

NEW VIEWS ON THE REFORMATION*

By B. E. MANSFIELD

WE often use very simple models to help us understand events and episodes in the past. Think of how readily we use physical and mechanical metaphors when speaking of the past, e.g. "growth", "rise and fall", "turning-point", and so on. It is not surprising that in unreflecting conversation we should speak in this way; but learned scholars have also at times organized the results of sophisticated and scholarly research by these simple and unquestioned models.

In the last one hundred years, perhaps indeed from a much earlier time, three simple models have offered themselves for our understanding of the great religious crisis of the sixteenth century which we call "the Reformation". First, one which has been familiar in Protestant circles and may be summed up in the motto, "*post tenebras lux*". In the Reformation, according to this model, the light of true religion was restored after generations of the dim flickerings of superstition. The use of this model goes back in fact to the sixteenth century itself. The partiality of the views which are founded on it is apparent. Historically, it leaves in the shade a fifteenth century which must be lit up if the Reformation itself is to be understood; religiously, one might ask, may the age which produced a document as moving as the *Imitation of Christ* be so easily written off? Yet, one would not deny that the questions of the sixteenth century are more urgent and more searching and the fibre of its faith more robust. One might compare the lyricism of Luther's *Freedom of a Christian Man* or the tautness of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* with the wistfulness of the *Imitation*, almost a symbol of an age that was passing. In the history of Christianity the sixteenth century is a genuinely creative age.

We pass secondly from the model of light bursting on darkness to that of a straight line of descent, from the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages to the arid materialist world of to-day. By this model the Reformation is seen as a stage on the sad pilgrimage of Western man; with it there came above all a corrosive individualism. In the simplest of forms, such a view had a vogue in the Romantic Age. It was also a stock part of earlier Catholic polemics. In fact, any simple or direct linking of Reformation thought to modern secularism cannot bear investigation. This simple line of descent is as arbitrary and fictitious as the simple line of ascent which the heirs of the Enlightenment postulated last century. Yet, this view is not wholly without virtue. It is at least aware that the Reformation was a critical moment in

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Christendom's history, opening ways of destruction as well as of creation. It avoids the perversity of those who have seen in the Reformation but a final expression of the religious culture of the Middle Ages.

The third model is the most sophisticated of the three. It had a great vogue a generation or so ago. The figure it uses is that of the cloak. The religious passions and agitations of the sixteenth century are of but secondary interest. They were only a cloak for other powers. The liberals, adopting their own version of "*post tenebras lux*", said: a cloak for the advance of liberty and toleration; the Machiavellians and *Realpolitikers* said: a cloak for the advance of the modern state.

In a sense my whole discussion is a criticism of this third view. But I might now draw attention to the assumption on which it rests, one particularly dangerous in Reformation studies, viz. that there is one basic element to which all the events we know, for convenience sake, as "the Reformation" can be reduced. All simple models for the Reformation break down at this point: the single word "Reformation" has been applied to a complex of events. Lucien Febvre has offered us the figure of the sea furrowed by innumerable currents, some running parallel, some intersecting one another, some streaming together and throwing one another into turbulence and confusion, as the truest model for the sixteenth century crisis.¹ Other figures may suggest themselves. That of a web in which the threads have knotted and tangled with one another has sometimes appealed to me. In the sixteenth century there was a crisis in Western theology, there was what we would call a "crisis of confidence" among educated people in their attitude to traditional religious forms and institutions, there was an outburst (indeed a series of outbursts) of popular religious fervour—an expression of deep anxieties. All this happened at a time when the States of Western and Northern Europe were scarcely capable of maintaining law and order. With the upsurge of religious passions, therefore, the shattering of the community and the breakdown of order was inevitable. It happened, too, at a time of unprecedented economic change which doubled the strains on the community; it happened at a time of intellectual renewal which increased men's unsettlement, leaving readers more open than ever to persuasion and giving to writers and preachers new powers of persuasion.

One can see why any report on recent Reformation studies can offer no simple model, no coherent pattern, no basic principle for understanding the whole. It can only touch on different phases. The diffuse, fragmentary character of modern Reformation research is a faithful mirror of the Reformation itself. Each field is intensively worked but all do not make a landscape that can be easily mapped.

