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The Cry for Reformation

THE IDEA OF REFORMATION

At the beginning of the sixteenth century everyone that mattered in the Western Church was crying out for reformation.

For a century and more Western Europe had sought for reform of the Church 'in head and members' and had failed to find it.

If you asked people what they meant when they said that the Church was in need of reform, they would not have found it easy to agree. Many rectors did not live or work in their parishes. Yet there might be excellent reasons for allowing them to work elsewhere and still to draw the stipend of the parish. The Pope's laws interfered in many matters of Church and State, and men talked of a need to limit the Pope's authority; but some of them needed the help of the Pope to manage the Church in their lands, and used the Pope's supreme power as a dispensing agent, a loophole by which princes or bishops might escape the rigorous working of church laws.

Everyone protested that to buy or sell work in the Church – whether bishoprics, or the parish ministry – was deplorable. It was the sin known as simony. But to pay fees on entry to an office could be defended as a form of taxation, or as a payment for the lawyers' expenses. It was at first sight disgraceful that the Bishop of Worcester should be an Italian continuously resident at and engaged upon administrative duties in the court of Rome. But the King of England needed an ecclesiastical agent at the Vatican and thought it not unreasonable that an English ecclesiastical office should pay his stipend. What one honest man believed to be an abuse, another honest man defended.

Everyone wanted reform, or professed to want reform. How to reform and what to reform was not so clear. The energies of some reformers went to create new religious orders, or little groups of prayer and study. Bishops tried to be stricter against ordaining ignorant men, or to compel monks and canons to live according to their rule. But at the administrative level the quest for reform limped along like a lame man who does not know where he is going. From 1512 to 1517 a great Council of the Church, called Ecumenical (though few besides Italians were present), was sitting in the Lateran church at Rome. Its members listened to long and eloquent speeches, and sat for many hours. They agreed, amid much else, that schism and heresy should be suppressed; that the Turks were a danger to the Christian nations; that bishops should have more power over the monks, and that no one might preach except by lawful authority; that the Roman mobs must not sack the cardinals' houses on the Pope's death; that professors in their lectures must establish the truth of the soul's immortality; that the printing of unsound books should be stopped. The men of a reforming spirit might think these conclusions edifying. But some at least did not recognize in the decrees of the Council a fulfilment of the vague and elusive phrase, 'reform in head and members'.

The feeling, diffused through Europe, that the Church must be reformed was as diversified as possible. For Italian bishops it might mean that the constitutional machinery of the Vatican was top-heavy, that the power of the cardinals had increased and should be diminished. For preaching friars it might mean that the lives of their congregations were evil when judged by the ideals of Christian sanctity. For secular lawyers it might mean that the ecclesiastical courts and ecclesiastical exemptions were intolerable obstacles to effective administration. For churchmen it often meant that, amid the creaking and cumbersome mechanisms of clerical bureaucracy, the incidence of church taxation was efficient and burdensome; while a long history of papal

warfare or politics or misgovernment had made men sceptical whether the kingdoms of God or of man were receiving any benefit from the revenue. Was it right that a dispensation from Scriptural decrees about marriage should be available, and if it was right, was it right that the dispensation should be so expensive to obtain? Was it not equivalent to one law for the rich and another for the poor? Was it right that a man with money could obtain permission to be married between Septuagesima and Ash Wednesday, and a man without money could not? Why should the centralized administration at Rome have the power to supersede the rights of local patrons in the appointment to benefices, and particularly when the administration seemed to use its power for the interest of its dependants? Was it justice that an ecclesiastic who committed a felony should be immune from the normal jurisdiction of the secular magistrates? When a government urgently needed money for the defence of the realm against Turkish invasion, was it expedient that churchmen should claim their vast endowments to be exempt from the duty of contributing? Was it worthy of the spiritual censures of the Church that the grievous weapon of excommunication should be wielded to collect debts and souls should be driven to desperation for trivial reasons? Why should the curate of a parish starve while his non-resident rector lived in comfort upon the stipend of the benefice? Were not too many of the clergy secularized – brawlers, drunken, adulterous, unworthy of their sacred office? Was not (if the critic was extreme, and perhaps in a pulpit) the modern Church a harlot, selling her beauty to anyone who could pay?

When churchmen spoke of reformation, they were almost always thinking of administrative, legal, or moral reformation; hardly ever of doctrinal reformation. They did not suppose the Pope's doctrine to be erroneous. They supposed the legal system and the bureaucracy to breed inefficiency, graft, injustice, worldliness, and immorality. If they were educated men, humanists of the Renaissance, these desires

were sometimes mingled with a plea for intellectual improvement. They not only wanted popes and bishops to be less secularized, monks to practise their rule, parish clergy to be more instructed. They sometimes talked of a theology which should be less remote from human beings, more faithful to the Gospel, a faith which should be less external and more akin to the teaching of the Lord. But to gain this end they had neither desire nor expectation of anything which could be called a change in doctrine.

The sense that reformation was needed, though diffused and often vague, derived its strength from particular occasions. A priest who was observed to be publicly drunken in the taverns was allowed to continue his ministry without rebuke; the scandal was notorious; and it was hardly noticed that in some other cases of drunkenness pastoral discipline was enforced. A corporation engaged in a suit over property with a monastery found settlement to be impossible without such an expenditure of time and money as rendered the distant verdict futile. A cleric known to be guilty of homicide was seen to escape with a modest imprisonment on bread and water. A parish priest kept a concubine openly and was unrebuked. An illiterate devoid of any knowledge of the Latin tongue was ordained to the priesthood, and could be heard mumbling nonsensically through his prayers at the altar; and the parishioners knew nothing of learned and devout men whom elsewhere bishops might be ordaining. Too many scandals; too many inconveniences; too many injustices; too much inefficiency unremedied and apparently irremediable – these lent force to the cry of churchman and of politician for reformation.

