

*The Intellectual Origins of
the European Reformation*

Second Edition

Alister E. McGrath

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Preface

The quest for the intellectual origins of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century has long been recognized as one of the most important recent undertakings in the study of intellectual history. Despite the tendency within certain schools of historical interpretation to disinvest the Reformation of any religious or intellectual character in order to facilitate its analysis as a purely social phenomenon, there is a growing realization that there is an irreducible intellectual element to the Reformation that demands and deserves careful analysis.

This book argues that such an analysis discloses that the intellectual origins of the Reformation are such that it cannot be thought of as a single coherent movement, whatever subsequent consolidation may have arisen through developments in its second phase. The two major streams of the Reformation – Lutheran and Reformed – have quite distinct and independent intellectual provenances. Historically, they can readily be demonstrated to have arisen independently of one another; theologically, they result from quite different understandings of the nature and manner of interpretation of the foundational resources of the Christian faith. While this study does not deal with the complex issue of the intellectual origins of the Radical Reformation, the clear divergence of this movement from both its Reformed and Lutheran counterparts at many critical junctures reinforces the conclusion that the European Reformation as a whole must be regarded as the outcome of a complex and nuanced series of micro-Reformations, each resting on essentially local understandings of theological sources and methods, whose subsequent interaction would define the shape of the macro-Reformation as a whole.

It must be made clear from the outset that social factors are of no small importance to the reception and transmission of ideas, whether

religious, political or scientific.¹ The way in which certain influential individuals understood and appropriated ideas, communities developed around them, and publications were established to propagate them, is an integral aspect of intellectual history, which recognizes the intrinsic importance of ideas in shaping culture and history, while also allotting a genuine role to social factors in their development, evaluation, and transmission.² An excellent example illustrating the complex interaction of social and intellectual factors is provided by the increasing influence of humanism in academic and ecclesiastical circles in the decade beginning 1510. While the intellectual attitudes of humanists altered relatively little over the period 1450–1530, the respect that they were accorded within the academic community increased substantially, with a concomitant enhancement of the impact of their ideas and methods within European universities.³ The social status of a group was thus of critical importance in determining the impact of their ideas.

This book is primarily concerned with one crucial question: how may the religious ideas of the first generation of mainline Reformers – especially Luther and Zwingli – be accounted for? What factors – intellectual as well as social – brought them into being? The quest for the intellectual origins of the Reformation involves the detailed analysis of the continuities and discontinuities between two eras in the history of thought, raising questions of fundamental importance for the historian of ideas and the theologian. It is hoped that this book will go some way towards identifying those questions, and providing provisional answers to them.

My thanks are due to many for their kindnesses during the preparation of this work. The original stimulus for writing it was provided by my students at Oxford University, who demanded better answers to their questions concerning the origins of the ideas of the Reformation than they had hitherto found. The first edition of this work appeared in 1987, and met with a very appreciative reception. However, much has happened in recent years, and it has been clear for some time that a new edition was required, amending the original work, and extending its scope.

Much of the research underlying the first edition of this work (1987) was carried out at the Zentralbibliothek and Institut für schweizerische Reformationsgeschichte of the University of Zurich. Since then, I have benefited from the kindness of many institutions as I have developed, expanded, and revised the work. My thanks are due to the British

Academy for two generous research awards to permit me to study the early Swiss Reformation in some depth; and to Oxford University for awarding me the Denyer and Johnson Travelling Fellowship twice, allowing me to undertake research on the late Renaissance and early Reformation at a number of European centers. I am particularly grateful to the following institutions for their hospitality and the free use of their enviable resources: the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, the Biblioteca della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, and the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Florence); the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire and the Institut d'Histoire de la Réformation (Geneva); the Institute of Historical Research (London); the Bodleian Library (Oxford); the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris); the Stadtsbibliothek Vadiana (St Gallen); the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek and the Universitätsbibliothek (Vienna); the Institut für schweizerische Reformationsgeschichte and the Zentralbibliothek (Zurich). I also gratefully acknowledge the editorial assistance of Elizabeth McGrath. Finally, my thanks are again due to the staff and students of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, for providing such an outstanding environment in which to teach, study and think.