There can be only one starting-point—Luther. School debates about the role of the individual in history seem unreal when we actually confront Luther. No-one can read him without feeling his force. Whatever will be finally said about the influences upon him, he pressed the theological traditions he inherited to breaking-point. He *is* the critical moment in Western theology. Free of hindsight, we need also to recall the years in which the talk of all educated Europe was of a monk of

¹ *Au cœur religieux du XVI^e siècle* (1957), p. 160.

obscure origins in a remote part of Europe. In February, 1519, a Rhineland scholar wrote to Luther these words :

“Switzerland and the Rhine country as far as the ocean is solid for Luther, and his friends in these regions are both powerful and learned . . . When it was noised abroad that you were labouring in great difficulty, some men tried to send you a large sum of money through me and they certainly would have done so. But this evening we received golden news that Luther lives and will live always . . . We have printed your collected works, . . . and within six weeks after the Frankfort Fair sent them to Italy, France, Spain and England, in this consulting the public welfare which we think is advanced by having the truth spread abroad as widely as possible.”²

That was written at a time when Luther had been a public figure for less than eighteen months. There is, then, an *historical* justification for the minute attention which scholars have given to Luther in the last two generations as they are continuing to do.

The beginning of modern studies of Luther was the work of Karl Holl in Berlin. From the turn of the century to the mid-twenties Holl produced a series of deeply worked essays.³ Two elements in Holl's work were fruitful for later work. First, he attempted to demonstrate the essential unity of Luther's thought. The view that Luther's thought is fragmentary, spontaneous and circumstantial has had a certain vogue. Thus, R. H. Tawney, in a well-known book, risked the remark :

“Luther's utterances on social morality are the occasional explosions of a capricious volcano with only a rare flash of light amid the torrent of smoke and flame, and it is idle to scan them for a coherent and consistent doctrine.”⁴

Holl led everything back to Luther's conception of the divine-human encounter worked out in the study, certainly, but also in Luther's own inner life. Secondly, Holl, as we would expect from this first point, concerned himself most with the young Luther, the Luther of the monastic years.

Problems were posed about these years which have occupied scholars to the present day. Indeed, discussion about them has recently been renewed. We should remind ourselves of the sources which are alone available to scholars for this discussion. Apart from a handful of letters there are, of strictly biographical materials, only the recollections of the later Luther, fragmentary in nature if often compelling. About thirty years ago they were collected together by Otto Scheel—from letters, lectures, commentaries and table talk—into a single volume.⁵ The most complete and compelling of these pieces is the great autobiographical fragment from Luther's preface to Volume 1 of his collected Latin works which appeared in Wittenberg in 1545 and of which the Fisher Library happily possesses an original copy. There

² Capito to Luther, P. Smith (Ed.), *Luther's Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 163-4.

³ *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, I, *Luther*, 6th ed. (1932).

⁴ *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1938), p. 77.

⁵ *Dokumente zu Luthers Entwicklung (bis 1519)*, 2nd ed. (1929).

Luther tells us of his anxieties about the Biblical phrase "Justitia Dei", the justice or righteousness of God which, following his theological teachers, he took to mean God's punitive justice, his condemnation of the sinner. This notion of God as a just judge was, so he feared, embedded in the very heart of the Gospel, since it was to be found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans at I : 17. He goes on :

"For I, irreproachable monk though I was in my life, felt myself to be, in the presence of God, a sinner of most unquiet conscience, nor could I consider him placated by the satisfaction I had performed. I did not love, nay rather I hated, this just God who punishes sinners and I was indignant at God, if not with blasphemy, certainly with a great murmuring, saying : 'As if indeed it is not enough for poor sinners to be eternally damned by original sin and to be oppressed by every kind of calamity through the law of the Ten Commandments, God now through the Gospel itself heaps misery on misery and directs against us his justice and his wrath.' In this way I raged with a violent and agitated conscience. Nevertheless, importunate, I beat at Paul in this place, ardently desiring to know what he intended. Until, by God's mercy, as I meditated the connection of these words, 'The Justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the just shall live by faith', there I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the just man lives by the gift of God, namely by faith, and this sentence 'The justice of God is revealed through the Gospel' to mean a passive justice by which a merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'. Then I felt myself at once reborn and to have entered the open doors of Paradise itself."

Apart from the biographical fragments there are available to scholars the texts of lectures which Luther delivered at the University of Wittenberg from 1512. His lectures of 1515-1516 on Romans have been seen by Holl and all later scholars as a particularly rich source. The story which lies behind the recovery of the text of these lectures may be briefly told. When at the end of the nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII opened the Vatican Archives to scholars, a copy of the lectures on Romans was found there ; it had come from the Royal Library at Heidelberg after its capture by Catholic forces in the Thirty Years War. This discovery stimulated an intense search for the original text ; it was found in a show-case in the Royal Library at Berlin, where it had been on public view for many years without its being seen by anyone capable of recognizing its value. It was published in a definitive edition only in 1938. A scholarly English translation has appeared for the first time this year.⁶

From these sources a picture with firm outlines emerged in the last generation. Luther passed through a severe religious crisis in his monastic years. It did not concern Church or Pope or other external matters but the supreme question of man's standing before God. How can men, their wills bent and bound to evil, achieve the spontaneous and selfless love and obedience which God's perfection deserves ? How

⁶ Edited by W. Pauck, in the Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XV.

