

10-1-1959

Why the Reformation Occurred in Germany

Gerhard Ritter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ritter, Gerhard (1959) "Why the Reformation Occurred in Germany," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 30, Article 71.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol30/iss1/71>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Why the Reformation Occurred in Germany*

By GERHARD RITTER

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article is printed by the kind permission of the editors of *Church History*. It was published in that journal in the June 1958 issue.

AT the end of the Middle Ages, the moral prestige of the old papal church was severely shaken in all the countries of Europe. Open criticism of its moral shortcomings and its organizational defects had been going on for centuries. To the diverse splinter movements of heretical sects (which were never wholly suppressed) had been recently added the great reform movements of the Wyclifites and the Hussites. But even they had brought about no lasting and widespread upheaval. Ultimately the old hierarchy had always prevailed. Why then did the Germans, a people slow to be aroused, fond of order, and faithful to the church, take it upon themselves to carry out the most prodigious revolution in the church? And why did only their revolt against the papal church have such vast and enduring consequences?

By way of answer, it is of course not enough to cite the adverse outcome of the council proceedings, particularly in Germany, the "gravamina of the German nation," and the reformatory efforts of the German territorial governing bodies. For these complaints and reform efforts made no headway in the direction in which the Lutheran Reformation was later to move—towards a renewal of church life in its innermost regions, one which would start from a new understanding of the Christian revelation rather than from patchwork improvement of the outward deficiencies of the ecclesiastical system.

It is true that this decisively new impetus to reform was entirely the personal deed of an individual of genius, without example or precedent: the deed of Martin Luther. But how did it happen that in Germany it was not immediately branded as heresy and stamped

* Translated from the original "Kirche und geistiges Leben in Deutschland um 1517" (Chap. 8 of the author's *Die Neugestaltung Europas im 16. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1950), by G. H. Nadel.

out, but met with a loud response, which did not even abate when it became universally evident that the attack shook the dogmatic foundations of the old priestly church? Could this response perhaps become intelligible in the light of the special nature of German Christian piety?

A person coming at this time across the Alps from Italy would sense immediately the vastly greater intensity of ecclesiastical and religious life among the Germans. The secularization of existence, the fading of the Christian ascetic ideals of the Middle Ages, encountered at the Renaissance courts of the South are not yet felt. All life is still consummated in the shadow of the mighty cathedrals, which dominate the panorama of the German city. With unbroken force the Christian teaching of the world to come still determines all forms of life; its influence, indeed, seems to wax continuously. Pious foundations become alarmingly numerous. Hundreds of clerical benefices, many dozens of altars, accumulate in the great churches; in Cologne, a good third of built-up ground was said to have been church property, and in some other places every tenth inhabitant was said to have belonged to the clergy. The sumptuous furnishings even of small village churches and the daily influx of churchgoers never cease to astound foreign travelers. The ecclesiastical organization of the masses pushes rapidly ahead. All kinds of lay brotherhoods, for the care of the poor and the sick, for the erection of homes, for common devotions, increase in number and magnitude with extraordinary speed. Every mendicant order attracts such associations; but still others spring up like weeds, and their spiritual control and supervision cause the church authorities no little concern. These groups teach their members unselfish service of their neighbors, but at the same time an outward sanctimoniousness which is shrewdly calculated to secure for itself certain salvation in the next world by multiplying prayers and oblations. Church devotions have become popular, the most sacred has become commonplace; very often, religious excitation is combined with a rank mania for sensation and miracle. The system of pilgrimages and relics, with its thousand frauds, the spread of the belief in witches, the alarming frequency of religious epidemics, of eschatological states of excitement in the masses — all these are repellent enough. But who could on their account overlook the numerous

testimonies of profound and genuine piety, the deep poetic touches of the cult of Mary with its reflections in poetry and the plastic arts and the moral effects of spreading the church's teachings among the people?