Abbreviations

ARG	<i>Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</i>
BHR	<i>Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance</i>
CR	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i>
EthL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
FS	<i>Franziskanische Studien</i>
FcS	<i>Franciscan Studies</i>
HThR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
RThAM	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale</i>
WA	<i>Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i>
WABr	<i>Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel</i>
WATr	<i>Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden</i>
ZKG	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
ZKTh	<i>Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie</i>
ZThK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Introduction

The European Reformation of the sixteenth century continues to retain its inherent fascination for historians, whether they are primarily concerned with its social, political, or intellectual dimensions. Of the many questions to be thrown up by the continuing intense scholarly activity in the field, perhaps the most intriguing is the question of the intellectual origins of the Reformation. How may the origins of the distinctive religious ideas of the Reformation be accounted for in terms of the overall development of thought in the period 1300–1600? To what extent does the Reformation mark a break with the thought of an earlier period, and to what extent is it continuous with it? Indeed, to what extent can the Reformation itself be regarded as intellectually coherent – or must it be seen as an aggregate of smaller movements, loosely connected by shared aspirations and goals, while espousing quite different understandings of how these are to be conceptualized and achieved?

Four questions are of particular importance in this connection:

- 1 Can one speak of “the intellectual origins of the Reformation” in the first place? The use of the singular term “Reformation” implies a significant degree of coherence and homogeneity within the movement, so that its origins may be traced back to a common source.¹ But what if this movement turns out to be variegated in its intellectual underpinnings, and hence complex in its intellectual origins? Might it not be necessary to speak of “the intellectual origins of the Reformations”?
- 2 Were there “Forerunners of the Reformation”? In other words, were there anticipations of aspects of the thought of the Reformation in the medieval period that immediately preceded it?

- 3 What is the relationship between the Reformation and the Renaissance? Was the Reformation merely an aspect of the Renaissance, or does it possess special significance on account of its subject matter, presuppositions, sources, or methods?
- 4 What is the relationship between the Reformation and late medieval theological schools of thought, particularly the *via moderna* and the *schola Augustiniana moderna*? This question has been the subject of intense debate in relation to Luther's early theological development, but it is also important in relation to Karlstadt, Zwingli, Peter Martyr, and Calvin, to name but the more prominent among the Reformers. It is this question of the intellectual – as opposed to the political, social, or institutional – origins of the Reformation that urgently requires detailed critical examination.

The European Reformation of the sixteenth century was concerned with *religious ideas*. There was an intractably religious element to the movement, despite the fact that it also possessed political, social, and economic dimensions. It is perhaps inevitable that many modern western historians, familiar with a privatized religious ethos, will assume that religion has no role beyond the realm of personal spirituality. Yet this was not the case in the sixteenth century, and it is essential to cultivate a sense of historical empathy in which the past role of religion is honored, rather than projecting its later vestiges onto this earlier period. That religious ideas played a significant role in the Reformation may be seen particularly in the cases of Luther and Calvin. This is not to fall victim to a currently unfashionable idealist reading of history, but to note the significance of theology for many of those involved at critical junctures in the Reformation movement. Thus Luther's reforming program rested to a significant extent on his religious ideas, such as his understanding of the nature of the church, which in turn impacted upon the social changes he believed to be entailed by these ideas.

The preoccupation of many historians of the Reformation with social issues is due, in no small part, to many western sociologists in the second half of the twentieth century adopting approaches to history that were ultimately dependent upon a Marxist analysis of the origins of ideas, which held that ideologies – such as the theologies of the Reformation – were merely an ideational superstructure erected on a socioeconomic substructure. Although Marx himself appears to have

adopted a simple “base–superstructure” framework, which held that ideas were ultimately determined by their socioeconomic substructure, these ideas were developed more fully by his later followers. Georgii Plekhanov argued for a five-level model of a modern society, as follows:²

- 1 The state of the productive forces;
- 2 The economic relations that these forces engender;
- 3 The sociopolitical system that develops on this economic base;
- 4 The mentality of people living within this system, reflecting both its economic conditions and its sociopolitical system;
- 5 The ideologies that arise among these people, embodying that mentality.

