

REFORMING FROM BELOW

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CHAPTER ONE

High above the town of Eisenach in Saxony towers the imposing Wartburg castle. With its great halls, its superb museum, and its Renaissance façade, the Wartburg is one of those rare, haunting places a visitor can never forget. It became famous as the refuge of Martin Luther when he was smuggled there after the dramatic gathering of the German princes at Worms in 1521. Luther had already been excommunicated by the papacy. By the time he left Worms, he was also under the ban of the empire. He had had the audacity to defy the assembled might of church and state. He was now the ultimate outsider, both heretic and outlaw. His marvelous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which still inspires people today, recalls this time of crisis and yet confidence. Luther’s productivity in the Wartburg was remarkable. Despite the threats he was under and his inner turmoil, he succeeded in translating the New Testament into pulsing, vivid German in the unbelievably short period of eleven weeks. Just imagine it!

This, then, is the familiar, glory side of the Reformation. On the southern tower of the Wartburg, however, one notices a bronze plaque that alerts us to a much darker side. It records the solitary confinement there of Fritz Erbe, a peasant arrested in 1533 for his refusal to have his child baptized. Though by all accounts he had been a gentle, good-living man, the Wittenberg theologians and the Saxon Elector wanted him beheaded for what they regarded as a blasphemous act. The Protestant leader, Landgrave Philip of Hesse, however, hoping

that Erbe might still be persuaded to recant, succeeded in commuting his sentence to life imprisonment. At first, Fritz Erbe was imprisoned in the “Stork Tower” in Eisenach, but courageous supporters were able to reach him there and give him some encouragement, so he was transferred to the dark, freezing cold underground dungeon in the South Tower of the Wartburg. He was let down into it by the “terror hole” in the floor, and he remained there until his death in 1548, sixteen years later. He remained firm in his faith to the end, despite the appalling conditions he had to endure and the arguments of the Lutheran preachers who were sent to convince him of the error of his ways.

Martin Luther and Fritz Erbe: Which represents the reality of the Reformation? This latest in a long succession of books about the Reformation has no interest in making either heroes or demons out of Luther and leaders like him, but it will seek to transform the way in which we approach this vast religious upheaval by directing the center of interest away from princes and popes and professors to ordinary people like Fritz Erbe. How did the Reformation, or rather the Reformations—for there were many—affect laypeople, children, the rhythms of day-to-day life? Whose Reformation was it, anyway? Who gave it its momentum? What part did the ordinary urban or village dweller have in shaping it? What about the role of parents or of the great majority of the population that was illiterate or semi-literate? One glance at the table of contents of this book may give some indication of its perspective: it approaches the religious history of the early modern period “from below,” in a grounded and down-to-earth way.

A generation ago, the central focus of a volume such as this one would have been on Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other major reformers. It would have traced in detail the controversy about indulgences (certificates of pardon), the rupture with the papacy, and the breakthrough to a new theology—justification by faith and the supremacy of scripture. It would have proceeded to detail the Catholic response to Lutheranism and Calvinism: the great Council of Trent in the middle of the sixteenth century, the emergence of the Jesuits and other new orders, the programs of Catholic reform. The book-ends holding the narrative together would have been the prolonged hostilities between the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V and the new

nation-states of France, Spain, and England, and the educational and cultural renewal we call the Renaissance.

There remains much, of course, to be said for such an approach. There will always be a need for the history of doctrine and religious concepts, for an account of institutional reform and high politics and the fascinating interplay between them. There will always be a place, too, for grand narrative and for the color and sparkle of towering personalities, with which our period is particularly abundant. It is a dull soul who cannot thrill to that. This book, however, will traverse a different path. Its aim is to alert the reader to quite new streams of research and perspective that are redressing an imbalance—one that has existed for far too long. Academic historians in the past have tended to focus on what is familiar to them: on ideas and political movements and the cultural elite. Moreover, all too often it has been male historians talking about male thinkers, politicians, and clergy. The aim of this book is to open up some new ground, especially for those who have not had the advantage of access to the discussions in learned journals and advanced scholarship, by focusing on the aspirations and frustrations of ordinary folk. How did they react to the religious, social, and cultural upheavals around them? Were they simply swept along, or did they themselves contribute to and modify them?