can men stand before the blinding purity and holiness of God? Only by God's creating of his free mercy the ground on which men may stand. Justification—a ground on which to stand before God—can be only the gift of God. Luther had so high a view of the relation between God and man that God alone could fashion it and give it form. It is the discovery of this gospel, justification *sola gratia, sola fide*, that Luther describes in various autobiographical fragments, e.g. that of 1545. What engaged scholars' attention was the problem of relating this and other recollections to the Wittenberg lectures. Is the experience described so dramatically in the 1545 Preface reflected in these lectures? Most scholars said *yes*, and went on to say that Luther's mature position is to be found in the Romans lectures of 1515–16, i.e. he had arrived at it before he appeared on the public stage with the controversy over indulgences in 1517.

In 1958 Ernst Bizer of Bonn published a book which questioned the established interpretation.⁷ Bizer was able to point to the Preface of 1545 itself, which (at least on one reading) suggests that the experience it describes occurred as late as 1519. Bizer scrutinized the texts of the lectures and concluded that, whatever the earlier probings and uncertainties, it is only after 1517 that Luther broke through to his conception of the Gospel as that word of grace which alone justifies men, i.e. gives them standing before God by awakening faith. Before 1517, even in the Romans lectures, Luther belonged still to the world of late mediaeval piety with its call to *follow* Christ; only in 1518 came the recognition that all man's hope must rest in *hearing* of Christ, in the faith which comes from hearing.

Bizer has forced scholars to look again at Luther's early lectures. He may also hasten new enquiries into Luther's relation to the piety of the late Middle Ages. If he were to make his case, we could no longer see the indulgence controversy as the outworking of a revolutionary theology already substantially achieved but as a stage in Luther's own inner development. The debate on his arguments—and it will be close and textual—has only begun and there is no unity in the voices.⁸

The young Luther whom Holl first drew from the shades will thus remain the subject of study. Two other aspects of recent writing on the young Luther should be mentioned. Naturally, in the twentieth century, it has often been asked how far an element of psychological breakdown or neurosis could have entered into the acute religious struggles of Luther's monastic years. The problem has been sensitively considered by E. H. Erikson, an American psychoanalyst, in his *Young Man Luther. A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*.⁹ Erikson has grappled with the historical and theological issues; he has not attempted to dispose of the Luther problem on the intellectual cheap by avoiding the discipline of reading the theological literature.

⁷ *Fides ex Auditu. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (1958).

⁸ See, e.g., J. Dillenberger, "Major Volumes and Selected Periodical Literature in Luther Studies 1956–1959", *Church History*, Vol. XXX, No. 1, March, 1961, pp. 71–2, and H. Bornkamm in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, Jahrgang 52, 1961, pp. 16–29.

⁹ Published in 1959.

Thus his interpretation is not vitiated from the start by theological howlers. Erikson finds in Luther what he calls an identity crisis. Luther lived in childhood and youth under the shadow of a domineering father ; he wanted to be himself, to make his own way in the world. First he entered the monastery to the displeasure of his father who had more worldly ambitions for his son ; this did not satisfy, and he finally broke through to a new and revolutionary understanding of Christianity, of the relation between God and man—won, conquered by his own experience and suffering ; in it he found himself, from it his creative energy could pour out. Can we say of this more than R. H. Bainton has already said : “ What we know (about Luther) is not what, for this purpose, we need to know.”¹⁰ The evidence will not bear the weight that Erikson will impose upon it ; we must fill in too much and attribute too much.

Much more interesting and important is the changing Catholic view of the young Luther. We are reminded by this that historical scholarship is not unmoved by the tribulations of the world beyond the study. Not only in works on Luther's early years but over the whole range of Reformation studies we are aware of a changed climate in the relations between Catholics and Protestants and we can feel the warming influence of the new ecumenicism. This is especially apparent in Germany, where the Hitler period exposed the futility of old polemics and denominational shibboleths. What ways of understanding are, for example, opened up by Hubert Jedin's remark in the Preface to Volume II of his majestic *History of the Council of Trent* that the scholarly work of recent times on the writings of Luther and the other reformers “ give[s] to the Catholic theologian of today a far deeper insight into [their] religious and theological mentality than was possible for the theologians and Fathers of the Council of Trent ”.¹¹ Studies of Luther's early religious development best register the changed atmosphere. At the turn of the century, Denifle denounced *sola fide sola gratia* as the excuse or cloak for an unassuageable sensuality. Still before World War I, Grisar, milder but no less malignant, presented the young Luther as a classic case of the deadly sin of pride. How different are the expressions of Joseph Lortz, the doyen of German Catholic historians of the Reformation, writing just before the Second World War :

“ It was a law of his being and became a secret of his power : he must always bear alone the burden of searching, struggle and break-through. It was a struggle of unheard-of suffering. Luther was obedient in that time to the secret of the Cross.”¹²

If, as Lortz believed, the doctrine which emerged from these struggles in the monastery was one-sided, it was “ a one-sidedness of surpassing earnestness and inner force, not one of frivolousness ”.¹³ Lortz's final judgment on Luther, that, in the intensity of his own experience at a time when theological teaching was confused and not

¹⁰ “ Interpretations of the Reformation ”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. LXVI, No. 1, October, 1960, p. 81.

