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Reformation on the Continent: Approaches Old and New¹

Much has changed in Reformation historiography over the last two decades. Long established temporal and geographical frameworks have been thoroughly revised and reappraised. If theology, politics, social movements, and economic trends were once treated as discreet areas of study, nowadays scholars in the field are much more appreciative of how these themes inform each other. This review essay appraises a selection of works that are indicative of the richness and variety that characterizes Reformation and Counter-Reformation scholarship today.

On 7 November 1626, the city pastor of the Imperial City of Lindau was locked out of his church; Master Alexius Neukomm was forbidden by the city council to preach. The obdurate and headstrong Lutheran pastor, who had served the city for thirty-six years, was getting on the nerves of the councilors. For some years, he had opposed the political elites on a number of issues, the most sensitive being two: the plan to introduce private confession in the church ordinance and the suspicion of official permission for the Jesuits to settle in the solidly Lutheran community. That morning, on 7 November, a crowd of supporters surged past the guard posted in front of Neumann's house, carried the pastor with them to the church, insulted and intimidated the *bürgermeister* and his retinue on the way, and crashed their way into the Church of Saint Stephan, demolishing the pew of the hated city syndic. This civic uprising toppled the city government; a deposed *bürgermeister* was recalled; and a new civic constitution seemed to be in the making before an imperial commission put an end to the tumult.

The prehistory and meaning of this event is the subject of Wolfart's study. While entitled *Religion, Government and Political Culture*, the emphasis of Wolfart's book is rather in the reverse order. The central thesis is the clash between an urban bourgeois political culture ("urban republicanism") —

1. The books reviewed in this article are: Owen Chadwick, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation in Germany* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Regina Pörtner, *The Counter-Reformation in Central Europe. Styria 1580–1630* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001); Johannes C. Wolfart, *Religion, Government and Political Culture in Early Modern Germany. Lindau, 1520–1628* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

socially anchored in guild corporatism, historically remembered in communal civic consciousness, and spiritually bolstered by evangelical convictions — and a new authoritarian urban regime (*Obrigkeit*), based on restricted elite decision-making, stressing sovereignty, obedience, and juridical uniformity. Civic unrest was endemic in late medieval and early modern Germany. The structural conflict over taxation and political power, so often characteristic of late medieval urban uprisings, was given a new intensity in the century of the Reformation. The disobedience of Alexius Neumann hinged upon his opposition in an ecclesiastical matter: the city council's plan to introduce private confession. At issue was one of the central questions of the Reformation: whether the ultimate decision in religious matters rested with governmental authorities or with the clergy. Under the short-hand label of Erastianism (i.e. the primacy of magisterial authority in matters religious), this question would plague every Protestant regime and poisoned the confessional divide between Lutherans and Calvinists. In the ritual of penance, so it turned out, the Reformed Church had adopted early on the practice of public confession, a measure followed by many, but not all, Lutheran churches. To many Protestants, private confession smacked of a return to clerical tyranny and papistry, especially in the wake of a Tridentine Catholicism, which strongly promoted the sacramental nature of private confession and introduced the use of confessionals.

This question, together with other religious issues, form part of Wolfart's enquiry. But the heart of his book is concerned with something else: the political culture of a local urban community. To interpret the events of 7 November 1626, Wolfart immersed himself in the city archive and analysed in minute details the micro and macro political contexts of Lindau. His major historical sources are the records of the city council, which gave him an intimate insight into the quarrels between guilds and city council, city pastor and city syndic. With a sharp eye to linguistic and textual nuances, Wolfart recreates a vivid picture of life in this small imperial city on an island in Lake Constance. There is a constant engagement with sources and theories, often stimulating, as Wolfart challenges accepted views and concepts in the field. An admirable local study, which originated as a dissertation at Cambridge written under the late Robert Scribner, Wolfart's work suffers nonetheless from a myopia of localism. The decade leading up to the 1626 tumult was far from uneventful in the larger geographical context; in fact, this local civic unrest occurred in the middle of a large-scale confessional conflict that would eventually engulf most of the Holy Roman Empire. Missing in this story of Lindau are the larger narratives of Protestant Central Europe: the intense eschatological fervour in Lutheran Germany during the Centenary of the Reformation in 1617 and the assertion of Protestant identity in the wake of Catholic attack.

