



Secondary Sources

What Was the Reformation?

Euan Cameron

Historians usually agree that the Reformation comprised the general religious transformations in Europe during the sixteenth century. However, they often disagree on what exactly was at the core of the Reformation. In the following selection Euan Cameron argues that the essence of the Reformation was a combination of religious reformers' protests and laymen's political ambitions.

CONSIDER: *How the protests by churchmen and scholars combined with the ambitions of politically active laymen to become the essence of the Reformation; what this interpretation implies about the causes for the Reformation.*

The Reformation, the movement which divided European Christianity into catholic and protestant traditions, is unique. No other movement of religious protest or reform since antiquity has been so widespread or lasting in its effects, so deep and searching in its criticism of received wisdom, so destructive in what it abolished or so fertile in what it created. . . .

The European Reformation was not a simple revolution, a protest movement with a single leader, a defined set of objectives, or a coherent organization. Yet neither was it a floppy or fragmented mess of anarchic or contradictory ambitions. It was a series of *parallel* movements; within *each* of which various sorts of people with differing perspectives for a crucial period in history combined forces to pursue objectives which they only partly understood.

First of all, the Reformation was a protest by churchmen and scholars, privileged classes in medieval society, against their own superiors. Those superiors, the Roman papacy and its agents, had attacked the teachings of a few sincere, respected academic churchmen which had seemed to threaten the prestige and privilege of clergy and papacy. Martin Luther, the first of those protesting clerics, had attacked "the Pope's crown and the monks' bellies," and they had fought back, to defend their status. The protesting churchmen—the "reformers"—responded to the Roman counter-attack not by silence or furtive opposition, but by publicly denouncing their accusers in print. Not only that: they developed their teachings to make their protest more coherent, and to justify their disobedience.

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Then the most surprising thing of all, in the context of medieval lay people's usual response to religious dissent, took place. Politically active laymen, not (at first) political rulers with axes to grind, but rather ordinary, moderately prosperous householders, took up the reformers' protests, identified them (perhaps mistakenly) as their own, and pressed them upon their governors. This blending and coalition—of reformers' protests and laymen's political ambitions—is the essence of the Reformation. It turned the reformers' movement into a new form of religious dissent: it became not a "schism," in which a section of the catholic Church rose in political revolt against authority, without altering beliefs or practices; nor yet a "heresy," whereby a few people deviated from official belief or worship, but without respect, power, or authority. Rather it promoted a new pattern of worship and belief, publicly preached and acknowledged, which *also* formed the basis of new religious institutions for all of society, within the whole community, region, or nation concerned.

A Political Interpretation of the Reformation

G. R. Elton

In more recent times the religious interpretation of the Reformation has been challenged by political historians. This view is illustrated by the following selection from the highly authoritative New Cambridge Modern History. Here, G. R. Elton of Cambridge argues that while spiritual and other factors are relevant, primary importance for explaining why the Reformation did or did not take hold rests with political history.

CONSIDER: *How Elton supports his argument; the ways in which Cameron might refute this interpretation.*

The desire for spiritual nourishment was great in many parts of Europe, and movements of thought which gave intellectual content to what in so many ways was an inchoate search for God have their own dignity. Neither of these, however, comes first in explaining why the Reformation took root here and vanished there—why, in fact, this complex of antipapal "heresies" led to a permanent division within the Church that had looked to Rome. This particular place is occupied by politics and

SOURCE: From G. R. Elton, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. II, *The Reformation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 5. Reprinted by permission.

the play of secular ambitions. In short, the Reformation maintained itself wherever the lay power (prince or magistrates) favoured it; it could not survive where the authorities decided to suppress it. Scandinavia, the German principalities, Geneva, in its own peculiar way also England, demonstrate the first; Spain, Italy, the Habsburg lands in the east, and also (though not as yet conclusively) France, the second. The famous phrase behind the settlement of 1555—*cuius regio eius religio*—was a practical commonplace long before anyone put it into words. For this was the age of uniformity, an age which held at all times and everywhere that one political unit could not comprehend within itself two forms of belief or worship.