Now what is peculiar is how closely this very vigorous popular piety is combined with severe, even embittered, criticism of the church and of her clergy; this attitude contrasts very noticeably with the blind devotion of the Spanish masses to the church. This criticism, voiced with equal severity among all classes of the German people, is itself a testimony, not perhaps of diminishing, but rather of live and increasing interest in religion and the church. There is, indeed, nothing which excites public opinion more than the church and its preaching. Among the masses, and in particular among the peasants, the preaching of the radical mendicant friars of the ideal of the propertyless church, in contrast to the prelates grown rich and unscrupulous, is most effective; in the agitation carried on by nameless hole-and-corner preachers, this ideal is not infrequently combined with communistic ideas in the style of the Hussites and with apocalyptic expectations of the imminent end of the world. Among the urban middle classes there is primarily the sound common-sense criticism of excessive church privileges and of the contradiction between the claims of the clergy to spiritual authority and its scandalous manner of life; finally, there is also the misuse of mass devotion by the sellers of relics and indulgences, whose fraudulent practices do not deceive the burgher's sober business sense. The lazy dronelike existence of monastics and of so many recipients of church benefices arouses the ire of the diligent artisan; the democratic consciousness of the new age offers resistance to the aristocratic, dignified, and contemplative mode of life of the higher clergy. The burgher is also apt to be critical of the overly artful scholastic sermon whose content is often overloaded with theological subtleties, of the involved casuistry of canon law and its procedures of penance; he desires an unsophisticated form of Christian teaching accessible to all, a straightforward handling, intelligible to the layman, of the church's authority to punish. The noble too has his bitter complaints against papal administration of benefices and financial practices. And finally, among men of letters — that is to say, above all among the members of universities, academic grad-

uates, the more studious clerics, and certain of the urban patriciate — the Humanists' criticism of church tradition gradually gains ground.

For in Germany too the reverence of the Italian Humanists for classical greatness of soul, for the beauty of classical forms of life, art, and poetry, found enthusiastic followers. At princely courts here and there, in the patrician houses of the great south-German imperial cities, and at most of the universities, the imitation of Italian patronage of arts and letters, of Italian "academies" and literary circles was begun; letters and poems were exchanged in artful and laboriously turned Latin; old authors, ancient coins, and all sorts of antiquities were unearthed and collected. The best fruit of these scholarly and semi-scholarly efforts was a literature which for the first time sought after the historical origin of the German character. It traced and published German historical sources of the Middle Ages, collected old-German folk-customs, proverbs, and the like, and created an ideal of a genuine Germanic character which in its essentials went back to the *Germania* of Tacitus. Together with this went all kinds of empty rhetoric, false pathos, courtly flattery (especially in the service of the house of Habsburg), fanciful creation of legends, and even deliberate falsification of history. Yet German national historiography received its first strong impetus from the semi-dilettante efforts of Celtis, Cuspinian, Trithemius, Wimpfeling, Bebel, Naclerus, Peutinger, Pirckheimer, and many others. Chroniclers like Aventin and scholarly antiquaries like Beatus Rhenanus rose far above the craft of the medieval chronicler. Such juridical learning as Ulrich Zasius' and Bonifacius Amerbach's challenged for the first time the heretofore undoubted preeminence of the Italian jurists. Cosmographers like Sebastian Münster and Martin Waldseemüller, orientalists like Reuchlin and Pellican founded new branches of learning. The rigid formula of scholastic tradition was attacked from all possible angles, and ample scope was obtained for new branches of knowledge, for a new, freer view of the world. All this added considerably to the strengthening of the national self-consciousness of educated Germans. They would no longer allow themselves to be called barbarians by the Southern people. It became a favorite theme of patriotic literature to praise the ancient virtues of the German character by calling on Tacitus

and to contrast German bravery and fidelity with Latin cunning and frivolity. Thus humanistic literature soon gained a keenly nationalistic trait. It turned against the "hereditary enemy," France, in the service of imperial foreign politics, and against the Roman curia, in the service of the German imperial estates and their "gravamina." But it met invariably with greatest approval when it treated the favorite theme of the time: the faults of the church.

The Humanists' own contribution to this theme was chiefly the derision of the paltry education of the average cleric. There was mockery of the "barbarous" Latin, the peasantlike bearing, and the "stinking cowls" of the mendicant friars, and the like, closely combined, naturally, with the usual jokes on concubinage, public immorality, and the high living of the priests. The most pointed satire of this kind was the collection of the fictitious *Dunkelmännerbriefe*, produced by Hutten's circle of friends. In it the new literary estate, whose self-respect was severely offended by the church's censorship of the great scholar Reuchlin and of his propaganda for Hebrew literature, gave vent to its need for vengeance in quite unmeasured and obscene terms. Among the criticism of the church must also be reckoned the Humanists' fight against scholastic learning and theology with its empty subtleties and artificialities. But this fight remained fruitless as long as it would merely destroy without erecting a truly all-embracing new ideal of learning and culture which went beyond the introduction of new style forms and new academic subjects (such as Greek and Hebrew grammar). Only two of the Humanists on German soil, however, were capable of this: Rudolf Agricola, who died in his youth in 1485, and Desiderius Erasmus. Both belonged to the cultural circle of the Netherlands.

