

# Whither The Reformation?

MICHAEL DEWAR

Basically the religious map of Europe, especially of Western Europe, has not changed since the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648. In mediaeval maps Jerusalem, 'the mother of us all', was shown as the centre of the world, geographically as well as spiritually. If we take Vienna, once the Hapsburg capital of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, as the centre of Europe we shall find a starting point for drawing up the religious map of Europe. From there draw three lines, North-west, North-east, and South. Roughly North and West of centre lies 'Protestant' Europe. South and West of this centre lies 'Catholic' Europe, and South and East of it 'Orthodox' Europe. Much of the last was long occupied for Islam by the Ottoman Empire, and shadowed by Communism until very recently, when revolutions broke out behind the Iron Curtain from 'Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic' in Churchillian phrase.

## **An Unchanged Map: *Cujus Regio ejus Religio***

In spite of the conflagrations of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles, the Russian Revolution, the Second World War, the Iron Curtain and after, the heartlands of Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and Unreformed Orthodoxy remain essentially unchanged. To these heartlands must be added the Americas, Australasia, and the Afro-Asian mission fields, colonized by Western Europeans.

There are obvious flaws, and exceptions to the rule. Poland, an essentially 'Catholic' country, long crucified between the two thieves of 'Protestant' Prussia and once 'Orthodox' Russia, is one obvious exception. So is Ireland, three quarters of which remains 'Unreformed', while obviously linked in every other way with Great Britain, nominally 'Protestant' but actually 'Post Christian'.

Switzerland and Czechoslovakia, pioneer centres of Reform, fall partly on the wrong side of the line. However Germany, long regarded as the heartland of Protestantism, is as clearly divided 'confessionally' as she has been politically. Hungary, with a Reformed minority, second only in size to the Church of Scotland, remains linguistically and culturally an exception to every rule, as when she was Europe's eastern frontier against the now Westernized Turk. In Romania, there is a Reformed minority in Transylvania, one of whose Bishops (yes, Bishops!) launched the recent revolution. This land was originally Hungarian. Temesoara was formerly Temesvar.

This leaves North Germany, (but not the Rhineland), the Scandinavian countries (including Iceland), Finland, and some of the Baltic lands, (but not Lithuania), Holland, and the British Isles well within the 'Protestant' sphere of influence.

Apart from the mixed Swiss, Slavonic, and Magyar lands already mentioned, there are the historic Waldensians in Italy itself; and a strong minority in France, of which three quarters are Reformed, and one quarter Lutheran, the latter mostly in Alsace.

These important exceptions go far to disprove the first Lord Birkenhead's easy generalization that 'it would seem that the Teutonic races have some deep stamp of Protestantism upon their blood'. This sentence is a monument to the fatuity of the able man, especially when it leads him further to write:

Modern scientists have discovered that the liability of individuals to certain diseases can be known from blood tests. I do not regard it as impossible that some day this process may be carried a stage further, and the types of a man's beliefs—no matter what his profession—may be determined by his physical composition, so that it will be possible to say, '*This man is really a Roman Catholic—or a Low Churchman—or a Freethinker, etc.*'<sup>1</sup>

The italics are mine, and underline the fallacy of a great Lord Chancellor's reasoning on religion.

## **History and Geography**

It is true that the Reformation had its greatest influence in North West Europe, and its smallest in the Mediterranean South. But there are no more passionately 'Nordic' racists, and no more reactionary Roman Catholic people in all Europe, than the Flemings—as blonde and blue-eyed as any Protestant 'Dutchman'! Conversely few more rigidly Calvinist people exist than the essentially swarthy and Mediterranean types of Southern France, and none more strongly Protestant than the Valdesi of the Alps, west of Turin. As to the Celtic peoples of the western seaboard, Ireland quite apart, the Welsh and Cornish are basically Methodist or Baptist. But their Breton brethren are devoutly Roman Catholic in a sense that many other Northern French are not. In the Hebrides, as in neighbouring Ulster townlands, one community may be Roman Catholic and another Protestant.