The tenet rested on simple fact: as long as membership of a secular polity involved membership of an ecclesiastical organisation, religious dissent stood equal to political disaffection and even treason. Hence governments enforced uniformity, and hence the religion of the ruler was that of his country. England provided the extreme example of this doctrine in action, with its rapid official switches from Henrician Catholicism without the pope, through Edwardian Protestantism on the Swiss model and Marian papalism, to Elizabethan Protestantism of a more specifically English brand. But other countries fared similarly. Nor need this cause distress or annoyed disbelief. Princes and governments, no more than the governed, do not act from unmixed motives, and to ignore the spiritual factor in the conversion of at least some princes is as false as to see nothing but purity in the desires of the populace. The Reformation was successful beyond the dreams of earlier, potentially similar, movements not so much because (as the phrase goes) the time was ripe for it, but rather because it found favour with the secular arm. Desire for Church lands, resistance to imperial and papal claims, the ambition to create self-contained and independent states, all played their part in this, but so quite often did a genuine attachment to the teachings of the reformers.

The Catholic Reformation

John C. Olin

The history of the Catholic Church during the sixteenth century is almost as controversial as the history of the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, variations on the terminology used, from "Catholic reform," "Catholic Reformation," and "Catholic revival" to "Counter Reformation" reflect important differences in historians' interpretations of that history. The hub of the controversy is the extent to which reform and revival in the Catholic

SOURCE: John C. Olin, "The Catholic Reformation," in *The Meaning of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), pp. 268, 289–290.

Church was a reaction to the Protestant Reformation or a product of forces independent of the Protestant Reformation. In the following selection John C. Olin, a historian specializing in Reformation studies, addresses this issue and analyzes the nature of Catholic reform during the sixteenth century.

CONSIDER: For Olin, the problems in labeling Catholic reform the Counter Reformation; what the inner unity and coherence of the Catholic reform movement was.

Catholic reform in all its manifestations, potential and actual, was profoundly influenced by the crisis and subsequent schism that developed after 1517. It did not suddenly arise then, but it was given new urgency, as well as a new setting and a new dimension, by the problems that Protestantism posed. What had been, and probably would have remained, a matter of renewal and reform within the confines of religious and ecclesiastical tradition became also a defense of that tradition and a struggle to maintain and restore it. A very complex pattern of Catholic activity unfolded under the shock of religious revolt and disruption. It cannot satisfactorily be labeled the Counter Reformation, for the term is too narrow and misleading. There was indeed a reaction to Protestantism, but this factor, as important as it is, neither subsumes every facet of Catholic life in the sixteenth century nor adequately explains the source and character of the Catholic revival.

Our initial task, then, is to break through the conventional stereotype of Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation to view Catholic reform in a more comprehensive and objective way. This will entail consideration of the reaction to schism and the advance of Protestantism, but this subject can neither serve as a point of departure nor be allowed to usurp the stage. The survival of Catholicism and its continued growth suggest another perspective, as do the lives and devotion of so many of the most important Catholic figures of this time. Indeed, if the real significance of the Catholic Reformation must be found in its saints, as has recently been remarked, then emphasis on schism, controversy, and the more secular reflexes of ecclesiastical man may be slightly misplaced.

Certain basic lineaments stand out in the Catholic reform movement, from the days of Savonarola and Ximenes to the close of the Council of Trent. The first and the most obvious was the widespread awareness of the need for reform and the serious efforts made to achieve it. This movement was in the beginning scattered and disparate, a matter of individual initiative and endeavor rather than a coordinated program affecting the church as a whole. Ximenes is the major example of an ecclesiastical or institutional reformer prior to 1517.

Erasmus and the Christian humanists, however widespread and deep their influence, worked in a private capacity, so to speak, and sought essentially personal reorientation and renewal, though they did envision a broader reform of Christian life and society. With the pontificate of Paul III, Catholic reform became more concerted and official, and reached out to encompass the entire church. The arrival of Contarini in Rome in 1535 ushered in the new era. New blood was infused into the papal administration, the early Jesuits were organized and began their extensive activities, and the General Council was finally convened at Trent. Despite its diversity, the movement had an inner unity and coherence and followed an identifiable and continuous course.

Of what did this inner unity and coherence consist? It was manifested in the first place in the desire for religious reform. . . . [W]hat features distinguish the Catholic reformers and link them in a common endeavor[?] As we see it, two characteristics run like a double rhythm through the Catholic Reformation: the preoccupation of the Catholic reformers with individual or personal reformation, and their concern for the restoration and renewal of the Church's pastoral mission. In short, Catholic reform had a marked personal and pastoral orientation.