The first question, then, in the public mind was not the question: 'Is the teaching of the Catholic Church true?' That teaching was believed to be unaltered through the long centuries of the past, unalterable into the future to eternity. In Bohemia there were Hussite heretics who exercised authority unrepressed. Hidden in the English countryside or in the Alpine valleys there were a few ignor-

ant groups of Lollards or of Waldensians; in Germany a few strange meetings assembled to study the Bible and to frame, as men imagined, a wild medley of sedition and blasphemy. The cry for reformation meant the suppression, not the encouragement, of these secret discontents.

Many of the obvious abuses were abuses by the highest standards of churchmen but were useful to the sovereign of the state or his servants. Linacre, the physician of King Henry VIII, had been rector of four parishes, a canon of three cathedrals, and precentor of York Minster before he was ordained priest. He was receiving payment for his medical services by this variety of rectories and prebends.

These were rather corruptions of the State, perhaps, than of the Church. The king was more responsible than the Pope. The king must reward his servants richly if he were to be well served. Since the Church possessed a big part of the wealth of every country, he could reward many of them only if he placed them in ecclesiastical offices. The great French diplomat, Antoine du Prat, was elevated to the archbishopric of Sens and entered his cathedral for the first time in his funeral procession. Bishops were often more eminent as courtiers than as pastors. When King Louis XII of France entered Italy in 1509, he was accompanied by three French cardinals, two archbishops, five bishops, and the abbot of Fécamp; and the presence of this galaxy owed nothing to an unusual anxiety about the royal conscience. During the second quarter of the sixteenth century, there were twenty-two bishops in the province of Languedoc in southern France, and only five or six were resident in their sees. Graft was no less to be blamed upon the Church when it was royal graft; and yet abuses seemed worse when they were perpetrated by clergymen to the advantage of clergymen. The clergy were the keepers of the public conscience. It was their duty to restrain avarice, to sanctify poverty, to denounce the usurer and the simoniac and the adulterer, to excommunicate even kings if kings fell impenitent into mortal sin, to do justly and to love mercy,

and to walk humbly before God. To these purposes their pulpits were sacred. If reform was needed, and everyone was so agreed, it was the duty of the clergy to proclaim its necessity and to demonstrate by deed and example that this world was still subject to the Church. They looked upwards to the Pope, set (they believed) by Christ or by Constantine over kings and princes, and expected that by his word he could still bring peace and justice and integrity to the peoples.

No Pope, not even a Hildebrand or an Innocent III, could have satisfied these loose, uninformed aspirations. For two hundred years the Pope's power had been sinking before the power of the kings. Though Christendom was still an idea which could command armies, they were mean little armies compared with the crusading hosts which once had assembled to conquer Palestine from the infidel. The conscience of Christendom was shocked when after 1525 the most Christian King of France was observed to ally himself with the Turks; shocked when Pope Alexander VI was among the first of Christian rulers to conduct such a negotiation. And yet the shock was shallow. Though men still believed in Christendom and still expected the Pope to be the head of Christendom, they looked for political leadership and security to their state and their prince. For two hundred years the kings and governments had been limiting the Pope's authority in their territories, restricting his powers to the confines which suited their purposes, and securing the effective right to appoint bishops. The authority of the Pope was still far-flung. Every ruler of western Europe must still reckon with it. The legal system of Latin Christendom continued to depend upon the papal courts. The prestige of vicar of Christ and head of Christian society continued to command a confused assent and respect among the peoples. But the States of Europe were restricting papal authority. To expect the Pope to reform the Church was to expect a miracle which he had little power to perform. He might give impetus to reform by example, or by

influence, or by teaching; but the days were passing when he could command – supposing that he wished to command.

The Pope's prestige has often been moral as well as social and doctrinal. In the years 1500 to 1517 it was entirely social or doctrinal. Under Alexander VI Borgia, Julius II, and Leo X it appeared that the throne of St Peter, like other bishoprics, had become a remunerative if uncomfortable seat for worldly politicians. Not to see the contrast between precept and practice was to be blind. A ribald pamphleteer (perhaps Erasmus) described a dialogue at the gates of heaven when Pope Julius II sought to enter:

JULIUS: Open the door quick. If you had done your duty you would have met me with the full ceremonies of heaven.

ST PETER: You seem to like giving orders. Tell me who you are.

JULIUS: You recognize me, of course.

ST PETER: Do I? I've never seen you before, and at the moment I find the sight extraordinary.

JULIUS: You must be blind. Surely you recognize this silver key . . . Look at my triple crown and my jewelled pall.

ST PETER: I see a silver key. But it looks nothing like the keys which Christ, true Pastor of the Church, gave me . . .

Europe was astonished to see Pope Julius II put himself at the head of the papal armies in north Italy; to see the vicar of Christ, sword at side and helmet on head, climbing the breach in the fortress of Mirandola which his generalship had captured.* That he saved the Papal States from anarchy, that he caused the foundations of St Peter's to be laid (18 April 1506), that he employed Raphael to paint the *stanze* and Michelangelo the ceiling of the Sistine chapel – these were as nothing in the scale of moral judgement now being used. His work seemed that of an Italian, and of a great prince of the Renaissance, not that of an international and moral authority. At Tours in 1510 a commission of French doctors of divinity found itself anxiously debating the question: What is the value of excommunications pro-

* The Archbishop of York commanded one of the Pope's armies during part of this north Italian campaign.

nounced by the Pope against a king resisting aggression by the Pope's army?

For centuries men blasphemed in their cups and bawdy songs, and improvised anti-clerical ditties for their drinking friends. Now these amusements were no longer confined to the tavern. They were becoming public property, the reading and the commonplace of honourable and educated men.

