

# MARTIN LUTHER

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

In this book we shall be considering the Protestant Reformation launched by Martin Luther from 1517 onwards as a major event in world history, and especially within the great saga of the history of human freedom. In this Introduction we shall be considering in particular the way that the religious changes he instigated have been discussed and debated in English and other European historical writing since the sixteenth century: our concluding chapter will also return to some of those themes.

Our subject, Luther, saw himself as a liberator and has been represented in the tradition of historical writing about him—the ‘historiography’—as one who struck some of the heaviest blows ever delivered for human freedom by his work as a theologian in freeing Christians of his own and subsequent ages from a burdensome Catholic religious system. As it gained its own historiography between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, Protestant ideology justified the Reformation as a liberating movement setting masses of people free from an essentially corrupt and unfree medieval Catholic system which had seized the once pure Christian Church of New Testament antiquity and created a tyranny of oppression and lies.

### ‘CHRISTIAN LIBERTY’ AND THE REFORMATION

The notion of the Protestant Reformation as a milestone in the history of human freedom goes back in fact to the Reformation itself, when the first Protestant reformers acclaimed their own acts of liberation from the medieval Church’s alleged tyranny. Here, for example, is the early Swiss Protestant leader Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) announcing his abandonment of the Catholic Church’s strict fasting laws as a major contribution to human freedom of choice and action:

## 2 INTRODUCTION

if you want to fast, do so; if you do not want to eat meat, don't eat it; but allow Christians a free choice...if the spirit of your belief teaches you thus, then fast, but grant also your neighbour the privilege of Christian liberty...[and do not] make what man has invented greater before God than what God himself has commanded.... Further, we should not let ourselves be concerned about such 'works', but be saved by the grace of God only.

Zwingli's understanding of freedom with regard to fasting in fact represented a kind of theological libertarianism according to which we are free of such imposed restrictions because we are 'saved by the grace of God only' and not by the legal coercion of any established religious system. Luther himself confirmed that insight:

the papal dominion...makes rules about fasting, praying and butter eating, so that whoever keeps the commandments of the pope will be saved and whoever does not keep them belongs to the devil. It thus seduces the people with the delusion that goodness and salvation lies in their own works. But I say that none of the saints, no matter how holy they were, attained salvation by their works.<sup>1</sup>

Early reformers, then, saw themselves as proclaiming a libertarian jubilee of freedom from centuries of Catholic enslavement. Luther himself made a major contribution to the unfolding of a historiography that portrayed his reforms as the antidote to the decadence that had crept over the course of time into the Roman Church. He represented Catholicism's moral, institutional and, above all, doctrinal abuses as time's evil legacy to the Church. The centuries had, he believed, left a thick dust of moral decay, when, for example, over the course of time, 'Avarice grew impatient at the long time it took [for Rome] to get hold of all the bishoprics, and my Lord Avarice devised the fiction that the bishoprics should be nominally abroad but that their origin and foundation is at Rome.' In terms of his own view of his role in restoring for the messianic future the purity of the distant past of the Christian Church lost in more recent recorded time, Luther came to see the papacy as the Antichrist coming between God and His people and he showed how the papal office had over the course of time introduced into the Church the institutions of the non-Christian world: 'the pope's teaching is taken from the Imperial, pagan law'.

As we shall see in [Chapter 3](#), as a consequence of his attack on the papal system of indulgences in 1517, in 1519 Luther was involved in debates in Leipzig with the Catholic controversialist Johannes Maier von Eck (1486–1543). The Leipzig debates turned into a protracted historical and theological review of the proceedings of the Council of Constance (1414–17) of a century before. The debates raised the specific issue of whether the Council’s denunciations and eventual execution of the Czech dissident John Hus (c. 1369–1415) made a heretic of Luther himself, as a critic of the Church. In the intervals of the Leipzig debate Luther carried out historical study, closely examining Hus’s doctrines, and began to draw lessons against papal claims from out of Church history. In the following year, Luther published an essay with an historical theme, ‘The Babylonian Captivity of the Church’, showing that the papal bondage was the malign legacy of time. In particular, baptism, the eucharist and penance, the three ancient core sacraments—channels of divine grace to Christians—had ‘been bound by the Roman Curia [papal court] in a miserable captivity... and the Church has been deprived of all her freedom’. His own historical importance, he was convinced, was not that of innovator—innovation was the sin committed against the true Church by the papal tyranny—but of restorer. Over indulgences, for example—that long tail of abuse that had grown on to the sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, penance—Luther claimed, ‘I alone rolled this rock away.’<sup>2</sup>

