William G. Naphy

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# THE PROTESTANT REVOLUTION

## FROM MARTIN LUTHER TO MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

WILLIAM G. NAPHY

FOREWORD BY

TRISTRAM HUNT

BASED ON AN ORIGINAL IDEA BY ALAN CLEMENTS

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# FOREWORD

by Tristram Hunt

ON A BRIGHT, BLUSTERY, SPRING DAY IN APRIL 2005 the body of Pope John Paul II was laid to rest with a requiem Mass in the crypt of St Peter's Basilica. Across the globe, billions watched the funeral on television, while official dignitaries crowded into St Peter's Square to pay their respects. Among them were the President of the United States, George W. Bush, and, representing Her Majesty the Queen, the Prince of Wales. To many, their presence seemed a proper reflection of the personal contribution of John Paul II to the twentieth century's turbulent history. But to religious commentators, the president's and prince's pilgrimage to Rome signalled something else: the final retreat of Protestantism from public life. That the representatives of two of the world's most iconic Protestant nations had dropped everything (including, in the case of the Prince of Wales, his wedding day) to attend the pope's Mass was graphic proof that the spirit of the Reformation had been abandoned.

On the eastern side of the Atlantic, that conclusion seems more and more the case. In an era of prosperous, Western secularism, British churches have been shedding congregations since the 1960s. While the 2001 census indicated that some 37 million people in England and Wales counted themselves as Christian, weekly attendance at Anglican services hovers around the 1.2 million mark.[1] Similar stories of declining numbers can be told for Methodist, Baptist and Church of Scotland services. Today, we might believe, but we don't belong. More than that, the cultural fabric of Protestantism – its essential moulding of Britain's intellectual, religious and creative life – seems to have been sidelined. The Reformation and the heroic split from Rome have been reduced to history.

Yet, despite the obituaries, its legacy lives on. Even in an age of nonchalant secularism, what this book and the accompanying television series show is the continuing impact of Protestantism in moulding our modern world. From literature to science, from gay marriage to the 'War on Terror', a vibrant struggle for Protestant principles remains alive in Britain, America and the developing world. Unbeknown to millions, the Protestant vision continues to shape their work life, home life, even their sex life. If we are to appreciate both the crafting of our own complex, national identities as well as some of the religious passions dictating modern geo-politics, we desperately need a continuing understanding of those epochal events of the Reformation.

Part of the problem is that, outside Northern Ireland, it is often difficult to detect the Protestant inheritance in modern Britain. Protestantism is something that goes on quietly, behind closed doors, in churches and chapels, at Sunday schools and prison ministries; the majority encounter the faith only at Christmas and Easter. When Protestantism does enter the public realm, it is rarely painted in the most favourable light: the Ulster cycle of Orange Order marches, Battle of the Boyne bonfires and anti-Catholic demonstrations, the low-level sectarianism in Scotland centred on Rangers versus Celtic football matches, the teaching of creationism in school biology lessons or demands for censorship from Christian evangelicals protesting against defamatory art, such *as Jerry Springer: The Opera*. Even in Lewes, East Sussex, where the annual Guy Fawkes bonfire night still attracts thousands of onlookers, the celebrations have become divorced from their Protestant pre-history.

Across Britain's suburbs and cities, the pulpit appears to wield ever less power. Sunday trading, gambling, pub opening hours – damaging reforms that Protestant churches passionately opposed – have all been sanctioned

by successive governments. Perhaps more worrying for the heirs to the Reformation, British society seems to be following a course of steady cultural re-Catholicization. The traditional Protestant reserve – the lonely, personal, unostentatious relationship with God – has been junked for the emotionalism of public mourning, icons and even shrines. The popular hysteria following the death of Princess Diana in 1997 was a long way from the quiet dignity that marked the passing of George VI and Winston Churchill. More prosaically, over the last ten years Britain's roadsides have become littered by personalized shrines to killed loved ones, many of them thereby recognizing an ongoing relationship with the dead. So even while Protestantism remains the official British religion, its theological impact on public life seems increasingly marginal.

Nonetheless, our mental and physical landscapes continue to be shaped by its legacy, not least in architecture. From the austere beauty of Ely Cathedral's whitewashed Lady Chapel to the geometric elegance of St Paul's Cathedral, from the Methodist chapels of the Black Country to the Baptist churches of south London, the Protestant inheritance has carved out our cityscapes and rural villages. Many such chapels have been deconsecrated – turned into carpet warehouses, bijou apartments, even wine bars – but their vernacular aesthetic (that ready embrace of the world as it was) has become a part of our familiar, if often squalid, everyday environment.