The big picture, as it were, is very much present in Regina Pörtner's meticulous study of the Counter-Reformation in Styria. Unlike Wolfart's study on Lindau, Pörtner's book, based on a D. Phil. Dissertation at Oxford, takes as its subject a province: Styria, the home base of Archduke Ferdinand, later Emperor Ferdinand II, an ardent supporter of the Counter-Reformation. By

definition and necessity, her focus is geographically more expansive and her sources more diverse. There is none of the historiographical awareness and theoretical reflection of Wolfart in this workman-like study of Styria. The reader is offered a detailed account of the progress of the Protestant Reformation in Inner Austria (1525–1578) and its eventual suppression between 1580 and 1630. A penultimate chapter takes the story to the 1780 Edict of Religious Toleration under Joseph I in order to demonstrate the limits of the Counter-Reformation. Unlike the story of Lindau, we meet few individuals in this book who did not belong to the political class. Essentially, Pörtner's story is the contestation between the three estates of Inner Austria (Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola) and the two archdukes, Karl II and Ferdinand, father and son. Overwhelmingly Protestant, the provincial estates nevertheless conceded in almost every confrontation with the archdukes, for the majority of noblemen adhered to a Lutheran doctrine of political passivity. Perhaps more importantly, the noble Estates feared the social and political passions of the common man, as Pörtner demonstrates convincingly in several incidents, when confessional solidarity between Lutheran nobility and Lutheran burghers, peasants, and miners yielded to the political common interest between territorial prince and the feudal landowning class.

Faced with a determined Catholic prince, whose convictions were sharpened by Jesuit counsel, the Protestant Church was gradually reduced to a remnant of its former strength in Styria. Ferdinand's attack focused first on closing Protestant schools and exiling pastors in towns under archducal jurisdiction. He then turned his attention to the nobility, removing the most vocal Protestants from territorial office, and intimidating the rest into a quiescent non-resistance as their commoner co-religionists lost their right of religious exercise. The crucial step came when Ferdinand forced the Protestant nobility to choose between religious conformity and exile, while dangling prospects of advancement for converts to Catholicism. Faced with the ennoblement of humble newcomers, the promotion of Italians, and the harsh attitude of their lord, the Protestant nobility acquiesced in the triumph of the Counter-Reformation. The defeat of the Protestant nobility in Upper Austria, the Peasant wars of Upper and Lower Austria, and, above all, the drastic punitive measures directed against the Bohemian Protestant nobility by a triumphant Emperor Ferdinand II after 1619, convinced the Styrian Estates of the futility of political resistance.

Without the estates' support (the towns in Styria were not politically represented), the common people resisted on their own, chasing out Catholic priests, intimidating delegations of officials, and hanging on to their traditional Lutheran beliefs until they were crushed by an overwhelming display of military force in the so-called Reformation commissions sent by Ferdinand after the 1590s. Protestant resistance centred in Upper Styria, especially in mining and farming communities with connections to the Lutheran areas of southern Germany. Here, Pörtner shows an interesting contrast between Upper and Lower Styria, where the frontier area with Croatia remained staunchly Catholic, a result in large part of the social antagonism between a

Catholic Slavic peasantry and their Protestant noble landlords. Even though Protestantism was apparently eradicated in Upper Styria, secret Protestantism survived into the late eighteenth century, when the problem of confessional conformity was finally resolved by the Toleration Patent of Joseph I.