Plekhanov thus argues that everything ultimately depends upon economics, but distinguishes a series of levels at which the fundamental economic forces operate. The link between “productive forces” and “ideologies” is thus not quite as straightforward as Marx suggests, and involves a more subtle identification and analysis of the interaction of the various strata than that which Marx himself proposes.³ Nevertheless, it is clearly understood that the development of ideologies is determined by social and economic issues. On the basis of this approach to history, the Reformation is fundamentally to be approached at the level of social history, which holds the key to the origins and the determination of its distinctive ideas.⁴

The deep and wide currents that the Reformation created in the flow of European history are an adequate testimony to the political and social dimensions of the movement. Nevertheless, those at the forefront of the Swiss and German Reformations had a clear concern for religious ideas, and based their political and social programs upon them. The historical significance of the Reformation is not merely inseparable from, but is largely a consequence of, the religious views of the major Reformers. Any attempt to understand the complexity of the sixteenth century Reformation must involve a serious engagement with the ideas that lay behind it.⁵ So how did the distinctive ideas of the Reformation come into being? And in what way do these ideas differ from those of the centuries prior to the Reformation? Is the religious thought of the Reformation a natural outcome of late medieval thought, or does it represent a break with a hitherto homogeneous intellectual tradition?

To answer these questions with any degree of precision and conviction, it is necessary to examine the manner in which theological ideas were developed and analyzed in the late medieval period, as well as the extent to which they could be – and were – controlled and regulated by both society and the church.⁶ Late medieval church and society exercised an ambiguous attitude toward religious ideas, which was both creative and repressive. By establishing a political and intellectual climate throughout much of western Europe in which theological scholarship and speculation could proceed, the church may be said to have adopted a creative attitude toward the development of new religious ideas; by establishing means by which unacceptable new ideas might be eliminated or suppressed, by force if necessary, the church may be said to have adopted a repressive attitude in the same area. Perhaps one of the more significant features of the fifteenth century is the evident growth in theological speculation – and hence doctrinal pluralism – in the religious houses and universities of Germany, and an apparently increasing reluctance or inability on the part of the church authorities to suppress this trend.

The present work represents an attempt to consolidate and expand our understanding of the intellectual origins of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century. There has been a growing recognition on the part of Reformation scholars that neither the events nor the ideas of the sixteenth century may be properly understood unless they are seen as the culmination of developments in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ Although there has been an understandable desire on the part of historians of the Reformation to treat the pivotal intellectual developments of the sixteenth century as complete in themselves, requiring little contextualization other than that provided by the early years of that century, certain assumptions underlying this approach have recently been called into question. For example, it is evident that both Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians of today have come to regard the sixteenth century as defining the point of departure for their present doctrinal positions, and thus tend to approach the period in the light of this assumption, with significant implications for the way in which its history is read, and the importance that is attached to it.⁸ While this may be perfectly acceptable for their somewhat limited purposes, it is most emphatically not acceptable to the historian of ideas, whose task and concern it is to account for the origins of the ideas that assumed such significance in the sixteenth century.

A further difficulty relates to the vexed question of periodization. How is the “period of the Reformation” to be defined? And to what epoch may the Reformation itself be assigned? For example, the Reformation may be viewed as the culmination of the Renaissance emphasis upon *studia humanitatis* – and thus merely as an episode in the general history of learning and scholarship over the period 1300–1600.⁹ Alternatively, on the basis of the Marxist interpretation of the place of the Reformation in European history – in which the superstructure of the history of its religious ideas is seen as inextricably linked with the substructure of the class struggle – the movement is viewed as a significant epoch in the development of the European bourgeois revolution.¹⁰ A further possibility is to view the Reformation as a significant episode in the transition of European countries from territorial states to sovereign powers in the period 1450–1660.¹¹ The danger is clearly that such periodization is imposed upon, rather than discerned within, the historical process itself.

The assumption underlying the present study is that the Reformation represents a significant episode in the intellectual, institutional, social, and political history of Europe, capable of being accommodated within a number of schemes of periodization on account of its multifaceted character. For the present purposes, however, the Reformation will be viewed primarily as an intellectual phenomenon. This is not to deny that it possessed other dimensions, nor even to assert that the intellectual element of the Reformation must be regarded as taking precedence over others. It is simply to observe that there was an irreducible intellectual element to the movement, which exercised considerable influence over it, and which thus both merits and demands serious study by all concerned with the Reformation. The Reformation occupies, and must continue to occupy, a legitimate and significant place in the history of ideas. The significance of the period to the self-understanding of the major western Christian traditions obviously lends added weight to these considerations.

