Martin Luther and the German Reformation

A comprehensive account of the life of Martin Luther, the man who split western Christendom for good.

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A portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach, c. 1526. Nationalmuseet Sweden. Public Domain.

Johann von Staupitz, c.1522. © akg-images

Five hundred years ago, in an obscure town in a remote part of Germany, an Augustinian friar set in train a series of events that led to the permanent splintering of western Christendom. The story of Martin Luther posting his *Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences* to the door of the castle chapel in Wittenberg is a defining moment in German history. But what were the origins of Luther's movement for religious reform? How should we understand the individuals and the events that propelled his protest from Wittenberg onto the European stage? And how can we explain the Reformation's significance in the context of contemporary concerns?

The eldest of nine siblings, Martin Luther was born in Eisleben in the county of Mansfeld on November 10th, 1483. His origins were relatively lowly: 'I am a peasant's son; my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father were true peasants', he commented later in life. This was an exaggeration. Although his family was of peasant origin, his father, Hans Luder, had become a senior figure in the local mining industry and wanted his eldest son to study law. Luther attended school in Magdeburg and Eisenach and in 1501 he enrolled at the university in Erfurt, where he gained a master's degree in 1505. Rather than continuing his studies, Luther entered the city's Augustinian monastery. Reflecting on this change of direction, Luther told a story that provides an insight into the nature of pre-Reformation piety: caught in a thunderstorm on the road to Erfurt, Luther called on St Anne, the patron saint of miners, pledging himself to a monastic life, if she came to his aid. In late medieval Europe, saints served as guardians and protectors, mediating between Heaven and Earth. This belief in saintly intercession was to become one of the many aspects of traditional religion that Protestant reformers such as Luther sought to eliminate.

Luther subjected himself to strict monastic discipline and met one of the formative figures in his life, Johann von Staupitz, Vicar General of the Augustinians' German monasteries, who served as his confessor. This was no easy task, for the young Luther was inclined to lengthy soul searching. Throughout his life, he was troubled by *Anfechtungen* – temptations, or struggles with faith. But he progressed rapidly through the clerical hierarchy:

he was ordained as a priest in 1507; a year later he was sent to Wittenberg to fill a temporary teaching post; and in 1510 he visited Rome, a place he would later describe as the seat of the Antichrist. In 1511 he moved permanently to Wittenberg, where he was awarded his doctorate of theology in 1512.

Situated within Electoral Saxony, Wittenberg was ruled by the Ernestine branch of the Wettin dynasty and had recently acquired a university. When Luther arrived, the town was being rebuilt by its ruler, Elector Frederick the Wise, who was determined to transform it into a centre of political and cultural power. It was an auspicious set of circumstances: called to a provincial university in a rapidly growing town, Luther was able to develop his bold ideas in relative freedom. He inherited the post of Professor of the Bible from von Staupitz and spent his time lecturing on scripture and holding theological disputations. From 1514 Luther also served as preacher in the parish church. Analysis of his writings suggests that his key theological insights – the ideas that drove his Reformation forward – developed over the course of this period (rather than coming to him via the Holy Spirit as he sat on the toilet, as his later remarks were sometimes interpreted).

Soon after publishing a critique of scholastic theology, in 1517 Luther composed his *Ninety Five Theses against Indulgences*, nailed them (probably) to the door of Wittenberg's castle church and sent them (certainly) to Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg, the Empire's most powerful churchman. (See Michael Mullett on the Ninety Five Theses). The date, October 31st, was significant: it was the eve of All Saints' Day, the date on which Frederick the Wise's collection of relics was displayed to the public in the castle church, attracting pilgrims from far and wide. The posting of Latin theses – numbered statements for public disputation – was usually an invitation to academic debate. It is not clear, however, that Luther intended such a debate to take place: for him, the key seemed to be the sending of the *Theses*, accompanied by a provocative letter, to Albrecht, on whose behalf the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel had been selling indulgences in nearby Magdeburg. But the *Theses* found an audience and were reprinted in nearby Leipzig, as well as in Nuremberg and Basel. Luther's critique of the church was now a public matter, at least among the Latin-speaking elite of early modern Europe.