The Protestant aesthetic has extended from architecture to art. All too often, we are given to think that when it comes to culture, Catholicism held the trump card. From the poetry of Chaucer and Dante to the frescos of Giotto and Michelangelo, the power and glory of Rome effortlessly overshadowed the dowdy, mechanical philistinism of Protestantism. And certainly the early Protestant reformers did themselves no favours. While Luther himself had few

theological difficulties with Church art (and adored choral music), many of his more radical followers regarded icons and images as affronts to God and obstacles to salvation. The outbursts of iconoclasm that scarred northern Europe during the mid-sixteenth century were an attack on the religious sorcery of imagery, not the aesthetics of art.

In their place the Reformation moulded a new, definably modern approach to art. Under Protestant influence, art moved from the Church to the home, its subject matter from the saintly canon to the secular world and its purpose from divine assistance to aesthetic contemplation. Indeed, art historian Professor Joseph Koerner has made the case that in the world of modern art one can trace clear Reformation tendencies: the iconoclastic impulse (now directed against the authority of 'art' rather than the Church) along with an often puritanical minimalism.[2] This is apparent in the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde work of Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Lucio Fontana. And maybe also in the work of such young British artists as Rachel Whiteread, whose 2005 work 'Embankment' consisted of 14,000 translucent white boxes piled high. In its confrontational iconoclasm, its celebration of whitewashed simplicity, there seemed something proteanly Protestant in Whiteread's installation.

But Protestantism was always a religion of the word rather than image. Luther had reworked his faith through the exacting text of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and opening up the mysteries of the Bible to the people has always been at the intellectual core of the Protestant project. Unsurprisingly, Protestant communities – especially Puritan ones – were among the most literate and educated. Readings from Scripture were common parts of Protestant services, while sixteenth-century godly households might typically contain devotional tracts, a copy of the Bible, and one of the many editions of John Foxe's

*Acts and Monuments* (1563). Reading and learning were central components of the Puritan existence.

Ian Watt's 1957 study, *The Rise of the Novel*, made clear the connection between this Protestant culture of the word and the development of the modern novel.[3] Crucial to this was the Protestant spiritual temperament – that ever present, internalized sense of self-doubt and struggle – and its literary manifestation in the form of the diary and autobiography. In many Puritan, particularly Calvinist, denominations there was also a strong conception of God's direct action in the world: how His hand was everywhere apparent. This gave rise to a detailed examination of each earthly event – however insignificant – in the hope of seeing God's purpose behind it.

These uniquely Protestant concerns were readily apparent in the diaries and autobiographies of the early seventeenth century, and then in the fictional work of John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe. With its caricatures, laboured symbolism and rambling narrative, it is difficult now to appreciate the enormous literary significance of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678 and 1684), but it has proved one of the defining texts of English literature. From Bunyan to Defoe to Samuel Richardson, then on to the great nineteenth-century novels of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, Watt clearly traced the lineages of a Protestant legacy. Indeed, with its Puritan heroine Dorothea and Dissenting villain Bulstrode, there is a strong case to be made for *Middlemarch* (1871–2) as one of the high peaks of Anglo-Protestant culture.[4]

Does such a tradition have any influence on our culture today? The practice of great English diary-keeping continues. And if *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is not quite worthy of Samuel Pepys, is it too fanciful to see in her self-lacerating catalogue of calories and cigarettes a modern, secular equivalent of the type of spiritual diary that godly men kept in seventeenth-century Essex? More obviously,

the novel remains a vibrant literary form in English culture. Ironically, some of the greatest twentieth-century English novelists – Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene among them – have been self-consciously Catholic. But the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has made the case that the novelist A. S. Byatt, in her tortured characterization, delight in wordiness and often morally focused plot lines, is an obvious inheritor of the Protestant literary tradition.

In America this Puritan culture is far more obvious. Over the last two decades, the evangelical community has rediscovered its literary ethic. And while Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are no George Eliots, their Left Behind series of evangelical novels – accounts of the lives of people stranded on Earth after the Second Coming – have proved staggeringly popular, with 60 million copies shifted since 1995. So too the format of the spiritual diary. One of the most influential books in American Protestant communities today is Pastor Rick Warren's *A Purpose-Driven Life* (2002). According to the promotional material, 'The most basic question everyone faces in life is "Why am I here? What is my purpose?" Self-help books suggest that people should look within, at their own desires and dreams, but Rick Warren says the starting place must be with God and his eternal purposes for each life. Real meaning and significance come from understanding and fulfilling God's purposes for putting us on Earth.'[5] They are sentiments that could have come straight from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And in its accessible, diary-like format Warren's work resembles a modern version of Puritan devotional literature. But one vital change between now and then is that in the seventeenth century Protestantism was influencing contemporary culture, while in contemporary America evangelical communities are often engaged in a conscious cultural retreat from mainstream, secular society.

