the German lands of the early 1520s.

This takes us to England, where during the past two generations of scholarship a lively debate has explored the very core of the course of events in England. The background, as exemplified by the two-volume history of the Reformation in England by Philip Hughes, a learned work, was that the ecclesiastical change in England occurred as a royal fiat from the top.²⁶ The work of A. G. Dickens, beginning with his study of the survival of Lollardy in early-sixteenth-century England, and culminating in his magisterial *The English Reformation*, argued the contrary. It showed that the persistence of Lollard heresy in the early sixteenth century, coupled with the influx of Lutheran ideas made for a program of religious (and societal) reform that was born by the English people.²⁷ Dickens's sentiment proved to be the dominant orthodoxy of the understanding of the English Reformation.

Then revisionism set in, exemplified by such scholars as Christopher Haigh, J. J. Scarisbrick, and, most recently, Eamon Duffy.²⁸ They charged A. G. Dickens with erroneously assuming that the Catholic faith and practice exerted a diminishing appeal on the English people.²⁹ Haigh and Scarisbrick—the former quite aggressively so—argued that Catholic sentiment was strong in England and Protestant sentiment grew only very slowly to the accession of Queen Elizabeth

26. Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 2 vols. (London: Hollis and Carter, 1950–54). The two volumes are an immensely learned work. This perspective can also be found in Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries: an Attempt to Illustrate the History of Their Suppression* (London: J. Hodges, 1895), which painted the picture of a flowering English monasticism extinguished by Henry VIII.
27. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*. (New York, 1964; 2nd ed. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
28. See here Christopher Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); and J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). An early assessment of the disagreement was by Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (London: Methuen, 1986).
29. A good illustration for such criticism is found in Christopher Haigh's *English Reformations*, cited above. Similarly revisionist is Martha C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation c. 1530–c. 1570* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

I and the definitive introduction of Protestantism in England.³⁰ In other words, Dickens had it all wrong. The English people were loyal to their church and continued to find ways to express this loyalty. While Dickens rose to a vigorous defense of his position, there is little doubt that the “popular dimension” of the Reformation was in England by all odds not too different from what it was in German lands on the Continent—namely that vigorous advocacy of reform by a few was coupled with widespread loyalty to the old church. One consequence of this disagreement has been a series of studies, such as by Robert Whiting and C. J. Litzenberger, on specific locales, since grandiose generalizations ought to be based on empirical data.³¹ The recent study of Ethan Shagan suggests that the English Reformation was neither imposed from the top nor did it come about as an untamable explosion from below; rather, it grew out of a dynamic process of engagement between the people and government.³²

A fourth facet of recent Reformation research was initially almost universally ignored, but gained widespread attention in the 1980s as a creative conceptualization of the Reformation. The concept of the Reformation as “early bourgeois revolution” was indefatigably propounded by a handful of Marxist historians in what was then East Germany. What most would consider a casual comment from a non-expert, namely Karl Marx’s associate Friedrich Engels about the German peasants’ war of 1524/25, proved the catalyst for a grandiose thesis that placed the early sixteenth century into a broader historical framework. The thesis held that early-sixteenth-century German society was experiencing a crisis, triggered by the emergence of a new protocapitalist, early bourgeois economy, which challenged the old feudal order. The new capitalist holders of economic power sought political power, and in order to attain this power they turned against the church, which provided the ideology for the old feudal order. This crisis triggered a revolution, at first not on the barricades but in the studies of a new type of intellectual, such as Martin Luther, who provided the ideological arguments against the feudal order and the church that provided its ideological support. This “early bourgeois

30. Dickens sought to refute this revisionist interpretation, which, naturally, focused on his own interpretation of the English course of events: “The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England, 1520–1558,” *Archive for Reformation History* 78 (1987): 187–222.
31. Robert Whiting, *Local Responses to the English Reformation* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998); C. J. Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire, 1540–1580* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001).
32. Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

revolution" failed because the reformers sided with the feudal authorities and abandoned the erstwhile goal of a new society, which was invoked by the more visionary reformers, such as Thomas Müntzer.³³

The disappearance of the German Democratic Republic also meant the disappearance of the Marxist historians who had propounded the thesis of the early bourgeois revolution. These historians, such as Günther Vogler, lost their professorial positions and their professional standing. But even though the phrase Early Bourgeois Revolution has disappeared from our vocabulary, the concept has influenced sixteenth-century scholarship with the relentless insistence on the role of economic and social factors in the course of events. We have learned that unrest and insurrection were not confined to the countryside in the 1520s but characterized towns as well. And we have learned that what used to be called the Peasants War is better labeled the "revolution of 1525."³⁴ Robert Scribner indefatigably raised questions about the popular dimension of the Reformation—using new methods to examine the use of visual propaganda to transmit Reformation ideas, the means of communication used, the nature of social movements, the role of festivals, and much more. Reformation history became, in these and other hands, the social history of religious change. The focus turned to the religion of the men and women in the pews, to popular religion, to Reformation from below. The concern was how ideas and practice were related.³⁵ This turn allowed paying attention to those whose absence in the Renaissance had so perplexed Joan Kelly Gadol, namely women. Women were discovered, though often with the same methodology that had made them invisible in the first place.

