

REFORMATION 500: WHENCE AND WHITHER?

INTRODUCTION

I take you on a journey at the outset to a field close to the railway station in Oxford. You might wander through it and notice little, or your eye might be drawn to four large stones which give you the outline shape of a rectangle. This is all that remains today of Osney Abbey, a medieval monastery, the second largest in England in its day, dissolved as part of The Reformation. Its stones were carted away to help to build the modern and secular university further up the hill, a university which today is synonymous internationally with academic endeavour and excellence. This is what history does to us. This is all that remains of a glorious past that once was present; this is one of the ways also in which what was past is invested in a changed future.

To speak generically of The Reformation is both *important* and *problematic*; *important* because something on the big canvas of Europe religiously and politically did in fact happen, however sporadically and scatterdly across time and place; *problematic* because the use of the term: reformation can tend to freeze in time a concept that is in and of itself elastic, dynamic and repetitive and was life-giving in its day - and has subsequently been taken up by a range of expressions of Christianity as life-giving still. It will be fairer and fuller to speak of The ReformationS. In sixteenth century Europe, principles and concepts, many of them already taking a critical toll on the church catholic before then, found their voice and changed the face of ecclesiastical, civic and economic life. This has resulted in both freedoms and disharmonies with which we continue to live today. This has further resulted in transporting and transplanting European religious polemics into the whole of the known world as the missionary arm of the churches sought to win for Christ souls anywhere and everywhere, locking them into the particularities of 'the one side' or 'the other side.' Ironically, it could be argued that it was Protestant religious toleration that enabled Roman Catholicism, in a new expansionist phase of its own life, to undertake missionary work afresh in the Protestant empires of the new, emerging world.

GOD AND EMPIRE

Reformation and its own aftermath were all done in the name of a God who must ever stand above the exclusivities of religious denominationalism as the primary port of call for any of us in the mature understanding of religious identity. But it has not always been seen like this. The contemporary near-powerlessness of Christianity in European democratic self-understanding and engaged citizenship combined is a distorting filter for us today in understanding what was happening and why it was happening as it was. Religion and identity once marched together as they do in Other World Faiths today. *Go and make disciples of all nations ...* in the wrong hands is an invitation to dominate and to distort even more than it is an invitation to serve and to save. Such expansionism was not the rolling out of piety alone; it marched hand in hand with aggressive colonialism, power and money. Religious superiority carries always with it the temptation to obliterate local inheritance with which it can have only an uneasy traded relationship of suspicion. It came with an inversion of power that is only heightened by internal competitiveness for dominance and territory. Reformation, in and of itself, brings an element of theological and religious cannibalism to the battlefield of change. Colonialization and civilization,

the latter being a self-explanatory paradigm from the perspective of the conqueror, regularly ride roughshod over the culture and the religion of the host nation. Imperialism, as Ancient Rome had long ago shown, has mouths to feed and borders to patrol. Drawing together earth and heaven 'in little space,' as the Christmas Carol expresses it, by means of defined and exclusive religious affiliations, helps wonderfully to concentrate the mind around territorial belonging and the great obsession of all empires: land.

LUTHER AND THE CHURCH

It would be wrong to anaesthetize or shackle the principle that lies within and behind the theological work of reformation. Its theological rationale is one of salvation by Scripture, Grace, Faith alone. The corollary of this is that sanctification in and of itself owes nothing to good and penitential works on our part. The issue at the heart of reformation, then as now, is the classic conflict over the classic question of the integrity and the range of human freewill within an understanding of operational and interventionist divine providence. The conclusion of the exploration of The Reformation Period is that sanctification is a product, not a condition, of an instant justification. On one level, this was a small adjustment of Pauline and Augustinian doctrine, critical and original on the part of Luther himself. Luther had and used his freedom to develop this style of theology in his home territory Saxony while being condemned in Rome. The combination of support and condemnation fuelled his tireless expression and exposition of this simple message: *sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*. For Luther, therefore, striking at doctrinal roots in this way makes his reformation very different from earlier attempts at reforming the church; in fact it offers a radically different picture of church in which all believers are simultaneously sinners and justified, all are equally priests. It also claims high moral ground in being a new and original brand of Christianity through its claim not to be novel and modist but primitive and Biblical. This is the root of its radicalness. This theological recipe went on to develop an anti-ecclesiology such as to deny the Papacy any authority in the church most widely understood along with challenging transubstantiation, compulsory celibacy and monasticism.