The puritan of the Middle Ages saw in money the root of nearly all evil. And perhaps the most painful contrast between religious ideal and clerical practice lay at this point. Religious men, following St Francis of Assisi or Thomas a Kempis or countless others of the medieval Church, still believed poverty to be part of the highest moral endeavour. But they no longer revered poor men. The holy beggar was no longer the object of unqualified admiration; partly because experience had shown too high a proportion of frauds, but partly because the moral ideal was beginning to be modified in the presence of social and economic changes. Yet the devout men still assumed the ancient ideal of poverty and detachment. 'It is vanity to seek riches which shall perish and to trust in them. It is vanity to pursue office and climb to high rank. It is vanity to follow the desires of the flesh . . . vanity to wish for long life . . . vanity to love what passeth away so quickly, and not to hasten where abideth joy everlasting' (*Imitation of Christ* 1, 1). The moral ideal was other-worldly; still monastic or quasi-monastic. But educated men, the middle class, the humanists, drinking deep from the springs of a rediscovered literature of Greece and Rome, filled with delight in this world, and finding themselves in a society of growing wealth, sensed incongruity and discrepancy between the ideal and the everyday life in which they found themselves. The old values inherited from the past were in conflict with the material and intellectual strivings of the present.

Money the root of evil – and yet ecclesiastical benefices seemed to the laity too often a mode of heaping gold upon

gold. And in the realm of money, in the opportunities for ecclesiastical good living, it seemed to many observers that Rome was pre-eminent. Everything in the Church, said the critics with exaggeration, is sold for money – pardons, masses, candles, ceremonies, curacies, benefices, bishoprics, the Papacy itself. 'If Popes, the vicars of Christ, tried to imitate his life – that is his poverty, labour, doctrine, cross, and contempt of this world ... would they be like the Popes who nowadays buy their see with money and defend it with sword and poison?'

Erasmus was at Rome in 1509, Luther in 1511; and neither of them quite liked it. Much later, Luther said: 'I would not have missed seeing Rome for a hundred thousand florins, for then I might have been afraid of being unjust to the Pope.'

The word *reformation* (which, unlike the word *renaissance*, was used widely by contemporaries and had been used for two centuries and more) shows that this quest for better things was characteristically medieval in looking backwards for its model and its standard. All the writers of the later Middle Ages saw the primitive Church through rose-coloured glass. In the lives of the saints they read of heroism and apostolic zeal; and seeing the ordinary or worse than ordinary men around them, they looked back wistfully and uncritically. Once there was a golden age. There was devotion, fervour, religion, holy priests, purity of heart. But now that ancient age of gold has degenerated imperceptibly to silver, from silver to wood, from wood to iron. 'There is as much difference between us and the men of the primitive church as there is between muck and gold.' This was no new cry of the fifteenth century. Three hundred years before, St Bernard of Clairvaux wished before he died to see the Church as it was in ancient days, when the apostles cast their nets for souls, and not for gold and silver. It was one of the typical appeals of the medieval preacher. Many reformers thought that the Emperor Constantine caused the disaster by his donation (the gift of

lands and secular authority to Pope Sylvester), that the golden age of Christendom had been ruined when the Pope acquired wealth. The new humanists of the fifteenth century were less naïve in their attitude to Constantine, and one of them, the papal secretary Valla, proved the legend of the donation to be a later forgery. But although the faint beginnings of a critical history made it less easy to think of a black present and a white past, a learned humanist like Erasmus still believed, if moderately, in a lost age of sanctity and purity. The Reformation always looked backwards.

A hundred years before, the claims of rival and competing popes forced churchmen to plan a reform of the Church in head and members. The Council of Constance (1414–18) and the Council of Basle (1431–9) met, passed many resolutions, and triumphantly ended the conflict in the Papacy. Their aspirations after reform in the administration and the piety of the Church were foiled by events, and by the weight of national and vested interests. But, while they had not done what they intended, they had sown dragons' teeth which by 1500 were springing up into armed warriors. Those Councils gave the idea of reformation such an airing that it could never be forgotten. They talked frankly, clamoured for change, advertised abuses, suggested remedies, evoked claims and an idealism which they had then failed to satisfy. They thereby multiplied discontent. If they failed in their practical aim, they left behind a state of public opinion which was restless, critical, disquieted, impatient, demanding reform in theory, and not always sensible of the practical consequences. In 1496 a Frenchman wrote that in men's conversation no topic was more frequent than that of reform.

Widespread, popular, and unsatisfied demands for reform are usually, in the end, revolutionary.

The demand grew by feeding on itself. Every bishop (and there were many) who attempted reforming measures in his diocese was liable not only to meet bitter resistance there but to raise further aspirations in neighbouring and

neglected dioceses. Every monk who sought to persuade the monastery to a strict and regular life seemed to vilify other houses. To demand reform is to denounce abuse. To denounce abuse is to raise doubts in the public mind, to criticize officials, to hold them up to public opprobrium. To demand reform was to diminish the prestige of Pope, bishops, monks, friars, and parish priests, and to open the way to further criticism. The government of the hierarchy was being weakened by attacks upon the clerical order.

The word *anticlericalism* might be misleading, since it suggests the different bitternesses of the nineteenth century. But in 1502 Erasmus said that a layman was insulted unpardonably if he were called a cleric, priest, or a monk. In 1515 the Bishop of London, whose chancellor was reputed to have murdered a merchant tailor, told Cardinal Wolsey that in the circumstances a jury of any twelve men in London would condemn any cleric, though he were as innocent as Abel. Mr Skidmore of Isleworth said a few years later that 'Welshmen and priests' were sore disdained nowadays.

This cry for reformation, growing as a wind whips up the waves, was not a new standard of judgement and criticism. The demand had grown from the academic programme of a university into the clamour of a people. Yet it is needful to ask why the old desire was so much more potent now than a hundred years before. For reform seemed to have been frustrated. At the end of all the endeavours of the fifteenth century the Papacy had produced Pope Alexander VI Borgia. Reform had been tried, and had failed.

