

Peter Opitz (ed.)

# The Myth of the Reformation



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## Preface

On June 8 – 10, 2011, the first conference of RefoRC, the Reformation Research Consortium ([www.reforc.com](http://www.reforc.com)), was held at the Institute for Swiss Reformation Studies at the Theological Faculty of the University of Zurich. RefoRC is the academic section of Refo500, the international platform that develops a great variety of activities worldwide related to the quincentennial commemoration of the Reformation(s). As a network of academics from various countries, confessional backgrounds, and perspectives of research, RefoRC aims at stimulating research in the field of the Early Modern period / Reformation era in all disciplines. The overall title, “The Myth of the Reformation”, encouraged critical perspectives on traditional beliefs about the sixteenth century Reformation(s). This volume features a selection of the papers that were presented at the Zurich conference. It assembles many diverse aspects and perspectives, which refutes for sure at least one myth: that the Reformation era is a boring period where not much is left to discover behind the traditional myths. May the spirit of these essays also stimulate our critical investigations as we prepare for the quintecennial celebrations of ‘the Reformation’.

Peter Opitz, Zurich



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Emidio Campi\*

## Was the Reformation a German Event?

A Mario Miegge con affetto immutato  
per il suo ottantesimo compleanno

*Was the Reformation a German event?* When asked to address this question, I was happy, because I automatically thought that I knew at least part of the answer, and this would be a definite “No!” As I began to prepare myself, the assigned topic grew on me, and I increasingly realized its complexity. In fact, it forced me to reflect not only on the question as such, but also on my own intellectual itinerary since my first exposure to international Reformation scholarship in Heiko A. Oberman’s seminar at the University of Tübingen in the autumn of 1968, an event which started my life-long quest for a better understanding of the Reformation.

If there is any truth in the dictum attributed to Voltaire, “Juge d’un homme par ses questions plutôt que par ses réponses”, the organizers are to be commended for their choice of lecture topic. They did not just ask: “What was the Reformation?”<sup>1</sup> nor “Was there a Reformation in the sixteenth century?”<sup>2</sup>—which are in themselves intriguing questions; but rather a more subtle one: “Was the Reformation a German event?” This is yet another clear indication that in a time when the Reformation is increasingly portrayed in terms of a principle of diversity, and pluralism is becoming a watchword in interpreting the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century, it is urgent not to conceal the difficulties, but rather to face the formidable challenge of reflecting on a new “grand narrative” of the age. While I am deeply indebted to the organizers for raising this question and for giving me the opportunity to share with others a few thoughts about it, I wonder, however, how realistic they are about my capability to respond to this query in a satisfactory way. Any reasoned response to this seemingly innocuous question entails most profound questions which require looking through a whole host of new studies, engaging in a genuine dialogue with older historians, and indeed demands a skill and a delicacy comparable with that of a surgeon operating on a brain. This attempt, therefore, can only propose a very partial answer, in some moments assertive, in others dubitative, and in others even speculative.

I propose to explore the topic in three main steps. First, I provide a brief survey of the fate of the word “Reformation” itself in which I shall bring out the polymorphous nature of the term and its complex meaning. Secondly, I shall

\* I would like to thank profusely Torrance Kirby (Montreal) and Ian Hazlett (Glasgow) for correcting the manuscript and giving insightful comments along the way.

1 See Bucher: <http://www.orlutheran.com/html/refwhat.html>.

2 See Hillerbrand: 2003, 525–552.

address some of the issues related to the characterization of the Reformation as an event. And thirdly, I shall dwell on the adjective “German” in connection with the noun Reformation.

### 1. Reformation: a Protestant notion?

For many, the word “Reformation” immediately evokes heroic memories of a determined German Augustinian friar defiantly hammering his challenge to the Roman Church with the posting of his Ninety-five Theses on 31 October, 1517. Yet long before it was applied to the work of Martin Luther, the word *reformatio* had an extended and varied history.<sup>3</sup> Its common usage already existed in classical Latin.<sup>4</sup> In its broadest sense, it means every attempt to renew the essence of a community, institution, or similar groups by reaching back to its originals, its primal sources. Indeed the concept has been known to Christianity since its earliest beginnings. Thus it was used in the time of the “Church Fathers”<sup>5</sup> to signal that Christians and the church are continually in need of “*reformatio in melius per Deum*” – in need of transformation for the better. From there, and already as early as the beginning of the fifth century, the idea had gained a specifically religious meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it was not until the early Middle Ages that the term *reformatio* began to acquire significant weight. Then *reformatio* was primarily an impulse of the Western Monastic tradition. In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia was fundamentally a ‘reformer’ owing to the fact that he did not create Monasticism, but rather ‘reformed’ it. Other tremendous waves of *reformatio* followed within the church through Benedict of Aniane in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Cluniac reform of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the reform of the Hirsau Monks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Cistercian reform of the twelfth century, as well as that of the Dominicans and Franciscans in the thirteenth. They were all not only struggling for the renewal of a declining monastic tradition, but also for the “reformation” of all Christianity and indeed of Christendom.