FAITH AND POWER

Politically and ingeniously, Luther combined the accrual of patronage with his espousal of princely authoritarianism during The Peasants' War. Power and piety were set to march hand in hand not only in Germany but also in Denmark and Sweden and, as things progressed, in other Scandinavian countries where church life was reorganized and regulated in a way that the Lutheran Reformation underwrote the validity of and lay in the hands of the godly prince. England and Ireland, in their own particular way, followed suit in their own idiosyncratic way. Other Reformers, and alternative Reformations, followed with: Zwingli in Zurich especially with Zwinglianism's combination of uncompromizing biblicism, severe iconoclasm and denial of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This engendered two conflicting confessional traditions; and with Bucer in Strasbourg and Calvin in Geneva, the second, Calvinism (originally of course a term of opprobrium) was a complex interaction of political, religious and social forces in such a way as to create a new tension and balance between ecclesiastical and civil authority so that the church authorities exercised a more independent rule in civic life than in any Lutheran manifestation of reformation thus far. Theologically, Calvin named explicitly the role of predestination in salvation; this marks a significant parting of the ways in that Lutheranism, under

the pen of Melanchthon, became wary of something, namely divine predestination, that has become characteristic of this branch of Reformed thought, even though its roots could be traced in part to Luther's anxieties about the sufficiency of human freedom over against divine freedom. Such Calvinism became the driving force of reformation in parts of Germany, France, Hungary, The Netherlands, England (and Ireland) and Scotland. The Scottish Reformation was made by its reformers, especially Knox, its nobility and its people and followed John Calvin. The English Reformation was primarily political and ultimately an accommodation between Calvinism and Catholicism, somewhat wittingly referred to by one scholar (Peter Lake) as 'avant-garde conformism,' brought about by the ricochet and domino effect of, successively: Henry VIII's overthrow of Papal Supremacy and dissolution of the monasteries; Edward VI's implementation of a widespread introduction of doctrinal and liturgical alterations in a Calvinizing direction resulting in the Prayer Book of 1552 and The Forty-two Articles of 1553; Elizabeth I's reimposition of the Protestant Formularies that had obtained before Mary, her immediate predecessor in the Roman Catholic tradition, sought to reverse a generation of ecclesiastical change along with Elizabeth's instinct for worship based on a traditional church structure with the guiding, if by then departed, hand of the subtle and liturgical Thomas Cranmer who has turned out in so many ways to be the salvation of us all through The Book of Common Prayer. It is the Anglican conviction to this day that our doctrine is to be found in our liturgy and *vice versa*. This gives us today, after the further impact on our polity of not quite an internal Anglican reformation but of what is called The Oxford Movement, the particularities of Anglicanism as Catholic and Reformed, grateful for continuities, however muddled, which serve us well in a contemporary generation, not least for their honesties of origin internally and externally but even more for their open untidiness and rescuing of comprimise as a positive work of God and humankind. It also gives us another contemporary honesty about Anglicanism as ultimately non-Confessional and as 'that messy contested tradition whose great virtue is that it cannot pretend to any great virtues.' (The Tablet page 16, 6 August 2016)

THE CHURCH OF IRELAND ...

However confusing we are to others and to ourselves, we now seek to live Christ first, church second as a contribution to community and communion in a world where we ourselves have for long been too happy with polemics over against eirenics. Because of politics and plantation, The Reformation in Ireland not only followed the English approach, with the Anglican tradition long holding what now seems to be an incredible position of ecclesio-political dominance, or Establishment, in 1870 and moving out of a realm of political dominance into the much more ecclesiastically confined and defined level democratic structure of internal Synodical Disestablishment. But Ireland also contains, independent of Anglicanism but to this day influencing Irish Anglicanism, strong elements of influence from the Scottish Reformation along with the arrival of a significant number of people from the Radical Reformation in England to Ireland during the seventeenth century. In 2017 we should not forget that in contemporary Ireland there are people of more than two hundred nationalities and of a wide range of World Faiths. The then immigrants to Ireland were Non-Conformists to an English Reformation that was seeking to salvage itself and to re-invent itself through stitching together its history and its monarchy and one which until the nineteenth century used the sacrament of Holy Communion as a Test for the holding of public office in the life of the state. As Irish Anglicans, and as historical carriers of the inheritance outlined above as well as being exponents of our own fractious relationships with

what is often referred to as ‘Catholic and Dissenter,’ we need to be realistic and contrite that our good relationships with Roman Catholics in Ireland are something of very recent and gracious giving on their part to us as much as of our giving to them. Without mutual forbearance on many sides, a relationship at all levels of society and church life such as we now take for granted and enjoy with tolerant openness simply would not have been possible nor would we be in a position to live lives of ecumenical exploration, interaction and adventure as we currently are.

