Alister E. McGrath

Reformation Thought

Fifth Edition

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An Introduction

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Preface to the Fifth Edition

This book is based on a course of lectures I gave to undergraduates at Oxford University during the 1980s and 1990s on the core ideas of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century from about 1500 to 1560. To this day, I still get letters from students who attended those lectures, explaining what they found so exciting about them, and the impact they had on their intellectual development. While the thought of the Reformation remains one of the most fascinating areas of study for historians, it also continues to be of central importance to anyone interested in the history of the Christian church or its religious ideas. This book follows the convention of including mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Anabaptist approaches to the questions under discussion during this "Age of Reformation," aiming for accuracy in scholarship, clarity in explanation, and charity in dealing with disputed questions.

The Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity – the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, shifts in economic and social thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality, and the reform of Christian doctrine. It was a movement based upon a more or less coherent set of ideas, which were believed to be capable of functioning as the foundation of a program of reform and renewal.

But what were those ideas? How may their origins be accounted for? And how were they modified by the social conditions of the period? One serious difficulty – indeed, perhaps the most serious difficulty – facing those new to the study of the sixteenth-century Reformation is a lack of familiarity with the ideas underlying it. While some students of this period already have a good grasp of basic

Christian ideas, perhaps even having a understanding of some of the specific doctrinal debates of this age of Reformation, others will find them unfamiliar, if not incomprehensible.

Many modern students of the Reformation now know relatively little about Christian theology. (The term "theology" has been used by Christians since the third century to mean "talking about God." The word is now widely used to refer to both the core ideas of the Christian faith, and the academic discipline which reflects on these ideas.) For example, the great theological slogan "justification by faith alone" seems incomprehensible to many students of this era, as do the intricacies of the sixteenth-century debates over the eucharist. Why should these apparently obscure issues have caused such a storm at the time? There is an obvious temptation for the student of the Reformation to avoid engaging with the ideas of the movement, and treat it as a purely social phenomenon. Yet this yields a thin and superficial account of a complex and multi-levelled movement, for which religious ideas were important, if not foundational. To study the Reformation without considering the religious ideas which fueled its development is comparable to studying the Russian Revolution without reference to Marx's core ideas.

This book is written for students who want to go beyond a superficial engagement with the ideas of the Reformation, and wish to deal with them seriously. They recognize the importance of these ideas, but are often discouraged from engaging them by the formidable difficulties encountered in trying to understand those ideas, and see why they generated such intense discussion and debate. Many also find themselves overwhelmed by the vast research literature in this field, which has changed our understanding both of the Reformation itself, and of its background in the late Renaissance, particularly in relation

to late medieval scholasticism. Some of this work has yet to filter through to the student, and there is a pressing need for a work which will explain the findings of recent scholarship, and indicate its importance for our understanding of the Reformation during the sixteenth century.

This textbook aims to provide the resource such readers need. It assumes that the reader knows little, if anything, about Christian theology, and aims to provide an entry level guide to the ideas that proved to be so central to this movement in European history, while at the same time distilling the findings of much recent scholarship in its field. It aims to take both *theology* and *history* seriously, exploring the core ideas of this fascinating period, yet being alert to the importance of the historical context within which they emerged and became established. In short, it is a work of *historical theology*, attentive to the complex interplay of ideas and social contexts. This theme can be explored in many ways, from traditional Marxist to more recent post-colonial accounts of the conceptualization of religious diversity and transformation in the German Reformation.

This book arose from many years' experience of teaching the field of Reformation studies to students at Oxford University, and I wish to acknowledge my complete indebtedness to those students. It is they who have taught me just how much about the sixteenth-century Reformation, so often taken for granted, actually needs to be explained. It is they who have identified the points of particular difficulty which need special discussion. It is they who have identified the need for precisely this work – and if the reader finds it helpful, it is those students who must be thanked. I am also grateful to my colleagues from the Oxford University Faculties of Theology and History for many helpful discussions concerning the difficulties

encountered in teaching Reformation thought in the twenty-first century.

This book first appeared in 1988. It was immediately clear that it had met a real educational need. An expanded and revised second edition appeared in 1993. The third and fourth editions of 1999 and 2012 offered substantially increased biographical coverage of major Reformation thinkers, and extended its coverage to include the thought of the English Reformation.

This new edition draws extensively on intensive research into the Reformation era and its context which I undertook recently in producing the fourth edition of my work *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (2020). It retains all the features which made its earlier editions so attractive to its readers, while incorporating additional material and updating the work as necessary, reflecting scholarly developments since the last edition. In response to user feedback, discussion of the ideas of the English Reformation have now been transferred to and incorporated within earlier chapters, thus allowing a greater appreciation of the wider intellectual context within which these emerged.