Fig. 1.3. Here peasants swear an oath of allegiance as they prepare to rise up against their masters. Note the central Christian symbolism of the flag under which they will fight. The woodcut by Pamphilus Gengenbach (c. 1480–1525) dates from 1524.

A NEW DAWN

As we set out on this journey, we have to remember, of course, that the period we are entering was a highly optimistic, utopian one, at an almost infinite remove from our contemporary Western one, with its pluralism and cynicism and disillusionment with all grand narratives and heroic solutions. The literary deposit of this optimism

is to be found everywhere, from Thomas More's famous *Utopia* to Campanella's *City of the Sun*, or Martin Bucer's blueprint for a godly society, the *Kingdom of Christ*. Ordinary people, too, had their own fervent dreams of a New Jerusalem, based on stubborn memories as well as ardent hopes. As we will see, many of them had no intention of sitting down passively when they found their rights and freedoms endangered, of letting things take their course. Others did follow the immemorial path of resignation, but what is so distinctive about this age is that a significant minority dared to blaze a new trail.

Indeed, the stirring of spirits was so extraordinary that to make sense of it, people reached back not only to dimly remembered events in their corporate memory but to texts from prophetic and visionary books from the Bible such as Joel and Revelation. The young would again see visions, and the old would dream dreams. Nothing seemed impossible anymore. A new age was dawning, and it was time to lasso the future. The New Jerusalem would come to pass in their own "green and pleasant land." A good and godly society was in its birth pangs.

After all, were not new lands with unheard-of wealth and wondrous plants and animals being discovered? Signs and portents in the sky were eagerly studied for evidence that changes in church and society were imminent. The whole world, it seemed, was to be turned upside down. In this highly charged atmosphere premonitions of doom mingled with hopes for the return of a Golden Age and for liberation from oppression and corruption. It was as if one were eavesdropping on the awesome battles of the legions of angels and devils in the heavens, of the Archangel Michael with Satan, of Christ with Antichrist. As the infidel Turks banged at the eastern door of Europe, as wars and rumors of wars abounded, it seemed that a cosmic battle was about to be joined, one that would be above all a spiritual battle. Therefore, you had better know which side you were on. Woodcuts, vividly colored broadsheets, popular poems, and songs and ballads set these apocalyptic ideas circulating among ordinary people. Sensational preachers such as Savonarola in Florence and still more fantastic rumors swept through homes and marketplaces. Above all, the printing press had put the vernacular Bible into laypeople's hands, and the message of the ancient prophets and apostles, raw and relevant

and relentless, was released. It seemed that Jeremiah was knocking at the gates of the cities and the apostle Paul was once again opening up people's minds and hearts to the great themes of the crucified and resurrected Lord. It was a time, then, for great hopes and expectations and for incandescent rage, too.

What is the evil brew from which all usury, theft and robbery spring but the assumption of our lords and princes that all creatures are their property? The fish in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the face of the earth—it all has to belong to them. Isaiah 5. To add insult to injury, they have God's commandment proclaimed to the poor: God has commanded that you should not steal. But it avails them nothing. For while they do violence to everyone, flay and fleece the poor farm worker, tradesman and everything that breathes, Micah 3, yet should any of the latter commit the pettiest crime, he must hang. And Doctor Liar [Luther] responds, Amen. It is the lords themselves who make the poor man their enemy. If they refuse to do away with the causes of insurrection how can trouble be avoided in the long run? If saying that makes me an inciter to insurrection, so be it!¹