TWO FURTHER REFORMATIONS

The rise and the dominance of institutions along with the capacity for change they regularly bring to bear on the individuals who either belong to them or are subjected to their ways of working is not, of course, new to The Reformation. However, the introduction of the open competition of religious free enterprise which is now a commonplace in ecclesiastical life owes its origin in terms of authoritative church bodies and families to The Reformation. The Reformation opened the windows to particular types of religious opportunity. Scholars are well aware that reformation of this character has engendered at least two further streams of development. The first is generically named The Radical Reformation and is associated in the first instance with the Anabaptists. Not only is this a direct challenge to the combination of baptism and citizenship which had obtained for one thousand years, it is also by extension a radical separation of church and state. It can further be argued that this movement, not least as a result of and as a response to its persecution, is one of the origins of the pluralistic, tolerant religious world of modern western democracies. This understanding has continued to influence political life worldwide as we cope with the death of Christendom, the rise of secularism and the movement of people of World Faiths, originally derivative of and notionally confined to one geographical area, to any and every part of the globe and bringing with them their culture and their religion as part of their identity. This in and of itself is a shock to the system of a generic Western Christianity that has long been beating the drum of its own victimhood, bereavement and obsolescence. The second is named the Counter-Reformation or the Catholic Reformation. The significant question to be asked is this: Is this movement a reaction against The Reformation movement itself or is it a movement which drew on its own independent sources for renewal and which shared the fundamental concerns of Protestantism to evangelize, to instruct, to create a new moral framework and to make society more actively Christian? Among such Reformed within the obedience to Rome we can name the Society of Jesus which, with a degree of benign irony today has its Loyola Institute at the heart of Archbishop Ussher’s Dublin University while the original Protestant Professorships have sunk beyond trace. The Jesuit Order, with its independent voice critical of centripetal institutionalization and its characteristic of compassionate justice, is reformed but expressed differently of course from any self-consciously Protestant Reformation. Today, for the first time, it finds itself as the source, the *fons et origo*, of the bishop of Rome in the person of Pope Francis. A reformed priest is bishop of Rome.

LUND AND MALMO 2016

Before The Reformation, the default setting of Christian Religious Establishments, East and West, to novelty in theology or religious community was to apply the test of heresy. This was the only real file on the shelf for dealing with your religious neighbour with whom you disagreed or whose flourishing you wished to truncate. The Reformation has changed that, however violent and

tortured the process. Its longevity and its 500 Year Commemoration in 2017 attest to a level of operational courtesy – after warfare, incrimination, anathematization – that makes it important for us to see it as an event, indeed a series of events, with continuing impact and importance. It changed things. Things are different. In Lund in Sweden on 31st October 2016 we saw what we perhaps thought we would never have seen in our lifetime: Pope Francis, bishop of Rome, and Bishop Munib Younan, President of The Lutheran World Federation, signed in Lund cathedral a theological agreement: From Conflict to Communion – Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017 and in Malmo Arena a practical concordat between Caritas Internationalis and The Lutheran World Federation in aid of Syrian refugees in the Middle East. They were accompanied by Kurt Cardinal Koch and the Reverend Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary of LWF. Their message was as simple as the earliest Christianity itself: what unites us is stronger than what divides us. This was a public commitment to common witness and service and in so many ways brings us full circle and out of darkness into understanding. We will continue to be different. We will, however, travel together rather than walking apart.

REFORMATION AND CHOICE

The Reformation is rightly lauded for offering choice in the public expression of faith in God. The contemporary world has shown us that choice can and does foment competition and cause chaos. The ecclesiastical world now has the opportunity to embrace choice with the pivotal recognition that The Other is essential to our setting our agenda, individually and corporately, and that your margin is the centre of my world. Connecting Others and margins is the calling of all churches together. The Reformation took place in a world where Christianity had no option but to rub shoulders with World Faiths other than itself. Some things it got spectacularly and disastrously wrong. We too in our day have no other option than to rub shoulders and to shake hands with those of World Faiths other than our own. Ecumenism simply is no longer sufficient. Reconciliation, in which Ireland North and South, has sought to specialize, and to which The Irish School of Ecumenics has contributed so significantly, demands of us as responsible citizens Inter Faith dialogue and understanding and respect.

I return to my opening illustration of Oxford University and Osney Abbey. In the setting of the University of Dublin 2017, perhaps the challenge to the universities is this: Is it still really necessary to be anti-religious in a world where mature humanity has long been calling all of us, religious and irreligious people and religious and irreligious institutions alike, to engage with the secular in a reconfigured humanism? And the question could extend to the wider educational establishment also. Is it still really necessary to find faith in God so problematic a concept, even if it is ‘not for you’, when today it seeks not to dominate and to indoctrinate but to contribute values of altruism and adventure to the human experiment and is open to criticism and to contradiction in a spirit of tolerance which goes beyond toleration? Do we all not need the freedom of reformation at some level of our operational existence even if we resist it at the pit of our stomach? Do we not live in a world where things have to continue to ‘give’ if we are all to do at least what Samuel Beckett, alumnus of this university, once invited us to do with chilling realism:

*Fail again
Fail better?*