While not necessarily suggesting that certain periods in history are genuinely more significant than others, the full significance of any such period – and the Reformation is clearly a case in point – can only be established through comparison with those that preceded it, and those that followed. It is for this reason that it is so important to establish the areas of continuity and discontinuity between the religious thought of the Reformation and that of the late medieval period, in that it is only

through this process that the innovative character and originality of the Reformation may be identified and established.

It will therefore be clear that an essential part of the present task will be the elucidation of the relationship to the religious ideas of the later Middle Ages of both the emerging Lutheran and Reformed theologies, in their formative periods, and the sources and methods employed in their establishment and articulation. It is difficult to speak of “the intellectual origins of the Reformation,” in that the movement simply did not possess the coherence and homogeneity which this phrase suggests. The origins of the Reformations at Wittenberg and Zurich are quite distinct, as will become clear from the analysis presented in this volume. For this reason, a distinction between the Lutheran and Reformed theological communities has been accepted. In part, this reflects the fact that the Wittenberg and Zurich Reformations exercised a significant impact on their regions,¹² and can be argued to have brought into being quite distinct (yet not unrelated) understandings both of the Reformation as a process, and of its distinctive ideas.

Yet there is another reason for accepting this distinction between these two Reformations. It is impossible to approach this question without being affected by the ecclesiological polarizations of the Reformation era, which continue to affect Reformation scholarship to this day. The growing religious and political tensions within Germany in the 1560s and beyond caused an increasingly sharp distinction to be drawn between “Lutheran” and “Reformed” as epithets applied to the two main confessions that developed within the Reformation.¹³ In the early period of the Reformation, the Reformers regarded themselves as evangelicals committed to a common program of theological education and reform. By the second half of the century, however, it was evident that a major bifurcation had occurred within the movement (if, indeed, it had not always been there from the beginning). The political roots of this fissure may be traced back to the abortive Colloquy of Marburg (1529);¹⁴ its intellectual roots, however, must be traced back further, as we shall demonstrate in this volume. By the 1550s, this political bifurcation was complete. One section of the movement, broadly corresponding to the German territories, regarded Luther, his catechisms, and the Augsburg Confession as theological authorities, whereas the cities of the Rhineland and Switzerland recognized the rival authority of Calvin and his *Institutio*, and the Heidelberg Catechism.¹⁵ Although it is evident that the two movements still regarded themselves as heirs

to a common tradition,¹⁶ political and ecclesiological developments, particularly the rise of confessionalism, led to an emphasis upon their divergence, rather than upon their convergence upon matters once held to be fundamental to the Reformation.¹⁷

The developments leading to the introduction of the term “Calvinism” illustrate this point. In the sixth decade of the sixteenth century, a new theological term entered the polemical literature of the churches of the Reformation. “Calvinism” appears to have been introduced by the Lutheran polemicist Joachim Westphal to refer to the theological, and particularly the sacramental, views of the Swiss Reformers in general, and John Calvin in particular.¹⁸ Once introduced, the term rapidly passed into general use within the Lutheran church. In part, this rapid acceptance of the new term reflected intense disquiet within the Lutheran camp concerning the growing influence of Reformed theology in regions of Germany hitherto regarded as historically Lutheran.¹⁹ Elector Frederick III’s open support for the Reformed theology in the Palatinate, especially his introduction of the celebrated Heidelberg Catechism in 1563, was the cause of particular concern. The defection of the Elector from the Lutheran to the Reformed party was widely regarded as an open infringement of the Peace of Augsburg,²⁰ and a destabilizing influence in the region.

The introduction of the term “Calvinist” thus appears to have been an attempt to stigmatize Reformed theology as a foreign influence in Germany. Calvin himself was alarmed at the use of the term, which he rightly regarded as a thinly veiled attempt to discredit the Elector’s espousal of the Reformed faith.²¹ By then, however, Calvin had only months to live, and his protest was ineffective. The term “Calvinism” thus came to be used to refer to the theological views of the Reformed church by its opponents. Students of the Reformation period thus find themselves viewing the period through the distorting lens arising from this most dubious bequest of early Protestant internecine politics. The precise relationship between Calvin and Reformed theology, particularly in the period after the death of Calvin, is considerably more complex than might be expected, and the use of the term “Calvinism” to refer to that theology is to be discouraged.