The reader is offered a great deal of information from the archives of the archducal government, the estates, and several leading noble families on this dominant narrative of the confessional-political history of Habsburg Austria, a theme well rehearsed in the works of Eberhard, Evans, and Herzig.² While Pörtner tells this story with competence, more original is her sub-dominant story, the actual unfolding of the Counter-Reformation itself, in chapters 5 and 6, in which she treats the issues of clergy, reform, mission, and propaganda. Because of the uneven survival of sources from the diocesan archive of Graz, the story here is less comprehensive than that of the politico-confessional narrative. It is fortunate that Pörtner resorts to the far richer archives of the Counter-Reformation orders, especially that of the Jesuits. The overall picture here confirms our knowledge of Catholicism in the Holy Roman Empire, except that in Styria the situation seemed even worse: weak diocesan control, prevalence of lay patronage of benefices, the poor material conditions of curates, and the even more abysmal educational level. To resuscitate Styrian Catholicism, an injection of new blood was needed. The Counter-Reformation at the spiritual and ecclesiastical level was thus largely the work of the Jesuits and Capuchins, whose members contained a large number of non-natives, especially Italians. The establishment of Jesuit colleges in Graz, Judenburg, and Loeben was crucial in providing both the clerical and official elites in Ferdinand's Counter-Reformation offensive. To some extent, the work of the papal nuncios in Graz compensated for the lethargy of the archbishops of Salzburg, who had official spiritual jurisdiction over Styria. Catholic renewal in Styria did not follow the model of Milan so much, inspired by the work of a saintly and powerful bishop, but typified what came to be known as a Habsburg model of Counter-Reformation, delicately balanced between the dynamism of Jesuit pedagogy, Capuchin missions, and outright political-military coercion. Where her sources allow, Pörtner offers the reader suggestive and insightful results. For example, the early supporters of the Jesuits came almost exclusively from archducal circles with the conspicuous absence of the estates. Only with the gradual conversion of the leading magnate families in the seventeenth century did the Society of Jesus gain the support of the nobility, in addition to their reliance on the *noblesse de robe* and the archducal government.

It is clear that politics and society are very much present in the current scholarship on central Europe during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Ever since the publication of A. G. Dickens's *The German Nation and*

2. See Winfried Eberhard, *Monarchie und Widerstand. Zur ständischen Oppositionsbildung im Herrschaftssystem Ferdinands I. In Böhmen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985); R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); and Arno Herzig, *Der Zwang zum wahren Glauben. Rekatholisierung vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

Martin Luther,³ it has been impossible to separate the Holy Roman Empire from Luther (or from Zwingli, Bucer, and other German reformers for that matter) in the English-language scholarship on the Reformation. Ideas have their context; theology echoes politics. Certain themes during the German Reformation — urban revolts, Peasants' War, anti-clericalism — which had been treated as minor topics in the older literature, assume central significance in the research of the past thirty years. How much the social and political have taken centre stage is reflected in the recent synthesis, *The Reformation in Germany*,⁴ published under the Historical Association Studies Series, succeeds in bringing the major findings in scholarship to students of the era. Following a classic chronology and not ignoring theology, Dixon's work nonetheless reflects the emphasis in the social and political history of the German Reformation: the Peasants' War, the theology of revolution, the urban and princely Reformations, the politics of religious change, and the consolidation of confessional territorial states constitute the central narrative in this very informative survey. This book would be especially useful for readers who do not follow German language scholarship, as the work of all current major historians is included. Obviously, no synthesis can cover all topics. A couple of lacunae are noticeable: first, given the importance of Luther's writings against Judaism and the polemical purpose of anti-Judaism in the Catholic-evangelical conflict, one misses a discussion of the role of Jews and anti-Semitism in these pages; second, while Dixon cites the work of Steinmetz and Vogler, he does not address directly the scholarly legacy of the Marxist contribution to Reformation historiography, which played an important role in stimulating the social history of the German Reformation.