The Reform Movement, in fact, reached beyond the sphere of Monasticism, and beginning in the eleventh century, embraced religious movements among the laity such as the Albigenses, Cathars, and Waldensians. Especially the latter considered the Constantinian turn to be the ruin of Christianity, and they consequently sought to renew the church from the inside out, in order to lead

3 See Emidio Campi (2010, 1 – 19); Theodor Mahlmann (2010, 381 – 442).

4 Theodor Mahlmann (1992, 416 – 427); Ulrich Köpf (2004a, 145 – 159, and 2004b, 159 – 164).

5 Ladner: 1959; Schneider: 2001.

6 See Edeltraud Kluefing (2005).

it back to an apostolic life.<sup>7</sup> Even Joachim of Fiore (1130/1135–1202), who professed his vows as a Cistercian monk in 1168, expressed multi-faceted hope for a deep spiritual renewal of the church with his prophetic perception of a coming age of the Holy Spirit soon to irrupt into history.<sup>8</sup>

While the church progressively deteriorated, the reform demands grew in magnitude and intensity. The expression *emendatio ecclesiae in capite et in membris* (= correction of the church in head and members), first used by pope Alexander III in a letter of 29 October 1170,<sup>9</sup> and its equivalent *reformatio universalis ecclesiae*, employed by Innocent III in his papal bull of 19 April, 1213 convoking the fourth General Council of the Lateran (1215),<sup>10</sup> both passed into common usage to express a general and deeply felt need, and remained a *topos* throughout the entire Middle Ages and into the Early Modern era. The demand for *reformatio in capite et membris*<sup>11</sup> was subsequently taken-up at numerous reform councils, and especially at the Councils of Constance and Basel in the first third of the fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup> There is a noteworthy definition of the notion of *reformatio* by the Spanish theologian John of Segovia (1395–1458), a leading figure at the Basel Council. He defined Reformation as *correctio morum pro extirpatione vitiorum* (= the correction of morals for the extirpation of errors).<sup>13</sup> This definition does not stir images of fanatical Protestant storming of the churches, but rather implies returning back to a starting point through the cultivation of the traditional Christian virtues, together with the containment of corruption through the improvement of the administrative machinery of the church. In passing, the word *reformatio* had acquired a closely analogous meaning in the secular realm. It recurs in the so called *Reformatio Sigismundi*, an anonymous document that swept through Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, containing plans for recasting the political and social order of the Holy Roman

7 Molnár: 1980; Audisio: 1999; Cameron: 2000.

8 Rusconi: 1999.

9 PL, 200,743: "... si ecclesiam Tornacensem in capite vel in membris tantae pravitate vicio invenerit involutam, tibi ex parte nostra significet, ut hujusmodi excessus pastoralis sollicitudine corrigas et emendes."

10 PL 216, 824: "... inter omnia desiderabilia cordis nostri duo in hoc saeculo principaliter affectamus, ut ad recuperationem videlicet terrae sanctae ac reformationem universalis Ecclesiae generale [...] concilium juxta priscam sanctorum Patrum consuetudinem convocemus propter lucra solummodo animarum opportuno tempore celebrandum: in quo ad extirpanda vitia et plantandas virtutes, corrigendos excessus, et reformandos mores, eliminandas haereses, et roborandam fidem, sopiendas discordias, et stabiliendam pacem, comprimendas oppressiones, et libertatem fovendam, inducendos principes et populos Christianos ad succursum et subsidium terrae sanctae".

11 The French canonist and bishop of Mende, *Guillaume Durand* (also Durant, c. 1230/32–1296), has been credited with inventing the formula *reformatio in capite et membris*; see Fasolt: 1981, 291–324.

12 Landi: 1997.

13 "correctio morum pro extirpatione vitiorum, sanctarum profectus [...] virtutum pro carismatum incrementum". I take this phrase from Edeltraud Klueping (2005, 1).

Empire, which entailed preserving and restoring peace and justice through the *potentia conservativa et pacativa imperii*, the conservative and calming power of the Empire.<sup>14</sup>

The late Middle Ages, however, also witnessed other, more radical tendencies for a *reformatio ecclesiae*. For instance, both the Lollards (followers of John Wyclif)<sup>15</sup> and the Hussites (followers of John Hus)<sup>16</sup> charged the church of their time with behaving in an ungodly manner, and challenged her to be true to the Word of God. For Wyclif the Bible was not just one authority among many; it alone stood above all other authorities. And along with this principle he believed that the Scripture was intended for everyone. Hus went even further than Wyclif in his call for reform and denounced the restriction of the chalice during the celebration of the Lord's Supper to the celebrant alone as contrary to Holy Scripture and to the ancient tradition of the Church. As the Waldensians had already experienced on their own bodies, tight limits were set for the possibility of a reformation in which the Bible provided the guiding principles for the life of the church.

Finally, the humanist movement cannot be overlooked. Preeminent scholars such as Pico della Mirandola, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Rudolf Agricola, Johannes Reuchlin, John Colet and Erasmus were in no way less guided by biblical vision in their concern for church renewal than other religious movements of their times. Think, for example, of Erasmus' *Enchiridion militis Christiani*. Herein rests his programme of reform. Although confrontation was not to his taste, he attacked with corrosive wit half-hearted attempts to live a Christian life, mocked outward ceremonies, or was sarcastic about the excesses of the cult of saints and relics. Yet he also made quite clear that the road to true religion lay along the path of "good learning" and particularly the study of the Scripture and of ancient commentaries upon it. And for all Erasmus' dedication to *belles-lettres* and stress upon revitalization of classical Antiquity, how moving was his concern for the *philosophia Christi*: that all truth, wherever found, belongs to Christ, and that a Christian commonwealth should have an ethical basis and be permeated with a fervent faith.<sup>17</sup>

On the eve of the Reformation – we can sum up the result of this brief overview – the conceptions of the *reformatio ecclesiae* were in no way uniform. They ranged from the conservative quest for complete renewal of the antique spiritual legacy to the radical nurture of eschatological hope. All of these conceptions of *reformatio* are oriented one way or another towards an imagined pristine Christian condition, and all have the hope of its eventual restoration in common.