The stark differences between the evangelical Protestantism of modern America (essentially Calvinist in inspiration) and the more lethargic Anglicanism of England (predominantly Arminian in outlook) highlights one of the historic drivers of Protestantism: national identity. Protestantism's focus on 'a priesthood of all believers' inspired by the word of Scripture led to the translation and printing of Bibles in the common tongue. In order that the people could be brought to the Protestant faith, they had to read the word of God in their own language.

From the outset, Protestantism often developed as a national faith, nowhere more so than in England, where the nationalization of faith (the transition from the Church in England to the Church of England) was driven home by the Tudor State's conscious elevation of Protestantism as a patriotic calling. Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer (1549), *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563), the *Protestant Wind* of 1588 (whereby God saved England from the Spanish Armada), the King James Bible, and another *Protestant Wind* in 1688 (whereby God saved England from Catholic King James II) cumulatively conjoined Protestantism to England's role in the world. First with England and then, following the 1707 Act of Union, with Britain, Protestantism underpinned an emergent national identity. And while many congregations sympathized with fellow believers struggling in the Low Countries, central Europe or the Americas, Protestantism helped to cement that unique sense of election: of England as Israel, a country called forth to serve God's purpose. Indeed, it was the very same language of manifest destiny and divine providence that the Pilgrim Fathers would use to describe their new-found land across the Atlantic.

Yet while Protestantism did much to forge national cultures – art, literature, music – in many cases the legacy continues today independent of the religion. One of the abiding ironies of Protestantism is that its ready embrace

of the world, its belief that God could be found in our everyday existence, led to an embrace of society that progressively segued into secularism. For the Protestant ethic's focus on the wonders of the world as it was – its refusal to flee the sins of man into nunneries and monasteries – gave rise to a mindset that saw the world function just as well in the absence of God.

So today we have inherited a Protestant mindset often devoid of its divinity; it is a secular legacy separated from the theology. One can witness elements of this cultural bequest in our obsessive approach to timekeeping, our national preoccupation with gardening and home-making (an updating of the evangelical focus on the 'sacred hearth', now reworked with 'domestic goddesses') and our approach to work and welfare. Both in Margaret Thatcher's war on the work-shy and Chancellor Gordon Brown's determination to reform welfare and 'make work pay', there lies the residual Protestantism of their Methodist and Calvinist upbringings. In many areas of our life where we seem so modern and rational – public policy, business efficiency, even the psychiatry of self-examination – we are repeatedly engaging with the secular seedlings of the Protestant Revolution.

This removal of God from the Protestant carcass is especially evident in British politics. The Tory party has long since dropped its battle cry of 'Church and King', and, it is fair to say, the Church of England could rarely be regarded today as 'the Tory party at prayer'. Led by Charles Kennedy, a Roman Catholic and recovering alcoholic, for much of the last six years, the Liberal-Democrat party is similarly detached from its Puritan origins in the Nonconformist movement. The journey from William Gladstone to Kennedy (via Lloyd George) is a telling story of Protestant descent. While Christian Socialism remains nominally alive in the Labour party, for the majority of Labour members, neither Methodism nor

Marx seems to have much of an impact on their political philosophy. As Tony Blair's spin-doctor famously put it, 'We don't do God'. Only in Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland (notably, the west-central communities of Ayrshire and Lanarkshire) does Protestantism still dictate the political agenda.

This is not to suggest that Protestant churches have no influence in political debate. From the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to the anti-apartheid struggle, Jubilee 2000 and 'Make Poverty History' campaigns against Third World debt, Protestant and Catholic congregations have helped marshal public opinion. Indeed, many of them have been inspired by the historic role Protestant congregations (typically Nonconformist) played in the campaign to abolish the slave trade in 1807, and the later anti-colonial movement. That sense of an international Protestant conscience, its global gaze, has been rediscovered in recent years. Few of its members might realize it today, but, for example, the origins of the Greenpeace environmental group can be found in the ancient Quaker tradition of 'bearing witness'.