The present study is conceived as an investigation and interpretation of the relationship between the two wings of the Reformation and the two great intellectual movements of the late medieval period – scholasticism and humanism – with a view to clarifying the intellectual origins

of the European Reformation. This analysis involves both a general overview of the relation between the Reformation and these intellectual movements, as well as a sustained examination of the Reformers' appropriation of the understandings of theological sources and methods associated with these movements. The study opens with a survey of religious thought in the two centuries immediately preceding the Reformation, documenting the inherent doctrinal pluralism that proved to be so effective a breeding ground for the ideas of the Reformers, and allowing the traditional concept of the "Forerunners of the Reformation" to be critically evaluated.

In the two major chapters that follow, the broad outlines of the relation of the Reformation to both humanism and late medieval scholasticism are delineated, taking full note of the developments in our understanding of the nature of both these movements that have been gained in the last half-century, and which have necessitated modification of many traditional interpretations of their relation. These broad outlines are then further developed by three subsequent chapters, dealing with the basis of all theological speculation – the understanding of the sources and the methods to be used. On the basis of this analysis, the clear divergence between the relationship of the early Lutheran and Reformed churches to humanism and late medieval scholasticism becomes evident, accentuating the incoherence of the notion of a single Reformation, as opposed to a series of distinct, yet interlocking and interacting, Reformations. This point is developed more fully in the conclusion, and its implications for our understanding of the Reformation assessed.

But enough of such preliminaries. We must turn to consider the intricacies of the backdrop to the Reformation in the confluence of Renaissance humanism and late medieval scholasticism, as we attempt to cast some light on how that movement came into being, and forged its distinctive ideas.

Part 1

The Intellectual Context

1

The Shape of Late Medieval Religious Thought

The intellectual, social, and spiritual upheavals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries define the context within which the development of the Reformation of the sixteenth century must be approached. Although it has often been suggested in the past that the late Middle Ages was merely a period of general cultural and theological disintegration,¹ it is now appreciated that it was also a period of remarkable development which sets the scene for the Reformation itself.² In this chapter, I propose to present a general survey of the religious situation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a prelude to an analysis of areas of continuity between the late medieval and Reformation periods.

The Rise of Lay Religion

It is now generally agreed that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not witness the general decline in interest in the Christian religion in western Europe that was once thought to have taken place.³ A careful examination of parameters such as church attendance or religious bequests and endowments – not to mention the new interest in pilgrimages and personal devotion – points to the vitality of Christian life in pre-Reformation Europe.⁴ The remarkable number and variety of books published for private devotional purposes is a clear indication of how important lay piety had become within an increasingly articulate and affluent laity.⁵ Although it is clear that there was a growing anticlericalism in many European cities,⁶ the development of this phenomenon was not solely a reflection of growing irritation with clerical privilege.⁷ The rise in piety and theological awareness on the part of the laity – particularly evident in the manner in which speculative

theology was subordinated to Marian devotion in popular literature⁸ – inevitably led to a growing dissatisfaction with the role allocated to the clergy in the order of salvation.

The close relationship that existed between education and lay piety in the later Middle Ages is indicated by the fact that the remarkable growth of interest in education in the fifteenth century was primarily associated with monastic houses, particularly those of the *devotio moderna*. The Brethren of the Common Life occupy a strategic location, historically and theologically, in that their distinctive conception of the nature of the religious life can be argued to mediate between the cloister and the world, engendering values and attitudes that can be seen as characteristic of the transition from the medieval to the early modern period.⁹ The *devotio moderna* can be regarded as the distinctive spirituality associated with the order, which undergirded its programs of education and monastic reform.¹⁰ Although the early *devotio moderna* was not primarily concerned with popular education, but rather with the reformation of monasteries,¹¹ it rapidly assumed a major pedagogical role in the fifteenth century. The student hostels attached to the major monasteries of the Brethren of the Common Life extended their interest in the pastoral welfare of their students to include their education. Inevitably, the piety of the *devotio moderna* was transmitted in this education process. The monastic educational program resulted in an increasing consciousness of the rudiments of a well-established spiritual tradition, as well as the elements of Latin grammar, in the laity of the later medieval period.