### THE CONTINENTAL HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Within the sixteenth century Luther’s historic overview of a Church held prisoner by the toils of time was given scholarly form by the Lutheran historian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75), along with a team of ecclesiastical historians working in the German Lutheran city of Magdeburg. Published in Basel in Switzerland between 1559 and 1574, the resultant ecclesiastical history, known as the ‘Magdeburg Centuries’, provided fuller narrative underpinning for Luther’s claim, not to be an innovator but rather a restorer of the pristine purity of the Church that had been lost in the long and dark ages of papal power. The authors—known as the ‘Centuriators’—would point, for example, to the story of the medieval monk Malchus to illustrate vividly how the Catholic Church’s gross doctrinal misunderstandings created a world of error, credulity and breach of God’s law from which Luther, the liberating and loving restorer, came to free the Church. Malchus as a monk had broken three of the ten commandments: the fourth (like

young Luther) by entering the monastery in defiance of parental commands; the fifth by attempting suicide in order to keep chaste; and the seventh by cheating his employer in returning to the monastery after having abandoned it. In cycling such stories, the Centuriators made Church history a key part of the justifying libertarian propaganda of the Lutheran Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

Luther as a great historical force became a subject of popular mythology in Germany, and the historian Robert Scribner traced the fascinating process by which the Luther-myth became enmeshed in German popular culture between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. He arose as a surrogate saint, with a festival dedicated to him, and he was readily incorporated into the extant German tradition of folk tales as a wonder-worker, a healer, superman and benevolent magician, particularly kind and helpful to peasants (in ways that in life he had not always been). When a collection of these accumulated folk tales concerning Luther was published in Germany in 1917, it was designed to coincide with the fourth centenary of the inception of the Reformation in 1517 and to confirm the identity of Luther and the Reformation. Typical of the tales that set out the historical importance of Luther was one published in 1617, the first centenary of the Reformation year. It was of a vision purveyed to Luther's overlord and patron Frederick the Wise (1463–1525), Elector of Saxony. In this fable Frederick falls into a sleep, to dream that God sends a handsome and noble monk, a 'son' of St Paul, whose teachings, as we shall see, were the strongest influence on Luther as a theologian. With Frederick's assistance, this monk, Luther, proceeds to bring down the tyrant's papal throne in Rome. The story further affirmed Luther's cosmic importance by linking him with the historical figure of John Hus, an earlier demolisher of papal claims. But the allusion to Luther's connection with St Paul and, in other representations, with the four evangelists or with St John and with key figures of prophecy, were all designed to attest Luther's exceptional historical role as, in Scribner's words, the 'bearer of salvation', the restorer of Christianity's chronically dilapidated edifice. That his role was to be seen as a salvation from the delusions and oppressions of the medieval Catholic Church was underlined by an illustration dated 1524 showing Luther as Moses—and leading Israel out of the slavery and darkness of Egypt into the light of Christ. Light again surrounded the image of Luther the enlightener in a first-centenary medallion representing him as nothing less than the 'light of the world'. The systematic creation of images of Luther—whether, as seems more likely, those responsible were intellectuals or whether the rise of the Luther legend was a spontaneous eruption from popular culture—confirms the reformer's acclaimed standing as the destroyer of an ancient oppression, history's most important spiritual

liberator since Christ. It was, according to this projection, the gross corruption, the spiritual and practical despotism of Rome, built up over centuries of accumulated enslavement, that gave Luther his epic historical importance as a herald of freedom.

Even so, around the time of the centenary of his 1517 protest, it began to appear that his liberating achievement was in fact endangered by a Catholic recovery set in motion by a rejuvenated papacy and Catholic episcopate, by the Catholic Church's Council of Trent (1545–63) and by new religious orders, above all the Jesuits. The crusade of recovery on the part of a reinvigorated papal Church was soon, in the Thirty Years War (1618–48), to be championed by Habsburg Catholic aggression that threatened the very survival of the Reformation in its German birthplace and throughout central and northern Europe. Thus, because the Reformation had already come to be sealed as the great moment of Christian liberation from ancient Roman Catholic tyranny, it was vital to have it protected by courageous heroes in Luther's own mould. Thus, for example, Denmark's Lutheran Thirty Years War champion, King Christian IV (1577–1648), was projected as a 'brave warrior', 'a lord and hero who is true to the Word of God' and who 'struggles with great danger for the pure teaching of God's word': 'he intends to struggle and fight a Christian battle against the enemies of [Protestant] Christendom'. The Reformation had become projected as a liberation and a salvation, and a century and more after its outbreak, insofar as the Thirty Years War was fought as a Protestant crusade, it was waged on the basis of conviction that Luther's salvation of Christianity had to be saved, his redemption of the Church redeemed and his liberation liberated from re-enslavement.<sup>4</sup>