¹¹ (1961), p. 1.

¹² *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 3rd ed. (1948), I, p. 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

fitted to guide him, he seized and magnified some elements in the traditional faith at the expense of others and so became a heretic, is not as interesting to us as the tone of his expressions and his recognition of Luther's spiritual greatness.

Thus, as Holl would have expected, the young Luther has been the subject of continuing and fruitful concern. As well, in the last generation, more systematic attention has been given to the thought of the later Luther and not least to Luther's attitude to the community and to the problem of Church and State. Again, it is not merely historical interest that has promoted these studies. Amid the catastrophes of the twentieth century, Lutheran Christians in Germany and Scandinavia have sought a clearer understanding of Luther. Hence, the so-called "Luther renaissance", at once a religious renewal and a scholarly tradition, as important in modern Protestantism as the Thomist revival in modern Catholicism. There are dangers in the Luther renaissance, notably that Luther, because he is being asked to speak to the needs of the twentieth century, will be transposed into an alien environment and his thought distorted. The tradition of exact scholarship which derives from Holl is one safeguard against this; another must be an historical sense that recognizes and rejects anachronistic judgments.

A new understanding of Luther's attitude to civil society and the relations of Church and State has been one of the best fruits of the Luther renaissance. Past attempts to trim Luther to recognized categories have revealed the complexity of the problem. He has been called a conservative, even (a charge going back to his own day) a sycophant of the powers that be. Yet no man was more irreverent towards the pretensions of rulers or, at times, less respectful of their authority. One might quote the remarkable letter which Luther wrote to his own prince, Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, when, without the Elector's permission, he returned from exile to the Elector's turbulent capital of Wittenberg in 1522:

"I have written this in order that Your Grace might know that I am going to Wittenberg under a far higher protection than that of the elector. I have no intention of asking Your Grace for protection. Indeed, I think I shall protect you more than you are able to protect me. And if I thought that Your Grace could and would defend me by force, I should not go. The sword ought not and cannot decide a matter of this kind. God alone must do it and that without the solicitude and co-operation of men. He who believes the most can protect the most. And since I have the impression that Your Grace is still weak in faith, I can by no means regard Your Grace as the man to protect and save me.

Since Your Grace wishes to know what to do in this matter, and Your Grace thinks you have done too little, I humbly answer that Your Grace has already done far too much and should do nothing at all. God will not and cannot suffer your interference or mine. He wishes the matter to be left in His hands and nowhere else. I suggest that Your Grace take a cue from this. If Your Grace believes, Your Grace will be safe and have peace. If Your Grace does not believe,

I at least do believe and must leave Your Grace's unbelief to its own torturing anxiety, such as all unbelievers have to suffer."¹⁴

Again, it has been said that Luther stands still in the mediaeval tradition, accepting the idea of a Christendom jointly governed by the two swords of Church and State. Yet his idea of the Church, that it is no more than the servant of the Gospel, with no life outside the proclamation of the Gospel, is radically different from the mediaeval Church's conception of itself.

What in fact we find in Luther are notions of genuine originality, deriving from his basic affirmations. Church and State for him belong to radically different orders. As he sees it, God governs the world through two kingdoms, each created and governed by him, but each distinct in character and purpose: the so-called "Kingdom of God" and the so-called "Kingdom of the World". The first is the realm of man's relation to God. Here nothing human can stand; here man can do nothing but confess his dependence on God's grace. Here consequently there can be no human hierarchy or authority, for all stand equally in a position of utter dependence on God's grace. Further, there can be—in this Kingdom and in the Church—no special religious order or status; priesthood, hierarchy, the whole visible, authoritative institution of the Church disappear. Within the other Kingdom, by comparison, there must be order and hierarchy; some must command and others obey, some must teach and others learn. This is the realm of the State, of culture and, indeed, of every part of human life which makes it tolerable and human. Out of his love, God has founded this kingdom, so that there will be good order even where men are not Christian, and has given them reason to guide them in creating such an order. Christians themselves must see their duty not in winning their eternal salvation (for they cannot win it—that is the other kingdom) but in fulfilling their vocations in the world, and, religiously speaking, no calling is superior to others. One can see why Luther declared that he had restored its dignity to secular authority and, indeed, to all lay vocations. Lay life was not inherently inferior to clerical life. Both Church and State fell within the divine purpose; in principle each was distinct so that rivalry between them was inconceivable. One preached the Gospel; the other achieved the daily compromises necessary to avoid the war of all against all in which the weak and defenceless would suffer most.