As the magnum opus of a long career, *The Early Reformation on the Continent* is a stimulating yet highly flawed work. Published in the series "Oxford History of the Christian Church," this book represents the scholarship and reflections of the illustrious career of Owen Chadwick, emeritus regius professor of modern history at the University of Cambridge. Not quite a conventional history — for it follows no strict chronology — Chadwick's work does not quite add up to a synthesis. Organized topically into eighteen chapters ("The Book," "The Bible," "Scholarship and Religion," "Death," "The City," "Conversion," "Marriage of the Clergy," "Monks and Nuns," "The New Services," "Church Order," "Creed," "Education," "Divorce," "In the Country," "Resistance Justified," "Radicals," "Toleration," and "Unbelief"), *The Early Reformation* might be best approached as a very long essay on the subject by an eminent historian of the Reformation. It is, in fact, a very dense reflection, for the big book covers in scope only the early continental Reformation from c. 1500 to 1560. The sharpest focus, by far, is on the Holy Roman Empire and Swiss Confederation, although Chadwick devotes some attention to France, the Low Countries, the Germanic Baltic lands, and Scandinavia (mainly Iceland).

3. A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).

4. C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation in Germany* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

There is no coverage of the reform movements in Italy, Habsburg Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland.

The reader may be struck at first by the lack of order in the juxtaposition of topics. But soon an intellectual profile emerges clearly in this lively book. Written in a lucid, often conversational, tone, *The Early Reformation* is the work of someone with pronounced and profound sympathies. At the risk of presumption, this reviewer would characterize that intellectual order as Protestant high Church, humanist, and irenicist. This impression emerges in Chadwick's intimate dialogue with reformers of the sixteenth century, in which he shows an admirable command of the writings of a large number of reformers, from the most eminent to the less prominent or the downright obscure. In this gallery of theologians and intellectuals, Chadwick's sympathies lie above all with four: Erasmus, Melancthon, Osiander, and Castellio.

Erasmus was of course the intellectual superstar of the early sixteenth century. His fortunes, however, suffered with the change of times. A moderate man caught between opponents and defenders of the Papacy, a private man forced to declare himself in public polemic, Erasmus died a Catholic in a Protestant town, and was spared the pain of prohibition of his works by the Index. In the early chapters of the book, Chadwick offers the reader a detailed summary of the life and writings of the great man of letters. The other three were Protestants. The first was Luther's closest colleague at Wittenberg, a reformer and superb humanist, the preceptor of Germany, a peacemaker, and a man who did not share Luther's sardonic and violent temper. More poignant still, Melancthon came to be vilified by those who questioned his loyalty to Luther and resented his compromising stance during the 1547 Interim. The second served the imperial city of Nuremberg faithfully for close to two decades as a reformer; he composed an anonymous tract denouncing the persecution of Jews on account of ritual murder charges; and left the employment of an ungrateful city council that loathed to antagonize Charles V in the wake of the Catholic victories in 1547. The third, Castellio, as is well known, won admiration from both his contemporaries and posterity for condemning the execution of Michael Servetus, the Spanish anti-Trinitarian who baited Calvin into condemning him to death. Perhaps the most revealing moment is the letter from Melancthon to Castellio dated 1 November 1557 (p. 394): "When I think of your writings I must be your friend though I do not know you personally. I should like a lasting friendship between us. Let us bear with wisdom a situation which we cannot change. If I live long behind I would wish to converse with you personally about many things." One could hear in the echo of these words Chadwick's own desire to converse with the past.

At its best, *The Early Reformation* reads as a series of stimulating conversations between the historian and his sources, above all the writings of reformers, church ordinances, and doctrinal works. Chadwick is at his best discussing the differences in theological opinion among reformers, elucidating liturgical details, and placing Protestant ministry in the larger social and intellectual context of the sixteenth century. He is good on books, the Bible, universities, and in general on the clergy. His chapters on the marriage of the

clergy, the responses of monks and nuns, the new Protestant services, and the creed of Protestants represent some of the most engaging and lucid writings on these subjects for a long time.