Alister McGrath
Oxford, July 2020

How to Use This Book

Three words sum up the aims and approach of this textbook: *introduce*; *explain*; *contextualize*. First, the book aims to *introduce* the leading ideas of the European Reformation, and the individual thinkers who introduced and developed them. Like a sketch map, it outlines the main features of the intellectual landscape of this age, providing suggestions for further reading which will allow its readers to add finer detail later. Second, the book aims to *explain* these ideas. It assumes that its readers know little about the Christian theology which underlies the Reformation, and explains what terms such as "justification by faith" mean, and why they are of religious and social relevance. Third, it aims to *contextualize* these ideas by setting them in their proper intellectual, social, and political context. That context includes such great intellectual movements as humanism and scholasticism, and the political and social realities of the imperial cities of the early sixteenth century.

So how should you use this book? How can you get most out of it? To answer this question, we need to look at its structure, which has two main parts.

1. *The Context of the Thought of the Reformation*

Following an introductory chapter, providing a sketch map of the great movements of reform and renewal which we today know as "the Reformation," identifying its main elements and some of the issues it raised, the next four chapters of the book set the historical and intellectual context for the great debates of the Age of Reformation. The second chapter provides an overview of some of the cultural and social issues which emerged in western

Europe during the late Middle Ages, which are thought to have contributed to the development of local reforming movements within the western church from the 1490s, particularly in Spain and Italy.

We then turn to consider the two major intellectual movements that are known to have had a significant impact on early sixteenth century religious thought – Renaissance humanism and medieval scholasticism. The third and fourth chapters of this book consider the leading ideas and representative figures from this period, considering their intellectual backgrounds, religious agendas, and contributions to the Reformation debates. The fifth chapter offers brief biographical sketches of some of seven significant figures of the Reformation, in preparation for the sustained engagement with the ideas of the movement in the second part of the work.

2. *The Core Themes of Reformation Thought*

The second major section consists of six chapters (6–11) which engage the main themes of Reformation thought – such as the authority and interpretation of the Bible, the doctrine of justification by faith, and the nature of the church. In each case, considerable care is taken to explain the positions of a range of contributors, including Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Catholic. At several points, significant English contributions to these debates are noted, referencing key English writers such as William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer. Although earlier editions included a chapter dedicated to the thought of English writers, their dependence on their continental counterparts made it more appropriate to integrate them into the thematic discussion of issues, and thus allow their significance to be better understood. A final chapter (Chapter 12) considers how the ideas of the Reformation

age spread internationally, and their impact on the historical process.

So how should you use this book? My correspondence with users of earlier editions suggests that most fall into one of two groups. I shall briefly describe these two broad categories of readers, and explain how each can get the most out of this textbook.

Some readers will want to go deeply into the thought of the Reformation period, understanding both its historical context and evolution and wider cultural and historical significance. They should read the book in its totality in the order in which the material is presented. This allows a cumulative and progressive approach to Reformation thought, in that each chapter can build on the foundations laid earlier. It is easier to understand the nature and significance of the theological debates of the age of Reformation if you know about their historical context.

Others, however, will want to master the key ideas of the Reformation, aiming to gain an understanding of their theological significance. For such readers, the historical and cultural context is not of pressing importance, and can be explored later. These readers should begin at Chapter 6, and end at Chapter 11. You will find discussion of certain points that reference earlier chapters – especially relating to Renaissance humanism and medieval scholasticism. You can either ignore these, or follow them through later. The work has been designed to allow you to understand the theological issues debated in the age of Reformation, without requiring a detailed historical knowledge of their background and context. You may also find it interesting to consider the longer-term significance of these ideas, which is discussed in Chapter 12.

This work also includes a series of appendices that deal with difficulties which experience suggests most students

encounter as they read works relating to the Reformation. What do these abbreviations mean? How can I make sense of those references to primary and secondary sources? What does “Pelagian” mean? Where should I go to find out more about the Reformation? These questions and others are dealt with at length, making this book especially valuable to those new to the field. I assume that the reader speaks no language other than English, and all Latin quotations or slogans are therefore translated and explained. Although the text of the work draws extensively upon foreign language scholarship, I have woven this seamlessly into the analysis, and limited my bibliographies to works that are available in English.

1
Introducing the Age of Reformation

Many students approach the ideas of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century in much the same way as medieval travelers approached the vast dark forests of southern Germany – with a sense of hesitation and anxiety, in case what lay ahead should prove impenetrable. They often feel like explorers venturing into an unfamiliar world, at times overwhelmed by the unmapped wilderness ahead of them, in which they could easily become lost. Many find themselves longing for a guide who will lead them through what sometimes seems like a dense and impenetrable jungle.