14 Koller: 1964; Bookmann: 1997, 384–386.

15 Hudson: 1988; Lahey: 2009.

16 Molnár: 1973; Hilsch: 1999; Fudge: 2010.

17 Holder: 2009, 37–57; Christ-von Wedel: 2001, 1–23; Christ-von Wedel: 2003.

Keeping in mind the turbulent late-medieval reform project in which both the frenzied activity of life and the intense piety of that time were literally reflected, a close look at the sixteenth-century reformers brings some surprises to light. As has been often noted, Luther's main goal did not concur with the aspirations of so many of his contemporaries. His aim was to renew neither his own Augustinian order nor the administrative apparatus of the church; and only indirectly was he concerned with the renewal of society. Not only was he sceptical concerning the reform efforts of the past and his own time – "I have almost totally given up hope for a general reformation of the church," he once said<sup>18</sup> – but he rarely used the word "reformation" to describe the work he himself had undertaken.<sup>19</sup> And when he employed the term, it was with a notable difference. He considered the reformation of doctrine of far greater importance than reform of practice and ritual in the church, and insisted moreover that reformation of doctrine would bring reformation of life in its wake.<sup>20</sup> In his own words:

Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account. Wycliffe and Huss didn't do this and attacked the papacy for its life. I don't scold myself into becoming good, but I fight over the Word and whether our adversaries teach it in its purity. That doctrine should be attacked has never before happened. This is my calling. Others have censured only life, but to treat doctrine is to strike at the most sensitive point . . . When the Word remains pure, then the life (even if there is something lacking in it) can be molded properly.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently the entire question of 'Reformation' is elevated to an altogether new level with respect to which all previous discussion now lags behind. The critical question regarding the "*legitima reformatio*" is posed: "Legitimate reformation", as Luther affirmed in a sermon in 1512, necessitates first and foremost a renewed listening to God's word with awe and fear,<sup>22</sup> and as he

18 WA 5, 345, 20–21 (Psalmenauslegung, 1519): "... ego velut certus desperavi reformationem generalem Ecclesiae."

19 See Wilhelm Maurer (1957, 49–62) and Erwin Mülhaupt (1967, 97–113); Bernhard Lohse (1968, 5–18); Gottfried Maron (1988, 17–20).

20 Martikainen: 1992. But surely this could be applied to John Calvin, Bullinger, Vermigli and almost all other Reformers. See Victor E. d'Assonville (2001); Herman J. Selderhuis (2009, 413–432).

21 WA TR 1, 294,19–295,3: "Doctrina et vita sunt distinguenda. Vita est mala apud nos sicut apud papistas; non igitur de vita dimicamus et damnamus eos. Hoc nesciverunt Wikleff et Hus, qui vitam impugnarunt. *Ich schilte mich nit fromm*; sed de verbo, an vere doceant, ibi pugno. Doctrinam invadere *ist noch nie geschehen*. Ea est mea vocatio. Alii vitam tantum insectati sunt, sed de doctrina agere, *das ist der gans an kragen grieffen* [...] Sed quando manet verbum purum, etiamsi vitae aliquid deest, *so kan vita dennoch zu recht kommen*." (=LW 54:110).

22 WA 1, 13, 25–35, part. 35: "Nam hic rerum cardo est, hic legitimae reformationis summa, hic totius pietatis substantia."

stated in his first commentary on Galatians (1519), it occurs when the word of truth is purely preached.<sup>23</sup>

Basically, Zwingli and Calvin's arguments follow the same line of thought. The *reformatio ecclesiae* is achievable, and indeed should be achieved, but not primarily as a reform of Church form and structure. They did not seek to found a Zwinglian or Calvinist church, and they did not lead off with a demand for "renewal" of the church through measures in areas of church life; rather they placed the Word of God at the epicentre because the church lives in relation to this alone. It was enough for them to confess the *ecclesia catholica et apostolica* and to shape a new understanding of how this is constituted through the divine *Verbum*. Thus Zwingli defined the church as every "community that was founded on faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his Word"<sup>24</sup>. In the disputation of Bern in 1528, one of the turning points in the Swiss Reformation, the Protestant party led by Zwingli put forward the thesis: "The Holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Jesus Christ, is born from the Word of God and it ever abides and it hears not the voice of strangers."<sup>25</sup> The same was true of Calvin. He seldom employed the word *reformatio* with the church as its object. His normal way of speaking of the reformation of the church shows that he intended it as the restoration – *restitutio* – of God's church, whose original face had been disfigured, to the proper form or order, viz: "Wherever we see the Word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever the sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence."<sup>26</sup> Such restorations are not accomplished once and for all, but must be undertaken again and again until the Last Day. Evidently, Calvin not only

23 WA 2, 609, 10–13: "Et, ut dicam libere, impossibile est, scripturas posse elucidari et alias ecclesias reformari, nisi universale illud reale, Rhomana curia, quam primum reformetur. Haec enim verbum dei audire non potest nec sustinere ut pure tractetur: verbo autem dei non tractato neque caeteris ecclesiis succurri potest."

24 Z III, 168,6–7 (Christliche Antwort Zürichs an Bischof Hugo, 1524). See also Z III, 217,35–218,1: "Denn das gotzwort macht die kilchen, und die kilch mag nit das gotzwort machen.", Z III, 223,6–7: "Welchs ist aber sin kilch? Die sin wort hört." See Berndt Hamm (1988, 23–27).

25 Z VI/1, 243,10–12 (Berne Disputation, 1528): "I. Die heylig christenlich kilch, deren eynig haupt Christus, ist uss dem wort gottes geboren, im selben belybt sy und hört nit die stimm eines frömbden."