But the days of political parties being partly formed around Protestant denominations is long gone. As such, this is part of that broader unravelling of Protestantism within Britain's public realm. The endless anxiety we feel today over the nature of Englishness or Britishness is itself partly a reflection of the vacuum left by the retreat of Protestantism. It was, in the idiom of the British historian Linda Colley, part of the ideological, commercial and military maelstrom that helped to forge British identity in the eighteenth century.[6] In its absence, one of the pillars of what historically constituted Great Britain has been removed. Officially, the Church of England remains a national Church, but we live in a multicultural, multi-faith society that poses new challenges for our modern sense of national identity. The next supreme governor of the Church

of England, the Prince of Wales, has appreciated that reality with his wish to be known as 'Defender of Faith' rather than the old (misapplied title) of 'Defender of the Faith' (hence his presence at the funeral of Pope John Paul II).

But what was the President of the United States doing in Rome? For the roots of modern America are intimately entwined with radical Protestantism and the flight from popery. The Pilgrim Fathers and early pioneer settlers from England and the Netherlands fled to the New World to build a pristine commonwealth free from the kind of tyranny and irreligion (as much Anglican as Catholic) they had witnessed in seventeenth-century Europe. And while the founders of the republic (men such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson) might have been, for the most part, Deists and free-thinkers, a strong strand of radical Protestantism remained within the American psyche. Indeed, for much of modern American history this translated into popular, anti-Catholic prejudice. The Ku-Klux-Klan was, in origin if not in practice, as much an anti-Catholic as anti-Semitic and racist organization. But the President's visit to the Vatican shows just how far this nativist mindset has shifted – particularly among the southern states of America – in the last thirty years.

For one of the great differences between modern America and 'old Europe' is the strength of faith on the western side of the Atlantic. From being a consciously Enlightenment, rationalist republic in the years after the American Revolution (1775–83), with relatively few taking part in organized religion, America had become a land of popular religiosity.[7] President George W. Bush, himself a born-again, evangelical Methodist, has spoken of religion in America as undergoing a 'Third Awakening'. And the fastest-growing churches are those outside the traditional groupings. While the Episcopalians and Presbyterians continue to lose followers, churches such as the

Pentecostalists and other non-denominational faiths have expanded massively. Some of these faith groups are identifiably Protestant in their obsessive focus on the words and meaning of the Bible, in their belief in a personal relationship with God, and a 'priesthood of all believers'. However, many also seem to be more in the line of radical Reformation sects, rather than traditional Protestant churches. Led by charismatic, occasionally televangelist preachers, such as Rick Warren and Joel Osteen, or the old guard of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, theirs is an emotional, revivalist faith based on the direct power of prayer and the personal role of Jesus Christ in your life. There is little room for the nuances of doctrine or theology in much modern American evangelicalism.

What does unite many of these aggressively autonomous churches is an increasingly conservative politics. For many of the years following the Second World War, the Protestant intervention in American political life was decidedly progressive. It was the Baptist churches that stood at the forefront of the civil-rights struggle in the 1960s, and it was from the southern Baptist movement that Democrat Jimmy Carter began his journey to the White House. Yet in response to the counter-culture of the 1960s – the strong sense that liberalism, feminism and secularism were undermining the religious foundations of the American way – evangelical conservatives began to enter public life. Inspired by such figures as Billy Graham, conservative congregations began to make their voices heard. And starting in the 1980s, they made the Republican party their political vehicle of choice – so much so that by the late 1990s, conservative evangelicals, organized by such consummate strategists as James Dobson and Richard Land, were able to dictate congressional, even presidential choices. The election of George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004 could not have happened without the assistance of the religious right.

Owing to their political power, the influence of evangelical Protestants on public policy has been significant. Putting aside age-old enmities, conservative pastors have joined with the Catholic Church to campaign against the right to abortion, same-sex marriage, even stem-cell research and gene therapy. Indeed, one of the most deleterious effects of evangelicalism on American public life has been the assault on scientific inquiry. Rather than regarding Protestantism and rationalism as historical bedfellows (a tradition stretching back to the founding of the Royal Society in the seventeenth century), US evangelicals have sought to undermine the principles of scientific method in numerous fields, from evolution by natural selection to climate change and even astronomy. In many schools creationism and 'intelligent design' have started to replace the Darwinian orthodoxy.

On foreign policy they have also made their mark. Conservative evangelicals have helped to shape America's unquestioning alliance with Israel, and even hardened opinion towards the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. At the time, one influential southern Baptist pastor declared, 'We should offer to serve the war effort in any way possible … God battles with people who oppose him, who fight against him and his followers.'[8] Many leading evangelicals regard the War on Terror as part of a greater eschatological, end-of-day struggle between black and white, good and evil, Islam and Christianity. What is perhaps more worrying is that President Bush often seems to be one of them.