### ENGLISH HISTORICAL WRITING

The conviction that the Protestant Reformation launched by Luther had freed a people in bondage to 'popery' became a fixed point of Protestant historical thought in Reformation Europe. In Reformation England, it is true, there was recognition of the value of much of the pre-Reformation ecclesiastical tradition, and in *De Antiquitate Ecclesiae et Privilegiis Ecclesiae Cantuariensis cum Archiepiscopis ejusdem* 70 ('Concerning the Antiquity and Privileges of the Church of Canterbury [i.e. the Church of England] with an account of its 70 Archbishops') Elizabeth I's first archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker (1504–75), drew inspiration from the historicity of the ancient institution known as *Ecclesia Anglicana*, 'the English Church'. However, better known as an Elizabethan ecclesiastical historian, and more fully open to Continental Protestant intellectual influences, was the great

chronicler of religion and the Reformation in England, John Foxe (1516–87), the author of the *Actes and Monuments of the Church*, popularly known as the ‘Book of Martyrs’ and first published in 1563. To Foxe the medieval Catholic system was a huge deceit, tyranny and burden in which:

The world, leaving and forsaking the lively power of God’s spiritual word and doctrine, was altogether led and blinded with outward ceremonies and human traditions, wherein the whole scope...of all christian perfection, did consist and depend....

The people were taught to worship no other thing but that which they did see; and did see almost nothing which they did not worship.

The church, being degenerated from the true apostolic institution above all measure,...did fall into a kind of extreme tyranny.... With how many bonds and snares of daily new-fangled ceremonies were the silly [simple] consciences of men, redeemed by Christ to liberty, ensnared and snarled.... All the whole world was filled and overwhelmed with error and darkness....

And it was Luther’s mission to undertake the destruction of ‘that wretched thraldom in which Christians were detained’, to speak out fearlessly with ‘stoutness of stomach and Christian constancy’. Foxe indeed incorporated in his account the projection we observed above of Luther as a saint, and, playing with one of the Catholic criteria of sainthood, reviewed ‘miracles’ associated with him. However, Luther’s real miracle was that of heroic, liberating courage, a seemingly puny David standing up to an apparently invincible Goliath:

What a miracle might this seem to be, for one man, and a poor friar, creeping out of a blind cloister, to be set up against the Pope, the universal bishop, and God’s mighty vicar on earth; to withstand all his cardinals, yea, and to sustain the malice and hatred of almost the whole world being set against him; and to work that against the said Pope, cardinals, and Church of Rome, which no king or emperor could ever do....

On account of such bravery, Luther was in Foxe’s view the undisputed ‘master’ of the Reformation. At the same time, though, Foxe was an intensely patriotic English Protestant historian, who drew particular



attention to the vital part played by his home-grown English hero of religious freedom, the dissident John Wyclif (c. 1329–84), whom Foxe's Protestant patriotism pronounced to be 'the valiant champion of the truth'. Wyclif's calling was also for Foxe that of initiating a liberation from deception and servitude: 'through him the Lord would first waken and raise up in the world, which was overmuch drowned and whelmed in the deep stream of human tradition...to revoke and call back the church from her idolatry, to some better amendment...'.<sup>5</sup>

Foxe's interpretation—learned, exhaustive, consummately eloquent as it was—became the cornerstone of the Anglo-Protestant interpretation of ecclesiastical history in terms of a sequence of pristine purity lost and recovered, the story of the Church's rescue from the clutches of the papal Antichrist being a reflection of the drama of human redemption itself. Luther taught, and Zwingli echoed him, that one of the chief marks of the papal Antichrist's tyranny was the imposition of rules and regulations impeding the freedom won for Christians by Christ crucified. For Foxe's fellow Elizabethan Protestant writer John Bale (1495–1563), one of the impresses of despotic Antichrist's regime was the needless imposition of the rules of celibacy on the clergy of the Church. Around AD 1000, Bale thought, the imposing of enforced formal chastity on the clergy under pressure from Rome in order 'utterly to dyssolve prestes marage' was a key strategic victory for the Antichrist as a usurping moral dictator.

In such ways the Tudor school of English Protestant historiography passed on a tradition that depicted 'medieval' ecclesiastical and clerical overlordship dominating the life of the Church in England and elsewhere, certainly in the first half of the second millennium, as a tyranny evident in daily enslavements and in the deliberate promotion of superstition and error, but to be vanquished by the light of the gospel restored, Luther being the primary restorer. The Reformation was to be seen, then, as a restitution of doctrine and elimination of abuse, but, even before those things, it was to be considered as a release from a most grievous subjection, a 'Babylonian captivity', to use Luther's term of 1520, in thrall to Antichrist. By the later seventeenth century, when the Protestant bishop of the Church of England Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715) produced the first two volumes of his *History of the Reformation* in 1679–81, a Protestant historiography had become firmly established according to which medieval 'popish' ecclesiasticism represented a fusion of delusion and servitude. The Protestant Reformation, with Luther as its captain, meant Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the consequent loosening of the ties of 'priestcraft' and the simultaneous delivery, of which Luther was the trail-blazer, of the Scriptures to the people in their own language. Burnet asked:

What is to be said of implicit Obedience, the priestly dominion over consciences, the keeping the Scripture out of the people's hands, and the Worship of God in a strange tongue, but that these are so many arts to deceive the world, and to deliver it up into the hands of an ambitious clergy!<sup>6</sup>

It was no coincidence that when Burnet issued the overture to his great history, the Reformation seemed to many in the British Isles to be, once more, in peril of re-enslavement, for the mighty power of Louis XIV's France, combining military, political and religious grandeur and servitude, was abroad to reverse the Reformation, while in England itself the revelations of Titus Oates (1649–1705) in and following 1678 seemed to reveal a 'popish' campaign to destroy freedom—both religious and political—and restore the slavery and deceits of the ages before Luther.