A map showing Luthe

Why did Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* create such turmoil? Why did this moment mark the beginning of the Reformation? The *Theses* are not a fully developed theological programme. Instead, they are an attack on the practice of selling indulgences – remissions from the punishment earned by sin – and a critique of the pope's claim to authority over the souls of the dead. They are an assertion of the need for contrition, for the preaching of the Gospel and for the living of Christian lives: 'Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said "do penance", willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance', states the first thesis. Luther writes as a pastor, concerned for the Christian souls placed under his care, whom he believed were being deceived by the meaningless promises made by the peddlers of indulgences. Staupitz had denounced indulgences in his sermons of 1516 and Luther's attack on clerical exploitation and his challenge to papal authority continued a long tradition of criticism of the late medieval Church.

Reformation history has tended, since the 1980s, to relativise Luther's importance, emphasising the medieval origins of his theological insights, the variety of more-or-less simultaneous calls for reform that sprang up across Europe and the vital importance of the political and social contexts in which the events of the Reformation unfolded. It is true that elements of Luther's message were familiar. The ground for the reception of his ideas had been prepared by long-standing resentment of the Church's wealth and, in particular, of the papacy's exploitation – financial and spiritual – of the Holy Roman Empire. Yet lay religious life was flourishing on the eve of the Reformation: men and women joined confraternities, went on

pilgrimage to saints' shrines and donated money and artworks to their parish churches. Whatever provoked their turn away from the traditional Church, it was not a lack of religiosity. There was, however, a degree of discontent, an awareness that repeated calls for reform had achieved little. Some of these calls had come from groups labelled as heretical, notably the Lollards and Hussites. Others came from movements for religious renewal that survived within the Church, such as the Devotio Moderna – a lay movement for religious reform – and Christian humanism.

The Hussites are of particular relevance. The Bohemian cleric Jan Hus, like his English inspiration, the Lollard John Wycliffe, attacked indulgences and condemned the vices and failings of the clergy. (See Richard Cavendish's short biography of Wycliffe.) Hus advocated communion in both kinds – that the communion wine, Christ's blood, should be given to the laity as well as the clergy – and emphasised the importance of preaching the Gospel. From the perspective of Czech history, locating the start of the Reformation in Wittenberg in 1517 is a provocative act, for it was not Luther but Hus who achieved the first lasting religious reform of the early modern era. (See Frantisek Smahel on Hus.) Though Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 following his condemnation by the Council of Constance and though the Kingdom of Bohemia suffered a decade and a half of religious warfare thereafter, the more moderate wing of the Hussite movement survived into the 17th century. Luther and his supporters co-opted Hus into their account of the history of the true Church. Hus was thought to have prophesied Luther's coming, saying before his death: 'You are now roasting a goose' (Hus meaning 'goose' in Czech), 'but God will awaken a swan whom you will not burn or roast.' Luther himself referred to this prophecy in 1531 and his Wittenberg colleague Johannes Bugenhagen invoked it in the funeral sermon that he preached for the reformer in 1546. In later portraits, Luther was sometimes depicted with a swan standing beside him.

Hus was assimilated into Reformation history as an early exponent of evangelical ideas, a Protestant before his time. Luther's relationship with Erasmus of Rotterdam, the greatest of the northern European humanists, was more problematic. Erasmus anticipated many of Luther's criticisms of the Church, as adherents of the 15th-century Devotio Moderna had done before him. Both advocated a type of piety focused on Christ. (See Stewart MacDonald on Erasmus and Christian Humanism.) In his 1503 *Handbook of the Christian Knight*, Erasmus provided a manual for living a Christian life, one focused not on the external rituals of the Church, but on inner, personal faith, on prayer and on the study of scripture. In his other works he mounted vitriolic attacks on the theologians of his day, on the clerical hierarchy and on the ignorance and credulity of the laity. Theologians (the 'schoolmen', as he called them) spent their time contemplating obscurities – whether God could assume the shape of a pumpkin, for example – rather than studying scripture and teaching morality. The clergy were preoccupied with worldly matters, with money and warfare, and neglected their flocks. The popes themselves, Erasmus lamented in *The Praise of Folly* (1511),'allow Christ to be forgotten, lock him up behind their money-making laws ... and murder him with their atrocious manner of life'. The laity, meanwhile, were mired in an 'ocean of superstitions', seeking salvation through the worship of images and relics, through pilgrimage and the buying of indulgences.

Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum* of 1516, an edition of the New Testament that presented the Greek and Latin texts in parallel, accompanied by extensive commentaries and annotations, was one of the most remarkable intellectual achievements of the age. It formed the basis for Luther's German translation of 1521-22 and for biblical scholarship into the 19th century. Erasmus and Luther seemed to be natural allies, as contemporaries noted. Erasmus was accused by Catholic polemicists of having paved the way for the Reformation, of having laid an egg that Luther hatched. He responded, with typically sharp wit, that the bird which Luther had hatched was of a different sort. The final break between the two reformers came in 1524-25, over the issue of free will. For Erasmus, free will was the power through which humans could turn either towards or away from God, denying that it would lead to godlessness and sinful behaviour. For Luther, however, mankind had lost free will at the Fall. Humans were trapped in sinfulness and could achieve nothing without the mercy of God. The break between the two reformers was public and irreparable, but there can be no doubt that in some parts of the Empire – in Nuremberg, for example – humanists were among the most important early supporters of Luther's ideas.
Within the Holy Roman Empire, humanists and early evangelicals found common ground not only in their criticism of abuses within the Church and in their emphasis on the importance of textual criticism and

biblical scholarship, but also in their articulation of early nationalist sentiments. The Empire was fragmented, both politically and culturally, yet during the 15th century a sense of shared German identity emerged, defined in opposition to Rome. (See Peter H. Wilson's survey of the Holy Roman Empire.) Calls for the emperor to assume responsibility for the reform of the Church echoed throughout the period. They can be found in the writings of the theologian Nicholas of Cusa, in the anonymous *Reformation of Emperor Sigismund*, written in 1438 and widely circulated into the early 16th century, and in the lists of German grievances (*Gravamina*) against the Roman Church that were discussed by the Diet, the Empire's representative assembly, from the mid-15th century onwards. Demands for a general council of the Church, or for a specifically German version, were loud and in the decades around 1500 humanists added their voices to the anti-Roman clamour. 'We who possess virtue and faith', asserted the scholar Heinrich Bebel, 'are greater than all other nations.' Ulrich von Hutten, a Franconian nobleman, was one of the most outspoken critics of Rome. The German nation, he wrote, 'now recognises how unjustly it has been led around by the nose and defrauded' by the pope. Others, for example the renowned Strasbourg preacher Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg, advocated a communal reformation to be carried out by every Christian.
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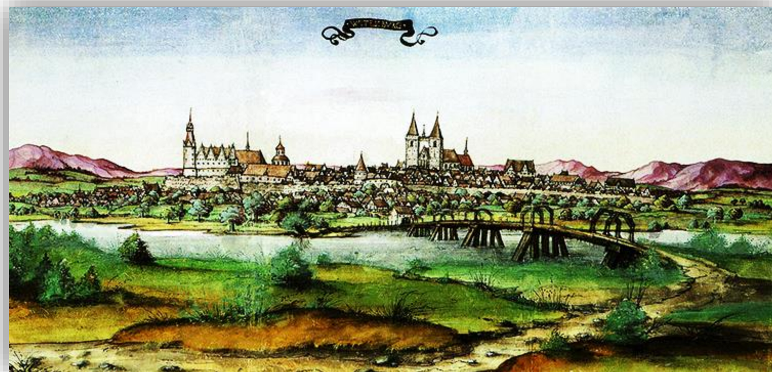
All these ideals proved illusory. No 15th-century reformer found a way of making the German church more attentive to the needs of its members or more pleasing to God. The long-standing criticisms of the Church and the repeated calls for reform set the stage for the reception of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*. They cannot, however, explain the unprecedented success of his movement. In order to do this, we must return to Luther. He is, as his biographer Lyndal Roper has recently shown so compellingly, a difficult hero. (See Elaine Fulton's review of Roper's biography.) There is much to dislike about him, aspects that are deeply off-putting to modern, liberal sensibilities. He was a great hater and his hatred manifested itself most spectacularly, and most fatefully, in his antisemitism. Luther's two 1543 tracts, *On the Jews and their Lies* and *On the Ineffable Name and Generations of Christ*, were vitriolic in the extreme, even by the standards of their time. Luther was also stubborn, authoritarian and, by the end of his life, deeply embittered. Yet it was, without doubt, his courage and conviction, his communication skills and his ability to create public interest that drove the Reformation forward.



