

The Continental Reformation.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

I.—HOW TO ESTIMATE THE REFORMATION.

A MODERN historian, who has instructed all of us, and whom many of us have had the happiness of knowing, has justly said that our aim in studying history ought to be "the formation of a right judgment on the great issues of human affairs."¹ Our recent and present political experiences must have shown to those who can take a calm survey of the situation that it is possible to adopt and maintain very strong opinions without the comprehensive knowledge on which strong opinions ought to be based. And if the study of history cannot always give the necessary knowledge, it can at least give us that sobriety of judgment which will show us the dangers of over-statement and over-haste, and keep us from lending a hand in winning apparent successes which prove far more ruinous than failures. History teaches us the extraordinary complexity of the forces which influence human action, and the great, though limited, power which men's wills and characters have in directing the course of affairs. It may be true that history never repeats itself, and therefore never tells us exactly what the present moment requires; but at least it can teach us the temper and spirit in which present problems must be approached.

Ecclesiastical history is no exception. There also there are no exact repetitions. The appeal to the first three centuries, or the first six centuries, is always interesting, and nearly always instructive; but it cannot always teach us what we ought to think or to do at the present time. Present conditions are so different that modifications are almost certain to be necessary. We can learn method, and we can learn temper, and still more surely we can learn what tempers and methods have proved

¹ Creighton, Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge.

disastrous. But perhaps the chief gain is to see the characters of the men who have produced the most valuable and permanent results. It is here that imitation is always safe. What such men actually said and did is of far less value than the spirit in which they worked. It can hardly be summed up better than in the motto which Döllinger chose for his guidance: "Nihil temere, nihil timide, sed omnia consilio et virtute" (No rashness, no cowardice, but in everything forethought and courage). How very different the history of the Reformation would have been had those who took leading parts in it acted on these principles! It is principles rather than hero-worship that we ought to get from this, as from other momentous periods.

It is inevitable that we should commonly regard the Reformation as a religious movement; but it was certainly not exclusively religious, and it is perhaps true to say that it was not primarily or mainly religious. A great crisis in European thought and action would have come in the sixteenth century, not only if there had been no Luther, or Zwingli, or Calvin, but even if there had been no great religious problems which had been clamouring for solution for at least two centuries.¹ The break with the past was quite as much political as religious, and the political break was accentuated by social and economical changes of the greatest magnitude. There were also vast intellectual changes which told in both directions. These perhaps affected the religious side of the movement more than the political side, but they would not have made the movement a religious one if there had been no religious questions to be solved. It was a period of deep and dangerous discontent, and a great upheaval of some kind was inevitable. Men felt that they were living in a new age, which called for a fundamental change in the conditions of life. This feeling may have been confined to the more thoughtful minority; but everyone could feel that evils which had lasted for centuries, and which had been intensified during the last fifty years, had now become intolerable, and must—either by rulers or people—be

¹ J. Mackintosh, "A History of Modern Liberty," ii, pp. 44, 49 *et seq.*

abolished. There were not a few who said that there would be destruction if reformation was denied much longer; and there were some who thought that destruction would be the better of the two. We must look to the eve of the French Revolution to find an era in which bitter criticism of almost all existing institutions was so rife as at the eve of the Reformation, and even in that case the criticism was not nearly so widespread as at the beginning of the sixteenth century; it was national rather than European, or at least was less intense elsewhere than in France.¹ But when the fifteenth century closed, the whole of Western and Central Europe was seething with discontent, and those who might have remedied it were paralyzed, in most cases by selfishness, because the abuses were profitable to them, in other cases by dismay. Those who longed to bring about a reform did not know where to begin; the removal of hopelessly corrupt portions might bring the whole edifice down.