Yet the great strength of Protestantism is its culture of self-government. From its earliest days, one of the hallmarks of Protestantism has been the practice of breakaway congregations seeking their own religious truth – even more so now; within the broad, Protestant communion there flourishes a market of competing, contradictory churches. So in contrast to the family-values conservatism of the Southern Baptist Convention there

flourishes the organization of Metropolitan Community Churches, with a specific focus on ministering to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities. In political discourse there exists the determinedly liberal evangelicalism of pastors such as Jim Wallis, who want to take back Protestantism for progressives.[9] And in contrast to the creationism of the evangelicals, there are numerous scientist believers, such as Francis Collins, who combines his work on the Human Genome Project with a deeply held, Protestant faith. Indeed, it is central to his sense of scientific inquiry.[10]

However, while America might be the fulcrum of Protestantism today, it won't be tomorrow. The centre of Christian gravity is moving from the northern hemisphere to the southern one: in 1900s' Africa there were 10 million Christians; in 2000 that number had swollen to a staggering 360 million.[11] As with every form of Protestantism in every different nation, African Protestantism has its own particular, cultural locus. The spiritual and oral traditions of African society have been transmuted into Protestant practice, with the Pentecostal church proving to be one of the fastest-growing communities.[12] Where missionaries once roamed, the Anglican Church remains powerful, but is now subject to the same political and cultural battles it faces in England and America. On the one hand, its progressive tradition drawn from the anti-colonial struggle remains vibrant, most obviously embodied in the saintly figure of the South African archbishop, Desmond Tutu; on the other hand, the evangelical, conservative wing is powerfully represented by Nigerian archbishop Peter Akinola and his fervent campaign against homosexuality within the Church.

As such, the conservative temperament of African Protestantism – much of it supported by close financial links to the US evangelical movement – is coming up hard against the predominant liberalism of the Anglican

communion. The appointment of a gay bishop, Gene Robinson, by the Episcopalian Church in New Hampshire, USA (following in the wake of the appointment and enforced resignation of gay priest Canon Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading), is currently threatening to divide the worldwide Anglican faith. Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is in the unfortunate position of trying to hold the fort against that quintessential Protestant urge for schism, division and debate. But while the disparate energies and cultures of Protestantism often threaten to cripple any binding institutional authority, these offshoots have the much needed capacity to reinvigorate the Church.

In our globalized world, the transnational transmission of faith and doctrine is becoming ever easier. A clear example of this is the revival of Protestantism in Britain's inner cities on the back of black British communities of African descent. Adventist, Pentecostal and evangelical churches are flourishing, even as the traditional Church of England struggles to retain its congregations. As ever with Protestantism, new forms and new contexts continue to determine its doctrinal and social progress. As William Naphy puts it, Protestantism's continual capacity for reformation has frequently proved an exceptional strength: 'It has, for five centuries, allowed Protestantism to respond relatively quickly and effectively to changing cultural circumstances by reinventing itself for each new age.'

So despite the presence of the prince and the president at John Paul II's funeral, despite the talk of obituaries and eulogies, the energy and ambition of global Protestantism still thrives. It not only remains the faith of millions of Christians, but is also an essential part of our cultural inheritance and contemporary social landscape. And it is evolving with the problems of the day: from the politics of debt relief to inter-faith relations, the battle over contemporary sexuality and the limits of scientific inquiry, the place of Protestantism in our nominally secular society

continues to be enormously influential. It behoves us to understand its complexities – its theology, its controversies, its sense of purpose. To know our own culture, to appreciate the geo-politics of America or the trajectory of the developing world, we need to get to grips with the faith that drives hundreds of millions of people. Almost five hundred years after Martin Luther sparked the Reformation, its legacy continues to shape much of our modern world. Its almost unique ability to change with the age makes it ever more challenging to decipher.

Tristram Hunt
NOVEMBER 2006

1 www.statistics.gov.uk and www.cofe.anglican.org

2 See Joseph Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago, 2003).

3 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1987).

4 See Raphael Samuel, ‘The Discovery of Puritanism, 1820–1914: A Preliminary Sketch’, in *Island Stories* (London, 1999).

5 www.purposedrivenlife.com

6 See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, 1707–1837 (Yale, 1992).

7 See R. Finke and R. Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1776–1990 (New Brunswick, 1992).

8 See Charles Marsh, ‘Wayward Christian Soldiers’, *NewYork Times*, 20 January 2006.

9 Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (San Francisco, 2005).

10 Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief (Free* Press, 2006).

11 See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, 2002).

12 See Stephen Hunt and Nicola Lightly, ‘The British Black Pentecostal “Revival”: Identity and Belief in the “New” Nigerian Churches’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, 1 (2001).