Wittenberg at the time of Luther.
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These qualities were apparent from the outset. In 1518 Luther was summoned to Augsburg to appear before Cardinal Cajetan, the papal legate, and in 1519 he and his Wittenberg colleague, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, debated in Leipzig against Johannes Eck, Pro-Chancellor of the University of Ingolstadt. In the course of these confrontations Luther developed and honed his ideas, defending the authority of scripture above that of the pope and the Church fathers and broadening his criticisms of the Church. In his response to Cajetan, he summarised his understanding of how salvation depends upon faith alone: 'Only faith in the word of Christ justifies, makes alive, makes one worthy and prepares one. Anything else is an exercise in presumption or despair.' This belief lay at the heart of his theology. Luther also, during 1518-19, demonstrated his skill in reaching a wide public. At Augsburg, he had a notary record events and left a document on the cathedral door, resubmitting his case to Rome. He subsequently published his version of the encounter. At Leipzig, Luther did not perform well in the debates – he was outclassed by Eck – yet his conviction compelled him onward. The theologian Philip Melanchthon, another Wittenberg

colleague, published an account of the Leipzig debate on behalf of Luther and Karlstadt. (See Michael Mullett on the role of Melanchthon and other reformers.)

Luther was moving inexorably towards excommunication, progressing rapidly along the path that had led Hus to martyrdom. 'The more powerfully they rise up, the more securely I laugh at them', he wrote in January 1520. 'I am resolved to fear nothing.' Among his publications that year were short guides to evangelical faith written in German for the laity, as well as another attack on papal authority, also written in the vernacular. The papal bull that excommunicated Luther was promulgated in June 1520. Entitled *Exurge Domine* (Arise, O Lord), it called on the Church to protect the vineyard of the Lord from the wild boar that had invaded it. Again, Luther's temporal lord, Elector Frederick the Wise, protected him, refusing to hand over his star theologian and professor to the pope's representatives in Germany. On December 10th, in another carefully staged event, Luther burned the papal bull and various works of canon law and theology in Wittenberg. In 1521 the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, Luther's friend and ally, published his *Passional of Christ and Antichrist*, a series of 13 paired woodcuts contrasting Christ's behaviour with that of the pope. It was one of the most effective pieces of Reformation propaganda, reprinted numerous times. Luther's break with Rome was complete, though we must keep in mind that at this point he still sought to achieve a universal reform of the Catholic Church rather than to establish a new confession.

In 1520 Luther published three seminal tracts. The first and most popular was his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, which appeared in August. Written in German rather than Latin, it was a call to arms: 'We have the empire in name, but the pope has our wealth, our honour, our bodies, lives, and souls and all that we have', Luther wrote. 'Oh noble princes and gentlemen, how long will you suffer your lands and your people to be the prey of these ravening wolves?' General councils had, Luther argued, failed to reform the Church and it was now the duty of the German emperor to take up the challenge. Temporal Christian power must destroy the three walls that the papacy had built to protect itself: the elevation of spiritual power above secular; the belief that only the pope can interpret scripture; and the assertion that only he can call a council of the Church. Here Luther argues that all Christians are spiritually equal, all are priests and all must therefore share responsibility for the reform of the Christian community. The readers, members of the German nation, must compel the pope to 'free [their] country from his unbearable taxes and robberies' and to give them back their 'liberty, authority, wealth, honour, body, and soul'.