A final feature of the historiographical landscape of the last decades has been the confessionalization thesis. As propounded by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, this thesis has become the new orthodoxy in the field.³⁶ In a way, simply an observation about the nature

33. An interesting illustration for this East German scholarship is the Luther biography by Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther: Theology and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

34. Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525. The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

35. This is found in such books as Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household. Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual. An Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and the recent fascinating book of Steve E. Ozment, *Flesh and Spirit: Private Life in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Viking, 1999), the latter examining the various rites of the church—baptism, marriage, burial—both before and after the Reformation.

36. A comprehensive bibliographical survey is that of Heinrich Richard Schmidt, *Konfessionalisierung im 16. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992). Equally incisive (and not uncritical) is Thomas Kaufmann, "Die Konfessionalisierung von Kirche und Gesellschaft," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 121 (1996): 1008ff. A critical assessment of the

and character of territorial society in Germany in the late sixteenth century, the stakes in this debate nonetheless are high in that the thesis ultimately focuses on issues of periodization, and thus macro-history.³⁷

To begin with, Schilling, Reinhard, and others found the notion of a "second Reformation," which had engaged Reformation historians in the 1970s, to be inadequate. This had been the notion of a massive Calvinist reform effort in the second half of the century, a reform effort that had all but overwhelmed German Lutheranism.³⁸ This concept, to which the late Bodo Nischan contributed most constructively, evoked a brief and intense debate.³⁹ Instead, Schilling and Reinhard argued that the movement to change Lutheran territories into Calvinist/Reformed territories (referred to as the "second" Reformation) must be understood as part of a much broader phenomenon, namely a "cohesive, societal process of change . . . which, going beyond ecclesiastical and theological change, led to political, social, cultural, and mentality change."⁴⁰ What took place toward the end of the century was more than a shift from one confession to another. Reinhard and Schilling argued that the real happening was the "confessionalization," of German territories, a comprehensive and fundamental phenomenon that encompassed all aspects of society. According to Schilling, confessionalization refers to a "fundamental societal happening which profoundly altered public and private life in Europe; . . . [it] is related to the formation of the early modern state . . .

concept of confessionalization is by Johannes Merz, "Calvinismus im Territorialstaat? Zur Begriffss- und Traditionsbildung in der deutschen Historiographie," *Zeitschrift f. bayerische Landesgeschichte* 57 (1994): 45ff. Another critic of the thesis is Philip Gorsky, who harks back to Max Weber with his argument that the several "confessions" had quite different ways of translating their beliefs into the public square: Philip Gorsky, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

37. A different way of using the term "confessional," namely as a term denoting the theological-creedal characteristic of the period from 1525 to 1648, is that of Harm Klueting, *Das konfessionelle Zeitalter, 1525–1648* (Stuttgart: E. Ulmer, 1989).
38. A thoughtful bibliographical survey and trenchant criticism of both term and concept is offered by Harm Klueting, "Gab es eine 'zweite Reformation'? Ein Beitrag zur Terminologie des Konfessionellen Zeitalters," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 38 (1987), 261–79. Heinz Schilling appears to have had ambivalent thoughts: "Die 'zweite Reformation' als Kategorie der Geschichtswissenschaft", in *Die reformierte Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland—Das Problem der zweiten Reformation*, ed. Schilling (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1986), 387ff.
39. Bodo Nischan, *Prince, People, and Confession. The Second Reformation in Brandenburg* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).
40. Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt und Staatsbildung. Eine Fallstudie über das Verhältnis von religiösem und sozialem Wandel in der Frühneuzeit am Beispiel der Grafschaft Lippe*. Gütersloh, 1981, 7. Heinz Schilling, *Die reformierte Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland—Das Problem der zweiten Reformation*, 7.

[to the] modern social-disciplined commonweal of subjects . . . [and to] modern economic systems." Or, as Reinhard put it, confessionalization is the "Fundamentalprozess der Frühneuzeit."⁴¹

The concept of confessionalization accordingly addresses also the question how medieval Europe became modern. At the core stands the question Norbert Elias sought to answer with his civilizing theory, but Schilling and Reinhard argued that the modern state had its beginning not in its monopoly of taxation and the military, but in its monopolizing of religion.⁴² Modernization thus means confessionalization, and the Reformation may be quite consistently seen as a crisis of modernization.⁴³ In other words, confessionalization formed the early modern state and national identities.