This quotation is taken from the fiery pamphlet *Vindication and Refutation*, written in 1524 by the preacher Thomas Müntzer. It reminds us that religious enthusiasm could easily slip at this time into social and political radicalism. Those who ministered to the poor on a day-to-day basis saw the oppressive conditions of their lives and could not neatly separate the religious world from the secular one. Müntzer, a conscientious pastor and creative liturgist, wrote, long before Luther, a German Mass for his congregation of tradespeople and peasants in the little town of Allstedt; he went on to play a leading role in the peasant rebellions in Thuringia. Eventually he was to die, after torture, by the sword of the avenging princes. Lutheran and Catholic historians alike have tended to dismiss him in the past as a bloodthirsty terrorist. Yet he was very much part of the whole Reformation movement. He pioneered a mystical theology for ordinary people and sought to open up the scriptures to simple, rough-hewn folk.

THE RADICAL REFORMATION AND THE PEASANTS' WAR

How, then, do we incorporate the whole spectrum of religious concerns into our treatment of the period? How do we free the Reformation from a false intellectualization and spiritualization? Over the past decades there has been a gradual move away from the previous confessional and largely doctrinal and institutional approach. One important step was that from the middle of the twentieth century, historians in the United States in particular began to draw attention to the “left wing” of the Reformation. Mennonites had a special interest in the bitterly persecuted groups of believers who emphasized their simple discipleship of Christ and who became known as the Anabaptists. Up to this time, Lutheran and Calvinist historians from Europe had tended to categorize such radicals either as naive idealists or as bloodthirsty maniacs. Historians such as G. H. Williams, however, have demonstrated that the so-called Radical Reformation needed to be taken seriously as a significant theological and social movement. Williams showed that it embraced a wide variety of groups, from the quietist Anabaptists, who turned their back on all coercion and violence, state-sponsored or not, to the millenarian militants who, for example, attempted to set up a new communal kingdom in the city of Münster in 1534–1535. The emphasis of the radicals on lay leadership and on communal forms of worship and lifestyle commended them to American readers in particular. Their critique of Christendom and their frequent advocacy of tolerance appeared to put them well ahead of their time. Their bravery under persecution also seemed quite inspiring. Though a minority group, they were far from an insignificant one.

Closely associated with this new scholarly appreciation for the Anabaptists and other radicals has been the growing attention paid to the conflagration of the Peasants' War, which spread across most of central Europe in the mid-1520s. Many other peasant revolts preceded it, such as the Peasant Revolt in fourteenth-century England, and many other insurrections were to follow it; nevertheless, until the French and American Revolutions in the eighteenth century, there was to be nothing to rival it in creativity and scope and impact. Marxist historians hailed the Peasants' War as part of the early bourgeois

revolution, and their research on its origins and development contributed considerably to our knowledge of it. As with the Radical Reformation, superb editions of new source material became more readily available, and these editions now sit side by side with those on the “official” or “magisterial” Reformation. The crude, smudgy pamphlets of the period have been painstakingly collected and published in readily available microfiche form.

As a result of this work and because of excellent collections of woodcuts and broadsheets, we are now much better equipped to see what the common folk thought and believed—although caution is warranted. By no means, for example, were all the pamphlets attributed to the stereotypical “simple peasant” written by them! While most Western historians in the late twentieth century were unable to accept the historical-materialist analysis of the Marxists, the importance of the Peasants’ War was beginning to be recognized. By 1975, the 450th anniversary of the rebellion, serious theologians and church historians were noting its intimate relationship to the Reformation. After all, the peasants and tradesfolk who marched under the rebel flag were often advised, counseled, and led by Christian preachers. Their flags themselves featured Christian symbols such as the rainbow, and the articles they drew up to negotiate with the authorities began with a call for proper preaching, quoted scripture, and were inspired by a thirst for divine justice. They saw Christ as their captain, as the Christ of the poor, and they denounced the oppressive princes, bishops, and magistrates because they had, according to the rebels, acted contrary to “law, honor, and God.”