It is understandably difficult for a student who has been immersed in the secularism of modern western culture to come to terms with a movement that was so clearly motivated by religious ideas. It is tempting to marginalize these ideas and view the sixteenth century through the lens of the modern period. Like any historical phenomenon, however, the Reformation demands that its interpreters attempt to enter into *its* world-view. We must learn to empathize with its concerns and outlook, in order to understand how these affected the great flux of history. The Reformation in Switzerland and Germany was directly based upon religious ideas which demand and deserve careful consideration. Even in England, where local conditions led to political factors having a somewhat greater influence, a significant core of religious ideas and concerns shaped the development of the reforming programs of the age. This book aims to explain as clearly as possible what the religious ideas underlying the Reformation were and how these impacted on individuals

and communities. So what do we mean by this idea of "Reformation," or the phrase "An Age of Reformation"?

The Concept of "Reformation"

Like many other terms used by historians to designate eras in human history – such as "Renaissance" or "Enlightenment" – the term "Reformation" is open to criticism. For example, the twelfth century witnessed a comparable attempt to reform the church in western Europe – but the term "Reformation" is not used by historians to designate this earlier movement. Other terms might be thought by some to be more appropriate to refer to the sixteenth-century movement we shall be studying in this work.

The term "Reformation" does not designate a specific chronological period – such as "the sixteenth century" (a block of time that is easily demarcated) or "the Middle Ages" (which proves rather more difficult to define). Like the term "Renaissance," it is an interpretative category – a way of mapping out a slice of history in which certain ideas, attitudes, and values were developed, explored, and applied. The present book uses the term "Reformation" in a restricted sense, engaging the leading individuals, ideas, and movements working for the reform and renewal of the church in western Europe over the period 1500–60. As the title of this work makes clear, its particular focus is on the *ideas* that lay behind the Reformation in its various forms. How did they arise? How were they understood? What was their appeal? And what were their consequences?

The term "Reformation" has achieved wide usage, and there are no persuasive reasons for ceasing to use it. It does, however, need to be used with caution. The historian John O'Malley makes an important point that needs to be taken seriously. Terms such as "Reformation," "Counter

Reformation," and "Catholic Reformation" are not, he cautions, "simple ideas." Rather, they "subtly directed attention to some issues and away from others, highlighted certain phenomena and cast others into the shadows, admitted some evidence but filtered out the rest."[1] O'Malley's point is that we need to be attentive to the historical evidence, and not allow ourselves to become trapped by preconceived ideas about what the Reformation *ought* to be, or whether it was a *good* thing or a *bad* thing.

The term "Reformation" has come to be generally accepted as the proper designation for reforming movements within church and society in the first half of the sixteenth century, partly because the movement was linked with the recognition of the need for a significant overhaul of the institutions, practices, and – though perhaps to a lesser extent – the *ideas* of the western church. The term, which has achieved wide acceptance, helpfully indicates that there were both social and intellectual dimensions to the movement which it designates. Christianity was woven into the social fabric of western Europe at this time, and the demands for reform included both a review of aspects of the Church which appeared to have become corrupt, and its ideas, some of which were called into question by the new biblical scholarship of the Renaissance. Reform was thus needed at the level of institutions and ideas; it was a demand for both social and theological change.

As it is used in the historical literature, the term "Reformation" is generally understood to enfold four basic components: Lutheranism, the Reformed church (often referred to as "Calvinism"), the "radical Reformation" (often referred to as "Anabaptism") and what was once called the "Counter-Reformation" but is now generally known as the "Catholic Reformation." In its broadest sense, the term "Reformation" is used to refer to all four movements. Some recent studies of this age have used the

plural form “Reformations” to suggest that the Reformation was a multi-faceted movement, or a loosely connected set of distinct reforming movements, rather than a single coherent movement with local adaptations.

The term “Reformation” is often used in a somewhat more restricted sense to mean “the Protestant Reformation,” thereby excluding the Catholic Reformation. In this sense, it refers to the three Protestant movements noted above. In some scholarly works, the term “Reformation” is used to refer to what is sometimes known as the “magisterial Reformation,” or the “mainstream Reformation” – in other words, the form of reformation that was linked with the Lutheran and Reformed churches, rather than with the more radical Anabaptists. Although this work focuses on the ideas of the Protestant Reformation, it is attentive to the concerns and ideas of the Catholic Reformation, which clearly merit discussion and consideration.