# 1

## SOWING THE WIND WITH REFORM

What can be more ruinous than to let such words as the following come to the people's ears? – 'The Pope is Antichrist; Bishops and priests are mere grubs; man-made laws are heretical; confession is pernicious; works, merits and endeavours are heretical words; there is no free will; everything happens by necessity' ... I see, under the pretext of the Gospel, a new, bold, shameless and ungovernable race growing up – in a word, such a one as will be unendurable to Luther himself.

Desiderius Erasmus
(*c.*1469–1536)

IF LEGEND CAN BE BELIEVED, THE PRIEST AND theologian Martin Luther nailed a set of 'questions for debate' (in Latin) to the doors of Wittenberg church on 31 October 1517. His intention was to advertise a university dispute about a series of debating points, ninety-five in total, and consequently referred to as Luther's Ninety-five Theses. He was concerned about practices that he considered inappropriate: the way in which the Church was raising funds (in part to finance the rebuilding of the Vatican basilica, the present-day St Peter's). Beyond provoking a lively theological and ecclesiastical debate at the university, it is not immediately clear what Luther hoped to accomplish. What *is* clear is that he had no intention of sparking a revolution and of breaking apart Western Christianity. But that is what he did.

Less than a century and a half later, by 1650, much of Europe had been convulsed by wars about religion as a result of Luther's 'accidental revolution'. Hundreds of thousands of people had died, towns had been laid waste, disease and famine had stalked the land. Armies had marched from Spain and Italy in the south, from Sweden in the north, across Ireland and Poland and the Czech Republic and Hungary. Monarchs had lost thrones and, in one spectacular case (Charles I of Great Britain), their heads. European foreign policy was thrown into disarray – Catholic France funded Protestant armies and Calvinist Hungarians looked to the Turkish sultan to protect their freedom of worship. Indeed, the conflicts left Christian Europe's southeastern flank open to Turkish Muslim advances, with the result that thousands of Christians (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinistic to name but a few) fell under Muslim power and, ironically,

were forced to coexist. Moreover, this religious rivalry and denominational competition was exported around the world and became a factor in European global competition in the opening phase of Europe’s first ‘push for empire’. Spaniards and Portuguese spread Catholicism in the east; Dutch Calvinists undermined Jesuit missions in Japan; British Protestants and French Catholics fought for dominance in North America.

Whether or not Luther’s hammer ever struck a blow in Wittenberg is unimportant. Within a century blows were being exchanged across Europe, and Christianity began to crusade against itself. More than at any time in the past, states and churches, ministers and magistrates, priests and politicians became almost obsessed with the beliefs of individuals. What people believed – not what they did – could get them killed. And yet, more than at any time in the past, people’s ability to think, question and decide religion for themselves became easier and more common. By the mid-seventeenth century it seemed as though almost everyone in Europe had picked up a hammer and was nailing theses on to every door, wall or tree they could find. How this accidental revolution happened, and its impact on the way the West thought and acted is fundamental to understanding how the modern world came into existence. One thing, though, is certain from the outset. If Luther had seen where his theses would lead, he would almost certainly have hammered his head rather than the nail.

However, any discussion of the Reformation, Luther, and what followed must begin over a century before Wittenberg. From the late fourteenth century throughout the fifteenth century the late medieval, Western Church was the scene of calls for reform. Some were dramatic, others less so. Most were unsuccessful, but left an indelible stamp on the mindset of the Church and its parishioners. At some level and to some extent most Christians in Western Europe were, by 1500, very well aware that things needed

to change, and that change was being demanded from above and below. As we shall see, though, the 'changes' that were being mooted were very different from what Luther actually set in motion and what eventually emerged.

Real problems arose – and with them calls for reform – in the late fourteenth century, when different nations in Europe recognized, in 1378, two different popes. One was based in Avignon (accepted primarily by France, as well as by Spain and Scotland) and the other at Rome (backed by the Holy Roman Empire, England and most Italian states). Urban VI and Clement VII posed a difficult problem for Western Christianity. With a strong theological commitment to papal supremacy (the idea that the pope, as successor to St Peter, was head of the Church), Christianity now had two heads – in this case, definitely not better than one. This was clearly a situation that required immediate resolution, but there was no mechanism for doing so. Very quickly, though, leading churchmen and scholars began to call for a general council (a gathering of leading clergymen and theologians). This council would constitute a 'supreme legislative body' capable of sorting out the number of popes and any other matters that might arise. In effect, it was the first step towards producing a system of checks and balances, and giving the Church a government. This was the conciliarist movement.

