

THE REFORMATION

By Patrick Collinson

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By John Keane

From New England comes the old joke about a high school history lesson. Teacher : ‘Why did the Puritans leave England for America?’ A pupil : ‘So that they could live their religion in freedom, and force others to do likewise.’ The irony wrapped within these words is cruel and whatever laughter it still provokes is due to the fact that we live in times different from those of the Puritans and their enemies. Theirs was a world in which the Almighty God had an overwhelming presence in everyday life – a world where all dissent from any orthodoxy was routinely punished.

Patrick Collinson’s short, splendid survey of the Reformation reminds us that the earliest Christian champions of religious freedom (groups like the Zwinglians, Calvinists and Anabaptists) were themselves profoundly intolerant of heterodoxy - just like their Christian opponents. The despotism of characters like Paul IV, that fierce pope who loved the Index of Prohibited Books, was obvious. Yet popes had no monopoly on despotism. The historical fact is that both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation had in common a dogmatic yearning to bring Christianity to the rural populations of Europe : to make the Ten Commandments a matter of individual habit, if need be with the help of much zealous moralizing and (if that failed) red-hot irons, swords and cross bows.

We should also not forget the arrogance of the dissenters themselves. Their self-assurance often exceeded that of their Catholic opponents. Martin Luther, the man who took advantage of the new powers of the printing press by writing on average one book every two weeks for thirty years, was driven in more ways than one. His attack on papal authority was swift and bold, matched only by the vicious assaults on his opponents. Luther's conscience was enthralled by the Bible as the Word of God, as the only true foundation of the faith of the Church. But this single-minded concentration on the Word sometimes turned nasty. At one point, in a pamphlet called *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (1525), he railed against rebellious peasants, recommending that their ears be 'unbuttoned with musket balls till their heads jump off their shoulders'. Calvin, who mostly believed tyrants were God's instruments, was equally fanatical on most matters. Erasmus, condemned by Luther as an eel whom only Christ could catch, regarded women as fools. John Knox, who was convinced, in Jesus' words, that he had indeed been born again, firmly agreed.

None of this bigotry should be surprising, for the thinking of the Protestant dissenters, Collinson emphasises, came from deep within the very tradition that they denounced. ‘It is the beginning of wisdom’, he writes, ‘to understand that the Reformation was not, in its own eyes, a novelty’ (p. 18). That point is fundamental, if only because it makes the revolutionary events of the sixteenth century seem doubly ironic. In the name of shoring up the old order, the Reformation had the long-term effect of laying the foundations of modern liberty.

How did this happen? Collinson skilfully explains that the power base of the early Protestants was urban. It was in towns like Magdeburg and Nuremberg (which opened its gates to Calvinist merchants and artisans from the Netherlands, and even offered tax breaks to attract them) that something like a counter-power to the established order was created. These towns, around three thousand of them in the German-speaking lands alone, were the levers used to turn the Christian world upside down by raising basic questions about who was entitled to get what, when and how on earth.

Some town-dwelling believers practised the right of resistance to arbitrary government. For that, they paid heavily. That happened to the ten thousand Huguenots who died in the August 1572 Massacre of St. Bartholomew, described by Collinson as ‘another September 11 moment in European history’ (p. 161). Other believers were luckier and more successful and it is to them - the Dutch and English revolutionaries in particular – that we owe some basic constitutional principles that would later feed the well-springs of democratic politics. The right to resist tyranny, the abolition of monarchy, constitutional conventions, written constitutions, popular election, limited terms of office : such principles of

government are virtually unthinkable without noting their roots in the Reformation controversies.

The Reformation also brought us traditions of *civil* liberty. In the struggles and counter-struggles that clawed at the heart of Christian Europe, the faithful on both sides at first clung with all their might to the canon that the ruler determines the religion of his state (*cuius region, eius religio*). In this way, Collinson shows, the friends and enemies of Reformation helped to discredit political abuses of religion. They saw the possibility that religion and despotism could hold hands, that faith and force could be confused, with evil effects. Hence, religious dissenters like George Buchanan (tutor to James VI) and John Milton (a great champion of liberty of the press) came to identify with the project of limiting the scope of state power. They spotted the importance of nurturing *non-governmental* spaces - families, schools, church congregations - protected by good laws. From the time of the American Revolution, these spaces would be called *civil society* : it was a religious - not a secular - invention designed to promote the active toleration of different faiths and to check governments prone to popish cruelty.

Collinson's descriptions of the Reformation will strike some readers as rather too conventional. Others will complain that this work by the Regius Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Cambridge confirms the rule that English scholarship on the subject remains insular. Collinson certainly missed a chance to tackle in fresh ways the contributions of the sixteenth century to the re-definition of *European* identity. That would in turn have raised pertinent questions about Reformation perceptions of the world of Islam, a topic about which

Collinson is oddly silent. *The Reformation* is nevertheless a worthwhile summary of a distinguished scholar's life work on a period of enduring - and global - significance.

Collinson helps us to see that the grand irony of the Reformation is that its dogmatism – religious ‘Bolshevism’ he calls it at one point – unintentionally gave birth to living traditions of civil and political liberty that all citizens could enjoy. He notes the fragility of these traditions and points out how ‘self-conscious reformations of the Reformation, outside the establishment and even against it’ (p. 211) continued well into the eighteenth century. During the 1740s, the energetic Christians of the American ‘Great Awakening’ called upon believers to keep their wits about them. So too did the Quakers and Methodists and early abolitionists. They had a point, and today it surely remains pertinent : so long as there are rulers who selfishly wield power and abuse religion in the name of religion, the Reformation will not be over.

John Keane holds chairs at London's Westminster University and the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. He is completing a new history of democracy – the first for over a century.