Two recent books, Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, have advanced the same notion in a somewhat different context. Marx's book, which focuses essentially on the sixteenth century, is in fact the "Confessionalization" thesis transferred back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Marx argues that the origins of the modern state are unthinkable without religion, specifically the Reformation, in that monarchs used religion to consolidate their power. This notion, wonderfully reminiscent of Ranke, is made less convincing, however, by the corollary argument that the sense of community is created by religion demonizing the "Other."⁴⁴ While this reintroduction of religion as an independent variable will be welcomed by some, I fear that religion is given too much credit.

41. Heinz Schilling, "Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich—Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620," *Historische Zeitschrift* 246 (1988): 6.

42. Elias's ideas are found in the second volume of his *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

43. Hand in hand with "confessionalization" went the process of what has been called "social discipline" of society. This process began well before the sixteenth century and accelerated steadily as time went on. It was a collaborative effort of church and state—the churches were eager to impose their moral standards upon society, while the state, in exercising its authority through regulations concerning such matters as festivals, vagrancy, begging, poor relief, saw these regulations as means to consolidate its power. If what the church ventured to do was largely voluntaristic, the action of the state was demonstrably repressive. The notion is that of Gerhard Oestreich, "Strukturprobleme des europäischen Absolutismus," in *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1969), 179–97. An essay that connects social control and the Reformation is by Bob Scribner, "Social Control and the Possibility of an Urban Reformation," in *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon, 1987).

44. Anthony W. Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

On one level, this notion was hardly divine revelation. A generation ago, Ernst Walter Zeeden had, in several publications, focused on the emergence of the "confessions," that is, new ecclesiastical bodies.⁴⁵ In other words, territories assumed their distinct "confessional" identity. But Zeeden suggested more than that. He observed that the formation of the "confessions," understood as ecclesiastical bodies, was "a process that touched not only on church affairs but also encompassed the political and cultural world, indeed both the public and the private spheres."⁴⁶ Schilling and Reinhart emphasized, however, that "confessionalization" is not the same as confessional identity. Confessionalization, so they argue, was crucial for the formation of the early modern state and had consequences for all aspects of society. Confessionalization is macrohistory, in that the thesis seeks to address the larger question about the nature of historical change. The thesis argues that religion and church were not two societal subsystems among many, but were the "structural axis of society."⁴⁷ In short, the most striking feature of the paradigm of Confessionalization lies surely in the fact that it asserts the dynamic power of religion and Christianity—in its several parallel but competing traditions—to form and mold society. Needless to say, this has enormous consequences for the way the function of religion in early modern German society is seen.

We do not have, at this time, the necessary distance from this lively scholarship to discern the impulses behind the confessionalization thesis. It is clear, all the same, that at the core must be the conviction that the changes brought about by the Reformation in the 1520s and 1530s were by no means as formidable and far-reaching—certainly not epoch-making, as Ranke had argued—as generations of (Protestant) historians had argued. Confessionalization means, above all, a devaluation of the Reformation. By same token, it does not necessarily mean the devaluation of religion in the course of society; Heinz Schilling, in particular, has strenuously sought to make that point. Nonetheless, the thesis entails less confidence in the societal force of religion in the first half of the century than it has in the second.

45. For example, Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Die Entstehung der Konfessionen*. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965). Zeeden clearly anticipated, without offering a broader conceptual perspective, the essential notion of the confessionalization thesis. See Note 36.

46. Ernst Walter Zeeden, "Zur Periodisierung und Terminologie des Zeitalters der Reformation und Gegenreformation," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 7 (1956): 67.

47. Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt*, 2. See also Wolfgang Reinhard, ed., *Katholische Konfessionalisierung. Wissenschaftliches Symposium der Gesellschaft zur Herausgabe des Corpus Catholicorum und des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 1993* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995), 420.

Thus far these observations about Reformation scholarship during the last generation have consisted of a series of footnotes, of varying significance, on the theme sounded at the outset: Reformation studies are very much alive and well. It is a defining characteristic of the various developments in Reformation research that they presuppose a pivotal importance of the course of events. That is best illustrated by the East German Marxist historians who, while rejecting traditional Reformation hagiography that had made the Reformation a trip up and down the Elbe river wound up saying that what happened in the German lands between 1517 and 1525 was the most crucial European happening prior to the French Revolution. Acquaintance with English seventeenth-century history, and the work of Christopher Hill, might have disabused them of such startlingly nationalist notions.

All of these aspects of current Reformation scholarship must be put into a broader context. In terms of books published, number of journals, and attendance at the annual meetings of professional societies, say the Sixteenth-century Studies Conference, Reformation studies have been a veritable growth industry. Were these reflections to end at this point, it would have been a story with a happy and an uncomplicated ending. But more is to be said.

Traditionally, church historians and theologians have dominated the field of Reformation studies. Secular historians who labored in this vineyard tended to be their handmaiden, spelling out the diplomatic and political ramifications of the theological postulates set forth by them. The secular Reformation historians thought like their brethren of the cloth. This has changed. Secular historians no longer see their work as an "auxiliary" discipline of theology, and they ask different questions and offer different answers. Some of the best work has been done by scholars who cared little whether Luther had, or had not, authentically interpreted the New Testament but who cared a great deal about politics of power or gender. These scholars examined the religious and theological issues of the sixteenth century not *sub specie aeternitatis*, but as expressions of overt or underlying realities of power politics, social structure, class, and gender.