REFORMATIONS, NOT REFORMATION

At the same time, however, as Mennonites and Marxists alerted us to the Radical Reformation and the crucial significance of the Peasants’ War, we were also coming to recognize the plurality and diversity of the Reformation movements. From the 1950s, there had been a renaissance of Catholic scholarship that reminded us of the breadth and depth of humanist and Catholic reformers such as Lefèvre in France or the cosmopolitan Erasmus, who had long been offering their own

programs of educational reform and creating their own lay networks, wanting to take a very different path from a Luther or a Zwingli.

The guild of twentieth-century historians came to recognize that there was not one Reformation. There were many: humanist, Catholic, communal, Zwinglian, Calvinist, Radical. Few were centered like Luther's on universities such as Wittenberg. While not denying the astonishing brilliance of Martin Luther as translator and interpreter

of scripture, as hymn writer and reformer, we began to pay attention to the small army of other reformers and opinion makers, of teachers and city clerks, civic counselors and lawyers. We noted the prevalence of urban sodalities (we would call them book clubs today) and well-staffed professional academies, and the way in which monasteries often harbored alternative opinions.

The reformations were quite varied. Under Cranmer, England went its own distinctive way. François de Sales initiated very attractive and popular forms of Catholic reform in Savoy. In Scotland and the Netherlands grassroots elements worked alongside an insurrectionist nobility. First we began to pay attention to the civic-centered reforms with their focus on the "common weal." Studies appeared on one city after another. But then this was complemented by some remarkable work on rural movements. It became clear that in some areas discontent had been simmering right down to the village level, where new initiatives were being launched to secure resident pastors, their own local church building, and accountable pastoral care. In this "communal reformation," in

both town and country, the emphasis was not on the finer points of doctrine or on restructuring the church's institutions but on the rights and liberties of the common folk, based on divine justice.

Some historians suggested that urban reform in southwest Germany and Switzerland had a distinctive "republican" profile. A reformer such as Martin Bucer, for example, in the bustling trading city of Strasbourg had firsthand awareness of laypeople's

Erasmus to Archbishop Warham 1521

The condition of things is extremely dangerous. I have to steer my own course, so as not to desert the truth of Christ through fear of man, and to avoid unnecessary risks. Luther has been sent into the world by the genius of discord. Every corner of it has been disturbed by him. All admit that the corruptions of the Church required a drastic medicine. But drugs wrongly given make the sick man worse. . . . For myself I am a man of peace, and hate quarrels. Luther's movement was not connected with learning, but it has brought learning into ill-repute, and the lean, and barren dogmatists, who used to be my enemies, have now fastened on Luther, like the Greeks on Hector.²

concerns for the “common good,” while the wealthier patricians, guild members, and even women such as Katharina Schütz Zell began to make their voice heard. Anticlericalism was another particular focus of research. Its opposition to the channeling of power and wealth to the clergy bound together theological and social concerns, the interests of city leaders and the urban poor, including impoverished clerics. Traditional foci of spirituality, such as monasteries or the revered Franciscan and Dominican friars, found themselves being scrutinized by disenchanted lay eyes and often found wanting. This anticlericalism combined with the apocalyptic excitement we have already noticed to sweep aside centuries-old devotional practices such as pilgrimages and the adoration of the saints. Ritual processions were caricatured in the streets, while in pamphlets long processions of derisory words mocked traditions: worshipers brought to the shrines “bread, wine, beer, along with chicken, goose, and horse”; hoping for healing, they offered wax images “in the shape of your diseased legs, arms, eyes, head, feet, hands, cows, calves, oxen, sheep.”³ This focus on anticlericalism points to the popular roots of the Reformation.

What fired anticlericalism? As important as the sermons or tracts of the new generation of reformers was the sense of injustice and exploitation that they were able to tap into. Reformations need fertile social soil if their proposals are to grow roots. Countless early sermons and pamphlets raised very concrete socioeconomic issues, and since they regarded Holy Scripture as an infallible mirror of God’s will for justice, they possessed divine justification for their passionate concern for social justice and at the same time a uniquely authoritative blueprint for a better society.⁴ We have to remember, of course, that in this period no one regarded religion as an individual matter. The Christian gospel, a good individual conscience, and social harmony were seen as quite inseparable.