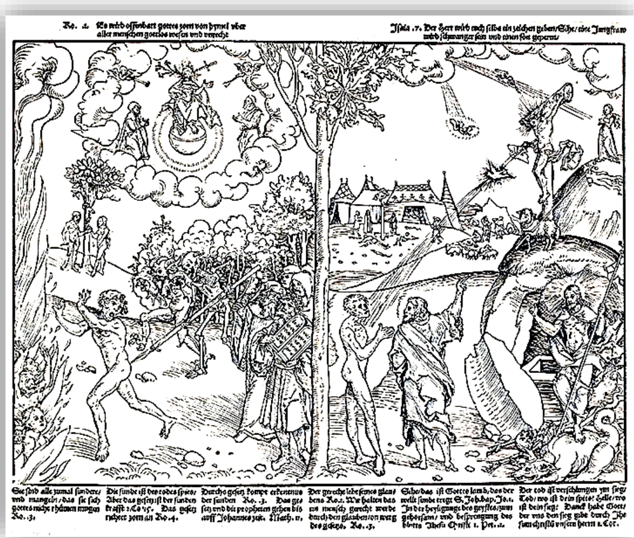
In the second tract, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther laid out his teaching on the sacraments, the rituals through which the medieval Church claimed to convey grace to the believer. Luther reduced their number from seven to just two: communion and baptism. Only these, he argued, had biblical foundations and only these two consisted of both a visible sign – bread and wine or water – and a promise of the forgiveness of sin. It was Communion, however – also known as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist – that proved to be one of the rocks upon which the unity of the evangelical movement foundered: it brought the reformers' irreconcilable differences of temperament and understanding into the open. All evangelicals rejected traditional Catholic teaching on the mass: it was no longer to be understood as a priestly miracle, a good work, a repetition of Christ's sacrifice. Transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ when the priest pronounced the words of consecration – was condemned, but what stood in its place was contested.

For Luther, Christ was still physically present at communion. The Christian did not need to understand how this happened; he or she must 'cling simply to the Word of Christ', to his promise that 'this is my body', for to do otherwise would lead to heresy. Other reformers played down Christ's real presence and developed more spiritualised understandings of communion. For Huldrych Zwingli and the Swiss reformers, communion was primarily a ritual of commemoration. This seemingly obscure debate had important consequences, for it determined the manner in which the Eucharist – the central ritual of the Christian community, and a key part of the laity's experience of reform – was celebrated. In some Lutheran territories the Lord's Supper resembled the Catholic mass, with the use of elaborate liturgical vestments, altars, altarpieces and wafers, and the retention of some Latin; in Reformed – Swiss or Calvinist – churches, however, simple tables replaced altars, bread replaced wafers and the vernacular replaced Latin.

In the last of his three 1520 tracts, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther's anti-papal invective reached new heights: 'Is it not true that under the vast expanse of heaven there is nothing more corrupt, more pestilential, more offensive than the Roman Curia?' He still hoped, however, that a general council of the Church could bring about reform. In this tract Luther writes compellingly of his understanding of the true Christian life: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' The believer is freed from sin through his or her faith in God: 'Faith alone, without works, justifies, frees and saves.' Yet the believer is also bound by love to serve his or her neighbour. Written in a period of remarkable creativity, these three tracts laid out Luther's programme of reform. With its focus on the authority of scripture, its defence of secular power wielded on behalf of the Christian community and its emphasis on spiritual equality, it threatened the entire edifice of the Roman Church.

Luther was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V at the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1521. Already excommunicated by Leo X, Luther faced condemnation by the pope's secular counterpart, the most powerful monarch in Christendom. Even more than the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther's appearance at the Rhineland city was a defining moment in the Reformation. Luther and his companions spent ten days travelling west from Wittenberg and were greeted enthusiastically along the way. When the reformer arrived in Worms, 2,000 people supposedly gathered in the streets, testimony to the public interest Luther had awoken. On April 17th, as he went to the Diet, people climbed onto rooftops in their eagerness to see him: his arrival was described in terms that consciously echoed the story of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Clothed in a simple black cassock, he stood alone before the assembled might and splendour of the Empire. He was presented with a pile of books and was asked whether they were his and whether he would retract what he had written. He requested an adjournment and when he appeared again the following day, he delivered an extraordinarily courageous speech, refusing to recant and concluding that 'unless I am convinced by the testimony of scriptures or by clear reason … I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God'. According to the account of events published by his supporters shortly afterwards, he added: 'I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.'

The events at Worms propelled his message far beyond those concerned with theology and the reform of the German church. His defiance of the emperor and of the secular and ecclesiastical estates of the Empire became, even during his own lifetime, legendary. It made him into a hero. Printed images of the reformer began to circulate, satisfying popular curiosity regarding the appearance of this remarkable rebel. Lucas Cranach the Elder, creator of the 1521 *Passional of Christ and Antichrist*, played a key role in formulating a distinctive iconography for Luther, at first depicting him still wearing his Augustinian friar's habit and later showing him dressed as a doctor and as a preacher in a black gown. Luther often carried a Bible in these portraits; in some he was also shown accompanied by the dove of the Holy Spirit, testifying to his divine inspiration. In a 1521 woodcut by the Strasbourg artist Hans Baldung Grien, Luther not only has a dove but also a halo. (See Bob Scribner on visual representations of Luther.)