The Reformation was neither the beginning nor the end of a great movement, but the culminating point—reached somewhat swiftly—of a process which had long been going on, and which has continued to our own time. Or, perhaps, it may be nearer the truth to say that it was a great explosion, the materials for which had long been accumulating, and the effects of which are still felt. In any case, it must not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon. It was a crisis in the general progress of society, in its troubled passage from the Middle Ages to modern civilization. It was the crowning episode in which the struggle for freedom of thought developed into a struggle for freedom of action. And in this great transformation a variety of elements were intertwined, acting and reacting on one another. There were not only the political, social, and religious developments which came to a head almost simultaneously; there were advances in art and philosophy, in navigation and weapons of war, in the opening out of new continents, in discoveries and inventions, especially in the discovery of buried

¹ Frederic Harrison, "The Meaning of History," p. 195.

treasures of literature and in the invention of printing. There was a general unfettering and enrichment of the human mind.¹

The Reformation is like the French Revolution in another particular. Hardly any other period of history has been more differently estimated. Both of them have been extravagantly praised and extravagantly abused. They have been regarded as the source, directly or indirectly, of almost everything great or beneficial that has since taken place. They have also been regarded as among the greatest of European calamities, equally distinguished by the portentous blunders and the portentous crimes which were their causes and their effects. Even so lately as May, 1910, the Borromeo Encyclical, which almost immediately produced such a sensation in Germany, declared that "the leaders of the Reformation were proud and rebellious men, enemies of the Cross of Christ, who mind earthly things, whose god is their belly." There is not much sobriety of judgment in criticisms of this kind. Whatever else the leaders may have been, they were neither demigods nor demons.

These extravagant estimates of the Reformation, made by subsequent generations, are easily recognized as fallacious by those who will make a serious effort to ascertain and fairly weigh the facts. But, in the generations before the Reformation, there runs a fallacy which is less commonly recognized. Almost from the Apostolic Age Christians have marked a contrast between the Church and the world. When the world was wholly pagan, such a contrast was inevitable. The Head of the Church was Christ, and the prince of this world was the devil. It was equally inevitable that this contrast should lead on to the contrast between "sacred" and "secular." As soon as that distinction was made, there was material for a mischievous fallacy. Secular is opposed to sacred. What is sacred must always be good, therefore what is secular is, of course, evil—it is profane and anti-Christian. Among the great services which the better Humanists rendered to European society was

¹ G. P. Fisher, "The Reformation," p. 10; A. Plummer, "English Church History, 1509-1575," pp. 7 *et seq.*

that of demonstrating that a great deal of what was purely secular was by no means evil.¹

It is with the Reformation as a religious movement that we have to do ; its other aspects will have for the most part to be ignored. And it is with regard to its religious aspect that the widest differences exist in estimating its merits. Everything, of course, depends upon the point of view. Is it a truism or a fallacy to say that a religious movement must be judged from a religious point of view? One remembers Dr. Johnson's trenchant comment on the dictum, "Who rules o'er freemen must himself be free," and one fears to meet with similar criticism. Nevertheless, there may be some reason in the presumption that the non-religious point of view is less likely to bring us to a sound conclusion.² Of course, if there is no God to guide the wills and affections of men, or if the Church is not a Divine institution for affording such guidance, then the non-religious point of view is the right one. We shall then regard the Reformation as a long stride in the march of humanity towards complete emancipation from all restraints, excepting those which each individual imposes upon himself under the guidance of his own reason. Little as they intended it, the Reformers, from this point of view, were leading society onwards towards that Utopia in which each man is to frame his own creed and his own decalogue, without let or hindrance.

Let us grant that such a view has fragments of truth in it. Nevertheless, it is utterly misleading. Can anyone doubt that religion supplied an immense deal of the driving-power of the movement? Can anyone doubt that many of its most important results were religious results? If you could have convinced any one of the leaders that he was working towards the abolition of all religious restraints, he would at once have become an opponent. The restraints which he desired to abolish, and the freedom which he desired to establish, were of a different kind. He aimed at securing freedom for each individual soul to have

¹ R. L. Poole, "History of Medieval Thought," p. 177.