The connection between the *devotio moderna* and individuals such as Erasmus,¹² and institutions such as the universities of Paris¹³ and Tübingen,¹⁴ serves to indicate how piety and pedagogy were intermingled in the period. Although there are indications that the educational standards of the clergy were themselves improving toward the end of the fifteenth century, the new educational movements were steadily eroding the advantage the clergy once enjoyed over the laity. All the indications are that piety and religion, if not theology itself, were becoming increasingly laicized toward the end of the medieval period.

The impact of the rising professional groups in cities throughout Europe in the late fifteenth century was considerable. No longer could a priest expect to satisfy his urban congregation by reading a Latin sermon as an adjunct to the reading of the mass – an intelligent and fresh sermon was required, if the priest was to be seen to justify his

position within society. No longer could he expect to justify his privileged position in urban society merely with reference to his calling.¹⁵ At a time of economic depression there was widespread criticism of priests, who were both supported by the public and exempted from the often punitive taxes they faced.

The phenomenon of anticlericalism was widespread, and not specifically linked to any area of Europe. In part, the phenomenon reflects the low quality of the rank and file clergy. In Renaissance Italy, it was common for parish priests to have had virtually no training; what little they knew they gleaned from watching, helping, and imitating. Diocesan visitations regularly revealed priests who were illiterate, or had apparently permanently mislaid their breviaries. The poor quality of the parish clergy reflected their low social status: in early sixteenth-century Milan, chaplains had incomes lower than those of unskilled laborers. Many resorted to horse and cattle trading to make ends meet.¹⁶ In rural France during the same period, the clergy enjoyed roughly the same social status as vagabonds: their exemption from taxation, prosecution in civil courts, and compulsory military service apart, they were virtually indistinguishable from other itinerant beggars of the period.¹⁷

The French situation illustrates especially well the growing alienation of the laity from their clergy. The fiscal privileges enjoyed by clergy were the source of particular irritation, especially in times of economic difficulty. In the French diocese of Meaux, which would become a center for reforming activists in the period 1521–46, the clergy were exempted from all forms of taxation, including charges relating to the provisioning and garrisoning of troops, which provoked considerable local resentment. In the diocese of Rouen, there was popular outcry over the windfall profits made by the church by selling grain at a period of severe shortage.¹⁸ Clerical immunity from prosecution in civil courts further isolated the clergy from the people.

In France, the subsistence crises of the 1520s played a major role in the consolidation of anticlerical attitudes. In his celebrated study of Languedoc, Le Roy Ladurie pointed out that the 1520s witnessed a reversal of the process of expansion and recovery that had been characteristic of the two generations since the ending of the Hundred Years War.¹⁹ From that point onward, a crisis began to develop, taking the form of plague, famine, and migration of the rural poor to the cities in search of food and employment. A similar pattern has now been identified for the period in most of France north of the Loire.²⁰ This

subsistence crisis focused popular attention on the gross disparity between the fate of the lower classes and the nobles and ecclesiastical establishment.

The vast majority of late Renaissance bishops in France were drawn from the nobility,²¹ a trend illustrated by diocese after diocese. In Meaux, the higher echelons of the ecclesiastical establishment were drawn from the urban patriciate, as were the senior clergy throughout the Brie.²² In the province of Languedoc, the senior clergy were generally outsiders, often nobility imposed upon the dioceses by royal patronage. Rarely resident within their dioceses, these clergy regarded their spiritual and temporal charges as little more than sources of unearned income, useful for furthering political ambitions elsewhere. The noble background and status of the episcopacy and senior clergy served to distance them from the artisans and peasants, and to insulate them from the economic subsistence crisis of the 1520s.

This increasing anticlericalism must not, however, be seen as a reaction against the Christian religion itself, but merely as a growing dissatisfaction with the role and status of the clergy within an increasingly professional urbanized, yet still Christian, society. Similarly, the rising hostility toward scholasticism in theology must not be thought to imply a decline in popular interest in religion,²³ but actually reflects both a growing theological competence on the part of some of the laity (and Erasmus may serve as an example), and increasing interest in nonacademic forms of religion (often expressed in pietistic, sentimental, or external forms) on the part of others.²⁴ To dismiss this latter form of religious expression as “superstition” is for the historian to impose improperly a modern *Weltanschauung* upon this very different period in history.