Law and Gospel, an example of Lutheran propaganda attributed to the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder, c.1528-32. © British Museum.

This incipient cult was given further impetus by his appearance and actions at the Diet of Worms. A widely circulated pamphlet account compared Luther's trial to Christ's Passion, ending not with crucifixion but with the burning of the reformer's books. A portrait was, according to this account, placed alongside the books, bearing the inscription: 'This is Martin Luther, a teacher of the Gospel.' While the books were reduced to ashes, it was said that the portrait refused to burn. This was the first of many 'incombustible Luther' stories, which were retold into the 18th century and served to shore up Luther's reputation as an instrument of God's will. No other evangelical confession celebrated its founder in such hagiographical terms and the image of Luther as a German hero that emerged during the 1520s remained an important part of German Protestantism into the 20th century.

Luther left Worms on April 26th, 1521. On his return journey he was 'kidnapped' – taken into protective custody – by agents of Frederick the Wise, who was concerned for his safety. (See Andrew Pettegree on the perils Luther faced.) On May 8th Charles V placed Luther under imperial ban: now an outlaw, he was dependent upon Frederick's protection. He was taken to the Wartburg castle in Eisenach. For Luther, this was a productive, though physically and spiritually traumatic, period, during which he produced two important works: *On Monastic Vows*, his final rejection of his former life as a friar, and his German translation of the New Testament, which was first published in Wittenberg in September 1522. Luther's translation of the whole Bible, completed between 1522 and 1534 and revised repeatedly until shortly before his death, was, in both intellectual and cultural terms, one of the most important products of the German Reformation.

In Luther's absence, events in Wittenberg progressed rapidly. At Christmas, Karlstadt, dressed not in priestly robes but in lay clothing, celebrated communion in both kinds in the castle church, against the elector's wishes. More changes followed: Wittenberg's Augustinian friars destroyed the altars and altarpieces in their church and in January 1522 the town council produced a mandate – the first evangelical church ordinance – which reformed the liturgy, prescribed the removal of religious images and reorganised poor relief. Such mandates were to play a crucial role in the institutionalisation of the Reformation throughout Protestant Germany and beyond.

Frederick the Wise was in a precarious political position, under immediate threat from his cousin, the Catholic Duke George of Saxony, who was determined to execute the imperial edict against Luther, who had returned to Wittenberg in March 1522. In what subsequently proved to be a typical piece of politicking, Luther aligned himself not with Karlstadt but with the Saxon elector. He reversed some of Karlstadt's key religious innovations – restoring a more traditional liturgy and defending images – and preached restraint. The pace of reform must, Luther argued, be gradual. For all the subversive potential of his theological insights, moderation became a hallmark of Luther's Reformation as it developed. As Luther accommodated himself, and his movement, to political realities, he made Karlstadt, formerly an ally, into a scapegoat for the radicalism of 1521-22.

Martin Luther died on February 18th, 1546. His teachings had won both popular and princely support in the Holy Roman Empire and beyond: by the time of his death, many principalities and cities in northern and eastern Germany had turned Lutheran and reforms had been implemented beyond the Empire's borders in Denmark and Sweden. Its founder's death, however, marked the beginning of a period of crisis for German Lutheranism. In 1546-47 members of the Schmalkaldic League, a group of Lutheran princes and cities led by Elector John Frederick of Saxony and Landgrave Philip I of Hesse, fought to defend their religious and political independence against Emperor Charles V, newly returned from his lengthy wars in Italy. They were defeated at the Battle of Mühlberg and in 1548 Charles imposed a temporary religious settlement intended to restore traditional belief and practice pending the conclusions of the general council of the Church that had been convened by Pope Paul III at Trent in 1545. The settlement proved impossible to enforce: Lutheranism was already too entrenched to eliminate and in 1555 the Peace of Augsburg granted it legal recognition within the Empire. But the need to preserve the true, evangelical church in a time of crisis had deepened the theological divisions that had arisen among Luther's successors, divisions that took three decades to heal. Moreover, Catholicism gradually, thanks in part to Trent and in part to the work of the Jesuits, reasserted its presence in the Empire: key territories, notably Bavaria, reaffirmed Catholic doctrine and practice. Luther's hope for a reform of the German church, in accordance with the programme that he had laid out in 1520, was never realised.