The unusual phrase “magisterial Reformation” needs explaining. It highlights the way in which the mainstream reformers developed a generally positive relationship with secular authorities, such as princes, magistrates, or city councils. Whereas the radical reformers regarded such authorities as having no rights or authority within the church, the mainstream reformers argued that the church was, at least to some extent, subject to the secular agencies of government. The magistrate had a right to some degree of authority within the church, just as the church could rely on the authority of the magistrate to enforce discipline, suppress heresy, or maintain order. In contrast, Anabaptism was opposed to recognizing any form of secular authority within the church. The 1534 Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster, which had to be ended by force, was widely seen as a threat to social stability throughout western Europe, and led to reforming movements throughout Europe being tainted by association with social anarchy – a

concern explicitly noted by Calvin in the preface to the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), addressed to the king of France.

All these senses of the word “Reformation” will be encountered in historical and theological works dealing with the sixteenth century. The term “magisterial Reformation” is increasingly used to refer to the first two senses of the term (i.e. enfolding Lutheranism and the Reformed church) taken together, and the term “radical Reformation” to refer to the third (i.e. Anabaptism). Although the present work is primarily concerned with the ideas of the magisterial Reformation, it includes discussion of all the components of this age of Reformation, including the Radical and Catholic reformations.

So how does the term “Reformation” map onto the related term “Protestant”? The term “Protestant” began to be used in the aftermath of the Second Diet of Speyer (February 1529), which voted to end the toleration of Lutheranism in Germany. In April of the same year, six German princes and fourteen cities protested against this oppressive measure, defending freedom of conscience and the rights of religious minorities. The term “Protestant” derives from the Latin term *Protestantes* (“those who protest”), which was used to refer to those who dissented from this suppression of religious minorities. It is therefore not strictly correct to apply the term “Protestant” to individuals prior to April 1529 or to speak of events prior to that date as constituting “the Protestant Reformation.”

The term “evangelical” is often used in the literature to refer to the reforming movements at Wittenberg and elsewhere (e.g. in France and Switzerland) prior to this date. The French term *évangelique* and the German term *evangelisch* were regularly used at the time within such early reforming movements to indicate their desire to

return to forms of Christian life and thought in line with the New Testament. Both these words derive from the Greek word *evangelion* (“gospel”), indicating the need to return to the New Testament to rediscover the core themes of the Christian faith. Although the word “Protestant” is now often used to refer to individuals or ideas dating from this earlier period, this use is anachronistic.

In what follows, we shall consider the main elements of the Reformation. While it is important to note their distinct identities and agendas, these elements interacted with each other, creating a process of self-definition which often took oppositional forms. Although, for example, Lutheran and Reformed communities shared similar agendas, the growing need to distinguish between them for political and social reasons, particularly in parts of Germany during the 1560s, led to increasing pressure to identify their points of difference.

The Lutheran Reformation

The Lutheran Reformation is particularly associated with the German territories and with the pervasive personal influence of one charismatic individual – Martin Luther (1483–1546). As we shall see, Luther was particularly concerned with the doctrine of justification by faith alone (Latin: *sola fide*), which became the central theme and focus of his religious thought. The Lutheran Reformation was initially an academic movement, concerned primarily with reforming the teaching of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Wittenberg was not a major university, and the reforms introduced by Luther and his colleagues within the theology faculty attracted little wider attention. It was Luther’s personal activities – such as his posting of the famous Ninety-Five Theses (October 31, 1517) and the Leipzig Disputation (June–July 1519) – which brought the reforming ideas in circulation at Wittenberg to the

attention of a wider (though not always appreciative) audience.

Strictly speaking, the Lutheran Reformation really began in 1522, when Luther returned to minister in Wittenberg from his enforced protective isolation in the Wartburg castle (see pp. 98–9). Luther had been condemned by the Diet of Worms in 1521. Fearing for his life, certain well-placed supporters removed him in secrecy to the castle known as the "Wartburg" until the threat to his safety had passed. (Luther used his enforced isolation to begin translating the New Testament into German.) In his absence, Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541), one of Luther's academic colleagues at Wittenberg, began a program of reform at Wittenberg which threatened to degenerate into chaos. Convinced that his own presence was needed if the Reformation was to survive Karlstadt's ineptitude, Luther emerged from his place of safety, and returned to Wittenberg.

At this point, Luther's program for academic reform changed into a wider program for the reform of German church and society. No longer was Luther's forum of activity the university world of ideas – he now found himself regarded as the leader of a religious, social, and political reforming movement which seemed to some contemporary observers to open the way to a new social and religious order in Europe.

In fact, Luther's program of reform was actually more conservative than that associated with his Reformed colleagues, such as Huldrych Zwingli. It also met with rather less success than some anticipated. The movement remained obstinately landlocked within the German territories, and – the kingdoms of Scandinavia apart – never gained the foreign power-bases which had seemed to be, like so many ripe apples, ready to fall into its lap. Luther's