² What follows owes much to "Lectures and Papers on the History of the Reformation," by Aubrey L. Moore.

communion with God in whatever way his personal experience taught him to be best for him. And he believed that in this great struggle God was working surely, if slowly, on his side. Will any Theist, who studies the course of events, condemn such belief as superstition? We do not obtain a more scientific view of history by leaving God out of the account.

If we adopt a religious point of view, the chief question to be decided is, Whether the Reformation was, on the whole, a benefit or a calamity for Christendom. We say "on the whole," because no sane critic would say that it has been a benefit without losses, or a calamity without advantages. The most fanatical Puritan must admit that some things that were harmless, and some even that were of real value, were sacrificed in the vehement desire to purify the Church. And the most bigoted Ultramontane must allow that there was need for purification, and that, if much that was precious was destroyed, some intolerable abuses were abated. No well-read Romanist can maintain that the Reformation was nothing better than the sudden outbreak of a number of false opinions and perilous practices, most of which had appeared before, and had, one after another, been condemned by the Church, and which now appeared simultaneously in order that, in God's providence, all these poisonous elements might be simultaneously cast out.

It is more true to say that, as a religious movement, the Reformation was an effort to get back to the Christianity of the primitive Church, as depicted in the New Testament and in the writings of the early Fathers. This meant getting rid of a number of additions to faith and discipline which had been made without Divine authority in the course of ages, and which had not only obscured, but had utterly disfigured, the teaching of Christ and His Apostles and their immediate followers. The disfigurement had been so complete that even those who were ignorant of what Christ and His Apostles had taught—and this ignorance prevailed widely among both laity and clergy—could not but feel that there was something fatally defective and misleading in the beliefs and practices which were pre-

scribed by authority or sanctioned by general custom. A religion which gave no permanent relief to the troubled conscience, and which often condoned what was plainly immoral, could not be of God. And as soon as the revival of letters caused the contents of the New Testament and the teaching of the Fathers to be known, it was seen that what passed for Christianity at the close of the fifteenth century was scarcely recognizable as such when placed side by side with what we know of Christianity at the close of the Apostolic Age.

That the effort to get back to primitive Christianity was not always well informed, and that in the end it became impatient, improvident, and violent, may be freely conceded. But we must not blame the reforming party for not using knowledge which they had never possessed, and which was still out of their reach. And they would have been more than mortal, and perhaps would have been less effective, if they had not in the end resorted to violent measures. The first Reformers aimed simply at getting rid of abuses, which could not be denied, and were not even concealed, and which were generally admitted to be appalling. They had no wish to interfere with existing authority, whether of Pope, Council, or Bishops. It was only when experience proved that neither Pope, nor Councils, nor Bishops would remedy these intolerable evils that they broke away from ecclesiastical authority, as then constituted, and took in hand the work of reform themselves.

That this view of the Reformation, when regarded as a religious crisis, is nearer to the truth than the Roman view, is shown by several facts.

1. Long before the close of the fifteenth century the desire for a reform of the Church was widespread. Men might differ as to whether the medieval Church was simply to be freed from grievous maladies, while its sacerdotal ministry and elaborate hierarchy were retained, or whether the only sure reform was to sweep away the medieval system altogether; but in almost all classes—monks and friars, clergy and laity—there were many who felt that the existing evils could not con-

tinue much longer, and that a great purifying process, possibly gradual, but probably tempestuous, must soon begin. Charles V. and Erasmus were for the gentler method, Zwingli and Calvin for the more radical. Luther began with the former view, but moved onwards—perhaps on the whole unwillingly—to the other. Yet all were agreed about this: a great reform was necessary, and could not long be delayed. Pope after Pope professed to be about to make reforms, and Adrian VI. tried to begin some. In 1522 he told his Legate at Augsburg to promise reform, but to point out that it would be a slow business; *inveteratus enim morbus, nec simplex*, and the Curia is perhaps the source *unde omne hoc malum processit*.