#### THE REFORMATION AS A POLITICAL REVOLUTION

The English case also seemed to show the equation between religious liberty and political freedom, more narrowly construed. Other nations of the Reformation apart from the English were able to trace in their histories the dramatic liberating effects of the Protestant restoration of the Church. For the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the Protestant Reformation was the concomitant of their national struggle for freedom, the Eighty Years War, 1567–1648—part of the set of providential processes that ensured national and republican freedom from colonialist, autocratically monarchical, papistical Spain. With that political emancipation came the luminescence of the light of the gospel, along with the marvellous commercial, rural and urban wealth that came to that new and free Israel, Holland. Thus the seemingly unwearied scriptural themes of Israel set loose from the houses of bondage in Egypt and Babylon could be once more recited, to celebrate the birth of freedom and prosperity blest by the shining of the gospel released by the demise of tyranny.

In that largely Calvinist republic, though, the credit for breaking with the toils of political servitude to Spanish state tyranny and religious bondage to Antichrist had to recognise the vital role of the Calvinist, rather than the Lutheran, Reformation legacy. The sixteenth-century Dutch Church historian Adriaan van Haemstede had already traced a Calvinist martyrology which embraced the heroes of the early

and post-Apostolic Church, as well as those slain by the papacy in the Middle Ages, and went on to give to the emergent godly rulers of the Netherlands patterns to emulate of the saviours of Israel in the Old Testament, Moses, Joshua and the rest, protectors of a chosen people. One further freedom was thought to have been gained from the Reformation that Luther spearheaded, the precious freedom of the mind, to question, to speculate and to challenge. Thus the Netherlands freedom-fighter against both Spanish and Romish tyranny, Philip Marnix van Sint Aldegonde (1538–98), in his *The Roman Beehive* (1569), pictured the tyranny of Catholicism as an intellectual trap—an imprisoning hive, close woven out of cunning theological sophistries from such medieval theologians as Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus.<sup>7</sup>

### THE ENGLISH HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Before the end of the Reformation century a Protestant view of the movement Luther launched as the great hiatus of post-scriptural history seemed firmly in the ascendant and historians writing in the period to come, such as Burnet, continued to accept a view of the religious renewal Luther had initiated as the great Red Sea of Christian history: for Marnix, it cleared away ‘olde rubbish or chalkie dust’ ‘digged out of the decayed welles of mens superstitions’. It is true that in the 1630s the line of thought that stretched from Foxe to Burnet was disturbed, as some ecclesiastical opinion in Protestant England itself was becoming less convinced of the beneficial effects of the Reformation stemming from Martin Luther. Thus, whereas Foxe’s historical symphony explained and justified the Reformation, William Laud (1573–1645), archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 to his death in 1645, was more firmly in the line of his pre-decessor Parker, looking, as Damian Nussbaum says, ‘to [the] medieval Catholic Church as the forerunner of the reformed Church of England’. Though Protestants, Laud and his party, in the ascendant in the Church of England in the 1630s and early 1640s, upheld attitudes to the sacraments and to worship that were in many ways close to those of mainstream Catholicism and they claimed the legacy of the medieval Church. In historical terms, they sought inspiration, not in rejecting the Catholic past, but in laying claim to its inheritance. For that reason, the Foxeian view of the Reformation as a restorative revolution was sidelined in Laudian ecclesiastical historiography.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, despite Laudian-inspired historical revisionism, for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the prevailing historiographical orthodoxy within the Church of England concerning its historical roots, along with the whole issue of the historical necessity of the Protestant Reformation initiated by Luther, remained broadly Foxeian. Indeed, it came to be accepted not only that the Reformation was launched by Luther but that its survival was constantly under renewed threat from its tyrannical foe, Rome. Therefore, the narrative of post-Reformation English history was systematically recast as a series of narrow escapes for Protestant liberty from Catholic despotism. The first assault nearly killed English Protestantism shortly after its birth, though the danger was headed off, as *The Protestant Almanac* of 1700 recalled, through ‘Our first Deliverance from Popery by K.*Edward VI*’—the Protestant-inspired government of the boy-king Edward VI (1547–53). Post-Reformation English history was, then, increasingly reorganised conceptually as a cycle of near-mortal threats, each narrowly averted, to the legacy that came from Luther. Within that cycle, a particularly high level of menace came, following Edward VI’s Protestant reign, from the Catholic reaction inspired by Queen Mary Tudor between 1553 and 1558. Then, ‘The Ruin’d Abbey; or, The Effects of Superstition’ by William Shenstone (1714–63) reminded its readers, England witnessed the restitution of an ancient and cruel popish despotism,

whose revengeful stroke

Ting’d the red annals of Maria’s reign.  
 When from the tenderest breast each wayward priest  
 Could banish mercy and implant a fiend!  
 When Cruelty the funeral pyre uprear’d,  
 And bound [Protestant] Religion there, and fir’d the base!