But, no matter how productive these scholarly impulses proved to be, there were problems. Once the field was robbed of its religious core, an intriguing consequence drove a wedge into the scholarly ranks. The field split into two divergent schools, roughly the church historians and the secular historians. Church historians, especially in Europe, have continued to do their work as they had done it before, focusing on Christianity, since for them religion is the pivotal subject matter of the century. Secular historians, on the other hand, pursued lines of scholarly inquiry that took them away from "religious" topics.

This has been the case especially in the United States. In the process, historians have insisted that positing an “age” or a “period” of the Reformation does not correspond to the way the time should be seen. This is an intriguingly astute observation, once the centrality of religion in the course of events is called into question. Not to overlook the fact that for historians of such countries as France, Italy, and England, this fixation on sixteenth-century religious turbulence never made much sense anyway.

There is another aspect. Both the discipline of church history and that of history have been undergoing major changes during the last thirty years. New areas of historical inquiry, such as women’s history, have minimized the prominence of European history in departments of history. The awareness that the histories of the overwhelming majority of humankind had been ignored in the standard curricula, together with a dose of political correctness, led to the repudiation, sometimes subtle, sometimes not, of Eurocentricity in the study of history as theoretically and historically outdated.

This turn of events was one of the factors prompting the subsuming of the narrow field of the Reformation, with its focus on the Continent and a time span of little more than a century, under the much broader category of Early Modern Europe, recently even more broadly as Early Modern Studies, the latter term encompassing non-European histories as well. The traditional chronological delineation of a discrete period between 1500 and 1650 as the period of the Reformation and Counter Reformation has been largely abandoned, except for a part of the larger “early modern” period. Thus, the emergence of the nomenclature of “early modern” Europe is part of the broader historiographical developments in Reformation scholarship during the past generation.

Interestingly enough, however, the notion of an “Early Modern Europe” has mainly meant a vague broadening of the chronological parameters without either a clear chronological consensus or an unambiguous underlying reconceptualization. Such is the case, for example, in Erich Hassinger’s *Das Werden des frühneuzeitlichen Europas*, a highly intelligent work in which, despite a chronological compass that extends from roughly 1300 to 1650, the Reformation as traditionally defined occupies the central place.⁴⁸ The same holds true for several other recent books on what is called the “early modern” period, which—according to different authors—began in 1517, or 1400, or

48. Erich Hassinger’s book offers perhaps the best illustration: clearly, his conceptualization suggests that what he calls “Frühe Neuzeit” was incisively marked by the Protestant Reformation.

1350, and ended—with analogous vagueness—sometimes at the end of the seventeenth century, sometimes as late as the French Revolution.⁴⁹ Whatever the parameters of this “early modern” period, the Reformation has strikingly remained right in the middle.⁵⁰ The only exception, as far as I know, is the multivolume *Histoire du Christianisme*, in which volume 7, dealing with the time from 1450 to 1530, narrates the story of the Reformation as the end of an “age of reforms,” while volume 8, dealing with 1530 to 1620/30, is entitled the “time of the confessions.” Here the parenthetical character of the Reformation as traditionally understood is expressed vividly.⁵¹

This increasingly widespread use of the term “early modern” or “early modern Europe” for the sixteenth century, including the Reformation, notwithstanding, the term would seem to be highly problematic. We can skirt the question if an “early” modern Europe does not require a “late” modern Europe as corollary. There is also the difference between the English use of “early modern” and the German use of “frühe Neuzeit,” two different terms that suggest different nuances—French historians distinguish between “histoire moderne,” which ended with the French Revolution.

More important would seem to be two questions: to what extent was the sixteenth century incisively characterized by “modern” aspects, and, secondly, is it possible to subsume the entire era under the rubric of such “modern” notions? Related (and crucially related to the understanding of the Reformation) is the question if the history of Christianity the first half of the sixteenth century allows for no better label than the rather evasive “early modern?” John O’Malley’s presidential address to the American Catholic Historical Association preferred the term “early modern Catholicism” to describe sixteenth-century Catholicism over the possible two alternatives “Counter

49. To cite a few books in point: Anette Völker-Rasor, *Frühe Neuzeit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000); Markus Reisenleitner, *Frühe Neuzeit, Reformation und Gegenreformation: Darstellung, Forschungsüberblick, Quellen und Literatur* (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2000); Martin Warnke, *Spätmittelalter und frühe Neuzeit: 1400–1750* (Munich: Beck, 1999); Frank Göttmann, *Die Frühe Neuzeit: gesellschaftliche Stabilität und politischer Wandel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1999); Walter Haug, *Mittelalter und frühe Neuzeit: Übergänge, Umbrüche und Neuansätze* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1999); Heide Wunder, *Der andere Blick auf die Frühe Neuzeit: Forschungen 1974–95* (Königstein: U. Helmer, 1999).