SOCIAL HISTORY

Perhaps the most groundbreaking change in our understanding of the Reformation in recent times has come from the contribution of social historians. Church historians had tended to work within theological

faculties. Social historians operated within secular history or economics or sociology departments. While not necessarily unsympathetic to theological and religious issues, they have naturally been much more interested in social dynamics and outcomes than in ideas for their own sake. Their researches, too, were based on very different source materials. Most people in our period could not read—perhaps as few as 5 percent, though literacy could be much higher in the towns. Social historians, therefore, have drawn the obvious conclusion that if we are to do justice to the great majority, we should turn our gaze from theological tomes and sermons and institutional records to humble tax records, wills, domestic accounts, marriage contracts, family chronicles. Since wills were crafted for public effect, they throw light on communal as well as individual concerns.

Thus social historians have given us the tools to get closer to the lifestyles and relationships of the vast majority of the population. They have demonstrated the inadequacy of relying upon the aspirational teachings and literature of the preachers, intellectuals, and theologians, which certainly tell us what the latter believed but give little clue as to how much of this fell on fertile ground. A careful analysis, for example, of the reception of the Reformation in Strasbourg “suggests the social specificity of the various forms of Reformation religion.” The upper classes embraced the Lutheran distinction between spiritual and secular freedom; among the tradesfolk, on the other hand, a more radical communitarian Christianity commended itself.⁵ It is not just that people accepted or rejected the new teachings according to where they stood in society: they did not even register what was being said unless it spoke to their own situation.

Social historians also introduced a different interpretive grid, which involves asking a variety of questions, sometimes borrowed from the related field of social anthropology. They have asked questions about kinship and social relationships, marriage and family property, patronage, civic and rural pressure groups. English historians have been particularly helpful in pointing to the role of the local parish, for example, in building community and reconciling feuds.

The perspectives of social historians enable us, therefore, to view reality through another lens, to view, for example, bishops or monasteries or their anticlerical opponents in terms of their social role in

society as well as their spiritual capacity. We have become conscious that the same theological ideas could be quite differently understood by the aristocracy, the lesser nobility, wealthy townsfolk, guildsmen and artisans in the town, and the destitute. Economic historians have also reminded us that much if not most history is made not by startling cataclysmic events such as Henry VIII's break with the papacy but in long, slow movements of change in agricultural practice or commercial innovation or even in climate. The chapters in this book, therefore, rest on a host of unbelievably patient, qualitative and quantitative studies in regional and national archives across Europe.

CULTURAL HISTORIANS

Cultural history has been another rich vein that has increased in value in recent Reformation studies. Our lives, including our religious lives, are framed and informed much less by formal credos or confessions of faith or by papal or synodical pronouncements than by the songs we sing, the illustrations we hang on our walls, the daily rhythms of our lives, the feasts and festivities we celebrate, and perhaps above all our "rites of passage"—how we mark birth and death, growing up into adulthood, forming lifelong relationships, facing illness and death. How do we celebrate and mourn, how do we distinguish between our private and public life, and how are these practices reflected in the spatial design of our homes and streets and city squares and plazas? These days historians of the Reformation work cheek by jowl with historians of art and music, of architecture and language, not to mention historians of food and costume. Material evidence, such as that provided by architecture, funeral monuments, and inscriptions, has also been paid increasing attention. All these contribute to building up some sense of the texture of the lives of ordinary people.

We have learned, too, from the cultural historian that we may understand a church or a society best when we view it not from the centers of power but from the margins. Accordingly, cultural historians have turned our attention to how urban and rural societies treated their "outsiders": the unclean trades, for example, such as the

butchers; nonsedentary groups such as the mercenaries, Gypsies, and wandering players; feared or despised groups such as the Jews and the “witches.” The role that the church has played thus appears in a new light.