The concern of historians must be to show how in the communities which renounced their old religious allegiance notions like these found expression in the common life and how, in doing so, they were modified, moulded and re-shaped, or how tensions and contradictions within them were resolved in practice. We cannot doubt that Luther's thought exercised an abiding influence over the parts of Europe which became Lutheran in the sixteenth century. The Lutheran renaissance of this century can be seen only as the thrusting-up of roots which have already lain—living and strong—beneath the soil. It is instructive that the new understanding of Luther's ideas on civil society has come from that community where his doctrine

¹⁴ *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. T. G. Tappert, in *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XVIII, (1955), pp. 320-1.

conquered most completely, thus creating an unparalleled identification of the Lutheran religion with the whole life of the community, viz. Sweden. Michael Roberts, in his great book on Gustavus Adolphus, has shown us how complete this identification was by the time of Sweden's intervention in the Thirty Years' War, and how, in appreciating it, we are helped to explain the character and course of that intervention.¹⁵ Now, in the twentieth century, many of the seminal books on Luther's ideas on the callings, on the two kingdoms, on Church and State come from Swedish pens.¹⁶

On the other hand, we cannot doubt that Luther's ideas were refashioned by the communities which received them. Certainly he would have disowned much that was characteristic of and familiar to later Lutheranism. The Saxon State Church, which became the model for Lutheran churches elsewhere, did not conform to Luther's original view of the radical distinctiveness of Church and State. It is a delicate task for the historian—and one, I believe, as yet far from completed—to distinguish what there is of Luther and what of other men and communities in historic Lutheranism, even that, indeed, of the sixteenth century itself. In these enquiries the attitude and position of the secular authorities will have a necessary part. Here generalities will no longer suffice; particular archival enquiries are called for. Thus, Bernd Moeller, in speaking of the spread of the Reformation in the free cities of the Empire, has recently said that each city had its own unique destiny in those critical years.¹⁷ Nor will the part of the secular authority be illuminated by assuming—as students like to do from time to time with what passes for adult cynicism—that to be a prince and to have religious faith are mutually exclusive. In short, only through biographical studies of princes, magistrates and officials will we be able to understand the part of state and town governments in the German Reformation. The biography by Irmgard Höss of Georg Spalatin, private secretary and court preacher to the Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, is a model for such studies.¹⁸ It was Spalatin who saw, against the inclination of the Elector's own conscience and in face of Luther's elemental faith in the Word alone, that, amid the debris of the old Church organization, only the Elector's initiative could give order and substance to the new Church. Höss recounts his hard-pressed efforts to move Luther and the Elector towards one another, to take the one beyond the confines of traditional practice and to restrain the prophetic turbulence of the other. He was the first architect of the Saxon State Church. Independent thinking about the religious question was certainly not unknown among the German rulers of that time. Franklin Littell has shown how Philip of Hesse, from a conviction that to pursue men for their beliefs was a grievous error (and plainly revealed as such in the New Testament), tolerated even the Anabaptist

¹⁵ *Gustavus Adolphus. A History of Sweden, 1610-1632*, Vol. I (1953), Vol. II (1958).

¹⁶ See, e.g., E. M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (1948).

¹⁷ *Reichstadt und Reformation* (Schriften des Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, Nr. 180, Jahrgang 69) (1962), p. 19.

¹⁸ Published in 1956.

communities, otherwise execrated by official theologians and ferociously persecuted by governments.¹⁹

We are led on to reflect upon the astonishing spread of Luther's doctrine and influence in the fevered years between 1517 and 1530. I believe it correct to say that we know less about this than about Luther's own development. Here, neither of two areas of enquiry may be neglected without risk of crippling distortion: first, the spontaneous response of men from every class to Luther as a religious teacher and, secondly, their venting of grievances of every kind by rallying to him. On every side in Germany at the turn of the sixteenth century there was a longing for religious certainty and satisfaction. It was expressed in the popular art and literature of the time and is notably revealed in the work of the first printers. Of this longing Luther was a symbol and to it he spoke. Moeller describes an incident which makes the point perfectly.²⁰ In 1519, with the Luther controversy already raging throughout the German Empire, Regensburg became a place of pilgrimage when a miracle occurred during the erection of a Christian chapel on the site of a dismantled synagogue. Pilgrims came in unusual numbers. But by 1522, 100-150 of the town's citizens were Lutherans. In that year the town's printer published both reports of the miraculous appearances and at least eight writings of Luther. By 1542 the town was Lutheran and the pilgrimage was at an end. Within a few years the same men and women were eager pilgrims and zealots in denying the efficacy of pilgrimages and all such things. What we observe in this is not the fickleness of the crowd but a deep and universal religious longing which sought satisfaction first in traditional ways and then in Luther's teaching.