So much still depends on historical chance, so much on local conditions four centuries ago. Poland once bid fair to be a bastion of the Reformed Faith. All Ireland might have been won for the Bible had all men had the foresight of Bishop Bedell of Kilmore to seek to translate 'God's Word Written' into the Irish tongue. This is not to deny that there is the 'naturally Catholic' and 'naturally Protestant' temperament. But basically humanity is as it ever was—'naturally sinful'! As such it is always in need of a change of heart, and of reformation.

## 'Faith' and 'Works'

It used to be customary, not least in Northern Ireland, to equate Protestantism with Progress, prosperity, and purity. Lord Macaulay's comparison of 'decadent' Portugal with 'forward-looking' Denmark is as well known as his New Zealander of the future sketching the ruins of St. Paul's from a broken arch of London Bridge. It is true that the Spanish and Portuguese Reformed Churches, in which the Irish Church has a special interest, have had their problems under the dictatorial régimes of 'England's oldest ally', and of 'Most Catholic Spain'. But who is to say that there is not still 'something rotten in the state of Denmark', when that model Lutheran (97%) dairy-farm provides Mrs. Mary Whitehouse with so much ammunition in her campaign against pornography?

The obvious truth is that 'majority religions', like Lord Acton's Absolute Power, tend to 'corrupt absolutely'. This is true, whether it was the politico-religious dictatorship of Franco's Spain, or the 'permissiveness' and high suicide rate of Lutheran Sweden.

In spite of the grouping together of the main Church 'families' of Protestant Christianity, and the centralization of the World Council of Churches at Geneva (centre of refuge for Calvin and Voltaire alike!); the Reformation must rediscover itself in a rediscovery of Personal Faith if it is to survive. Four centuries ago Roman Catholics believed firmly in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and in Salvation by Works. These beliefs were reinforced, and petrified in the following generation by the Counter Reformation at the Council of Trent.

At the same time it is often suggested by some that Protestants, by reaction from an Infallible Church, replaced it with an Infallible Book. In fact the rediscovery of the Bible, resulting from the Fall of Constantinople and the release of Greek texts in the West, and the discovery of printing at the same time, created the atmosphere in which the Reformation was brought to birth.

## Bible and Church

But it is by a *living belief* not simply in *Scripture Alone* (*Scriptura Sola*) or in *Salvation by Faith Alone* (*Fide Sola*), but in *Christ Alone* (*Christo Solo*) that the Reformation remains a living thing. The Church has always been 'renewed' through a rediscovery of God's Grace from St. Paul onwards through St. Augustine to Luther, from Bunyan to Wesley, and from Wesley to Karl Barth and Billy Graham. Without it a dead hand descends on Reformed Christianity, as it did when some seventeenth-century Swiss Theologians debated as to whether the vowel points in the Hebrew text were inspired, or when so called Liberal Protestantism arose in more recent generations.

This has often meant that many so called Protestants today, especially of the English speaking world, believe so strongly in activism and 'do gooding' that 'Justification by Works' seems to many

to be a feature of *Evangelical* Christianity. It is, conversely, Roman Catholics who are more likely to speak of *Faith* than Protestants in the present post Christian age.

In an Ulster context much has been heard of 'Romeward trends in Protestantism'. Looking outwards in a wider context there *are* many indications of 'Protestant trends in Roman Catholicism' to which our eyes should also be open, unless we are being deliberately obscurantist. These include the study of the Bible by groups and individuals, the use of the vernacular for purposes of worship, and the beginnings of the marriage of the clergy. Obviously these trends are more likely to be seen in such countries as Holland and Germany than in Ireland or Spain. It is where the two lines of demarcation meet in the centre rather than on the remote fringes that Reformation influences are likely to have the most impact.

It has also often been suggested that as Roman Catholicism appears to be finding the Bible, so the Reformation traditions are finding the Church. The World Council of Churches, seen as a Christian bridge between East and West by many and as a snare and a delusion by others, is cited as a proof. But it has never been satisfactorily proved that the Reformation was *not* aware of the Church. No stronger 'Churchman' existed than John Calvin with his ideal of a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper at the Cathedral of St. Pierre in Geneva. But Protestantism to be true to itself must not lose sight of the individual.