How, then, do we explain the significance of Luther's Reformation? With his Ninety-Five Theses, and with his subsequent writings, Luther unleashed a set of ideas that led, ultimately, to the permanent splintering of western Christendom (recent attempts at doctrinal reconciliation notwithstanding). Late medieval calls for reform were important in setting the scene, but there can be no doubt that Luther himself had an epoch-making significance. He showed that one individual could, through invoking the authority of scripture, successfully challenge the power of the papacy. Luther's Reformation, as it unfolded, revealed that the whole edifice of the late medieval Church was vulnerable and that it could collapse remarkably swiftly if the circumstances were right.

What followed this revelation was not, however, religious freedom or a shift towards liberty of conscience. Indeed, mainstream Protestantism was as intolerant of religious diversity as Catholicism. Early modern statements of faith – the 1530 Augsburg Confession, the decrees of the Council of Trent, the Westminster Confession of 1646, to name but a few – defined doctrinal orthodoxy and laid down guidelines for the organisation of churches. Throughout Europe, orthodoxies – Protestant and Catholic – were enforced through education and, where necessary, through persecution. Luther had unwittingly inaugurated a confessional age, during which Europe was divided into distinct religious groupings. Throughout this confessional age, religion served to justify and to prolong warfare and religious violence and suffering continued into the 18th century: in 1731-32 the Catholic Archbishop of Salzburg expelled 19,000 Lutherans from his territory, forcing them to wander Europe as refugees (many of them ending up in Elector Frederick William's Berlin). Individual voices advocated toleration and in parts of Europe – particularly Germany and the Dutch Republic – ordinary people did learn to live with religious diversity, co-existing in mixed-confession communities. But the rise of religious toleration was a painfully slow process, one that is still far from complete today.

Luther's teaching had threatened the traditional walls of ecclesiastical authority, but now, in Wittenberg, he began to erect new walls, which would protect his own authority. Nothing, however, could contain his ideas. In 2017 public and scholarly attention has inevitably focused on one particular Reformation: Luther's. Yet the reform of 16th-century religious life was driven forward by a huge variety of individuals, ideas and events. The early modern period witnessed not one Reformation, but many. Catholicism – both medieval and early modern – was by no means uniform in its beliefs and practices, yet its diversity was nothing compared to that of Protestantism. We have only to think of the huge variety of Baptist or Pentecostal churches in America today to see some of the long-term consequences of abolishing papal authority, of preaching a priesthood of all believers and of empowering the laity to interpret God's word.

Some of these disparate Reformations developed, like Luther's, in close dialogue with local political authorities. In Zurich, for example, Zwingli, who was appointed people's priest in the city's main church in 1518, led a Reformation that was heavily dependent on his own charismatic personality and preaching. He owed a substantial intellectual debt to Erasmus and his teaching was shaped by Luther's early writings. Yet Zwingli's Reformation, as it developed in Zurich, had a very different flavour to Luther's. There were key theological differences between Luther and the Swiss reformers, the most important of whom were Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, and Johannes Oecolampadius in Basel. It was, as we have seen, the question of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist that divided them irreconcilably. They also held different views regarding the nature and pace of reform. Zwingli was more prepared than his Wittenberg counterpart to abolish the old order and to retain only what was necessary to conform to his vision of God's plan. In the parts of the Swiss Confederation and southern Germany that followed the Reformed teaching of Zwingli and his successors, churches were stripped of images, liturgy was simplified and moral and social discipline was policed through the creation of courts.