The tragedy of the Dominican friar Savonarola has given posterity this sense of failure in a dramatic form. When the French king Charles VIII passed through Florence in 1494, Savonarola begged him with passion to convene an ecumenical council at Rome and depose Pope Alexander VI. To the conquests of France the Pope was more useful upon his throne. Savonarola, burning with moral and

prophetic power, persuaded the city of Florence to accept Christ as king, attacked luxury and simony and the papal curia, defied a papal suspension and then an excommunication, dispatched wild appeals to the sovereigns of Europe to convoke the reforming council, and, deserted at last by the Florentine mob, was burnt upon the piazza of the Signory on 23 May 1498. His was the medieval cry for reform, uttered in the old way, triumphant for a moment in the old way, suppressed in the old way. Most of his contemporaries saw little of importance in the tragedy. Less than twenty-five years later Erasmus, whose appeals for reform were half as passionate and twice as effective, thought Savonarola's defiance to be a sad example of the evils to be found among friars.

But what was it that made the call to reformation more potent and more revolutionary in the early sixteenth century than a hundred years before? Was it simply that the abuses were worse? That corruption so rotted the carcass that the hollow body collapsed in the moment when it was pushed?

The evidence upon this point, though hard to judge, suggests not. The Reformation came not so much because Europe was irreligious as because it was religious. The medieval Church begat repeated waves of fervent idealism, and was doing so again. The abuses now condemned were always abuses and always condemned at the bar of public opinion. A lot of parish priests were ignorant in 1500, a lot of parish priests were ignorant in every age. The reformers were under an illusion in looking back towards a golden age. The Church came to dominate western Europe in rough times, and the scars of that roughness could still be seen upon it. Most of the abuses were not so much worse. What was new was the extent of men's awareness of the defects in Church order and the possibility of remedy.

In certain areas, and in certain practices, there had been decline during the fifteenth century. The new world of credit afforded opportunities to the self-seeker beyond the

wilder dreams of his predecessors. There was a new blatancy in non-residence, in piling up ecclesiastical offices, in keeping concubines, in drawing the pay of a priest without being ordained as a priest. 'We Italians,' wrote Machiavelli, 'are more irreligious and corrupt than others . . . because the Church and its representatives set us the worst example,' and there may be a truth somewhere in the complacent self-accusation. But there was plenty of reforming idealism even in the Italy of the later Renaissance.

What is undoubted is the extent of religious practice. Henry VIII was said to hear three masses on days when he was hunting and sometimes five on other days; and the devout Margaret Beaufort heard six masses every day. Medieval fervour threw up new modes of devotion, and the later fifteenth century saw several new forms of piety. Savonarola persuaded the Florentines to bring their treasures and burn them; in 1507 Pope Julius II sanctioned the cult of the holy house at Loreto, believed to be the Lord's home miraculously transported by angels from Nazareth; the Dominican Alain de la Roche (died 1475) popularized the (much older) use of the rosary; in the churches a characteristic monument was the Pietà, the Virgin of pity with her dead Son; it was the age when the Stations of the Cross began to be placed upon the walls of churches; the union of a bell with a prayer of the Virgin, known thereafter as the Angelus, is of the later fourteenth century. A part of what is loosely known as 'Counter-Reformation devotion' began to flower before the Reformation.

The strong and popular devotion to the Virgin was accompanied by a marked growth in the cult of the saints and their relics, and of pilgrimage to their shrines. Ill-regulated fervour could be superstitious or even demonic. In 1500 more witches were being tortured and burnt, more Jews were being persecuted. But superstition was no innovation. Since the darkest ages peasants had consumed the dust from saints' tombs or used the Host as an amulet or

collected pretended relics or believed incredible and unedifying miracles or substituted the Virgin or a patron saint for the Saviour. In 1500 they were ardently doing these things. What was new was not so much the practice as the way in which the leaders of opinion were beginning to regard it.

In short, the perpetual gap between the religions of the literate and the illiterate was widening till it could hardly be bridged. While popular devotions, mingled with popular superstition, seemed to be almost uncontrollable by bishops or by theologians, while the ardour of the people was seeking the emotional cult, the printing press was at work publishing more than 100 editions of the Bible between 1457 and 1500.

We must therefore seek other explanations than the simple theory that the Church was too bad to continue, and consider two special circumstances: the increasing control of kings over their kingdoms, and the improved education of the intelligent minds of the western world.*

THE POWER OF GOVERNMENT

Kings Henry VII and Henry VIII were more powerful in England than any of their predecessors. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in Spain likewise; the kings of Portugal and Denmark, certain German princes, and even the German Emperor, were less weak than their recent predecessors. Government, though not modern, was becoming a little more modern. The pace varied from land to land. In England the private armies of the barons had been exhausted

* Some writers add a third circumstance – the discovery of America and the consequent widening of horizon and unsettlement of mind. There is little evidence to warrant so large a conclusion. The practical and social consequences became grave in the later sixteenth century, especially in the inflation of prices, but after the Protestant revolt. The theoretical consequences beset Christian thinkers only in the seventeenth century. There would have been Martin Luther if there had not been Christopher Columbus.

in the Wars of the Roses and the lords thereafter weakened by the Tudors; in France the feudal nobility remained great enough to divide the realm; in Poland the nobility was gaining control over the king. But the foundations of a civil service, of an improved machinery for administration and justice at the centre, the use of trained lawyers – these ingredients of a modern state marked the constitutional development of several realms during that age. And around these more effective governments was gathering the idea of the nation, the half-conscious and yet patriotic loyalty of their peoples.