It is instructive to compare this book with a synthesis Chadwick wrote some thirty years ago for the Pelican History of the Church.⁵ The earlier work followed a more conventional structure. Divided into three parts (“The Protest,” “The Counter-Reformation,” and “The Reformation and Life of the Church”), it introduces the Reformation in chronological order, beginning with Luther, Calvin, and dealing with the radicals and the English Reformation. In contrast, *The Early Reformation* takes a much more focused approach: the Counter-Reformation is left out, as is England, and the larger world-historical perspective — one of the strengths of the earlier synthesis — yields to a narrower fulcrum on central Europe. In spite of these differences, there is a deeper similarity between these two works. Chadwick’s approach to the Reformation is that it was shaped by the ideas and work of reformers, constrained naturally by the social and political contexts of their time; and that the legacy of reform was clearly visible in the reordered ecclesiology, liturgy, and theology of the Protestant world. With the institutional Church thus privileged, the radical Reformation — the Anabaptists, anti-Trinitarians, and other sectarians decried by both Protestant reformers and Catholic conservatives — occupied only the margins of this picture, however sympathetic Chadwick might be to their fate. In comparison with the earlier work, *The Early Reformation* has revised some of the mistakes, for example, in the story of the 1534–35 Anabaptist kingdom of Münster. Nonetheless, his picture of the radicals still leaves something to be desired: one gets the impression that Thomas Müntzer and Heinrich Pfeiffer were proto-Anabaptists (p. 377), and that the theology of Bernhard Rothmann, Protestant preacher in Münster turned Anabaptist, was but an aberration, when, in fact, a sacramentarian tendency in north-west Germany and the Low Countries was strongly present even before the Reformation.

By privileging the institutional Church, and by adopting a topical/thematic approach, *The Early Reformation* misses the confusion, excitement, and fluidity of the early Reformation movement in Germany. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz has argued, the hatred of the clergy was one of the central unifying forces in the early evangelical movement. The potential for radicalism — the Bible, priesthood of all believers — was present in all moments, for Luther and the radicals as well.⁶ There was nothing inherent that separated Luther from Müntzer or the Anabaptists from the beginning. The revolution of 1525 would form the watershed. An awareness of the need for religious renewal implied action. Whether this action entailed only the overthrow of “Roman tyranny” or the destruction of the old political and social order came to divide the “magisterial” from the “radical” Reformations, to use George H. Williams’s

5. *The Reformation* (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1964; rev. ed. 1972).

6. See H. J. Goertz, *Antiklerikalismus und Reformation. Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); *Pfaffenhass und gross Geschrei. Reformatorische Bewegungen in Deutschland 1517 bi 1529* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987).

distinction. Luther's volte-face during the German Peasants' War typified the dilemma faced by all religious reformers: how far to go in order to herald in the kingdom of God? By invoking the doctrine of the two swords, Luther chose order, tradition, and political passivity. Donning the mantle of the prophet, Müntzer cast in his lot with the "godly" only to die a rebel. Still others chose their own paths: Karlstadt was well on the way to a more radical Reformation before the events of 1525 shocked him back into the path of the magisterial Reform; Hubmaier begun his career as cathedral preacher in Regensburg whipping up an anti-Jewish uprising before joining the ranks of the Anabaptists and eventually finding martyrdom.