Once again the Reformation legacy derived from Luther was to be rescued, as *The Protestant Almanac* recalled, with ‘Our second Deliverance from Popery by Q.*Elizabeth*’. The threat, though, was far from over even then. In the collective national historical imagination, wave after wave of new popish dangers to the traditions of Luther and liberty were depicted. Included amongst these were: the attempt by Catholic terrorists to assassinate the godly King James I and his parliament in the Gunpowder Conspiracy of 1605; the massacre of Irish Protestants by Catholic insurgents in 1641; the firing of London in 1666 in an attempt by papists to wipe from the earth its greatest Protestant city; next, the alleged popish plot against Protestantism and freedom in favour of absolutism and Catholicism disclosed by the

informer Titus Oates; followed by King James II's use of arbitrary measures allegedly to annul the Reformation, between 1687 and 1688. The last, *The Protestant Almanac* recounted, was followed by 'Our third Deliverance from Popery, by K.Will. & Q.Mary', in the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9.<sup>9</sup>

### REVISIONIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

That Revolution was an international event, concerned as much with curbing the power of Catholic-absolutist France in Europe at large as with ensuring the survival of Luther's heritage within the British Isles. Within the decade when the Revolution took place, the revocation by Louis XIV in 1685 of the 1598 Edict of Nantes, which had guaranteed religious and civil freedom to French Protestants, was a further reminder from the wider European theatre that the price of Protestant survival in the face of popery was eternal vigilance against its constantly renewed assaults, while Catholic persecutions of Luther's spiritual descendants on the Continent in the course of the eighteenth century acted as further memoranda in that direction. Even so, a new ambivalence began to appear in Protestant thinking about the reality of the danger to the great tradition of the Protestant Reformation that Luther had set in motion. Scepticism, even, over the continuing scale of the popish menace begins to be apparent, for example, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, part I, published in 1678 when the power of popish Louis XIV was at a high point. In this work the ultra-Protestant Bunyan, a passionate admirer of Luther's work and theology, imagined the emblematic figure of 'giant pope', a farcical, superannuated and harmless relic of the past, once formidable but 'grown so crazy and stiff in his joints, that he can now do little more than sit in his Caves mouth, grinning at Pilgrims as they go by, and biting his nails, because he cannot come at them'.<sup>10</sup>

So a new ambiguity began to arise in Protestant thinking about the Luther tradition of Protestantism: was it in fact a vulnerable holy grail that had constantly to be guarded from its popish would-be thieves? On the one hand, Hanoverian Protestant Britain's growing wealth had constantly to be protected from the beggary that popery brought with it: 'Pontific fury! English wealth exhaust[ed]...the beggar'd shore... what Rome might pillage uncontroll'd', as it was imagined. On the other hand, the very wealth of the great Protestant realm provided its own securities against dangers to its economy, its global trade protected by the Royal Navy, its currency and investments guarded by prudent

Whig government and the Bank of England. On the political front, too, the last Catholic Jacobite military threat to Protestant Britain in 1745 both signalled that there was once more a danger to the Reformation—but also revealed that it was largely illusory. Increasingly, then, thinking Protestants could afford to become less fevered, more relaxed about Catholicism as a primordial foe and about its place in a schematic construction of the past. This is even evident in Shenstone's poem 'The Ruin'd Abbey', in which the surviving, ruined physical remnants of medieval popery—a monastic 'mouldering wall, with ivy crown'd;/ or Gothic turret, pride of ancient days!'—while safe in the Protestant hands of English estate-owners, could sufficiently quieten the still necessary fear of popery in the breasts of 'the sons/ of George's reign, reserv'd for fairer times'. Thus the very antiquity—specifically the mediocrity—of popery partly inoculated it as far as progressive-minded Protestant Hanoverian Britons were concerned.