2. The large amount of agreement which was reached at one or two of the conferences between the opposing parties, and especially at Ratisbon in 1541, is evidence that the Reformers were able to urge a great deal that was fully admitted by the other side.¹

3. When at last a Council did meet at Trent, although the conditions which were imposed did not allow the Lutherans to be present, yet a number of their reforms were discussed, and a few of them were partly carried.

In the face of such facts as these, it is foolish to maintain that the Reformers were simply a gang of heretical mischief-makers. They were revolutionists, because nothing less drastic than a revolution could cure the deep-seated evils. Yet their aim was not (as the Romanist declares) the destruction of religious truth, but its revival. And the movement was also—although the Reformers did not consciously aim at this—a revolution leading to the right of the individual to have his own ideas about religious truth.

It was not at once seen that this necessary revolution might be effected in two ways, and that a choice might have to be made between the two.² It was at least conceivable, however

¹ B. J. Kidd, "Documents illustrative of the Continental Reformation," pp. 341 *et seq.*—an invaluable help to the student of this subject.

² C. Hardwick, "History of the Christian Church during the Reformation," pp. 1-7.

improbable, that the Pope and the hierarchy throughout the whole of the Western Church would make a combined effort and free Christendom from its deadly corruptions. And it was conceivable, and not improbable, that the civil and ecclesiastical rulers of each nation might work in concert, and remove the scandals which existed within their own jurisdiction.

The more general plan might have seemed to be not quite impossible when Pius III. became Pope in 1503 ; but his hopeful Pontificate lasted only twenty-six days. The hope might possibly have revived when Adrian VI. succeeded Leo X., in 1522, but he only lived long enough to learn the insuperable difficulty of the task. In neither case did a general reform become an actual possibility. Only one reason for this need be mentioned. It was impossible to abolish the corruptions which both sides deplored without causing financial ruin to vast numbers of officials, high and low, ecclesiastical and civil. Not only would it have been impossible to induce these officials to co-operate in the work of reform—and without their consent reform was condemned to failure—but good men on the Roman side, who were most anxious to abolish abuses, shrank from inflicting so much suffering as their abolition would involve. When men had sunk their whole fortune in buying a lucrative post which had been put up for auction, would it not be monstrous to abolish all such posts? And there was no money with which to make compensation. When Leo X. died, the Papacy was not only in debt, but bankrupt. A reforming Pope had no chance of success. Every door was barred, and every wheel was jammed.

Nevertheless, when Adrian VI. was elected, hopes of reform were kindled, at any rate outside Italy. In Holland inscriptions were put up : " Utrecht planted ; Louvain watered ; the Emperor gave the increase." To which, however, someone added : " And God had nothing to do with it." In Rome it was quite impossible that any reforming Pope should be popular. The worldly interests and domestic sympathies of multitudes of Romans were bound up with the maintenance of the medieval

traditions respecting the Papacy and the Curia;¹ and the Roman populace was both amused and enriched by the profligate expenditure of the hierarchy. Adrian VI. tried to moderate this, and himself set a severe example of simple living. When he died, the Romans put up *their* inscription. They professed to think that the physician who attended the Pope in his last illness had helped to make the illness fatal. Over the physician's door they hung a wreath, with an inscription "to the liberator of his country" (*Liberatori Patriæ Senatus Populusque Romanus*).

In the end, it was the national system of reformation that was carried out, partially in Germany and Switzerland, and much more completely in Holland, England, and Scotland. In those countries in which the national and political stimulus was absent or was weak, the religious movement failed. In Italy and Spain, where the struggle was chiefly a matter of religion and culture, the struggle was ineffectual. In France, where political support was fitful and uncertain, the religious movement was defeated.

¹ J. A Symonds, "The Renaissance in Italy," ii., pp. 404 *et seq.*