If the above examples argue against too much of a conceptual distinction between the institutionalized Protestant Reformation and the radicals, we need only to consider one more case in order to be convinced of the fluidity and dynamism of the larger context. A magnet for reformers and dissidents, the Alsatian city of Strasbourg rivalled Wittenberg and Geneva as one of the intellectual centres of the Reformation century. In addition to a trio of prominent reformers (Bucer, Capito, and Zell), Strasbourg also offered refuge at various times to men as different as Calvin and the spiritualist Caspar von Schwenckfeld, not to mention the English and French religious exiles during the 1550s. While the first reform currents were present as early as 1519 in Strasbourg, the city fathers moved cautiously, alarmed by the tumult of the Peasants' War and wary of provoking Emperor Charles V. Solidly evangelical in sentiment, the Catholic mass was not abolished until 1529 and an evangelical church ordinance only materialized in 1534 when the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster posed an immediate challenge to Protestant identity (all the more so since the theological inspiration for the Münster Anabaptist, Melchior Hoffmann, was languishing in a Strasbourg jail). Far from marginal, the radical experiment, the millenarian kingdom in Münster posed a great threat to the Protestant Reformation because it played into the Catholic polemic against the reformers: all religious innovations ultimately lead to violent revolutions. No wonder that Luther, Bucer, and Urbanus Rhegius raved against the polygeny and communalism of the Münsteraners, for behind their attack lay the defence against the charge that Protestants were no better than crypto-Jews, hoping to force the hand of God in their chimera of a kingdom of God on earth.

If we cannot think of Luther, Zwingli, and the other reformers without the Holy Roman Empire, if the theological is also the political, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that religion cannot be understood without thinking about society. Here, perhaps, is the significant weakness of *The Early Reformation*. Chadwick's Reformation story is essentially that of the reformers and intellectuals. Their ideas and actions are described with insight, sympathy, and great understanding. But how did the common folk receive the theological debates and ecclesiastical changes? Here and there — in the chapters "Education," "Divorce," "In the Country," "Toleration," and "Unbelief" — Chadwick offers the reader glimpses into the religious life of the people of the sixteenth century. But even in these chapters, the narrative is shaped by

institutional change and the subjects too often represent only the intellectual elite, as in the chapter "Unbelief."

There is of course a choice to be made. It may not be possible to write equally well on doctrine, liturgy, music, politics, and the social history of the Reformation. No doubt, many a fine study on society and religion give short change to theology and liturgy. Eloquent as he may be on many themes, Chadwick is a bit weak on the more current scholarship in politics and social history. His discourse on the 1525 German Peasants' War relies essentially on an outdated work.⁷ While Blicke's far more influential 1981 study is cited, Chadwick's narrative does not seem to reflect the newer scholarship and interpretation of the uprisings of 1525. When German-language scholarship is cited, it tends to represent older works, some of which are still quite useful. But one misses the work of Heinz Schilling, Luise Schorn-Schütte, Heinrich R. Schmidt, and Anton Schindling, just to mention some of the most prominent names.

While Chadwick gives extensive coverage to Germany and Germanophone Switzerland, his exposition on the Reformation in France and Geneva seems perfunctory. Again, there is heavy reliance on the writings of reformers and a few monographic studies (Kingdon, Garrison-Estèbe, Roelker), while some crucial works (Monter, Richet, Diefendorf, Descimon) are neglected. Curiously, Calvin comes across as relatively bloodless, compared with the vivid portraits of Luther, Zwingli, and some reformers of lesser rank. Is Chadwick perhaps not keen about predestination? Or does he dislike an opponent of toleration, who insisted on the death penalty for Servetus?

Lest this review end on a negative note, let the present writer emphasize his pleasure in the company of Chadwick's pages. His is an immensely erudite, insightful, and personal reflection on the Protestant Reformation, one gained from a lifetime of scholarship. Between social, political, and intellectual histories of the Reformation there can be no absolute boundary, for the forces of religious change defy neat conceptual classification. *The Early Reformation* and the other books under review show that Reformation history continues to be an exciting, contentious, and dynamic field of scholarship, and that the constant interplay between monographic studies and works of reflection and synthesis is precisely the mechanism for advancing our knowledge.

7. See Günther Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977) — the eleventh revised edition to a work first published in 1933 with open Nazi sympathies.