Its historic menace largely assuaged, 'Popery' was no longer necessarily or continuously seen as an unmitigated evil, nor was the Reformation legacy of Luther and his followers necessarily viewed as an unalloyed good. The lexicographer and, probably, Jacobite supporter of the Catholic Stuarts' dynastic claims Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–84) typified a new willingness to see things of value in what the recorder of Johnson's observations, James Boswell (1740–95), himself briefly a convert to Catholicism, termed '*the old religion*'. Thus the Catholic doctrine of purgatory was to Johnson's way of thinking 'very harmless', with 'nothing unreasonable' to it; there was 'no idolatry in the mass'—as close as he could approach to a direct repudiation of his own Church of England's description in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1563) of the rite as 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'. Catholics, Johnson pointed out, did 'not worship saints; they invoke them; they only ask their prayers'. The Catholic sacrament of penance seemed to him 'a good thing'. As for the Catholic issue in the affairs of his own day, Johnson sympathised with the London Catholics attacked in what he called the 'miserable sedition' of the antipopish Gordon Riots of 1780 and, perhaps even more remarkably, was on the side of the Catholic Irish 'in a most unnatural state, for we see there the minority prevailing over the majority. There is no instance...of such severity as that which the Protestants of Ireland have exercised against the Catholics'. 'I would be a papist if I could', he exclaimed in the year of his death, when he 'argued in defence of some of the peculiar tenets of the Church of Rome'.

Johnson was by no means an uncritical admirer of Catholicism: he decried, for example, its concealment of the Scriptures from the people and the Catholic Church's practice of withholding the chalice from the

laity in the eucharist. He also largely shared the inherited view of Romanism as an ancient corruption:

In the barbarous ages...priests and people were equally deceived; but afterwards there were gross corruptions introduced by the clergy, such as indulgencies or priests to have concubines, and the worship of images, not indeed, inculcated, but knowingly permitted.

For all that, Johnson, one of the most influential British public voices of his day, typified in the second half of the eighteenth century a revolution in British Protestant views of Catholicism prevalent at least amongst educated elites, and issuing in moderate pro-Catholic legislation in 1778 and 1791. Whether this reversal of attitudes to the Catholic faith would be reflected in an altered view of the Catholic Church's moral and spiritual quality in the Middle Ages would depend in part upon the momentum of a revolution in aesthetics and sensibility—the Romantic movement, especially in literature and the arts and already in part traceable within Johnson's lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

Shenstone's cult of the 'mouldering wall with ivy crown'd' was certainly part of a love of the medieval, and therefore Catholic-linked, picturesque fostered by the Romantic poet Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824) in his celebration

Bless'd is the man in whose sequester'd glade,  
Some ancient abbey's walls diffuse their shade.

William Wordsworth (1770–1850) was a literary disciple of the man he called 'the Roman Catholic clergyman', the Jesuit Thomas West (1720–79) whose *Guide to the Lakes* largely pioneered Lakeland tourism. But Wordsworth was able to find more than merely picturesque significance in the extant ruins of the medieval monastic architecture of worship. Wordsworth's discovery of the spiritual value of the Catholic past recalls something of Parker's and Laud's ability to see merit in the pre-Reformation Church. His particular interest as a poet lay in the beautiful architectural legacy of Catholicism within the landscape of England and Wales (Furness Abbey, Tintern Abbey) and on the Continent (Catholic Bruges and Cologne) and was expressed in a string of poems that unmistakably create a sense of empathy for medieval Catholic Christianity. He further developed the affection for ivy-clad monastic ruins that was characteristic of the earlier literary

picturesque school into an appreciation for monastic meditation typical of the instinctual, a-rational leanings of the Romantics,

And meditate upon everlasting things  
In utter solitude.

While Wordsworth had no patience with what he termed the ‘Revival of Popery’ in his own day, and was perfectly capable of delivering routine anti-popish copy, our own interest is held by his cultivation of a highly enthusiastic sense of Catholic history: of the heroised Catholic figures of Mary Queen of Scots (1542–87); of the Polish Catholic king Jan Sobieski (1624–96) whom Wordsworth acclaimed as the ‘Deliverer’ for his rescue of Vienna from the Turks in 1683; of the Catholic martyrs under Henry VIII, ‘saintly Fisher’ (Bishop St John Fisher, 1469–1535) and the ‘gay genius’ of St Thomas More (1478–1535). He deeply appreciated the wisdom of medieval Scholasticism, the valour of the Crusades and the beauty of the medieval cult of Mary, while strongly deploring the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536–40) by Henry VIII—‘choirs unroofed by selfish rage’. Wordsworth’s preparedness to see in medieval catholicity, not unmixed merit—that might have been rather too much for him or his readers to take on—but the lineaments of ‘Justice and peace;—bold faith’ opened up, under the inspiration of Romanticism and medievalism, the strong possibility, in Europe’s most important Protestant state, of a receptivity to the medieval Catholic Church, its aspirations and achievements, and a gradual retreat from an historical interpretation that had justified Luther’s Reformation itself as a necessary liberation from enslaving superstition.<sup>12</sup>