A thoughtful assessment of the larger conceptual issues is found in the volume edited by Rudolf Vierhaus, *Frühe Neuzeit-frühe Moderne? Forschungen zur Vielschichtigkeit von Übergangsprozessen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992).

50. In German scholarship, aided by that fascinating ability of the German language to coin new words, the term “Frühneuzeit” has appeared as a noun. As noted in the text, there is a subtle difference between “Neuzeit” and “modern.”

51. Marx Venard, ed., *Histoire du Christianisme des Origines à Nos Jours*, Vol. 7. *Temps des confessions (1530–1620/30)* (Paris: Delclée, 1990).

Reformation" or "Catholic Reform."⁵² Now, it would seem rather obvious what reasoning must have stood behind the choice of the label "early modern." The history of sixteenth-century Catholicism is to be disconnected from the Protestant Reformation, as it is admittedly problematic to tie a whole century to impulses that came from an inimical movement. Nonetheless, it raises serious problems that epitomize, in fact, the issues surrounding the term "early modern."⁵³ Such questions as what is "modern" Catholicism, and how did sixteenth-century Catholicism as "early modern" anticipate it, require cogent answers. To speak of Catholicism "in the time of early modern Europe" hardly constitutes an improvement.

The terms "modern" and "early modern" are employed without a clear and persuasive definition of what they denote. Both are highly malleable terms, especially "modern," since each generation, whether in the thirteenth century or the twenty-first, sees itself as "modern."

At the very least, the term must denote newness. There is, of course, no doubt but that there are aspects of the sixteenth century that reverberated with new ideas. The incipient ideas about religious freedom come to mind as an example. By the same token, it is self-evident that such "modern" ideas were few and far between and that traditional notions, norms, and values continued to dominate the scene. Since we are here concerned primarily with religious history, one might point to such factors as the retention of the medieval worldview, the absence of critical scrutiny of the Bible, the continued dominance of Aristotelianism in the universities, and so on.

Much of the sixteenth century was "old" and "medieval." To argue that the Protestant Reformation was an essentially medieval phenomenon does not preclude the acknowledgment that some notions and ideas were new. Ernst Troeltsch, in his famous but too little read essay on "Protestantism and Progress" made the point rather cogently.⁵⁴ The Protestant reformers gave new answers to traditional medieval problems. In a myriad of ways, the sixteenth century—most assuredly the early sixteenth century—remained deeply embedded in the medieval value system. It retained the notion of the *Corpus Christianum*, the society that was identical to the church. The understanding of divine providence was traditional, that is, deeply anthropomorphic.

52. John O'Malley, "Was Ignatius of Loyola a Church Reformer? How to look at Early Modern Catholicism," *Catholic Historical Review* 77 (1991): 177–93.

53. In a way, the same conceptual problem surrounds the use of the term "Renaissance" as a historical epoch. And that quite aside from the propriety of its applicability to the history of Christianity during that time.

54. Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress. A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912).

Martin Luther may never have thrown the inkpot against the devil, but the famous story receives its credence in that he well might have. Luther lived in a time in which he was able to note that in a neighboring town a woman had given birth to a mouse, or that the devil was responsible for bad beer.⁵⁵ One should not read these statements as facetious frivolities but as profoundly indicative of the old medieval *Zeitgeist*. The fervor of the European witch craze and the sixteenth-century persecution of dissenters are further illustrations for the persistence of the medieval value system. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists and Jews, alongside other religious dissenters and fringe groups, would assuredly have been shockingly surprised to be told that they were enjoying a premodern age.

In short, as Ernst Troeltsch was at pains to note, there is little “modern” in the Protestant Reformation (and in the Council of Trent), and there is not much more in the sixteenth century in general. But this reality—surely not revelatory truth to students of the sixteenth century—poses the question why the term “early modern” has almost universally come to encompass the early part of the sixteenth century and the Protestant Reformation. The explanation lies in the fact that historians have become uneasy to attribute an epoch-forming significance to the Reformation as a religious phenomenon. Evidently they do not find sufficient dynamic in the religious turbulence of the first half of the sixteenth century to see it as a discrete historical period. Moreover, the term “early modern” is becomingly devoid of ideological content.

The consequence, of course, has been that the term “early modern” has come to be employed to denote a historical epoch, albeit with unspecified chronological parameters. The Protestant Reformation is subsumed under this period. But, whatever legitimacy one might conjure up for the use of the term “early modern,” its dynamic does not capture the dynamic of the Reformation, however understood. The preoccupation with the centrality of “early modern Europe” distorts the significance of the Reformation.