The relation between this and the success of a Protestant revolt is undoubted but not easy to define. It might be said broadly that in England, and in Denmark, the Reformation came because limitation of the power of the Church was necessary to the further development of efficient government. Efficient government demanded restraint upon papal intervention, upon ecclesiastical privilege and exemptions, upon the legal right of an authority outside the country to levy taxes. In all the states of western Europe, and not only in the states which would later become Protestant, this began to happen before 1500.

But this connexion between constitutional development and the Protestant revolt, which looms so large in English history that it dwarfs every other consideration, was not a general rule throughout Europe. Before the Reformation began, the kings of Spain and France partially satisfied their need to control the Church. In 1478 the Pope granted to the Spanish sovereigns the right to set up and direct the Inquisition: a system of courts which effectively controlled the churchmen of the land and was under the immediate authority, not of the Pope or the bishops, but of the king. The inquisitors had power over all religious orders and (after 1531) over bishops, and there was no appeal to Rome from their verdicts. The kings of France, like the kings of England, but with more success, limited the interference of the Pope during the fifteenth century. In 1516, after long

interviews between the Pope and King Francis I, was signed the Concordat of Bologna, which determined the legal relation of Pope and Crown until the French Revolution of 1789. The king secured the right of appointment to all the higher posts in the Church of France, and placed within narrow limits the right of appeal by the clergy to the see of Rome. He could now nominate to 10 archbishoprics, 82 bishoprics, 527 abbeys, and numerous priories and canonries, and as dispenser of these favours and their endowments he was indirectly in control of the property of the Church. When he wanted ecclesiastical money, his methods need not even be devious.

In the fifteenth century the kings of England were already controlling the appointments to bishoprics. Even the weak emperor Frederick III in Germany, even the weaker kings of Scotland, obtained this right of nomination to many sees. The Republic of Venice fought several battles with Rome to the same end. The Popes were slowly losing actual (not theoretical) authority over the churches in the different states, the appointments to higher posts, the right to levy contributions and to maintain the immunity of ecclesiastical estates from taxation, and the right to hear appeals without interference. But it is certain that the Popes had never before given away so much authority as by allowing the Spanish Inquisition and by granting the Concordat of Bologna to the French king. The Pope was becoming weaker because the governments were becoming stronger. And the stronger the government, the more helpless lay the vast wealth and possessions of the Church and the more dangerous to vested interests and to corruption was the cry for reform.

The Reformation was not always a means by which legitimate sovereigns strengthened their hold upon their states. The contrary is sometimes true. In many lands the Protestant revolt was associated with a political revolt against an external or foreign sovereign – as in Scotland, the Netherlands, Sweden, some of the Swiss cities, some of the

German princedoms seeking freedom from imperial supervision. Even the English political revolution against the Pope was a faint reflection of the discarding of a foreign master.

As the power of the prince was increasing and the power of the Pope decreasing, Church reformers looked to the government for effective power to reform. Reform needed a knife to cut through the legal knots which protected established abuse. In the tangle of rights and prescriptions, the conflict of legal systems secular and ecclesiastical, the rival jurisdiction of courts, the constant opportunity for delaying tactics, the powerlessness of the diocesan system, and the anarchy in some parts of the ecclesiastical administration, the idle and the vicious flourished comfortably. You wished to reform a monastery? If you went to the provincial of the order, or the bishop, or the Pope, you would probably end in years of frustrating litigation, at the end of which little good had been done; but if you went to the king, he might break rudely through the tangle and order the monks to behave or begone. The best of reformers, at least in Spain, England, France, Germany, wanted the sovereign to act. He alone possessed the power to act effectively.

The Cardinal d'Amboise, empowered by the king to conduct a reformation in France, needed fortifying for reform with a Bull (from Pope Alexander VI) giving him full authority as papal legate. Thus armed with weapons from the heads of Church and State, he conducted an admirable reformation of several monastic houses and congregations. In 1501 he determined to reform the Cordeliers at Paris, and commissioned two bishops to visit and reform the house. When the commission arrived, the friars hurried away to the chapel, exposed the blessed sacrament, and began singing psalms. The two bishops waited for four hours and then, frustrated, went away. Next day they came back with the Provost of Paris, a hundred archers, and a

band of constables. Again the friars fell to their psalms. They were stopped, and the papal bulls and royal decrees were read to them. They replied by quoting extracts in a contrary sense from their charters and the canon law. After a prolonged deadlock, and a different commission composed of Cordeliers, the Cardinal at last secured a measure of reform in the house.

In the tangle of law, the reformer, though he needed papal power, needed royal powers also. He carried with him the decrees of the king as well as the bulls of the Pope, and he might need the king's guards. In modern language, though the State had always been necessary to the reform of the Church, it was becoming ever more necessary as its own power grew more effective, more sovereign.

The old ideal of a unity in Christendom was collapsing before the rise of the national states. The Vatican still trumpeted forth the claims of an Innocent III or Boniface VIII to world dominion. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI, as lord of the continents, divided the newly discovered world of America and the Indies between Spain and Portugal. In a European conflict Popes might still talk of deposing enemy kings from their kingdoms. Before a solemn audience of Alexander VI in St Peter's, Chieregato repeated the age-long interpretation of the two swords of power, the spiritual sword wielded by the Church and the temporal sword wielded by the State at the behest of the Pope. These vast pretensions corresponded to little enough in the cold reality of European politics. The Pope could sometimes secure what he wanted, but by diplomacy, no longer by decree. Bulls might thunder forth, and were still potent when they thundered, but behind the scenes there had been bargaining. To achieve anything important in France, Spain, Portugal, England, parts of Italy, parts of Germany, the Pope must secure the cooperation or the complaisance of the effective ruler. This was the age when the See of Rome first found it desirable to retain ambassadors (nuncios) in the European capitals. The first per-

manent nunciatures were set up at Venice in 1500 and at Paris in 1513. Men no longer bowed before the dread rebukes of the Church. They arranged them, compromised with them, argued about them, even bought them against their enemy – for in 1500 they were decidedly worth buying.