The first serious attempt to use a council to settle the issue of multiple popes was the Council of Pisa, which, in 1409, simply elected a third pope. Fortunately for the Western Church, the next council, meeting at Constance in Switzerland, was more successful. It deposed two of the popes, accepted the abdication of a third, and elected Martin V as the single new pope. This ended the Great Schism in the West, as well as the so-called 'Babylonian Captivity' (papal residency in Avignon). It also ended conciliarism. Martin V and subsequent popes showed no interest in erecting a system of 'constitutional' government

for the Church, much less bringing in checks and balances on papal power, and accepting the supremacy of anyone or anything (such as a council) over them. However, this did set an interesting precedent, and during the Reformation meant that councils were often seen as a means of resolving the debates sweeping the Church.

Conciliarism was not the only reform movement. Its focus was on the structure and government of the Church, and it was largely motivated by a desire to resolve a specific problem (multiple popes). Two other movements, though, with entirely different motivations and goals, arose at the same time. The first appeared in England in the 1380s, when the philosopher and theologian John Wyclif began to call for a Church that was humble and poor. He was particularly incensed by ecclesiastical wealth in both land and finery (the gold, silver, jewels and ornamentation seen in churches), though he was not so offended as to give up his well-paid posts in the Church. He also believed that the Bible should be placed in the hands of ordinary Christians, and that it was the standard against which doctrine and practice should be checked. Opponents called him and his followers Lollards (probably from the Dutch *lollaerd*, 'a mumbler') since they 'spoke nonsense'. In the end, Lollardy was suppressed and, interestingly, English Church officials banned all English-language versions of the Bible. Although a sensation at the time, especially in England, the movement met with little success, and rather quickly faded into the background. It did, however, throw into stark relief the question not only of the Bible, but also of its language.

The second major movement to arise during the Great Schism was considerably more successful and had a lasting impact in central Europe. Wyclif's ideas spread, rather bizarrely as a result of foreign-policy ties, from England to Bohemia (in the modern Czech Republic) and had an impact on the preacher Jan Hus at Prague University. Hus

and his followers, Hussites, were much more successful than Wyclif in that their ideas became linked with ethnicity (an important issue in explaining the success of some reformations, to which we shall return). As a Czech-speaking movement, Hussism provided an epicentre for resistance to German-speakers. Hus also attacked the wealth of the Church and highlighted many other areas of perceived abuses, especially among the clergy. Hus became so successful that he was summoned to the Council of Constance (which would elect Martin V and end the Great Schism) to explain his ideas. He was provided with a safe conduct by the Holy Roman Emperor. Sadly, this availed him not at all, and the council finally sealed the end of the schism with Hus's blood – he was burnt at the stake as a heretic.

Unlike Lollardy, though, Hussism did not fade away. News of Hus's execution was met with fury and violence in Bohemia. His followers split, and civil war ensued. Despite fratricidal infighting and efforts by forces loyal to Rome, Hussism survived in two predominant forms. The Utraquists, of whom there were two types, were the less radical version, largely resembling the Roman Church except in two key areas. First, they worshipped in the vernacular, the language of the people; second, the common people received both the bread and the wine at Communion (hence their name – from *utraque*, 'each of two'). The norm elsewhere was for the bread to be given to all, but the wine to be taken only by the celebrating priest. The more radical variety of Hussism, the Union of Bohemian Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*) shared these views, but went well beyond them. The Brethren rejected the notion of transubstantiation – that the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. They also denied any concept of a priesthood separate from the rest of the believing community (in effect, they held to a priesthood of all believers). They also believed that the Christianity of the

early Church and the New Testament called for a radical separation from general society and, especially, the State. They also stressed Christ's instruction to 'turn the other cheek'. They therefore opposed all forms of violence, capital punishment, military service and taking oaths (including in courtrooms).

Many of these issues will be highlighted in the story of the Reformation that follows. The most important point to grasp at this point, though, is that by 1500 there was a part of Europe that was already beyond the control of Rome. Not only was there an established, functioning form of Christianity that rejected the papacy before Luther, but, in Bohemia, there were actually two varieties. These two, as we shall see, were foretastes of the features of Protestantism set to emerge in the course of the 1500s. The Utraquists were a structured church (denomination in the modern sense) very similar in hierarchy, worship and theology with Rome, but rejecting papal control. The Brethren were less interested in theology and considerably more concerned with constructing an entirely different type of society, community and way of life that were distinct and separate from the wider community.

## A NEW PIETY

It would be a mistake, though, to imagine that calls for, or awareness of the need for, reform came solely from the top levels of society or a few learned theologians and their followers. Indeed, in some senses reform was well under way by the time of Luther, and was almost a mass movement. Two specific examples will suffice for the general trend. The first was the *devotio moderna* (new devotion or new piety) and the second was humanism. In their own way these two movements were changing not only the way people thought about religion and their church, but also the way in which they practised their faith

and worshipped their God. The changes were slow, often minimal and usually seemingly inconsequential. Cumulatively, however, these two movements laid much of the groundwork for what would follow in the Reformation.