The quest, of course, for the “ordinary” or average person can be something of a chimera and can sometimes lead to a false dichotomy between popular and elite culture. Rather fringy outsiders, such as the miller Menocchio with his homespun theories of the universe,⁶ have sometimes been taken to represent popular religion, while entire swaths of Catholic and Lutheran rural and urban dwellers have been labeled submissive pew-fodder and therefore quite uninteresting.

Unlike today's world, however, the “high culture” in the early modern period was not hermetically separated from the “popular culture” of the majority of the population. With one or two exceptions, such as court and university life, people of all classes mixed quite freely. Gradations, of course, were respected, even to the shape and color of the clothes one was allowed to wear. But everyone attended the same church, went to the feasts and festivals together, mixed and mingled in the street and the marketplace. Shakespeare's dramas remind us how philosophical monologues and buffoonery succeeded and complemented one another.

No small part of the challenge of the religious Reformations, therefore, was that they altered life for everyone, not just for the nuns and the monks who were forced out of their monasteries. The changes impinged on every dimension of life. It is true that many of the fundamental patterns of family relationships, with their intimate connection to property rights, proved remarkably resistant to change, but what is astonishing is how many of the subtle textures of daily life were transformed: the intimate discourse and gestures of divine and human love, the practice of prayer and almsgiving, the central metaphors in which God and Christ, church and spirit, individual and communal life were expressed, were transmuted and transfigured. It was not just the furniture of church buildings that changed but, much more fundamental, the furniture of people's minds and hearts. Where such changes took firm root in the imagination, the Reformation was most profound.

REFORMATION AND WOMEN

At long last, too, historians have come to ask a question so obvious that it was universally ignored: Was there a Reformation for women? Within the last generation or so, we have finally woken up to the fact that 50 percent of the people living, thinking, and working in our period were women. Unsurprisingly, much of this is attributable to the relatively new phenomenon of women historians. It is, however, remarkable how long it has taken to “rediscover” the perspectives and contribution of women in this period, whether as mothers or nuns, wives or single women, and to investigate how they crafted their lives, formed their children, and influenced their menfolk. I can still remember my delight at finding a very useful biographical index at a splendid German library but then my growing mortification as it dawned on me that it listed not a single woman.

The role women have played, however, is only one issue. Interest has moved well beyond casting them as either heroine or victim. As scholars have reviewed gender perspectives, they have discovered that virtually all our previous presuppositions about piety and worship, the fashioning of theology, the reading of scripture, the life of children, the realities of home and public life need to be comprehensively revisited. Issues of male honor, for example, impinged hugely on how women were regarded and treated. Historians are beginning, therefore, to look at understandings of masculinity, and as this is addressed, it has become quite clear that the way in which men viewed themselves varied greatly from one region to another and from one time to another. Once the questions were posed, it all seemed so obvious, but why has it taken us so long to get there?

Argula von Grumbach challenging the Ingolstadt theologians to a debate:

I do not flinch from appearing before you, from listening to you, from discussing with you. For by the grace of God I, too, can ask questions, hear answers and read in German. There are of course German Bibles which Martin [Luther] has not translated. You yourselves have one which was printed forty-one years ago, when Luther's was never even thought of. . . .

God grant that I may speak with you in the presence of our three princes and of the whole community. It is my desire to be instructed by everyone. . . .

I have no Latin; but you have German, being born and brought up in this tongue. What I have written to you is no woman's chit-chat, but the word of God; and [I write] as a member of the Christian Church, against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail.⁷

HOTLY DEBATED ISSUES

Many issues remain wide open as this book goes to press. That is good, because it illustrates that there has never been such an exciting time to study Reformation history as now. At virtually every gathering of early modern historians, for example, there is a debate about periodization: How should we carve up the course of Christian history? This is far from being just a typical academic infight. If, for example, we set a starting point around 1520, this suggests a view of the Reformation as an abrupt break from the past, which begins and ends with Luther. It has become increasingly clear, however, as we work through a whole raft of issues—from popular piety to biblical interpretation to institutional reform—that there is substantial continuity with the late medieval period. If, on the other hand, we were to see the Reformation or Reformations as a subset of a much wider Renaissance movement, that could set the starting point far back in the fifteenth century or even earlier. There are economic, social, political, and cultural arguments for a whole host of different positions. In this volume we are opting for the “long sixteenth century” option, which assumes that the early modern period stretches back into the medieval period and extends well into the seventeenth. Again there are unmistakable signs of a revolt against a narrowly European view of this period, recognizing that the new religious movements were already beginning to have an impact on North and South America and Asia.