As the system of European states grew into manhood, the Italian needs and responsibility of the Papacy loomed larger relatively to the international responsibility. Like the other rulers of Europe, the ruler of the Papal States had to establish efficient control over his territories. The officials of the see needed to be Italian; popes were made to sign promises before election that all the Roman offices should go to Romans; the number of Italian cardinals steadily increased. To retain a majority of Italian cardinals was also to keep at a distance the pressure which kings might seek to exercise through their national cardinals. During the fifteenth century there were only two non-Italian popes, and one of them was Alexander VI Borgia. There was one more non-Italian pope, Adrian VI, who reigned briefly in 1522–3. There was not another till 1978. It was hardly conceivable that a non-Italian could effectively perform the Italian duties of the Pope.

THE NEW LEARNING

The upper classes, the rulers, the merchants, were beginning to be better educated. The presses were working, the printers were multiplying, the libraries, though still tiny by later standards, were adding to the number and range of their books. The press made possible methods of study which were in embryo in the days of manuscripts. Texts could be compared, instruments of study acquired more cheaply, critical editions prepared, though the word 'critical' could not be used as it could in the seventeenth century, for the manuscripts still lay hidden in the library chests, and the methods of scholarship were not experienced. More people were reading books. Knowledge was increasing.

But the Renaissance was not only new information. It was a movement of the spirit as well as the mind. The idea of the Renaissance is irretrievably vague. Sometimes it has been supposed that the new atmosphere of individualism, of delight in the human being, of nature and art and the achievement of mankind, was a necessary and direct background to the religious revolution, as though man was rising like a Samson to cast off the withes which bound him to orthodoxy and the ascetic ideal. Stated thus baldly, the alleged connexion between Renaissance and Reformation is so obviously untrue that the most elementary knowledge of the age is sufficient to disprove it; so obviously untrue that opinions may be found to assert paradoxically that there was no connexion between Renaissance and Reformation. Sane historians do not doubt that the connexion, though not precisely that of cause and effect, was intimate. But it is much easier to be sure that the connexion exists than clearly to define it. Moral fervour like that of St Bernard was more responsible for the Reformation than critical freedom like that of Peter Abelard. It was more a movement of faith than of reason.

The humanists were as varied as possible. They had little in common except a love of classical antiquity. The humanists of Italy, where the revival of the classics was linked with the rising sense of nationalism and the glories of the Italian past, lived in an atmosphere markedly different from that of the humanists of the north, of Germany, France, and England. Italian humanism was literary, artistic, philosophical, whereas northern humanism was religious, even theological. This contrast, like many historical contrasts, diminishes on close inspection. It would be wrong to take seriously the affected paganisms of an eccentric like Pomponio Leto, who called himself High Priest, knelt every day in front of an altar dedicated to King Romulus, and every year celebrated the founding of the city of Rome. With a few marked exceptions, Italian humanism conformed to a religious spirit, and in the north there was an evident humanism of philosophy

and literature. But the contrast remains. In France and Germany and England there was a movement taking a stimulus from the Italians and their renewed love of Greek and Latin antiquity, but transforming it into a decidedly religious context; the movement often known as Christian humanism, and represented at its best by John Colet and Sir Thomas More in England, by Lefèvre of Étaples in France, and above all by Erasmus of Rotterdam.

ERASMUS (*c.* 1466–1536)

Erasmus thought that in his boyhood northern Europe knew nothing of the new classical learning already flowering in Italy. He cannot be said without reservations to have devoted his life to any cause, for he loved his comforts dearly. But in so far as he undertook a cause, he intended to encourage the new studies by example and by precept and to remedy this state of northern 'barbarism'. Between 1498 and 1514 he lived in Paris, Oxford, and Italy, taught for two years at Cambridge, and thereafter settled at Basle, with intervals, until his death in 1536. Though his harmless vanity sometimes flattered him that he alone had educated the northern universities, the stream of learning was flowing more widely than he ever owned. But more than any other humanist, he wrote books which penetrated the homes and the studies of northern readers. The bookshops sold them in numbers prodigious for those days. A printer in Paris who heard a suggestion that the Sorbonne might soon condemn *The Colloquies* as heretical, hurried through the press an edition of 24,000 copies. Erasmus was more than a master of style and of scholarship. His natural wit was fed by a delicate and humorous and sometimes cynical observation of human beings. He could write to instruct and move as well as to amuse. But while he could not be dull, he was rarely superficial, his intellect was powerful as well as agile, he penetrated to the core of his subject.

As a satirist he poked fun, often gentle and sometimes bitter, at nearly all the various professions or classes of the state. His whimsical ridicule pricked or goaded kings, merchants, soldiers, tradesmen, scholars. Among all the targets, he aimed his most penetrating shafts at the abuses of the Church. It is a question whether he directed his thrusts at the Church more because worldly clergymen are easy prey for the satirist, or because he was offended in his moral sense and believed that ridicule gave a cutting edge to the plea for reform. The Netherlands was the home of those cells of reforming zeal and devotion known as the Brethren of the Common Life, the milieu from which had risen the peak of medieval devotional writing, *The Imitation of Christ*; and Erasmus received part of his education under their care. It is plain, at least, that he was not writing only to please, not writing only because he knew that criticism of ecclesiastics would multiply his sales. Erasmus was not fired by a reforming passion or zeal. But his sensible and scholarly nose was otherwise offended by the stink of corruption. He despised ignorance, superstition, obscurantism, and wished to cure them. Because his pen was able to portray those vices in the most entertaining light, he could communicate his own contempt to countless other minds. The diffused effect of writings like *The Praise of Folly* (1511) or *The Colloquies* (1518) cannot be calculated.