26 Inst. IV,1,9. See also Calvin's Reply to cardinal Sadolet (1539), in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation* (1844, 25–68, part. 35–36), and his Sermons on Deuteronomy, Deut 4:1–2, Sermon 19, in CO 26, 108–109: "Car aujourd'huy le principal article dont la Chrestiente est troublee, quel est-il? Nous demandons qu'on escoute Dieu parler: et là dessus qu'on ne reçoive quelque doctrine qui sera forgee à l'appetit des hommes: mais que le monde s'assuiettisse à Dieu, que l'Escriture sainte soit tenue comme une doctrine de perfection: que nous la cognoissions estre la verité de Dieu, à la quelle il faut que toute nostre vie soit reiglee, qu'on n'y adiouste n'y diminue."

believed that *restitutio ecclesiae* was necessary in his time, but he also understood his work “to be a part of that restorative process of the church”.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, the reformers had a completely different conception of the *reformatio ecclesiae* than people had been used to up until then. And so it is no wonder that after the initial enthusiasm, many refused to follow the reformers. For some they went too far, for others not far enough. Obviously, for those who were loyal to the old church, they went too far. Reformation meant revolution, uproar, and destroying Christendom. On the other side of the spectrum, for those like Thomas Müntzer or the Anabaptists, the reformers did not go far enough.<sup>28</sup> A renewal of faith was not enough for them; they were not willing to wait patiently for the fruit of faith, as the reformers recommended. What had begun must be brought to completion. That entailed a radical reformation of the church, in some cases even with the use of violence, in order to establish absolute purity. These radical reformers, however, did not achieve their goal in the Reformation century.

On the contrary, the old believers had historically great success. With the Council of Trent, they successfully mustered astounding strength for an entirely new plan for the reorganization of the Roman Church. It is noteworthy that this council, which was called with a view to mending all of the damage that had been caused by the Reformation, grew to be more and more of a powerful reform council of an entirely new type. It ran, so to speak, on two tracks: alongside the reformulation of Catholic dogma in contrast to Protestant teaching stood the many general “*decreta de reformatione*”, the reform decrees which would influence the life of Catholicism for centuries to come – from mandatory residency for bishops to provision of improved theological education for the clergy, from Bible translation to revised marriage regulations.

It is no coincidence that the word “reformation” appears so often in the documents of the “anti-reformation” Council, while it is almost totally missing from the confessional documents of the sixteenth-century Protestant churches.<sup>29</sup> One could say with some degree of irony that everybody in the sixteenth century is talking about the reformation, with the exception of the magisterial Protestant reformers! Is it not astounding that this word should ultimately come to be assigned to these of all people? Is it not indeed remarkable that what they initiated came to be known as *the* Reformation?

27 Benjamin Ch. Milner (1970, 155). See also Pete Wilcox (2006, 107–130, part. 124–126); Michael Bush (2008, 285–299, part. 292–299).

28 See Tom Scott (1983, 194–213); Siegfried Bräuer/Helmar Junghans (1989, 174–194, 195–220); Andrea Strübind (2003, 440–470).

29 I have searched for the word reformation (Latin and French) in the *Confessio Augustana*, *Confessio Gallicana*, and *Confessio Helvetica posterior* in the BSLK and the new edition of the *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften*, ed. by Heiner Faulenbach et al. (2002–). There is no reference in the *Augustana* and *Gallicana*, and it does appear two times in the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* (Campi: 2009, 273,16, and 313,8).



History sometimes takes strange turns and historiography follows behind. And usually the actors are not even asked for their opinions. Yet, surely the historians are absolutely right in calling “reformers” those who did not consider themselves such, because in the last analysis they plainly understood the real sense of the term *reformatio*: namely, neither a plan to undertake large or small-scale corrections, nor a proud expression of human reason, but rather the striking recognition that the Church is born from, lives in, and moves by the Word of God. This does not mean to flee history for some abstract matter of theology. The recovery of the primacy of the authority and importance of God’s Word is compatible with the historiographical theory that treats the Protestant Reformation as embedded within a broad process of political, economic, socio-cultural change that extended from late-medieval communalization to early-modern confessionalization. Indeed, we would be guilty of reductionism if we were either to undervalue or to ignore the reformers’ concern that God’s Word could not be bound by human fear or obscurantism, but must go daringly free. From the encounter with the Word came a fresh understanding of the Christian message, a new awareness of the nature of the Church, which not only involved the renewal of devotion and worship, but in addition supplied the commonwealth with a new public ethos to match the new perception of faith. This encounter with the Word was not new, in the sense that nobody had ever known it before, or that the reformers were the first who properly understood it – in fact, they were continuing a debate that had been going on for centuries – but was new, fresh for them as in each generation it has to be found and proved anew.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Reformation: Event or Process?

The massive indeterminacy that surrounds the characterization of the term “event”, and even the broad definition, commonly found in dictionaries, as a ‘thing that happens’, thereby shifting the burden to the task of clarifying the definition of what it is to ‘happen’, would at least initially seem to pose a fatal hindrance to a critical reflection on the description of the Reformation as an event.<sup>31</sup> Scholarly help comes from the Scottish historian, Tom Scott, who in his learned article “The Reformation between Deconstruction and Reconstruction”,<sup>32</sup> refers to Heiko Oberman’s delight in quoting Herodotus’ Preface to his *Histories*, in which the father of historiography distinguished carefully

30 On the continuities and discontinuities between the Reformation and late medieval reform of church, theology and piety, see Berndt Hamm (1995a, 193–220, part., 220–216; und 1995b, 57–127).

31 See Casati/Varzi: 2002 (2006).

32 Scott: 2008, 406–422, and 2010, 358–363.

between the acts, the great and marvellous events (= ἔργα μεγάλη τε καὶ θαυμαστά) and their subsequent impact, and the interpretations imposed upon them by humans (= τὰ γινόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων). Of course, Oberman's intent was to challenge a tendency (nowadays fortunately decreasing) among social historians, of blurring this distinction by eliding "event" and "impact" into a "process".<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, this Herodotean distinction makes an excellent starting point for our purposes.