As well, there were grave social and political conflicts imminent in Germany at the beginning of the sixteenth century. If they are not too blinkered by their system, Marxist historians may help to illuminate them for us. We may conclude that Luther's appearance was critical in German public life in 1520 because so many turbulent streams ran together around him. To trace the course of these streams to their moment of impact in and around 1520 is a still unfulfilled task and one of great delicacy.

It would seem that the modern historical consciousness has understood more readily the dynamics of Protestantism's advance in its later—Calvinist—phase than the apparently spontaneous combustion in Germany around 1520. For one thing it is possible to speak in that later period of "Protestantism" without anachronism. For we must always bear in mind that until 1550 many Europeans stubbornly refused to accept the brutal fact of a divided Christendom. The great scholar Erasmus inspired hopes of reunion not only in men of his own stamp but at the courts and in the chancelleries of princes. In 1530 Emperor Charles V crossed the Alps to meet the Diet of the German Estates at Augsburg. Germany was taking on the appearance of two armed camps. Peter Rassow has shown how Charles V saw it not only as a condition of the future existence of the German Empire but as a duty imposed upon

¹⁹ *Landgraf Philipp und die Toleranz* (1957).

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 23-4.

him as Christ's Vicar and Christendom's shepherd in matters temporal, to heal the broken body of Christendom.²¹ The earnestness of the search for reunion is revealed by the existence of a vast correspondence—54 letters are extant—between participants in the Diet and Erasmus who was at Freiburg. Only the repeated failure of these endeavours and the rejection by the Council of Trent in 1546 of Luther's doctrine of justification enforced awareness that Europe was finally divided in religious faith. Calvin began to exercise an influence on West European Protestantism at that moment of awareness. In analogy with the gradual movement in Europe's economic and political life towards the Atlantic coast, the lands of Western Europe replaced in the generation after 1550 the German Empire as the place of decision in the development of the religious crisis. In Calvin himself, in the lively, literate, urban classes out of which he came and to which he addressed himself and in the pattern of Church life and organization which he created, we are in a more familiar world than the Germany of 1520. Of recent works which help us to trace and understand Calvinism's advance, I might mention R. M. Kingdon's *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France*.²² Kingdon has, from a study of the Genevan archives, shown how men were drawn from France to Geneva in Calvin's time, how they were trained to be ministers and returned to France under the Genevan discipline to gather communities and teach his faith. If, in thinking of the German Reformation, we feel that, as faith suggested to Luther himself, the wind blows where it lists, Geneva saw that there was virtue in taking thought.

Naturally, our understanding of both Calvin himself and his theology has been altered drastically by the researches of the last generation. In the popular imagination—as students teach me year by year—Calvin is a gloomy fanatic exalting an arbitrary, jealous and vindictive God who has condemned most of mankind to eternal perdition before they are born, i.e. all of Calvin's teaching can be summed up in the doctrine of predestination. This is but a vulgarized version of views to be found among historians and theologians two generations ago. Let us compare the picture emerging from modern research.²³ His teaching of predestination is in no sense central to Calvin's thought. Indeed, it is doubtful if we can speak of a central doctrine of Calvin's at all. His thought is not in fact the severely logical structure which it was once thought to be. If his training in dialectic and his readiness to debate produce from time to time in his *Institutes* their unappetizing fruit of strained and tortuous arguments, the book was in fact intended to be no more than a gloss on scripture. All Calvin's thought was intended to be a pointer to Christ. It is this essentially Christological character of Calvin's thought which modern theological research has lit up. In speaking of salvation in Christ, Calvin can be as lyrical as Luther, whose doctrine on justification he shares. Predestination is not an independent, let alone central, element in Calvin's thought; it is an attempt to solve

²¹ *Die politische Welt Karls V.*

²² Published in 1956.

²³ Cf. F. Wendel, *Calvin. Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (1950); W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (1956).

the problem posed by the fundamental contention of all the Protestant Reformers—the ground or source of their faith and piety—that man's salvation consists wholly in the free, unmerited and perfect gift of God, justification *sola fide, sola gratia*. It was obviously an unsatisfactory solution, but that does not affect the fact that, in the body of Calvin's thought, it plays only a subsidiary role. Calvin did not introduce Old Testament legalism into Christianity. His training in law, fruitful though it was for his thinking about the civil state and society, did not affect his doctrine of salvation. If Calvin binds the Old and New Testaments together, it is not in order to introduce Old Testament legalism into Christianity; it is to make Christ the hero and subject of all scripture, since the Old Testament pictures in symbols what the New will see revealed in reality.