Another highly controversial area is that of confessionalization. To what extent should we see this whole period as one in which the real motor and determiner of events was the early modern state, with its agendas of centralized control, standardization, and repression of dissenting views? Were theological and religious considerations at best secondary to state propaganda and indoctrination, especially as religious conflict became identified with political rivalry and military confrontation between nation-states? What degree of popular or personal support did the various Reformations really enjoy? This is, of course, a crucial question for a book such as this one, which focuses on the views of the ordinary person.

Ultimately, the answer given may be dependent not only on the evidence available but on the historian's understanding of what

constitutes human nature and human society. As the carefully choreographed Catholic processions wound their way through the streets, however, it is hard to doubt that most people must have felt a heightened sense of solidarity with the earthly community as well as the heavenly community that the processions were prefiguring. On the other hand, the plurality of religious options and the trend toward interiorization of the faith encouraged what the irenic Catholic theologian George Cassander (1513–1566) called “a sort of third type of people,” who found good and bad in both sides and longed for a mediating position. Should we assume, from a patronizing position in the present, that communal identity and personal freedom are necessarily opposed to one another? Recent research has certainly shown that the old distinction between a bourgeois, republicanizing Protestantism and a submissive, politically absolutist Catholicism can no longer be maintained.

Finally, how are we to do justice to the “cross-pollination” that took place in people’s hearts and minds as well as in institutions at this time? How can we represent appropriately the interplay of biblical themes with social unrest, of theological motifs with cultural or nationalist considerations, of personal inclinations with the whole matrix of economic and social determinants? If the traditional style of doing church history sometimes suggested that nothing mattered except ideas and institutions, doctrine and churchmanship, the new can go to the other extreme, with an overwhelming preponderance of social or gender analysis. There has been, of late, something of a revolt against too analytical and determinist readings of this period. It has been suggested that we have permitted the intrusion of anachronistic categories. Do modern political terms such as “liberal,” “conservative,” “radical,” and “reactionary” really help us to understand this period?

It has been emphasized, therefore, that it would be good to treat the language and values of sixteenth-century men and women with the utmost seriousness and not to read them from our perspectives. We need to avoid using “shopworn” modern categories for the time and place we are studying and “patiently seek conceptions better suited to bring out [their] character.”⁸ We have to guard against assuming that common folk were only interested in social outcomes and were not passionately engaged with faith in God and love of their

neighbor. Countless men and women, after all, risked the loss of property, security, and lifelong friendships, put witnessing to their faith above family or marriage, bought forbidden books, harbored fugitive preachers, and stood firm under all manner of threats. Women faced the risk of being shut away for life. Many believers died a ghastly death by beheading or by drowning or at the stake. It seems inappropriate not to take this seriously.

There are undeniable problems of interpretation here. We can never wholly escape from our own vantage point. The task of fusing the horizons of early modern people with our own will always be a challenging one. At the very least, however, their language and thought, their spirituality, their courage and timorousness have to be allowed to appear in their own alien forms. The great sobering corrective for all of us historians is that we are driven back again and again to the sources, social as well as personal. Analysis and smooth synthesis must always be held to ransom by the discordant testimony of the evidence, textual and nontextual. We have to attempt to create from that testimony and the questions of other historians a rich, textured picture of what faith, discipleship, martyrdom meant for ordinary people. We always have to remember that, as Robert Scribner put it, "the ways in which they sought to relate their religious and secular aspects were more varied and complicated than the neat compartmentalizations 'religious' and 'social' imply."¹⁰