One of the ways in which the Reformation has been interpreted since its inception was through commemorations. Although in 1617 the observance of the first centenary of the publication of Luther's 'Ninety-five Theses' already celebrated the epoch-making significance of the reformer's cleansing of the Church, it was not until the late seventeenth century that the word Reformation was actually used to describe an era in church history inaugurated by the former Augustinian friar. Veit Ludwig von Seckendorf's *Historical and Apologetic Commentary on Lutheranism or Reformation* (1692) was the first work to employ the term Reformation in this sense.<sup>34</sup> Textbooks, dictionaries and encyclopaedias of the eighteenth century, typically linked the era now identified as the Reformation to the life and public career of Martin Luther. The Reformation epoch thus came to be acknowledged as an event centred on the 1520s and 1530s, and ending with the Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555). Through this approach not only other reformers (such as Zwingli and Calvin, not to mention Bucer, Bullinger, Cranmer, Vermigli), but also other reformations (such as the Bohemian, Swiss, English, French and radical reformations) tended to be ignored or side-lined. Moreover, the Reformation was initially studied as a purely religious phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> The first historian who cast his net more widely than had conventionally been the case was Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) in his masterwork, *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation* (1839–1847; Engl. Transl.: *History of the Reformation in Germany*, 1845–1847). The father of modern historical scholarship located the Reformation in both its ecclesiastical and political settings and saw both as mutually interactive. But when we have paid tribute to Ranke's insistence on "showing the past as it really was" ("*blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen*" ist), i. e. at all costs and without compromise, we must not gloss over that in his work this sixteenth-century event formed, as Thomas Brady put it, "the opening chapter of what may be called (to give it its traditional nickname) the 'Luther-to Bismark' story of German history."<sup>36</sup> We need to face the fact that Ranke was working with an idea of "destiny" in

33 See the chapter on "Social History" by Thomas A. Brady (1982); and Mack P. Holt (2003, 133–144).

34 *Commentarius historicus et apologeticus de Lutheranismis sive de Reformatione* (1692), occasioned by the Jesuit Maimbourg's *Histoire du Luthéranisme* (Paris, 1680), still useful as a rich storeroom of materials. See Bernhard Lohse (1986, 205–206); Carter Lindberg (1998, 10).

35 Dickens/Tonkin: 1985, 9.

36 Brady: 1998, here 10–11.

relation to Reformation which came into Protestant historiography during the second half of the sixteenth century, and hardened thereafter, and from which modern church historians are now struggling to be free. In a passage from the Introduction to the *Handbook of European History* Brady convincingly notes that the “concept of ‘destiny’ [is] ... subtly but forcefully present in the work of Ranke.”<sup>37</sup> With Germany’s defeat in the Great War the “Luther-to-Bismarck” narrative of the Reformation came to an end. In his skilfully written appreciation of Luther, Gerhard Ritter (1888–1967), the Nestor of German historians in the first half of the twentieth century, focussed upon the centrality of Luther’s theological concern and religious significance. On the other hand, his staunch nationalism betrayed him into disconcerting and even suspect references to Luther as a prophet of national revival, “the Eternal German”.<sup>38</sup>

I do not propose to address the interpretations of the Reformation offered in the period from World War II to the end of 1990s, which has seen the advent of new paradigms to study the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. Some of them have collapsed, like the notion of the Reformation as an “early bourgeois revolution” indefatigably propounded by a handful of Marxist historians;<sup>39</sup> others have lost some of their lustre, like the Reformation as “urban phenomenon”,<sup>40</sup> while others, like the “communalization” thesis or the “confessionalization” thesis, still retain plausibility, although no longer in their original versions, and only with substantial corrections. While for the analysis of post-war developments I refer to the *Archive for Reformation History 2009*, a special issue produced to celebrate the publication of Volume 100 of the journal,<sup>41</sup> in the limited space afforded me I propose to consider the writings of the first decade of our century.

A glance over recent textbooks of history is quite instructive.<sup>42</sup> In 1999 James Tracy’s *Europe’s Reformations, 1450–1650* came out, and in 2000 Andrew Pettegree’s *The Reformation World*; in 2003 Diarmaid MacCulloch published his influential work *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490–*

37 Brady/Oberman/Tracy: 1995, XIX.

38 Ritter (1925, 151, with six extensively revised editions). Engl. Transl.: *Luther; His Life and Work*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963.

39 The thesis was first stated by the East German historian Max Steinmetz. For a brief survey, see Andreas Dorpalen (1988, part. 99–137).

40 Bernd Moeller led the way with *Reichstadt und Reformation* (1962), translated into English as *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1972. Perhaps the most vocal was Steven E. Ozment, *Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland* (1975). For the debate over the reasons for the appeal of the Reformation, see Berndt Hamm/Bernd Moeller/Dorothea Wendebourg (1995c).

41 *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte/ Archive for Reformation History*, ARG 100 (2009): especially Thomas Kaufmann (2009a, 15–47) and Thomas A. Brady (2009a, 48–64); Christoph Burger (2009, 326–349).

42 In the discussion that follows I am indebted to Tom Scott (2008, here 406), to Thomas A. Brady (1998, here 23–27), and Heinz Schilling’s comment, in *ibid.* (1998, here 42–45).