If this approach to Calvin's thought is the correct one, it is clear that we must understand in a new way many of the tag words that have been attached to it. Take, for example, the phrase "the total depravity of man". It does not mean that Calvin was an inhuman fanatic who attributed to men the meanest of motives and was unalterably hostile to the life of the senses and of the intellect. The phrase makes sense only in man's relation to God; again, it is concerned to safeguard the citadel of *sola fide, sola gratia*. In speaking of men at the purely human level, as it were, Calvin can be lyrical about their gifts of body and intellect. He himself was trained in the literature and thought of the ancient world and was, in a sense, its devotee to the end of his life. He deliberately rejected the doctrine that the beauties of nature and art might be valued only for their usefulness. If he never ceased to warn his followers of how full of misery and calamity our human life is—and his letters, particularly those to the persecuted of France, are among the most moving documents of the century—his and Calvinism's attitude to this present life is positive and this helps to explain Calvinism's creative working on Western society and civilization. Indeed, the theological revisions which I have rapidly sketched are of as much interest to historians as to theologians. Their problem is to explain the peculiar dynamism of Calvinism as an historical movement. They must look, not only at the flexibility of its organization and at the persuasiveness of its propaganda (the themes of Kingdom), but also at its resilience of spirit, which can be explained only in a study of its inner life, its piety and theology. The theological revisions are giving to historians valuable clues which they ought not neglect.

I have spoken of recent revisions in our understanding of Luther and Calvin. The most spectacular advances of the last generation, however, have not been in these areas at all, but in what historians now call the "radical reformation" and what used—with lack of discrimination—to be called simply Anabaptism, i.e. the movements beyond or to the left of the classical Protestantism of Luther and Calvin. Only in the last generation have these movements come to be studied systematically, in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and in the United States of America. Earlier they were treated by historians in a very arbitrary way. One explanation was the scarcity of sources. These movements experienced fierce persecution and their books were burned. When, in calmer times, historians investigated them, it

was not their own writings but those of their enemies against them which offered themselves as the readiest sources. The result was a picture at once too simple and very biased. The new research is correcting this and revealing above all the great variety and complexity of these movements. They flowed from no single source and had in common only a rejection of the idea that Church and State could work together to create a Christian commonwealth. All were concerned to assert, but in very various ways, the independence, the self-direction, as it were, of the Christian body. One historian, Williams of Harvard, has classified the radical groups under six headings.²⁴ But he makes one primary distinction, between the so-called "spiritualists" and the so-called "Anabaptists". The first, of whom some appeared in Saxony during the first turbulent onrush of Lutheranism, found the sole source of faith in the divine Spirit acting directly and immediately on men. Against Luther, who placed his trust in the unique written record of an historic revelation, that is, Scripture, the spiritualists looked for a living encounter between the divine and human spirits, without which Scripture was dead words. The spiritualists could then be very free in their interpretations: "the wind bloweth where it listeth". The Anabaptists by comparison were rigorously scriptural; indeed, as they appear first in Zürich in the 1520's, they are calling for a return in the whole life of the Church to the New Testament pattern. Like many in the sixteenth century, they looked for a return to a golden age in the past, in this case one delineated in the New Testament documents. What they saw in the New Testament was a Church of true believers, separate from the pagan world and certainly from the State, which was that world's instrument of oppression, and enjoying a close and disciplined life to which believers' baptism, i.e. adult baptism, was the entrance and of which it was the symbol. If all the Anabaptists believed in the complete separation of Church and State, only a minority were revolutionaries. They were those who believed that the gathered Church was the model of a new society and civilization, of a new millennial age whose birth pangs would be revolutionary violence. It is not surprising that the brutal persecutions to which they were subject should arouse apocalyptic hopes and resentments in the little Anabaptist groups. Most Anabaptists, however, believed that, if true believers should cut themselves off from the wicked world, they should certainly not resist their enemies by force, let alone attack them, but rather suffer and endure.

We find then, in sixteenth century radicalism, whatever it owed to the pietistic or sectarian movements of the Middle Ages and to the Reformers themselves (and it could be much), a distinct movement, a third force beside the old Church and Protestantism and one which left a lasting heritage, e.g. in the idea of the free Church. Naturally, it has been argued that these movements were primarily an expression of social discontent. It would not be surprising if movements which exposed the corruptions of existing society and gave hope of a truer, purer communion should appeal to the dispossessed of the world. But there are considerations which suggest

²⁴ *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, in Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XXV (1957), Introduction.

that this social appeal was of marginal importance. First, the social backgrounds of members were very diverse. Thus, the first Anabaptist group in Zürich was composed of five priests, nine educated laymen, five nobles, and only seven common folk.²⁵ Secondly, where their experiences can be documented, it is plain that these earnest people had behind them a time of religious anxiety and release and, what is more, their writings are almost wholly concerned with religious questions. Thirdly, most groups taught that Christians would not find release from bodily ills in this world but were destined for suffering greater than that of the ungodly and indeed at the hands of the ungodly. These were truly churches under the Cross. The court and police records which recall their sufferings and which scholars are now disinterring are witnesses to the character of the sixteenth century as important as the writings of Machiavelli or the ledger books of the banking house of Fugger to which the secular mind of our own time more naturally turns. I quote an example from an Anabaptist martyrology, the last stages of the trial of Michael Sattler at Rottenburg in 1527 :

“ Upon this speech the judges laughed and put their heads together, and the town clerk of Ensisheim said : ‘ Yes, you infamous, desperate rascal of a monk, should we dispute with you ? The hangman will dispute with you, I assure you.’