Arguably, the insistence of traditional Reformation scholarship that a revolutionary break with the past occurred early in the sixteenth century, presumably on October 31, 1517, grew out of a combination of Protestant self-confidence and ignorance. However, it is important to keep in mind that this Protestant sentiment was by no means parochial Protestant hubris but rather was part and parcel of the way Europe has understood itself and its past ever since the sixteenth

55. The remark is in WA TR 2, 154b; see also WA 49, 21, a sermon on 1 Timothy 1:2, in which Luther writes “Teuffels, wie du gehest und stehest. Item, wenn du falsch bier machst.”

century. This notion of the newness of the Reformation fit harmoniously with the understanding of the medieval past, that is, with the derogatory dismissal of the "middle" ages—perceived as dark, blatant obscurantism in every imaginable form—by the "moderns." The Protestant understanding of the newness of the Reformation was, in other words, by no means an eccentric perspective held by Protestant divines. It expressed the self-understanding and self-confidence of post-fifteenth-century Europe.

Protestant theologians and historians were not alone in exulting in ever longer catalogues of sixteenth-century newness. Everyone did so, except for a few Catholic diehards. Now, that we have become post-modern, leaving modernity behind us, the disposition to extol modernity at the expense of the Middle Ages has decreased. At the same time, the apologetes for the Middle Ages who point out that we have not given that epoch its due have become more vocal. Scholars, such as Johannes Fried or Horst Fuhrmann, have argued that much of what was considered to be "modern" can be found *in nuce* in the medieval world.⁵⁶

Intriguingly, Reformation studies have not been significantly affected by the epistemological challenges of contemporary philosophy and theory in the Humanities. In other disciplines, these challenges triggered an intense and lively discussion since they undercut the epistemological and methodological assumptions with which the Humanities, including History, had been operating for more than a century. Did this challenge reach Reformation historiography? Several years ago, Gerald Strauss presented a thoughtful paper entitled "What can Reformation historians learn from Foucault," and his answer was simple: not much. Most Reformation historians, even as the historical profession in general, have continued to pay homage to the creed of historical objectivity, à la Ranke, unperturbed by the dramatic changes in the scientific and literary paradigms over the last century.

This is surely intriguing, since Reformation historiography demonstrates, better than most other periods of European history, that there have been several "objective" Reformations—constructed by Protestants, by Catholics, by Calvinists, by Anglicans, all claiming, certainly since the middle of the nineteenth century, the mantle of scholarly

56. Johannes Fried, ed., *Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein, ca. 1996); Horst Fuhrmann, *Deutsche Geschichte im hohen Mittelalter: Von der Mitte des 11. bis zum Ende des 12. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), English translation *Germany in the High Middle Ages, c. 1050–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and especially his *Überall ist Mittelalter: von der Gegenwart einer vergangenen Zeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996).

objectivity. The one place where things have changed is in nomenclature, and there it is, in my judgment, quite wrong. Or, at any rate, misunderstood. I am referring to another new orthodoxy in our midst, namely, the use of the plural to denote the absence of a single way to view phenomena. This means that we no longer speak of Christianity, Catholicism, Reformation, but of Christianities, Catholicisms, or Reformations. Such use of the plural is the case, for example, in the otherwise well-informed history of the Reformation by Carter Lindberg.⁵⁷

The use of the plural with reference to Zwingli, Calvin, Cranmer, or Menno Simons to propound the revelatory truth that these theologians held to different theologies and different notions of what constituted "reform" does not seem to me to constitute historiographical progress, even if it is a postmodern way of looking at things. The use of the plural would seem to be only then appropriate, if it can be demonstrated that the several movements were nurtured not by a single impulse but by a variety of impulses that had little, if anything, in common.

Two additional developments in recent Reformation historiography must be mentioned. One, the remarkable increase in interest in the stories of women in the Reformation, must be mentioned again in the context of the still ambiguous use of theory, since the recovery of women's stories, seeing them as more than domestic helpmates and managers of holy households, must not only be attributed to the impact of social history. It surely was also the outgrowth of a paradigmatic methodological shift that questioned the Rankean notion of historical objectivity and its reliance on archival sources that, by definition, afford men a privileged and altogether subjective status. The appropriation of notions of critical theory lies at the heart of the exodus of the stories of women (and children, by the way) from the bondage of Ranke.

Interestingly enough, the first foray to retrieve the stories of women in the Reformation appeared in 1885.⁵⁸ This was followed by no less than three volumes—one on women in Spain and Scandinavia, one on women in France and England, the third on women in Germany and Italy—by Roland Bainton, who utilized the same biographical approach that had characterized his biographies of Luther, David Joris, or Michael Servetus.⁵⁹ Since Bainton, a large number of monographs

57. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

58. Annie T. Wittenmyer, *The Women of the Reformation*. (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1885.

59. Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1973); *Women of the Reformation from Spain to Scandinavia* (Minneapolis, Minn.:

on various aspects of women in the Reformation have appeared—Anabaptist women, women martyrs, Catholic women, women authors of *Flugschriften*. Collectively, these studies have both changed and enriched the traditional understanding.⁶⁰

Finally, what one might label the most formidable challenge to traditional Reformation studies grew out of two aspects of scholarship already mentioned—the argument that the sixteenth-century Reformation stood in harmonious continuity with the fifteenth century, with much of what was advocated in the Reformation merely a continuation, perhaps acceleration, of trends already in place. And, secondly, the argument that the process of confessionalization meant that the truly striking societal changes occurred at the end, and not at the beginning, of the sixteenth century.