The advent of printing led to works of popular devotion becoming increasingly accessible to the intelligent and literate laity, and appears to have contributed considerably to the promotion of popular piety, particularly through the growing body of devotional material that now began to appear.²⁵ This technological development was of particular importance in contributing to the remarkable success of Erasmus’s *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* in the first decades of the sixteenth century, a success that unquestionably reflects the fact that it was addressed to precisely such an articulate lay piety, expressing that piety in an intelligent and intelligible form.²⁶ Thus Erasmus’s criticisms of scholastic theology were directed against the form in which it was expressed – particularly the rather inelegant forms of Latin employed by linguistically

challenged scholastic theologians – rather than against the religious ideas that it articulated.²⁷ The remarkable impact of the *Hortulus Animae* at Strasbourg – which went through 25 editions in the 19 years following its publication in 1498 – is a typical testimony to the vitality of the interiorized piety characteristic of the urban professional classes of the later medieval period.²⁸ It is also clear that there was an essential continuity between the piety of the *devotio moderna* and that of the Reformation,²⁹ thus indicating the fertile ground upon which the new religious outlook associated with the sixteenth century movement would fall.

The Crisis of Authority Within the Church

While the challenge to the authority of the church posed by the rise of the lay religious consciousness must not be underestimated, a more serious challenge to that authority had arisen within the church itself. The late medieval period witnessed a crisis in ecclesiastical authority that would ultimately find its expression in the astonishing doctrinal diversity of the fifteenth century. The fourteenth century appears to have opened without any real awareness of what the future held in this respect. The Jubilee of 1300 constituted a splendid backdrop to the publication of *Unam sanctam* in 1302, marking the zenith of medieval papal ecclesiastical ambitions.³⁰ The apparent moral victory that the Pope had secured over the French monarch was, however, shown to be hollow through the humiliation of Anagni, and the establishment of the Avignon papacy in 1309.³¹ The fact that the theological authority of the Avignon popes was largely based upon that of the theology faculty at Paris serves to demonstrate the severe restrictions placed upon them in this respect. Although the Parisian theology faculty supported the condemnation of William of Ockham in 1339,³² in 1333–4 it had forced upon an unwilling John XXII a humiliating alteration of his pronouncement on the beatific vision.³³ The condemnation of Ockham is faintly ironical, in that one of Ockham's chief targets in his *Tractatus contra Johannem* was none other than John XXII's pronouncement on the beatific vision.³⁴ Ockham has, however, added significance on account of his theory of the sources of Christian doctrine. In his *Opus nonaginta dierum*, Ockham developed a theory of doctrinal authority that denied the pope (or, indeed, an ecumenical council) any right to legislate in matters of faith.³⁵ There was thus no fundamental

means by which the pope might resolve the contemporary diversity of belief concerning the eucharist or the assumption of the Virgin,³⁶ or legislate to eliminate the doctrinal diversity that ensued from the erosion of papal authority.

The death of the last Avignonese pope (Gregory XI) led to the Schism of 1378–1417, culminating in the recognition of three rival claimants to the papacy in the aftermath of the Council of Pisa (1409).³⁷ It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the “Babylonian Captivity” of the papacy at Avignon and the ensuing schism upon the medieval church. To whom should believers look for an authoritative – or even a provisional – statement concerning the faith of the church? In a period of unprecedented expansion in theological speculation within the university theological faculties and religious houses of western Europe, guidance was urgently required as to the catholicity of the new methods and doctrines that were emerging. The traditional method of validation of such opinions was by reference to the teaching of the institutional church, objectified in the episcopacy and the papacy, yet the theological and moral integrity of the institution of the church itself appeared to many to be called into question by the events of the Great Schism, and the period immediately preceding it. Furthermore, Ockham had called into question the role of both the papacy and ecumenical councils in such a process of validation, and initiated a debate over this matter continued by Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson, and Johannes Breviscoxa.³⁸ The development of the astonishing doctrinal diversity of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is probably due to the apparent suspension of the normal methods of validation of theological opinions, together with an apparent reluctance (or possibly even an inability) on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities to take decisive action against heterodox views as and when they arose.³⁹