What the German Humanists at once understood and took from the lifework of the great Dutchman was first its satirical, condescending criticism of the outward aspect of the late medieval church: the scandalous mode of life and ignorance of her priests, especially of the monks, the dull superstition of the populace, the excess of her ritual, her misuse of spiritual power for secular purposes, and the degeneration of her theological learning. In his *Praise of Folly* he could put more cleverly and aptly than anyone else the doubts and objections which the sound common sense of the German burgher had long raised. The new wide outlook on the

world and on life which stood behind this admittedly went over the heads of most German readers as far as its final aims were concerned. It was the ideal of an intimate union of humane and liberal culture, of humanity in the sense of the old Hellenic and old Roman patrician society, with the Christian ethic of love as defined in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The "philosophy of Christ," as Erasmus imagined it, set out to reconcile the consciousness of the natural dignity and moral strength of man, newly sprung up in Italy, with the teaching of Christ's act of redemption and our duty to follow it; it set out to unite the belief in the unique value of the Christian revelation with the recognition of religious truth in the great spiritual creations of all peoples and all times. This was possible only with the aid of many ambiguous, often contradictory, theological formulations which barred the great mass of German readers from a deeper understanding of the Erasmian ideals of life. They exercised their strongest influence outside territorial Germany: we shall meet them in the path of the Swiss and Dutch Reformation and also repeatedly in the Latin countries and in England. Erasmus was in any event far removed from the emphatic nationalism of the German Humanists and from their crude contentiousness; he lived in a cosmopolitan world of learning beyond all nationalistic boundaries and shunned nothing more than any threatened intrusion of the noise of great political struggles into the edifying calm of his scholarly existence. If in Germany he was despite this hailed with extravagant enthusiasm as leader, indeed as prophet and champion of a new age, this was largely a misunderstanding. Erasmus' tender, subdued philosophy of life and his dignified and delicate scholar's personality were not made for the severe and decisive spiritual and political battles towards which Germany now advanced. Yet his theology showed certain genuinely German traits, which separate him clearly from Italian Humanism and which help to explain the astonishingly powerful effect he had on Germany despite all his cool cosmopolitan restraint.

Even the most passionate and most embittered German criticism of the church could still be called the anger of disillusioned love. The very heat of the Germans' zeal proves how much the message of the church meant to them, how heavily the decadence of spiritual life weighed on their soul. The indifference of most Italian Human-

WHY THE REFORMATION OCCURRED IN GERMANY

729

ists to this question was incomprehensible to them, as indeed it was to Erasmus, who would have nothing to do with any kind of neo-paganism. The moral abuses in the life of the late medieval clergy (which are witnessed by testimonies far too voluminous to allow of doubt) were certainly no greater in Germany than in other countries; such monstrous profligacies as those of the papal court of Alexander VI were still inconceivable among the German prelates. But nowhere was the zeal of spiritual and secular authorities to improve these faults greater than in Germany, and nowhere did they inspire more vehement invective. But the more vehement it was, the less progress could any outward reformation make toward its goal. For the root of the evil was deeper: the church, as a Roman legal institution for the administration of means of grace and for the execution of magical, sacred acts, could no longer satisfy the religious needs of the German soul.

In order to understand the special nature of the German piety of that time in contrast to other forms of worship, particularly the Latin, one might best begin with a comparison of religious works of art. What is obscured in theological literature, dominated as it must be by the universal ideas and thought-forms of scholasticism, immediately becomes visible in art: the striving of the German temper for a direct personal appropriation of salvation. Italian religious art preferred scenes of the glorification of the church, her means of grace, her holy fathers and martyrs, and her triumphs; it liked to represent the Mother of God as a princely personage, surrounded where possible by her heavenly retinue. Altar pictures of this kind are found in Germany too, but far more popular are representations of a more intimate kind which move the pious heart: scenes, perhaps, from the life of Mary, with pictures in a middle-class setting, but especially Christ's passion, depicted with the most intimate participation in the suffering of the Man of Sorrows. The *Vesperbild* or *Pietà*, the representation of the Mother of Sorrows with the dead Son on her knee, is the only German contribution to the rich treasury of motives of late medieval religious art. The Last Judgment, too, with its horror, and the story of the wise and the foolish virgins, with its strong appeal to conscience, never failed to move German artists very deeply.