The importance of the period traditionally defined as the Reformation has thus been challenged from two sides, representing two historical periods, one preceding it and one following it. These two periods, the fifteenth century and the late sixteenth century, are seen as having been more powerful, effecting more lasting change, and entailing more profound significance, than the first half century from 1500 to 1555. In the process, the Reformation as an event of exciting discontinuity and innovation lost its credibility. It has, as Heinz Schilling noted, “disappeared.”⁶¹ Hans Jürgen Goertz similarly, in his book *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei: die reformatorischen Bewegungen in*

Augsburg, 1977); *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1971),

60. I note the following from the voluminous literature: Hermina Joldersma and Louis Grijp, eds., “*Elisabeth’s ‘manly courage’*”: *Testimonials and Songs of Martyred Anabaptist Women in the Low Countries* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 2001); Paul F. M. Zahl, *Five Women of the English Reformatio* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); Anne Conrad, ed., “*In Christo ist weder man noch weyb*”: *Frauen in der Zeit der Reformation und der katholischen Reform* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1999); Merry Wiesner-Hanks, ed., *Convents Confront the Reformation: Catholic and Protestant Nuns in Germany* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1998); Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner, eds., *Luther on Women: a Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Matheson, ed., *Argula von Grumbach: a woman’s voice in the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1995); Katharina M. Wilson, *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Sherrin Marshall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe: Public and Private Worlds* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). An attempt to bring the categories of gender studies and feminist theory to bear on the sixteenth century is by Merry E. Wiesner, “Beyond Women and the Family: towards a gender analysis of the Reformation,” *Sixteenth-century Journal* 18 (1987): 311–23.
61. Schilling picked up the thrust of Pierre Chaunu’s thesis in his essay, “Reformation—Umbruch oder Gipfelpunkt eines Temps des Réformes?” in *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland als Umbruch*, eds. Stephen E. Buckwalter and Bernd Moeller (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 24.

Deutschland 1517–1529, makes a similar point.⁶² Schilling deserves to be quoted at length:

In light of the insights of scholarship on confessionalization during the last decade, we will not be able in the long run to avoid the recognition that the societal changes effected by confessionalization were more profound than the changes directly effected by the Reformation. Of course, we must not fail to notice that confessionalization is unthinkable without the Reformation, even as the Reformation itself is unthinkable without the preceding late medieval reform. . . . The late Middle Ages were the boarding, the Reformation was the runway, and confessionalization was the take-off of European modernization.⁶³

Thus, the Reformation of the sixteenth century is deprived of its pivotal character. Some scholars speak of an “age of reforms” or “age of Reformations,” and they denote thereby that a cohesive epoch of roughly three centuries was characterized by a steady succession of efforts at societal and religious reform. Of these, the effort commonly called “Reformation” was only one, perhaps not even the most important aspect.

If, as we noted above, term and concept “early modern Europe” remain evasive because too many questions remain unanswered, the same must also be said about the term “Reformation.” A veritable inflation of new definitions and new notions has flooded the field, despite differences essentially arguing a plurality of movements of reform, both over time and in conceptualization. A generation ago, Enno van Gelder spoke of the “two Reformations” of the sixteenth century,” a minor one of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and a major one of Erasmus and his brand of Christian Humanism.⁶⁴ Pierre Chaunu, in turn, identified no less than four “reformations,” of which the first occurred in the thirteenth century, and the “fourth” was that of the seventeenth-century dissenters.⁶⁵ In short, no clarity exists.

This perspective sees what we used to call the Reformation as only a part of a broader societal development that, beginning in the fourteenth century, modified and changed the medieval synthesis. Precisely this is what I take to be the troublesome issue simmering on the backburner of Reformation scholarship: if there was a broadly defined “age of reforms” that began well before and ended quite a bit later

62. Munich, 1987, 13.

63. Schilling-Reinhard, 35; Buckwalter-Moeller, 49.

64. Enno van Gelder, *The Two Reformations of the Sixteenth-century; a Study of the Religious Aspects and Consequences of Renaissance and Humanism* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1961).