The urban Reformations in Switzerland and southern Germany were propelled, in many cases, by popular support for evangelical ideas. Artisans and guild folk proved receptive to preaching and to printed polemic, which criticised the hierarchies of the Roman church and their financial exploitation of the laity and that emphasized spiritual freedom and equality. Iconoclasm was one of the ways in which they made their views felt. In Basel laymen destroyed many of the images in the city's churches in 1529. They were frustrated by the city council's failure to introduce reform: 'In three years of deliberation you effected nothing; in this one hour, we resolve everything', they told their magistrates. For urban magistrates, as for princely rulers, the decision to adopt religious reform was made in part because of the need to maintain order. Access to church property was, of course, also an important consideration, in Germany and

Switzerland no less than in England under Henry VIII. This property included not only land and money, but also legal rights and privileges. To introduce the Reformation – whether in its Lutheran or Reformed manifestation – was to bring the church, its material goods, its traditional immunities and its control of education and charity under the control of the secular authorities. Eventually, these Protestant churches became parts of the administrative apparatus of their cities and territories. Pastors became, in effect, civil servants, responsible not only for preaching but also for public order and morality, for social welfare and for overseeing educational systems that enforced confessional orthodoxy.

Ultimately, state protection enabled the Lutheran and Swiss Reformations to survive and to flourish. Right from the start, however, there were individuals and groups who were inspired by the evangelical message, but who refused to accommodate themselves to the exigencies of early modern social and political life, with its emphasis on conformity and order. In 1521 three laymen, the so-called Zwickau prophets, arrived in Wittenberg claiming that God spoke to them directly; they were amongst the earliest representatives of the radical or 'left wing' of the Reformation. They were rapidly followed by other *Schwärmer*, or false enthusiasts, as Luther labelled them: those who followed inspiration and visions rather than relying on the word of God as revealed in Scripture and interpreted by trained theologians. One of the most notable was Thomas Müntzer, who preached a radical apocalyptic message and who was executed in 1525 for his role in the Peasants' Revolt. This 1524/5 revolt was unprecedented in its scale, starting in south-west Germany but eventually extending as far as Saxony in the east and Austria in the south. It was motivated to a large extent by socio-economic grievances, but drew inspiration and dynamism from evangelical preaching by figures such as Müntzer. It confirmed for Luther and for others that religious radicalism would serve as the harbinger of social rebellion and violence. Luther's response was vile: in his *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, published just after the revolt had been suppressed, he argued that through their disobedience to the civil authorities the peasants had 'abundantly merited death in body and soul'.

The distinction between magisterial – state-led – and radical reform has been questioned in recent historiography: it tends not only to yoke together individuals and groups who had little in common, but also to downplay the radical content and potential of 'mainstream' Protestant teaching. Yet there can be no doubt that there were Christians whose beliefs and practices set them apart from the institutional churches of the era. Among these 'radicals' – Martin Luther's 'unruly offspring', as they have recently been described – were the Anabaptists. Originally a term of abuse, Anabaptist, or re-baptiser, was used to denigrate members of a variety of disparate groups that originated in Germany and the Swiss Confederation in the 1520s. Under the leadership of Michael Sattler, a former monk, a group of these Anabaptists formulated the Schleitheim Confession in 1527, the first of many statements of faith in the Reformation era. They defended adult baptism, describing the rite as a 'covenant of good conscience with God'. They refused to swear oaths, or to take up arms: in effect, they rejected, on the basis of their interpretation of Scripture, any form of engagement in worldly affairs.

Sattler was executed by the Austrian authorities in 1527: his tongue was cut out, he was then tortured with heated iron tongs and burned. In 1528-9, re-baptism was designated a capital crime within the Empire and hundreds more executions followed. The rise and fall of the Kingdom of Münster in 1534-5 confirmed Anabaptism's reputation for subversion. In the Westphalian city Anabaptists, led by Jan Matthys (a former baker) and then Jan van Leiden (a former tailor), instituted a theocracy, an attempt to realise a New Jerusalem, a godly community on earth. This was an alternative religious and social world: in addition to adult baptism, the city's new leaders introduced the communal ownership of goods and polygamy. The experiment did not last long: the city was recaptured by the Catholic prince-bishop of Münster; Jan van Leiden and two companions were tortured and executed, their bodies placed in iron cages on the tower of the city's main church as a warning. The Münster revolt lived on, however, in communal memory and throughout the 16th century Anabaptists were persecuted mercilessly within the Empire. Some found refuge, for a while, on the estates of Polish and Bohemian nobles in eastern central Europe; they were then forced, as a result of 17th-century re-catholicisation, to flee further afield. Anabaptists survived in the relatively diverse religious environment of the northern Netherlands; some – most notably the Mennonites – were eventually among those religious groups who crossed the Atlantic to found new communities in America.

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