The Catholic reformers focused on the individual Christian and his spiritual and moral life. They sought essentially a *reformatio in membris* rather than dogmatic or structural change. The members of Christ's church must lead better Christian lives and be instructed and guided along that path. This is the burden of Savonarola's prophetic preaching, the goal of Erasmus and the Christian humanists, the objective of Ignatius Loyola and his *Spiritual Exercises*. The Theatines, Capuchins, and Jesuits emphasized this in terms of the greater commitment and sanctification of their members. The reforms of Ximenes in Spain, Giberti in Verona, and the Council of Trent for the universal church had this as an underlying purpose in their concern for the instruction and spiritual advancement of the faithful. . . .

Such a focus presupposes concern for the reform of the institutional church as well, for if men are to be changed by religion, then religion itself must be correctly represented and faithfully imparted. Thus the church's pastoral mission—the work of teaching, guiding, and sanctifying its members—must be given primacy and rendered effective. Hence the stress on training priests, selecting good men as bishops and insisting that they reside in their dioceses, instructing the young and preaching the gospel, restoring discipline in the church, and rooting out venality and unworthiness in the service of Christ and the salvation of souls. The Bark of Peter was not to be scuttled or rebuilt, but to be steered back to its original course with its crew at their posts and responsive to their tasks. The state of the clergy loomed large in

Catholic reform. If their ignorance, corruption, or neglect had been responsible for the troubles that befell the church, as nearly everyone affirmed, then their reform required urgent attention and was the foundation and root of all renewal. This involved personal reform, that of the priests and bishops who are the instruments of the church's mission, and its purpose and consequence were a matter of the personal reform of the faithful entrusted to their care. The immediate objective, however, was institutional and pastoral. The church itself was to be restored so that its true apostolate might be realized.

The Legacy of the Reformation

Steven E. Ozment

Various historians have identified widespread changes stemming from the Reformation. The most obvious of these were the changes in religious affiliation and the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics that developed. However, there were other cultural and social changes stemming from the Reformation that directly affected daily life. In the following selection Steven Ozment analyzes the legacy of the Reformation, emphasizing how it displaced many of the beliefs, practices, and institutions of daily life.

CONSIDER: *How the changes emphasized by Ozment might have affected daily life; what connections there might be between the Reformation and witchcraft according to Ozment.*

Viewed in these terms, the Reformation was an unprecedented revolution in religion at a time when religion penetrated almost the whole of life. The Reformation constituted for the great majority of people, whose social status and economic condition did not change dramatically over a lifetime, an upheaval in the world as they knew it, regardless of whether they were pious Christians or joined the movement. In the first half of the sixteenth century cities and territories passed laws and ordinances that progressively ended or severely limited a host of traditional beliefs, practices, and institutions that touched directly the daily life of large numbers of people: mandatory fasting; auricular confession; the veneration of saints, relics, and images; the buying and selling of indulgences; pilgrimages and shrines; wakes and processions for the dead and dying; endowed masses in memory of the dead; the doctrine of purgatory; Latin Mass and liturgy; traditional ceremonies, festivals, and holidays; monasteries, nunneries, and mendicant orders; the sacramental status of marriage; extreme unction, confirmation, holy orders, and penance; clerical celibacy; clerical

immunity from civil taxation and criminal jurisdiction; nonresident benefices; papal excommunication and interdiction; canon law; papal and episcopal territorial government; and the traditional scholastic education of clergy. Modern scholars may argue over the degree to which such changes in the official framework of religion connoted actual changes in personal beliefs and habits. Few, however, can doubt that the likelihood of personal change increased with the incorporation of Protestant reforms in the laws and institutions of the sixteenth century. As historians write the social history of the Reformation, I suspect they will discover that such transformations in the religious landscape had a profound, if often indirect, cultural impact.