If Wordsworth was able to see medieval Catholicism in a relatively favourable light, as part of that new appreciation of the Middle Ages and their mystique that was at the centre of Romanticism from the late eighteenth century onwards, his English contemporary William Cobbett (1763–1835) was savagely iconoclastic about Catholicism’s replacement, Luther’s invention, Reformation Protestantism, and its effects in and on England. He considered these to have been acutely injurious to the poor—not an emancipation of the masses but their economic and social enslavement. In his *History of the Reformation in England and Ireland* (1824–7) Cobbett claimed to ‘show not only that the people were better off, better fed and clad, before the “Reformation” than they have ever been since, but that the nation was more populous, wealthy, powerful and free before than it has ever been since that event’. Indeed, pre-Reformation England was a social utopia in which ‘Usury among Christians was unknown until the wife-killing



tyrant [Henry VIII] laid his hands on the property of the Church and of the poor'. What was for Wordsworth a cultural and aesthetic loss, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, was to Cobbett a social catastrophe because it suppressed the charity and welfare dispensed by the monks: 'When the Protestant religion came...the poorer classes were plundered of their birthright and thrown out to prowl about for what they could beg or steal.' Subsequently, 'When Elizabeth had put the finishing hand to the plundering of the Church and poor, once happy and free and hospitable England became a den of famishing robbers and slaves' and in Elizabeth's reign 'we have the great, the prominent, the staring, the horrible and ever [en]during consequences of the "Reformation", that is to say, pauperism established by law'. It hardly needs adding that Cobbett's strictures are not history: they made up propoganda for his radical Tory critique of a commercial and industrialising country that he condemned as driven by a hard-nosed and selfish money-making ethos.<sup>13</sup>

Some years previous to Cobbett's production, in 1802 Wordsworth's almost exact French contemporary, the Catholic aristocratic royalist Francois René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), had turned his own attention to defending the values of traditional and medieval Catholicism against the rationalist, secularist, modernising codes that the French Revolution had championed, and he was able intellectually to go a great deal further than Wordsworth in saluting the immense positive contribution to human progress and welfare made by the medieval Catholic Church. The sacrament of penance, for instance, often regarded as the linchpin of clerical dictatorship over the laity, was to Chateaubriand 'one of the strongest barriers against vice and a masterpiece of wisdom'. Chateaubriand even had the ingenuity to cite the twin icons of the eighteenth-century anti-Catholic rationalist Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778), in defence of penance. Indeed, for Chateaubriand—and intrinsic spiritual considerations apart—the whole Catholic sacramental system conduced vastly to natural human morality and benefit. The Church's sacrament of matrimony he believed did so pre-eminently, and it was in discussing this rite that Chateaubriand embarked on a hymn to the medieval Church's entire civilising achievement:

Europe still owes to the Church the scanty number of good laws that it possesses. There is, surely, no social situation that has not been provided for by [the Church's] canon law, the fruit of the wise experience of fifteen hundred years, and of the genius of those [medieval] popes of the name of Innocent and Gregory.<sup>14</sup>

Chateaubriand, indeed, should be regarded as the founder of a Catholic school of historical writing that came, confidently, almost defiantly, to rejoice in the grandeur and the achievements of the medieval ‘ages of faith’, and to deplore Luther’s Protestant Reformation as an historical catastrophe. As history rather than rhetoric, Chateaubriand’s work should no doubt have admitted more of the faults of the medieval ecclesiastical set-up, and *The History of England to 1688* published between 1819 and 1830 by the Lancashire-based Catholic priest John Lingard (1771–1851) was candid in admitting those defects that had led to the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation in Germany: that country’s high-born prince bishops

neglected the episcopal function; the clergy, almost free from restraint, became illiterate and immoral; and the people, ceasing to respect those whom they could not esteem, inveighed against the riches of the church, complained of the severity with which the clerical dues were exacted in the spiritual courts, and loudly called for the removal of many real or imaginary grievances....

However, although Lingard acknowledged that there were genuine sources of more or less secular-based dissatisfaction with the medieval Church, in his eyes Luther, an opportunistic coward, with ‘liberty... constantly in his mouth’ and writing “‘Christian Freedom’” and “‘Bondage of the Church’”, ‘converted the general feeling to his own purpose’, which was ‘to subvert the foundations of the existing church, that he might raise another on its foundations’. The Reformation was born, then, of no high historical necessity but out of Martin Luther’s ability to exploit social grievances for his own ends.<sup>15</sup>

Increasing confidence was henceforward to mark new generations of Catholic historians in defending the record of their Church and in calling into question the historical justification for Luther’s Protestantism. By the beginning of the twentieth century the English Benedictine monk, cardinal and historian Francis Aidan Gasquet (1846–1929), fostered a species of Catholic historical writing that boosted the claims of the medieval Church to social benevolence and pastoral and spiritual care. Gasquet’s 1906 *Parish Life in Mediæval England* in particular forms a vivid evocation of a devout, medieval English Catholic population of willing daily Mass-attenders receiving the sacraments with joy and frequency. Of these, penance was no burden or enslavement of the conscience, for the disciplinary canons of what Gasquet called the ‘English Church’ instructed confessors ‘to hear what anyone may want to say, bearing with them in the spirit of