Behind the simplest hymn or prayer or action or protest lies a whole raft of factors, associations, hopes, and visions that no individual or team of people can hope to uncover or recover. The past is in the past, and it is forever lost to us. Yet its allure and challenge remain. As in all human relationships,

we may need both to preserve the courtesies and to move beyond them. A respect or even reverence for the people of the past can spur us to stretch our imaginations, to deploy a comprehensive palette

Wilhelm Rem's Augsburg Chronicle of 1524

Then on 15 September the Council had two weavers beheaded furtively; the alarm bells were not rung. The first was called Speiser, a good follower of the Gospel with a good reputation. When they struck off his leg-irons and brought him to the front of the Council Chambers he asked where they were taking him, and they said to him, they intended to execute him. . . . He said, the Council was dealing with him unjustly and violently. . . . It was because of the word of God that he had to die, and he was quite ready to die. He had a good reputation and was a God-fearing man. Then they chopped his head off on the marketplace. . . . They imprisoned many women and men here because of what they were saying, putting them to torture, and expelling many from the city.⁹

that will do justice to their ideas (“the flowing, curative waters of Wittenberg,” as one pamphlet described them) as well as to social and cultural factors, and to trace the way in which groups and individuals tuned in and tuned out of the messages they heard, developed their own idiosyncratic “take” on issues, and spoke out bravely or prudently kept their peace.

I would argue for an approach that respects but does not absolutize the role of ideas, spiritualities, and theologies—which can be valued as genial articulations and responses to the issues generated by the socioeconomic and cultural matrix—but gives equal emphasis to how communities and individuals wove such credos into the warp of their own particular lives. Most communities, after all, expressed their deepest beliefs not in propositional form but in song and ceremony, whether in Catholic processions and pilgrimages or Protestant celebrations of the Lord’s Supper or days of fasting and penitence.

DID ANYTHING REALLY CHANGE?

The jury is still out on the question of the “success” of the religious Reformations. Many would argue that they brought about little significant social or cultural change, pointing quite correctly to the reemergence of clericalism, to the censorship of ideas and books, and to the enforced uniformity of the confessional era. Others note the stubborn resistance of rural communities to reforms that looked all too much like impositions from the city slickers. In my own view, the impact and memory of the Reformations, stumbling and compromised as they often were, remained a motor for highly significant change in the mental outlook and actual lives of so-called ordinary people. The audacious expectation of a comprehensive “Reformation,” the symbolic language of a new dawn, a new age of light, freedom, truth, and justice, kept recurring in different forms: Puritanism, Jansenism, Neoprotestantism. Even liberation theology, it has been suggested, owes much to its Reformation heritage.

The era’s contributions to the Western world we know today are incalculable. New centers of pilgrimage like Wittenberg and Geneva as well as the countless Catholic sites were established. Histories,



February / Man at Fireplace



March / Ploughman



April / Man Pruning



June / Man Hoeing



July / Man Mowing
with Scythe



September / Couple Making
Wine



October / Sower



November / Man Chopping
Wood



December / Disk of Sundays

Fig. 1.4. Woodcuts depicting daily peasant life from a fourteenth-century calendar. Augsburg Johann Schobsser, "Kalendar" (June 1488) in Adam von Bartsch, *The Illustrated Bartsch: German Book Illustration before 1500*, Vol. 86: Part VII, Walter L. Strauss and Carol Schuler, eds. (New York: Abaris Books, 1984), 310–12. See also p. 39 in this volume.

martyrologies, hymnbooks, and “display cabinets,” listing eminent men and women, kept fresh the memories of the new saints, scholars, and confessors for future generations. The Counter-Reformation’s massive building programs, educational initiatives, and networks of care for the sick and the poor left a legacy for the future that cannot be gainsaid.

All the Reformations really posed the same question: What is the church, actually? By the variety of their answers, their stern challenge to tradition and authority, and the consequent polarization of opinion, new discursive fields were created. The resources of word, song, and literature opened up endless options for the interior life and for communal experiments of all kinds. The dream of a church in the prophetic mold was not to be forgotten.