Educated men were mumbling all these things about the clergy, about monks and popes, corruption and graft, popular superstition and idolatrous practices. Erasmus expressed, and brilliantly, what they were barely articulating; and educated Europe laughed. Kings and bishops, scholars and merchants, anyone with a claim to be educated, hailed him at first with amusement and then with serious approval. By 1517 he had become part of the accepted order. Not so much in Italy, but in France and England and Spain and Germany, the new learning and Erasmian critique of the Church went hand in hand, especially among churchmen. More than any other single man, he

lowered the European reputation of popes and clergy, monks and friars, and (above all) of the theologians.

Above all the theologians. He once described a contemporary as 'a scab of a fellow, theology incarnate'. He condemned them as pedants, logic-choppers, manipulators of meaningless notions, constructors of syllogisms, warriors over terms. 'A man might sooner find his way out of a labyrinth than the intellectual mazes of the Realists, Nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Occamists, Scotists.'

This public scorn of the school-theologians weakened the bastions of traditional doctrine. It needs explanation. It is well known that the problems of logic and ethics and metaphysics can confuse the mind, but to despise them is not therefore inevitable.

The contempt for the schoolmen included a contempt for their 'crabbed' (that is, not Ciceronian) style or faulty grammar. But this was something deeper, stronger, more passionate than the contempt of a romantic poet or a neo-Gothic architect for his classical predecessors. It is more to be compared with the 'Battle between the Ancients and the Moderns' at the end of the seventeenth century, a battle wherein the literary disagreements rested upon a deeper discord of philosophy, the ancients thinking the moderns rash and perhaps heretical, the moderns thinking the ancients narrow and fanatical. 'I heard a camel preaching at Louvain,' said one of Erasmus's characters, 'that we should have nothing to do with anything that is new.'

First, the theologians were defending a creed by methods which seemed to be obsolete. Their theology was entangled with philosophical principles which many philosophers had ceased to believe.

For two hundred years the school of Nominalist philosophy*

* Nominalism: the axiom that only the individual is real. Therefore it is impossible to frame syllogisms with a universal premise, since the 'universal' is only a collection of unique individuals. Hence a strong scepticism about merely logical conclusions, as opposed to conclusions derived from observation or experience.

had been conquering the universities of northern Europe. The Nominalists were sceptical about the power of the human reason to reach true conclusions in the realm of metaphysics. They were known as 'the modern school' and were more or less dominant, by the year 1500, in many leading universities of Germany and France.

The Nominalists were orthodox by intention and were not overthrowing the doctrines of the Church. But they illustrated the helplessness of the reasoning faculty by displaying its inability to demonstrate the leading doctrines of Christianity. They were therefore sceptical about the great *Summae*, the medieval reconciliations between Christian doctrine and the natural philosophy of the Aristotelians. Many of these *Summae*, though written from diverse standpoints according to the school of the authors, constructed their reconciliations upon a confidence in the power of reason. The Nominalists believed that this ill-founded confidence undermined the massive structures of theology at their base and made them imposing piles of rubble. They did not think the doctrines of the Church to be untrue. They thought them to be known not by reason but by revelation – by the authority of the Bible or of the Church, indeed by the authority of both Bible and Church.

The attitude of theologians towards the doctrine of transubstantiation is a momentous illustration of the change in philosophy. St Thomas Aquinas, following his school of philosophy, distinguished between the 'substance' (or universal concept of the bread) and the 'accidents' (or external properties of the individual pieces of bread). He expounded the mystery of the Eucharist by proposing that the substance of the bread was changed into the substance of the Body of Christ, while the accidents, its appearance and colour and taste and shape, remained those of bread. The Nominalists could not believe, on rational grounds only, in the real existence of a universal or 'substance' of bread. Since the individual alone is 'real', they could only conceive a change of substance to mean a change of accidents at the

same time. They believed the doctrine of transubstantiation to be true. The Church authenticated it and therefore it was true. Had we but the reason as a guide, we should think it untrue. But in such a mystery the reason is helpless.

The Nominalist theologians thus drove a wedge between truth known by revelation and the doubts of the rational faculty. No longer were they seeking a concord between faith and reason, for faith and reason seemed to be lodged upon different planes, and to harmonize them was like mingling oil and water. Religious philosophy was falling into disrepute. The rope of Nominalism was throttling the windpipe through which the philosophers had breathed. Soon after the beginning of the English Reformation, Oxford men were tearing the heavy folios of Duns Scotus and using them as wastepaper. This symptom of an attitude to Duns Scotus was not a consequence of the Reformation, but a cause. His majestic constructions looked like intellectual wastepaper.

The critics of the fifteenth and sixteenth century fastened with zest upon the minutiae which the schoolmen thought it possible to resolve. A confidence in rational theology ended in over-confidence about the possibility of inference. It is a later scandal, and untrue, that the schoolmen discussed the number of angels who could dance upon the point of a pin. But St Thomas Aquinas, for example, argued whether if angels have local motion they pass through intermediate space, or whether an angel can be in more than one place at one and the same time. On the axioms available to Aquinas it seemed rational to pursue the answers to these questions. On the axioms of the Nominalists it seemed irrational. These answers not being given in Scripture or the definitions of the Church, reason was incapable of finding them. Instead of seeking real solutions to real problems, the Thomists appeared to the Nominalist critics to be merely presumptuous.

To Erasmus and to the early Reformers, educated in a society sceptical of the metaphysical reason, the word

syllogism stank of absurdity and complacency. These divines, wrote Erasmus contemptuously, think that, like Atlas bearing the heaven upon his shoulders, they are underpropping the Catholic Church with their syllogistical buttresses.

Philosophy was not dead. The Franciscans were still Scotist, the Dominicans still Thomist, and the study of the old ways of thought continued at the universities. But it was no longer the main effort of philosophers. The Nominalists, shrinking from insoluble problems, turned their studies towards logic and the problems of meaning. And thus they carried philosophy away from the realm of theology.