Even this cursory observation indicates intellectual and spiritual

connections which it would be easy to confirm by further examples and to trace through the entire Middle Ages. Time and again a buried antagonism comes to light, a contest between the spirit of Latin churchdom, with its outward legalism, and German piety, with its strong temperamental needs and intense seriousness of conscience. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman church developed more markedly into a legal institution, whose rigid juridical-theological apparatus bound the religious procedure of salvation increasingly to the execution of outward sacred acts and the fulfillment of external sacred norms. But this very development serves to conceal even further the genuine, pristine essence of religion as the direct personal experience of God. The conscience of the deepest and purest German spirits had already revolted against this in the Middle Ages. Outward exhibition of religious experience in glowing ecstasies and visions, in new and striking forms of monastic asceticism, had always been rarer in Germany than the tendency to the most intimate submersion in the divine secrets. None of the founders of the great medieval orders was a German. There was, however, a German mysticism of great historical significance, which can be traced throughout the entire late Middle Ages.

The lay piety of upper Germany and the Netherlands (in which Erasmus too was nurtured), now turning towards more mystic edification, now towards more practical and efficacious piety, shows a common trend in its most varied forms: to relegate the church's sacramental apparatus of grace to lesser importance than the personal assurance of salvation which is sought and experienced by the individual believer in direct intercourse with his God. This, of course, need by no means lead to an attitude of opposition to the church. But the more emphatically the church stressed the indispensability of priestly mediation and juridically extended the concept of the power of the keys, the closer lay the danger that the pious soul would feel this intervention as a disturbing impediment, as an interference of alien power in the innermost secrets of the heart. The boundary between mysticism and heresy was never clearly drawn and was easily transgressed; indeed Germany in the fifteenth century was almost overflowing with mystical heretical sects. And even among the great mass of church people, where heretical inclinations were lacking, the priestly performance of the

WHY THE REFORMATION OCCURRED IN GERMANY

731

sacraments could be regarded more or less indifferently and pushed aside. The more easily this was done, the lower the moral prestige of the priesthood sank, and the misuse of the power of the keys for secular purposes became manifest. Finally, there was no lack of opposition-minded reformers who were able to justify on theological grounds such a rejection or at least devaluation of priestly mediation in salvation. In the writings of the so-called early reformers, especially of the Dutchman Wessel Gansfort, one can already discover a revolutionary bent which resembles the Lutheran conception of the process of salvation. Also outside the mystic tradition, Wyclifite ideas, which proposed to set a new community of saints in place of the hierarchically conceived priestly church, continually excited and engaged German theologians. The conviction that all reform in theology must begin with a return to the oldest and most original truths of Christianity, intelligible to the layman, was disseminated in the widest circles; it too was among the basic teachings of Erasmus and through the instrumentality of his writings it took hold of a very broad stratum of scholars, theological as well as lay. On the eve of the Reformation there were throughout Germany pious men and women to whom, from the point of view of their personal faith, the church with its splendid hierarchy appeared as a place of downright sale and corruption. They lived in a religion of quiet inwardness, in uncertain groping and seeking, of which hardly anything was expressed publicly. But because here was undoubtedly the greatest religious vitality, they too constituted a dangerous threat to the dominance of the old church. It was only a matter of combining the new religious vitality of the "devout in the land" with the already mentioned loud criticism and political opposition, which filled the whole age, against the outward aspects of the church. Once this combination had been accomplished the revolutionary momentum could no longer be arrested.

In retrospect we see both currents of church opposition at work simultaneously though at first independently. The one struggles against manifest abuses and insists on reforms, but in practice does not go beyond a patchwork improvement of institutions. Though it does not reach down into spiritual depths, it is nevertheless most impassioned, impelling, and popular. The other current is less con-

cerned with the outward appearance of the church, but instead touches on the substance of religion and the spiritual roots of church life. Those in power long underestimate its significance because at first it lacks any prospect of practical effect. But at the same time, it has the advantage that practical power can do nothing against it. In the figure of Martin Luther the two currents combine for the first time. He is a man of the people, an agitator in grandest style, and the most popular speaker and writer that Germany has ever produced; possessed of unprecedented hitting power and coarseness of language, of boundless anger and fighting zeal, he sways the masses most forcefully. He shares the moral indignation of his contemporaries over the outward corruption of the church; he uses all the slogans of anticlerical and antipapal opposition of the preceding hundred years and still outdoes them — but at the same time he is the most brilliant and profound theological thinker, the most powerful and strong-willed prophet-figure of his people, and a religious genius whose experience of faith is of unprecedented inwardness and intimacy.

This combination is plainly unique. And thus Luther became incomparably the most formidable opponent of the old church.

Freiburg, Germany