While the Reformation influenced the balance of political power both locally and internationally, it was not a political revolution in the accepted sense of the term; a major reordering of traditional social and political groups did not result, although traditional enemies often ended up in different religious camps and the higher clergy was displaced as a political elite. The larger social impact of the Reformation lay rather in its effectively displacing so many of the beliefs, practices, and institutions that had organized daily life and given it security and meaning for the greater part of a millennium. Here the reformers continued late medieval efforts to simplify religious, and enhance secular, life. If scholars of popular religion in Reformation England are correct, Protestant success against medieval religion actually brought new and more terrible superstitions to the surface. By destroying the traditional ritual framework for dealing with daily misfortune and worry, the Reformation left those who could not find solace in its message—and there were many—more anxious than before, and especially after its leaders sought by coercion what they discovered could not be gained by persuasion alone. Protestant “disenchantment” of the world in this way encouraged new interest in witchcraft and the occult, as the religious heart and mind, denied an outlet in traditional sacramental magic and pilgrimage piety, compensated for new Protestant sobriety and simplicity by embracing superstitions even more socially disruptive than the religious practices set aside by the Reformation.

Women in the Reformation

Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert

The great figures of the Reformation were men, and traditionally focus has been on their struggles and their doctrines. In recent years scholars have questioned what role women

played in the Reformation and whether the Reformation benefited women socially or in any aspect of public life. These questions are addressed by Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, both specializing in women's studies, in the following excerpt from their book Connecting Spheres.

CONSIDER: *Ways women helped spread the Reformation; why the Reformation did not greatly change women's place in society.*

Defying stereotypes, women in good measure also were instrumental in spreading the ideas of the religious Reformation to the communities, towns, and provinces of Europe after 1517. In their roles as spouses and mothers they were often the ones to bring the early reform ideas to the families of Europe's aristocracy and to those of the common people in urban centers as well. The British theologian Richard Hooker (c. 1553–1600) typically explained the prominence of women in reform movements by reference to their “nature,” to the “eagerness of their affection,” not to their intelligence or ability to make conscious choices. Similarly, Catholic polemicists used notions about women's immature and frail “nature” to discredit Protestantism.

The important role played by women in the sixteenth-century Reformation should not surprise us, for they had been equally significant in supporting earlier heresies that challenged the established order and at times the gender hierarchy, too. Many medieval anticlerical movements that extolled the virtues of lay men praised lay women as well. . . .

Since the message of the Reformation, like that of the earlier religious movements, meant a loosening of hierarchies, it had a particular appeal to women. By stressing the individual's personal relationship with God and his or her own responsibility for behavior, it affirmed the ability of each to find truth by reading the original Scriptures. Thus, it offered a greater role for lay participation by women, as well as men, than was possible in Roman Catholicism. . . .

[Nevertheless,] the Reformation did not markedly transform women's place in society, and the reformers had never intended to do so. To be sure, they called on men and women to read the Bible and participate in religious ceremonies together. But Bible-reading reinforced the Pauline view of woman as weak-minded and sinful. When such practice took a more radical turn in the direction of lay prophesy, as occurred in some Reform churches southwest of Paris, or in the coming together of women to discuss “unchristian pieces” as was recorded in Zwickau, reformers—Lutheran and Calvin alike—pulled back in horror. The radical or Anabaptist brand of reform generally offered women a more active role in religious life than did Lutheranism, even allowing them to preach.

"Admonished to Christian righteousness" by more conservative Protestants, Anabaptists were charged with holding that "marriage and whoredom are one and the same thing." The women were even accused of having "dared to deny their husbands' marital rights." During an interrogation one woman explained that "she was wed to Christ and must therefore be chaste, for which she cited the saying, that no one can serve two masters."

The response of the magisterial Reformers was unequivocal. The equality of the Gospel was not to overturn the inequalities of social rank or the hierarchies of the sexual order. As the Frenchman Pierre Viret explained it in 1560, appealing to the old polarities again, the Protestant elect were equal as Christians and believers—as man and woman, master and servant, free and serf. Further, while the Reformation thus failed to elevate women's status, it deprived them of the emotionally sustaining presence of female imagery, of saints and protectors who long had played a significant role at crucial points in their life cycles. The Reformers rejected the special powers of the saints and downplayed, for example, Saints Margaret and Ann, who had been faithful and

succoring companions for women in childbirth and in widowhood. With the rejection of Mary as well as the saints, nuns, and abbesses, God the Father was more firmly in place.

CHAPTER QUESTIONS

1. What were the most important differences between Catholicism and Protestantism in the sixteenth century? In what ways do these differences explain the appeal of each faith and the causes of the Reformation?
2. Considering the information in the preceding chapter, how might the Reformation be related to some of the intellectual and cultural developments of the Renaissance?
3. In what ways would it be accurate to describe Luther and his doctrines—and indeed the Reformation in general—as more medieval and conservative than humanistic and modern?