The weakening in the fifteenth century of the means by which orthodoxy might be enforced became more pronounced in the first half of the sixteenth century, as factors such as the continued rise of nationalism in northern Europe, the Franco-Italian war, and the Hapsburg–Valois conflict combined to make the suppression of heterodoxy by force considerably more difficult. The nationalist overtones of the early reforming movements and growing independence of the Swiss and southern German cities, to name no other factors, considerably diminished the ability of the curia to respond to the growing ideological and political threat from north of the Alps. Furthermore, Hadrian

VI failed to press for the convening of diocesan and provincial synods in northern Europe during the years when the possibility of suppressing the new movements was greatest (1522–3). The factors leading to the erosion of such centralized power as had previously existed at this crucial period in history are not fully understood; however, the consequences of this erosion of power are all too obvious, in that the new reforming movements were allowed to develop with minimal hindrance.

The Great Schism was ended by the Council of Constance (1414–17), which elected Martin V as pope on November 11, 1417.⁴⁰ The circumstances under which this council was convened, however, were to occasion a further crisis of authority within the church. In that there were several claimants to the papacy, it was widely held that the only manner in which the matter might be settled was through the convening of an ecumenical council. The fifth session of the Council enacted the decree *Haec sancta*, which affirmed that its authority was derived directly from Christ, and was to be respected even by popes. Although it was on the basis of this presupposition that the election of Martin V took place, the assumption that such authority was invested in a council (rather than the pope) led to disagreement concerning its ecumenicity.⁴¹ The subsequent undermining of the conciliarist position,⁴² culminating in Pius II's bull *Execrabilis* (1460), did not defuse the crucial theological question arising from the rise of the Conciliar Movement: who had the authority to validate theological opinions – the pope, a council, or perhaps even a professor of theology? It was this uncertainty that contributed to no small extent to the quite remarkable doctrinal diversity of the late medieval church.

An additional threat to the authority of the church, understood at both the political and theological levels, arose from the rapid expansion of printing. This new technology permitted the transmission of ideas from one locality to another with unprecedented ease, and posed a formidable challenge to those wishing to ensure conformity to existing ecclesiastical beliefs and practices.⁴³ The hapless task faced, for example, by the French religious authorities as they attempted to stem the flood of evangelical pamphlets and books in Paris from 1520 onwards is an important indication of the general difficulty of controlling ideas in the later Renaissance.⁴⁴ The enforcement of intellectual conformity became an increasingly difficult business throughout western Europe, as the widespread distribution of books broke down traditional social and political barriers to the dissemination of new ideas.

The Development of Doctrinal Diversity

The doctrinal diversity so characteristic of the later medieval period cannot be explained on the basis of any single development. However, of the various factors contributing to this development, in addition to the absence of magisterial pronouncements, several may be singled out as being of particular importance. First, it is clear that a number of quite distinct theological schools emerged during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, with differing philosophical presuppositions and methods. These schools tended to be based upon, or associated with, specific religious orders. As a result, various quite distinct approaches to theology, differing both in substance and in emphasis, may be discerned within the late medieval period. Second, there was considerable disagreement on the nature of the sources of Christian theology, and their relative priority. Of particular importance in this respect is the absence of general agreement concerning the status and method of interpretation of both Scripture and the writings of Augustine of Hippo.⁴⁵ Third, the tension between the rival logico-critical and historico-critical methods became increasingly significant in the later fourteenth century, with a concomitant polarization in areas of doctrine sensitive to methodological presuppositions (such as Christology and the doctrine of justification). Fourth, the rise of lay piety – an important phenomenon for many reasons – proved a near-irresistible force for development in certain areas of theology, particularly Mariology, as an expression of the beliefs and attitudes underlying popular devotional practice and reflection. Fifth, in certain areas of doctrine – most notably the doctrine of justification – there appears to have been considerable confusion during the first decades of the sixteenth century concerning the specifics of the official teaching of the church, with the result that doctrinal diversity arose through uncertainty over whether a given opinion corresponded to the teaching of the church or not. Some of these factors may conveniently be considered at this point, before being developed further in later chapters.

Although the development of theological schools may be traced to the establishment of Tours, Reims, St Gall, Reichenau, and Laon as centers of learning in the ninth century,⁴⁶ the rise of the great theological schools is especially associated with the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the aftermath of the Gregorian reforms. By the end of the