Michael said : ‘ God’s will be done.’

The town clerk said : ‘ It were well if you had never been born.’

Michael replied : ‘ God knows what is good.’

The town clerk : ‘ You archheretic, you have seduced pious people. If they they would only now forsake their error and commit themselves to grace!’

Michael : ‘ Grace is with God alone.’

One of the prisoners also said : ‘ We must not depart from the truth.’

The town clerk : ‘ Yes, you desperate villain, you archheretic, I say, if there were no hangman here, I would hang you myself and be doing God a good service thereby.’

Michael : ‘ God will judge aright.’ Thereupon the town clerk said a few words to him in Latin, what, we do not know. Michael Sattler answered him, *Judica*.

The town clerk then admonished the judges and said : ‘ He will not cease from this chatter anyway. Therefore, my Lord Judge, you may proceed with the sentence. I call for a decision of the court.’

The judge asked Michael Sattler whether he too committed it to the court. He replied : ‘ Ministers of God, I am not sent to judge the Word of God. We are sent to testify and hence cannot consent to any adjudication, since we have no command from God concerning it. But we are not for that reason removed from being judged and we are ready to suffer and to await what God is planning to do with us. We will continue in our faith in Christ so long as we have breath in us, unless we be dissuaded from it by the Scriptures.’

²⁵ Cf. N. Birnbaum, “ The Zwinglian Reformation in Zürich ”, *Past and Present*, No. 15, April, 1959, p. 41. For this problem, see also F. Blanke, *Brüder in Christo*, 1955, pp. 48-9.

The town clerk said : ' The hangman will instruct you, he will dispute with you, archheretic.'

Michael : ' I appeal to the Scriptures.'

Then the judges arose and went into another room where they remained for an hour and a half and determined on the sentence. In the meantime some (of the soldiers) in the room treated Michael Sattler most unmercifully, heaping reproach upon him. One of them said : ' What have you in prospect for yourself and the others that you have so seduced them ?' With this he also drew a sword which lay upon the table, saying : ' See, with this they will dispute with you.' But Michael did not answer upon a single word concerning himself but willingly endured it all. One of the prisoners said : ' We must not cast pearls before swine.' Being also asked why he had not remained a lord in the convent, Michael answered : ' According to the flesh I was a lord, but it is better as it is.' He did not say more than what is recorded here, and this he spoke fearlessly.

The judges having returned to the room, the sentence was read. It was as follows : ' In the case of the attorney of His Imperial Majesty vs. Michael Sattler, judgment is passed that Michael Sattler shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall lead him to the place of execution and cut out his tongue, then forge him fast to a wagon and thereon with red-hot tongs twice tear pieces from his body ; and after he has been brought outside the gate, he shall be plied five times more in the same manner . . .'

After this had been done in the manner prescribed, he was burned to ashes as a heretic. His fellow brethren were executed with the sword, and the sisters drowned. His wife, also after being subjected to many entreaties, admonitions, and threats, under which she remained steadfast, was drowned a few days afterward. Done the 21st day of May, A.D. 1527."²⁶

I have tried to describe some recent developments in Reformation scholarship. I hope, too, to have sketched in at least part of the new picture emerging from it of the European sixteenth century and of the acute but diverse crisis which then occurred in the history of our civilization. You may be surprised that I have had so little to say about things which, say, fifty years ago, would have occupied our whole attention—the split in the Church, the attendant controversies over the condition of the Church, and the debates on external things, clerical celibacy, Church rules and taxes and so forth. Here, indeed, is the measure of the deepened understanding of the Reformation which modern scholarship has given us. A French historian has recently put our present view in this summary : " The schism is not the Reformation ; it is a consequence of the Reformation ".²⁷ In other words, the Church conflict is the least interesting and important part of the Reformation ; to begin at that end is to misconceive it from the start. What are primary—and here we are still only at the edge of the mystery—are the manifold anxieties and aspirations which existed before the Church conflict, which alone gave it its great seriousness and explain its wide-ranging and lasting effects.

²⁶ Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-4.

²⁷ Piere Chaunu, " *Réforme et Église au XVI^e Siècle* " *Revue Historique*, CCXXVII, Avril-Juin, 1962, p. 373.