1700, followed in 2004 by Peter Wallace's *The Long European Reformation...1350–1750*, and Ronnie Hsia's compendium, *A Companion to the Reformation World*; in 2005 Ulinka Rublack's *Reformation Europe*. The subtle but discernible use of the plural ("Reformations"), the conspicuous evidence of the European dimension, not to mention the increasingly inflated chronological parameters in the titles, combine to reveal first of all that the days have definitely gone when the rise of the Reformation was ascribed to manifest destiny, or indeed Luther-centric accounts of the Reformation depicted him as interpreter of the German character. Secondly, reference to multiple "Reformations" rather than simply "the Reformation" does not necessarily constitute historiographical progress. It would seem to be appropriate, only if it can be demonstrated that is not attributable to a kneeling down before the Baal of postmodern culture, but rather that several movements comprising the Reformation were nurtured not by a single, but by a variety of impulses. Thirdly, that the Reformation is increasingly portrayed as a European phenomenon in which new outlooks fostered a religious revolution on a Continental scale with even extra-European dimension represents certainly a formidable challenge to traditional Reformation studies. And finally, the ambitious, encompassing agenda of these textbooks indicate that the Reformation is now seen not so much as an historical event that lasted at most a few decades, but rather as a prolonged process, with roots going back hundreds of years and extending over several centuries. It is increasingly customary among scholars to refer to this period as the "Long Reformation".<sup>43</sup>

This last perspective, while ambiguous as any attempt at periodization of macro-history, yet an essential part of recent accounts of the Reformation, is certainly the most crucial and deserves closer attention. This is the consequence to be drawn from studies on late-medieval history over the last decades (e. g., Eamon Duffy, Robert Swanson, Peter Blickle, Heiko Oberman, Berndt Hamm), which have both enriched and revised our understanding of church and society in the medieval centuries.<sup>44</sup> They have shown that religion was not at all in terminal decline, but it had remarkable vigour and inventiveness. Therefore the Reformation can no longer be regarded as the decisive turning point in European history – neither in the perspective of general history, because it represents the culmination point of the late medieval communalization, nor from the point of view of church history, since the reformers were inheritors of the late medieval theology that they shared with their Catholic opponents. Concurrent with this revisionist reappraisal of the Reformation in the light of the preceding centuries is the confessionaliza-

43 Besides the above-mentioned works, see, e. g., Robert Scribner (2001); and Nicholas Tyacke (1998).

44 For an overview of this historiographical trend, see, among others, Robert N. Swanson (2000, 9–30).

tion thesis, which addresses the question how medieval Europe became modern. Heinz Schilling, Wolfgang Reinhard, and others have convincingly shown that the changes brought about by the Reformation in the 1520s and 1530s were by no means as far-reaching as Ranke, and with him generations of (mainly Protestant) historians, had argued. On the contrary, the changes which profoundly altered public and private life in Europe did eventually take place in the last decades of the sixteenth century and extended well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A further feature of the confessionalisation paradigm is the inclusion of the post Tridentine Catholic Church into the process of European modernization with its parallel, but competing traditions of reform. Ultimately the confessionalization thesis ties this process to the churches – Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed – working hand in hand with emerging modern states for the twin purposes of social discipline and state-building.

Needless to say, these two historiographical paradigms have enormous consequences for the way the Protestant Reformation is now perceived. In this framework, no longer can the Reformation be regarded as a self-contained unit with little connection to the period that preceded it; nor is there any longer wide acceptance of its role as the pivotal event in the origins of modern history. The Protestant Reformation is now being subsumed under these two periods, or to use Brady's trenchant words, "has been squeezed between the later Middle Ages behind and Confessional Era ahead."<sup>45</sup> The result is the "Long Reformation", a series of fragmented events in small and often competing groups, plus some greater ones, but without a centre and lacking a bold vision. In short, this is the way in which Reformation history is being written today.

We do not have, at this time, the necessary distance from this lively scholarship to discern the impulses behind the communalization and confessionalization theses. We can only observe that Reformation studies are no longer the privileged field of church historians. Social historians have firmly taken hold of the Reformation and there is little likelihood of their letting go.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, no matter how productive the scholarly impulses prove to be, there are inevitably dissenters from this apparent consensus within the field. Such voices are less often heard, but they are no less real for that.<sup>47</sup> Church historians in particular tend to argue that confessionalization implies a disparagement of the Reformation in favour of later developments, and that it is necessary to re-evaluate its unique historical significance. Moreover, they hold that pluralism, and not confessional uniformity, was a fact of life in the second half of the sixteenth century and beyond. Whether the arguments of the dissenters are a contribution of weight

45 Brady: 2009a, 63.

46 Holt: 2003, 133.

47 See, e. g., Heinrich Richard Schmidt (1997, 639–682); Thomas Kaufmann (1996, 1008–1025, 1113–1121); Harm Klueting (1999, 17–47); Marc R. Forster (2001).

to this great debate, or a pretentious and muddle-headed version of the Rankean triumphalist approach, time and others wiser will decide. Meanwhile, we can perhaps console ourselves with the thought that at this point social historians and church historians have work to do together, if they would only stop suspecting and patronizing one another.

### 3. Reformation: German or European?

Finally, I would like to address this last point with some comments on three recent narratives of the sixteenth century Reformation: Hans Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom*,<sup>48</sup> Thomas Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Reformation*,<sup>49</sup> and Thomas Brady, *German Histories in the age of Reformation*.<sup>50</sup> Hillerbrand presents an entirely conventional, Luther-centric account of the Reformation, such as we might have expected of a previous generations of historians. The author is not prepared to locate the Reformation within a broad impulse to reform encompassing the time between 1450 and 1650 (like James Tracy), or 1490 to 1700 (like MacCulloch), or 1350–1750 (like Peter Wallace). Hillerbrand's account gives little attention to the late-medieval church, beginning indeed unabashedly with the year 1517 and making the German course of the events until the Augsburg Peace of 1555 the backbone of the work. He does attempt, however, to offer a European perspective focussing in separate chapters on Scandinavia, England and Scotland, Eastern Europe, and France. He also gives a sensitive account of the Catholic Church and its reform, although the complicated and long-term problems faced by those seeking to implement the Council of Trent are left aside. Although the tone echoes older generations of historians, and is critical of those currently engaged in a passionate debate concerning the place of Reformation in the framework of the communalization and confessionalization paradigms, Hildebrand attempts nonetheless to offer a Continental perspective, and does therefore regard the Reformation as more than a journey between Elbe and Rhine.