65. Accordingly, Chaunu gave his book the title *Le Temps des Réformes. Histoire religieuse et système de civilisation. La crise de la Chrétienté, l'éclatement, 1250–1550* (Paris: Fayard, 1975).

than what we customarily have defined as the Reformation, then it can hardly be argued that the Reformation was an innovative break, a revolution. Rather, it must then be seen as the continuation of trends that reach back into the fifteenth century and find their culmination in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

What is argued here is quite simply that the Reformation was historically significant only as the purveyor of notions already formulated in the fifteenth century and as cause of societal consequences in the 1570s and 1580s. The guild of church historians is thus confronted with an understanding of the sixteenth century that rejects the canonical view of the Reformation as the pivotal event in modern history—as has been argued ever since Ranke. Importantly, however, the new perspective nonetheless affirms the significance of religion in the historical process. Of course, one may well view the question of nomenclature as unimportant, or one may conclude, with Bernd Moeller that it is “völlig aussichtslos” to establish boundaries of historical epochs from cause or effect.⁶⁶

No surprise, then, that Protestant church historians (and theologians) have been forced to rise to the challenge of discerning the implications of the challenge to the “newness” of the Reformation. The notion of a radical innovation brought about by the Reformation lies at the very core of the Protestant self-understanding. Oswald Bayer and Willfried Joest countered the notion of the essential continuity of the fifteenth century and the Reformation with the argument that the Reformation in general, and Martin Luther in particular, formulated a new theology that sharply broke with the theological tradition of the Middle Ages.⁶⁷ Berndt Hamm, while acknowledging that much of what earlier generations of scholars had seen to be new in the Protestant Reformation was, in fact, the continuation of trends and emphases discernible in the preceding century, insists that the Reformation was an innovative event. His notion is that the aspects of long-term change are integrated into a constellation of discontinuity, which is part, in turn, of long-term change.⁶⁸ The question seems to be mired in categories of intellectual history. If that path is pursued,

66. Schilling-Reinhard, 49.

67. As an example, see the older monograph by Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967).

68. Berndt Hamm, “Wie innovativ war die Reformation?” *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 27 (2000): 493ff. The summary appears on page 497: “Faktoren des langfristigen Wandels sind integriert in eine reformatorische Gesamt-konstellation des Umbruchs, der wiederum in andersartige Vorgänge eines langfristigen Wandels integriert ist.” At issue is the interrelationship between change and continuity. Hamm has a comrade in arms in Thomas Kaufmann, who identifies nine areas in which the Reformation brought about incisive change. See Kaufmann, 1119.

exceedingly sophisticated explorations will need to discern the relationship of sixteenth-century Reformation ideas with ideas from preceding centuries. As the discussion over the time and nature of Luther's "evangelical discovery" has shown, however, no level of sophistication seems to be able to resolve the uncertainty. To demonstrate successfully that early-sixteenth-century notions can be found in earlier centuries does absolutely nothing to enlighten us about the dynamics of the time after 1517.

Another way of addressing the issue will focus not so much on the ideas themselves as they were propounded at one time or another, but will ask if certain ideas was perceived as new, indeed totally new, by a generation. Foremost at issue, so it would seem, is the self-consciousness of a time and generation—and not the intellectual historians' eloquent tracing of causalities and connections. The argument can be made—persuasively so—that this was the case with the Reformation. To place the notion of self-consciousness and self-understanding in the center will allow us to understand the controversies of the 1520s and 1530s. The first generation of reformers, whether in Germany, England, or France succeeded in convincing their contemporaries that they had unearthed biblical truths that had lain hidden for centuries.

We conclude and return to our initial question: was there a Reformation of the sixteenth century? Of course, there was—but the real question is if we can define this Reformation as radical break with the past and, second, if there was an age, or a period, of the Reformation? In the future, the tellers of the stories of the past will tell the story differently. But how? At present Reformation studies are at an impasse: theological and social historians face one another as do those who posit dramatic changes in the early part of the sixteenth century and those who do not. Each cohort of these disciples of Clio operates with its own assumptions and arrives at different conclusions. Precisely because Ranke bestowed on the "Reformation" such multifaceted meaning and significance, there exists no consensus concerning the Reformation and its place in the dynamics of the sixteenth century. At issue are not the kind of specifics that at one time were the electrifying excitement of Reformation studies—if Luther's evangelical discovery occurred in 1516 or 1518, or if the introduction of polygamy in Münster in 1534 was the result of demographic discrepancies or Jan van Leyden's promiscuity, or even if the Reformation was, or was not, an urban event.

At issue are fundamentals: did there occur in the early sixteenth century dramatic changes in religion and theology that incisively influenced society? I, for one, would argue that there were—because

they were perceived as such at the time. But the resolution of our scholarly impasse will not come, in my judgment, until each of the competing perspectives presents its grand narrative of the age. Then we will be able to discern if "early modern" is a term that is rightly applied to Christianity in the sixteenth century and if pre-sixteenth-century antecedents rendered early-sixteenth-century changes in church and society insignificant because they were not new. That grand narrative will set the parameters for the work of the next generation of scholars. There should be lots of excitement ahead.