The study of logic, though healthy for the mind, offers meagre food for the soul. Sir Thomas More once said that he 'might as soon obtain bodily nourishment by milking a he-goat into a sieve as spiritual nourishment by reading the schoolmen'.

On top of this internal decay of the school theologians came the humanist criticism, with its lack of interest in the philosophical inquiry, its unprofessional ideas of a less narrow form of education, and its affection for critical and historical inquiry.

The clash between the schoolman and the humanist may not have been inevitable. It is easy to exaggerate the discord between the old learning and the new. Some of the ensuing controversy was not because the schoolmen closed their eyes to new knowledge but because the new scholars were arrogant, contemptuous, and aggressive. Nevertheless, the tradition of the schools often suffered from the worst defects of traditionalism. In 1505 Wimpfeling is said to have distressed the University of Freiburg by trying to prove that Christ, St Paul, and St Augustine had not been monks. Lefèvre of Étaples fell into a long battle when he suggested that Mary Magdalene and Mary the sister of Martha were not the same person. Erasmus believed that the Epistle to the Hebrews was not written by St Paul, doubted whether

the book of Revelation was from the hand of St John the Apostle, knew that the Trinitarian verse of the first Epistle of John was found in none of the Greek manuscripts, discerned that the works of Dionysius the Areopagite were spurious. If the standards of criticism were still vague and uncertain, they were creating conflict between the new studies and the outworks of the orthodoxy which the school theologians were guarding.

In 1514–16 a quarrel over the German scholar Reuchlin rent the scholars into two camps. A convert Jew named Pfefferkorn ran a campaign to confiscate Jewish books that were anti-Christian. Reuchlin was a strange, theosophical, ranging philologist who was founding the modern study of the Hebrew language. His reputation for scholarship enabled Erasmus to compare him to St Jerome. He was already unpopular with conservatives because he dabbled mysteriously in Hebrew cabbalism. His study of Hebrew disclosed to him certain weaknesses in the text of the Latin Vulgate Bible. He defended the Jewish books and attacked Pfefferkorn. In 1511, he wrote a book entitled *Augenspiegel* to defend the utility for Christian scholars of the Jewish Talmud, which Dominicans of Cologne were proposing to burn. His book was condemned by the inquisitors at Mainz and solemnly burnt at Cologne. Both sides appealed to the Pope, who finally upheld the condemnation in 1520. The efforts of the inquisitors to secure Reuchlin's fall appeared to be so bigoted and ignorant as to drive most of the German humanists into sympathy with Reuchlin and contempt for his opponents. Two enemies of the Cologne inquisitors, Ulrich von Hutten and Crotus Rubeanus, wrote *Letters of Obscure Men* (1515) as a skit upon their methods, a skit which mocks all the 'theologians' in a common ridicule. The idea of an *obscurantist* was forming.

The line which divides dogma from theological opinion was not, and is not, easy to draw. Intending no critique of dogma, the humanists could not trample cynically upon the conventional theologians without approaching the

foundations of the Catholic tradition. Erasmus had a programme for the recovery of true theology.

In 1503 he published the *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (Handbook for the Christian Warrior), an attempt to expound the lines of this true theology. It was a simpler theology, more primitive, more Biblical, less tangled in logical subtlety and more direct to the human soul, stripped of the layers of glosses and authorities and commentaries. In 1516 he published an edition of the Greek New Testament, and appended a largely fresh Latin translation. For the Gospels he used a poor Greek manuscript of the fourteenth century, for the Acts and Epistles two Greek manuscripts of a similar date, and for the Apocalypse a manuscript of the eighth century which he erroneously believed to be apostolic. But though his version was mostly no better than the Vulgate, which he sometimes altered without sufficient reason, it was much to have begun the use of Greek manuscripts. He wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible in the vernacular, he wanted it circulated to the humblest. He discarded the commentaries of the schoolmen, and sent the student with a caution to the Fathers. He published editions of Jerome and others among the Latin Fathers, made translations from Athanasius and Chrysostom and others among the Greeks. He wanted the Bible to come fresh to the human breast, and wrote a Latin paraphrase of all the books in the New Testament except the Apocalypse.

Compared with this new study of the Bible and judged by this quest for simplicity, the complexities and irrationalities of popular devotion seemed ridiculous. Erasmus and his fellows were impatient, contemptuous, angry with the superstitions of the people. Those superstitions, cults of statues, visits to Madonnas that rolled their eyes or to bleeding Hosts, seemed to be not mere harmless vehicles of a rude devotion, not merely vulgar and credulous, but the bane of true religion. The people cultivated a religion of external acts and substituted a pilgrimage, an indulgence, a relic, for a genuine change in heart and life. It is the better

side of Erasmus, the concern for true religion, which turned his satire into the severest form of condemnation. 'Perhaps thou believest that all thy sins are washed away with a little paper, a sealed parchment, with the gift of a little money or some wax images, with a little pilgrimage. Thou art utterly deceived.' 'Without ceremonies perhaps thou shalt not be a Christian; but they make thee not a Christian.' The agelong medieval sense of contrast between ideal and reality was beginning to merge into an educated sense of contrast between the Bible and the religion popularly practised in the Church.

Europe wanted reform, and was not expecting revolution. Like Erasmus, many educated men would have preferred the Church to be ridiculed into good sense and efficiency and purity of life. But a man who is holding property will not be mocked out of it. There were forces more potent at work, both to maintain the existing state of the Church, which would not be altered without violence and illegality, and to ask whether the existing state of the Church was not the symptom of a deep-seated and moral disease. There was a celebrated saying of the sixteenth century: 'Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it.' It is certain, at least, that Erasmus alone would not, and could not, have hatched it. He afterwards said that he would have written his books otherwise if he had foreseen what was coming.