In a 900–page narrative, Kaufmann provides an unapologetic account of the sixteenth-century Reformation that puts Martin Luther squarely at the centre, and throughout keeps an eye firmly on German territories and German Lutheran confessional culture in the first half of the sixteenth century. Having dealt with the social, political and religious preconditioning of the Reformation movement and with Luther's early career and writings, he proceeds through the Peasant's War, then to a detailed account of the imperial Diets, the imposition of prince-controlled Lutheranism and Catholicism, and finally

48 Hillerbrand: 2007.

49 Kaufmann: 2009b.

50 Brady: 2009b.

describes the Schmalkaldic War and the Peace of Augsburg. The flow of events is masterfully recounted, but when the author interrupts his narrative to treat Zwingli, the radicals, and the Peasants' War, they appear as villains causing harm to the hero and spoiling the (Lutheran) Reformation by splitting it. The few pages devoted to the Council of Trent serve to reinforce this monolithic Lutheran perspective. Significant events and dynamics that characterized religious life elsewhere in Europe – in the Swiss Confederation, England, France, Italy, Spain, as well as North and Eastern Europe – are not tagged on at the end, as in much of German Reformation scholarship, but are simply ignored. Kaufmann's *Geschichte der Reformation* is indeed properly a 'History of the German Reformation'. As such the work has strengths that lift it beyond the usual accounts. It is thorough and erudite, in particular in its use of primary sources. The difficulty with this approach is immanent in the basic assumptions and logic of the work itself: the Reformation is portrayed as a German phenomenon par excellence, which in turn provides the key to interpreting all variant patterns of Reforming endeavour and commitment. Such a candid and forcefully expressed view merits attention and invites debate, not least because the scholarship of recent decades points out persuasively that the Reformation, by whatever definition, was more than a "Deutsches Ereignis" and that it is *highly* problematic to employ solely German or Lutheran criteria in order to understand the religious upheavals in sixteenth-century Europe. Indeed we must beware of Kaufmann's hidden agenda. He is concerned to preserve the unity of the Reformation under Luther's theological leadership<sup>51</sup> – and here we are, once again, back in the world of manifest destiny and the "Eternal German"! What Kaufmann appears not or indeed prefers not to see is that the legitimate ideal of doctrinal unity is perfectly possible without the assumption of Luther's primacy vis-à-vis other actors.

It is impossible to summarize the whole variety of perspectives that Brady's *German Histories in the Age of the Reformations* opens up.<sup>52</sup> For our purposes it will have to suffice to mention that following the path laid out in the last twenty years by the framers of the communalization and confessionalization theses, he looks at changes in religious life in wider political, cultural, and social context. With verve and a robust prose, he makes a good case for the view that the period 1400 – 1650 is the real breakthrough of the modern world. Although not in Brady's opinion a revolutionary break with the past, the Reformation certainly led to significant changes in Germany. Ultimately, however, it was the political system of the empire that directed the developments set in motion by Luther's movement. Setting aside traditional

51 Thomas Kaufmann (2008, 149 – 171, see 170): "Certainly his [sc. Calvin] life's work didn't serve any other Reformation than the one that took its beginning in Luther".

52 For detailed discussion, see Tom Scott (2010: 358 – 363), and the review by Joel F. Harrington in *Renaissance Quarterly* (2010, 214 – 215).

interpretations that place the German Reformation at the heart of a modernization of Europe, Brady insists on the importance of the creation of “confessions, marked by conformity in doctrine and, to a lesser degree, in ritual practice” (p. 289). The Reformation – this is the consequence that must be drawn – is not after all the most significant event of German history.

These works are representative of developments in recent Reformation historiography. While I dissent from each of these three perspectives, albeit on different levels, I readily admit that I have learned from all of them. They have helped considerably in addressing the problematic of the last part of the assigned topic. In my judgement, it must be recognized that in the last three decades two influential paradigms – communalization and confessionalization – have seriously eroded the notion that has so long dominated our understanding of the Reformation as a milestone on the road towards modernity, a powerful catalyst of the so-called “disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber).<sup>53</sup> Despite some manifest methodological differences resulting in differing focal points, if anything unites the various specialized fields of historical studies it is surely the widespread consensus that the Reformation was indeed a Europe-wide phenomenon and a prolonged process that stretched over centuries. Consequently, it is hardly invidious to point out that the idea of envisaging the Reformation as a “*Deutsches Ereignis*”, or of exalting the person of one of the reformers for confessional purposes, is antiquated, as is the attempt to identify special confessional characteristics contributing to a national identity or indeed to the course of world history.

This paradigm shift is by no means as unfavourable as one might suppose for Reformation studies, because it helps to reopen a debate that had been prematurely closed by *Kulturprotestantismus*.<sup>54</sup> The key role played by the Reformation in the older model of modernization might have lost some lustre along the way. Its essential tenets, however, can now be studied more effectively, and in a wider context, without clinging to ideological or confessional traditions. Indeed, it would seem to be a reasonable task for church historians to streamline the confessionalization theory by adding to the sounding brass of excessive *étatisme* the clanging cymbal of theological assumptions that shaped and influenced, accelerated and anticipated modern patterns of political, economic, and social behaviour. It is not a question of catching up with the *Zeitgeist*, of keeping pace with modern theories, but of trying to get a better understanding of a relevant period of modern history deserving our close attention.