The *devotio moderna* began in Holland during the late 1300s (in many ways in the aftermath of, and in response to, the Black Death and the subsequent bouts of epidemic plague) and spread across the Low Countries, Germany, France and parts of Italy. The movement, with its emphasis on the supposed original simplicity of the early Church and its faith, appealed to lay people and clerics alike. Clergy responded to the movement's call for a more holy, devout life by keeping the vows they had taken. Lay people were especially attracted by an emphasis upon an inner devotional life, apart from (though often complementing) the Church's institutional means of salvation (for example, the sacraments of the Mass or extreme unction – the last rites). With between a third and half of all clergy dying during the plagues of the last half of the fourteenth century, these institutional means were considerably less available, and in some parishes lay people were largely left to their own resources.

Adherents (perhaps better described as exponents) of the *devotio moderna* also took to heart many of the more theologically orientated ideas of the period. Thus, purely external and superficial acts of formulaic piety and devotion were criticized. Likewise, many asserted, as forcefully as Luther would do early in the Reformation, that God could be understood not only by scholarly theologians, but also by the humblest peasant. The catastrophic psychological impact of the Black Death also brought to the fore an appreciation of the mortality and sinfulness of all mankind (surely God was striking his people with plague for their sins) and the urgent need for salvation.

However, this movement did not lead to a call for a change to the structures of the Church: rather, it was a

plea for all individuals to take a more active part in the devotional life of the Church and its worship. In particular, and in stark contrast with later reformers, exponents of the *devotio moderna* often stressed the intimate and mediating nature of the sacrament of the Mass when adored or taken by a Christian. Great stress was also laid on the physical sufferings of Christ (and, at times, his mother the Virgin Mary) and his victory over them – all the more critical and poignant for a society piling its dead into plague pits (like 'lasagne', as the Italians noted) in their thousands.

The movement arose in the Low Countries, with Geert de Groote as a key figure. He was not a priest, but was licensed to preach (in and around Utrecht), although his licence was eventually revoked because of his sermonic attacks on clerical abuses. The movement attracted much lay support, and this became more or less organized into the Brethren of the Common Life. The Brethren were associations (sometimes sharing accommodation) of lay people, including women, and 'secular' priests (those who were not monks). The communities were often semi-monastic in style, but never wholly cut off from the world. A monastic version did develop among the Windesheim Canons (founded 1387) under Florentius Radewijns.

However, the movement was most successful in its impact on the way in which lay people actually worshipped, and the types of piety they displayed. It was both intensely personal and explicitly secular in its determination that the new devotion would be imbedded in 'this world'. The best-surviving window into this new, personal type of religiosity and piety is the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis from Cologne. During this period, though, other works were also important, for example, the *Spiritual Ascensions* by Gerhard Zerbolt, a priest and librarian at Radewijn's foundation in Deventer. Indeed, his work was certainly read by Luther, though it is impossible to say with certainty that he or any other reformer was heavily or directly influenced

by the *devotio moderna*. However, what can be said is that many lay people, especially in northern Europe, were influenced by the movement and, as a result, favourably inclined to types of religion that placed an emphasis upon personal and individual piety, and a more direct relationship with the divine.

## Humanism

While the *devotio moderna* had an important impact on the practice of religion in much of Europe, humanism had a much greater influence, especially in the understanding of religion. Beginning in Italy during the Renaissance, humanism placed its emphasis on rediscovering the culture of the ancient world. In particular, this meant reviving classical Latin, encouraging a familiarity with Greek and, in the context of religion, placing a similar importance on a knowledge of Hebrew. This new learning, ‘humane letters’ as it was called, was in contrast to medieval scholasticism (sacred letters), which stressed philosophical and theological exactitude. This contrast and critique is best exemplified by the humanists’ jibe (entirely unfounded) that scholasticism had become so obtuse that adherents might spend hours arguing about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Humanism was, therefore, a new way of thinking about the past, a new way of reading documents, a new way of expressing oneself (normally in ‘correct’ Ciceronian Latin).

In some cases, this new emphasis upon Latin, classical learning and ancient culture became almost slavish, if not actually pagan. The poet Dante Alighieri, fortunately for Italian, decided (only just) not to compose his *Inferno* in Latin. His fellow poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) saw some of his own works as an attempt to rival the elegant Latin of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Many authors opened their literary works not only with invocations of Christ, but also pagan