mildness, and not exasperating them by word or look'. The administration of this sacrament also opened up the egalitarianism of the medieval Church, for in it, wrote Gasquet, on the basis of a fifteenth-simple, '...were treated alike'. Indeed, Gasquet's understanding of the century book of confessional *Instructions*, all, 'rich and poor, noble and institutions of the medieval Church was that they made up a progressive and sociable entity, one whose guilds and confraternities resembled the emergent trade unions of his own day as well as those other bodies representative of self-help and sociability, benefit societies and provident associations. Indeed, the cooperative spirit sponsored by the medieval Church made village life under the care of one pre-Reformation County Durham monastery resemble 'some Utopia of dreamland'. There were plentiful holidays based on holy days, provision of entertaining and instructive religious plays, and conviviality upheld in village 'ales' put on by the Church—though, lest any reader come away with the wrong idea, Gasquet's version of the potation provided at those treats seems to have resembled nothing so much as a kind of sarsaparilla, 'a sweet beverage...hardly an intoxicant'. Finally, this whole *tableau vivant* of innocent, cooperative and soberly merry Catholic English life was led by a dedicated and educated parish clergy, ably assisted by a full range of conscientious parish officers. The Protestant Reformation engineered by Luther could be seen only as the most deplorable explosion of that serene world, like a wild boar invading a vineyard.<sup>16</sup>

Further into the twentieth century, a Catholic philosopher of history, Christopher Dawson (1889–1970), echoed Gasquet's encomium of medieval Christian confraternal life and developed it into a hymn of praise for what he saw as its realisation of some of the highest ideals of human society, brought to near perfection in the city of the Catholic Middle Ages:

it was the medieval city which first provided the favourable conditions for a thorough-going christianization of social life... the medieval city succeeded in reconciling the interest of the consumer with the corporate freedom and responsibility of the producer...it was this integration of corporate organization, economic function and civic freedom which makes the medieval city the most complete embodiment of the social ideas of the Middle Ages, as we see them in their most highly developed form in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas.

It is particularly noteworthy from our point of view that Dawson linked medieval Catholic society so closely and repeatedly with *freedom*.

Thereby, the notion inherited from the reformers that the Catholic system had meant bondage, and the Reformation liberty, had been turned on its head. Meanwhile, more popular Catholic writers such as G.K.Chesterton (1874–1936) spread the romantic medieval vision, while his co-religionist Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) called for the restoration of the medieval guilds.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside the influence of Christian socialism, or of an anti-capitalist ideological reaction, in romanticising a vision of a cooperatist and corporatist Catholic Middle Ages, the Christian ecumenical movement gaining ground after the Second World War sidelined the older kind of confident Protestant historiography, deriving in England ultimately from Foxe, which had so sweepingly discredited the Catholic Middle Ages and Church. For instance, the Anglican historian A.G.Dickens in his masterly 1964 *The English Reformation* notably cautious in his attitudes to assumptions about late medieval Catholic clerical corruption in England, and in his introductory survey 'Scenes from Clerical Life' put his readers on their guard against, for example, the bias of Tudor governmental reportage of scandals in the monasteries and convents, data produced so as to justify politically motivated suppression. When J.J. Scarisbrick published *The Reformation and the English People* in 1984 and Christopher Haigh issued *The English Reformation Revised* three years later, the intellectual foundations were already in place for the building of Eamon Duffy's magnificent scholarly defence of the viability and popularity of the late medieval Catholic religious and social system in which, Duffy wrote, 'Corporate Christians' occupied a zone of 'holy neighbourliness': *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400—c. 1580*. In one of the most emphatic reversals of historiographical consensus ever achieved, by the 1990s, in the most influential English-language studies of the Reformation and pre-Reformation, the medieval Catholic system had come to be represented as workable, beautiful and popular, with, to say the least, a strong suspicion that the Reformation, at least in the British Isles, represented a victory of absolute and ruthlessly enforced state power to uproot people, as painfully as a mandrake torn up, from ancient and beloved rites and social customs.

Could there be any dissent from this new apparent orthodoxy? Available in German since 1939 Joseph Lortz's *Die Reformation in Deutschland* appeared in English translation in 1968 and delivered to English-speaking readers a sustained and angry condemnation of the late medieval Church—the 'disintegration of the Christian priesthood', 'an un-Christian way of life...regarded as normal', 'scandals of the Renaissance papacy', 'the terrible extent of corruption', 'the general decline of the religious orders', the supposedly austere Cistercian monks living for 'the enjoyment of pleasure', 'widespread decay amongst the

higher and lower clergy', cynical mechanisation of piety. The entire system was, indeed, a kind of Babylonian captivity, and Lortz cited a view of Luther's Reformation as a deliverance: 'The Reformation came like the fulfilment of a long-overdue self-liberation'. So concluded the Catholic scholar Lortz, returning to the concept with which we began this chapter, that the Reformation was a major human emancipation. So, until we have made further progress with this book the jury of my readers may not yet be able to deliver any verdict on whether or not the Luther-movement was in the end the striking-off of fetters tying down the Christian soul.<sup>18</sup>