Let us consider a few examples in order to settle these ideas. The first example is the gallant attempt of *Kulturprotestantismus* to show how the doctrines of personal vocation and predestination brought about decisive

53 For a perceptive discussion of this theme, see Alexandra Walsham (2008, 497–528).

54 For a brief account in English, see Gordon Rupp (1977 [repr. Atlanta, Ga, 1987]); see also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (2006, 61–105).



transformations at the origins of modernity. This is not just to be stored as a museum piece, only of meaning to antiquarians or aesthetes, but is rather the kind of work which must be done again. Yet, properly understood, this classical example is part of the evidence why, in our day, it is essential to adopt a new approach. For scholarship has recognized and highlighted the rather naive self-confidence and the highly romanticized image of the Reformation which accompanied that older approach. Today we know that if those doctrines proved significant for the social and cultural shifts that occurred, it was because of the complex intermingling with other trends in a manner that remains difficult to pinpoint and analyze exactly. Secondly, to reach a nuanced understanding of the Reformation in the framework of the confessionalization theory room must also be made for fresh investigation and criticism of the rich tradition of Christian worship and spirituality, the pastoral care of souls, the intellectual and cultural achievements forged and tested by generations of theologians who, armed with the new critical tools in both Hebrew and Greek, challenged old interpretations of the Scripture sanctioned by popes or other mere office-holders. Thirdly, at least a good case can be made out (with support from the seminal work of Christoph Strohm<sup>55</sup>) for the view that the period 1555–1650 represents a real breakthrough of modern European jurisprudence initiated from below rather than imposed politically from above and with distinct confessional – Roman-Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed – roots. Fourthly, with awareness of the Continental dimension and of the long-term impact of the Protestant Reformation, it would seem reasonable to be sensitive to doctrinal comparisons among the different European reformations between the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period as evidence of the overarching process of fundamental change in European and world Christianity. This includes finding new sources and discovering the voices of lesser known reformers, as well as better integrating into the larger reform-minded era the humanist groups who preceded the Reformation, the Anabaptists, the Socinians, and other radical movements. Fifthly, demythologizing Catholic and Protestant confessionalization may prove difficult in view of the polemics on both sides of the great divide between reformers and what they called “Popery”, but not impossible, and in any case the attempt has to be made. Sixthly, consideration must naturally be given to the re-examination of the relation of the various Christian denominations to Judaism, Islam, as well as to socio-cultural nonconforming groups, including early instances of atheism or scepticism. Last but not least, and thinking in terms of the “Long Reformation”, Heinz Schilling’s suggestion to pursue further research on the narrative of the Reformation as a “German event” is surely of continuing importance. It will be studied, of course, not so much as the historical reality of the sixteenth century, but as one of the great European foundational myths. In his words: “the founding myth for the ‘belated nation’

55 Strohm: 2008a; 2008b, 6–35; and 2011, 75–88.

as was that of the ‘Grande Révolution’ for the French Republic.”<sup>56</sup> And one could add: the “Glorious Revolution” for the United Kingdom,<sup>57</sup> “William Tell” and “Huldrych Zwingli”<sup>58</sup> for the Swiss Confederation, or the “Free Italian republics of the Middle Ages” for the national Unification of Italy.<sup>59</sup>

\* \* \*

*Was the Reformation a German event?* In this essay it has been argued that the Reformation is too important to be used merely as the founding myth of a nation, let alone of a confessional hero. It has been further suggested that reconsidering the Reformation within the framework of the communalization and confessionalization paradigms may assist in a more effective study of its theological tenets and its impact on the rise of early modern Europe, without clinging to ideological or confessional traditions. Having appealed to history, however, we must also abide by history. While there are questions we must raise for ourselves and answer by ourselves, to which the voices of the past may be irrelevant or even fallacious, there are other questions, and these are the most profound, to answer which the voices of the past may freshly intervene. Thus, even a working historian ought not to be shocked or surprised by the perception of the Reformation articulated in 1518 by a (then) obscure Augustinian friar of the Saxon Province: “The church – he said – needs a reformation, but this is not something for one person, the pope, also not many cardinals, [...] but rather for the entire world, or more correctly, for God alone. The time for such a reformation is known only by him who created time.”<sup>60</sup>

56 Schilling: 1998, 47. The notion “Belated Nation” goes back to Helmuth Plessner’s celebrated book *Die Verspätete Nation*, 1935/1959. See Wolfgang Bialas (2010).

57 For example, Patrick Dillon (2006); Edward Vallance (2006).

58 For example, Thomas Maissen (2011), third ed.

59 The Genevan historian Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi was the author of a monumental 16-volume *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* (1809–1818), which regarded the free cities of medieval Italy as the origin of modern European states. The work, together with Madame de Staël’s novel, *Corinne: ou Italie* (1804), inspired the leaders of the country’s Risorgimento, the movement for national unification in nineteenth-century Italy.

60 WA 1, 627,27–31 (Resolutiones, 1518, Conclusio LXXXIX): “Ecclesia indiget reformatione, quod non est unius hominis Pontificis nec multorum Cardinalium offitium, sicut probavit utrumque novissimum concilium, sed totius orbis, immo solius dei. Tempus autem huius reformationis novit solus ille, qui condidit tempora.”

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On June 8–10, 2011, the first conference of RefoRC, the Reformation Research Consortium ([www.reforc.com](http://www.reforc.com)), was held at the Institute of Swiss Reformation Studies at the Theological Faculty of the University of Zurich. The overall title »The Myth of the Reformation« encouraged critical perspectives on traditional beliefs about the sixteenth century Reformation(s). Peter Opitz provides a selection of the papers that were presented at the Zurich conference.

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