The great age of Protestant missionary expansion was the nineteenth century. Anglican Missions were generations behind Lutheran missions in India, while the Jesuits had been in the field in the Far East for centuries. Allowing for 'forced conversions' by the Jesuit Fathers, and the consequent acceptance of religion *en bloc*, the Reformed traditions often allowed their denominationalism to divide and weaken by contrast with Rome's monolithic insistence on unity.

### **House Churches and Separation**

It is in the mission field, notably in the Church of South India, that the 'Younger Churches' once dismissed as:

*New caught, sullen peoples,  
Half devil and half child*

have taught the Anglo-American Churches especially, furiously to think about their divisiveness and its impact on Afro-Asian Christianity. If this has resulted in an over self-conscious Ecumenism to counteract earlier Separatist trends the time is overdue for a synthesis between the 'activism' of much Western Christianity (especially in the English-speaking world) and the older 'pietism', which is much stronger than many care to admit.

That it is already on the way is shown by an increase of Study Circles and Renewal Prayer Groups in the home, and 'House

Churches', in which 'the Word of God is preached' and sometimes, indeed, in which 'the Sacraments are duly administered'.

An awareness of the barrenness of a merely intellectual or ethical Christianity, a new confrontation between the individual and his Creator and Saviour, transcending 'the Church' of the Ecumenists and 'the Churches' of their critics, may well produce another 'Church of the Desert', as when the Holy Spirit breathed new life into the Huguenots of the Dispersion, and so brought healing to their earlier wounds.

*Let me no more my comfort draw  
From my frail hold on thee,  
Only in this rejoice with awe,  
Thy mighty grasp on me.*

### **Then Whither the Reformation?**

Thither the Reformation—*where Christ is, there is the Church!* Otherwise Protestantism, in its present World and Church setting, is in danger of becoming what the French Protestant, Gabriel Monod, once called 'the limitless aggregate of freedom of thought'.<sup>2</sup> If it were no more than this, this freedom could deteriorate into freedom *from* worship. Liberty of the Spirit is not licence. But an injunction to 'quench not the Spirit' must not ignore new 'Pentecostalist' forces, which are at work in all branches of the Christian Church. Basically it remains true that 'The Bible and the Bible only is the religion of Protestants', as William Chillingworth said it was three centuries ago. But it remains even more basic to the future of the Reformation that 'in Christ' there is the 'new Creature'. This is neither Anglican nor Presbyterian, Reformed nor Lutheran, Methodist nor Moravian, but 'one in Christ Jesus'. Without *His Spirit* making alive, the *denominational letter* is in danger of killing still.

### **Variety and Tension**

A French writer has said of his countryman, the ruthlessly logical John Calvin, that a demon might have whispered to him as to Dante, 'you did not know that I, too, was a logician?' This was the 'demon' of private judgment. For in spite of his prodigious efforts to build up a rigid orthodoxy, even more orthodox than that which preceded it, there was a logic within the Reformation movement itself which shattered the seemingly impregnable rock of logic on which Calvin hoped to build it.

Variety is the motto, and as Bossuet saw it, the badge of the Protestant Religion. The Churches of the Reformation varied according to time and place, ever seeking to 'more light to break forth from God's Most Holy Word', as John Robinson saw it. So both the seventeenth century Roman Catholic bishop and the seventeenth

century Puritan pastor saw a truth hidden from the Master Mind of the sixteenth century Reformation himself.

There was Dutch Protestantism, before and after the Synod of Dort; and French Protestantism, before and after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and before and after the Revivals of the nineteenth century.

There were our Anglicanism and the varieties of the English-speaking Free Churches, whether Independent, Baptist, or Methodist. There was, and is, German Lutheranism, so different from Scandinavian Lutheranism, from that of the heroic Gustavus Adolphus and the half-mad Charles XII; as both are different from the Lutheranism of the Baltic lands, such as Finland, Estonia, and Latvia.

There was, and still remains, the variety of Swiss Protestantism from canton to canton. There is the escalation in Geneva itself from rigid Calvinist orthodoxy to the laxest Liberalism, between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Today there is a Roman-Catholic, mainly non-Swiss, majority in Geneva. In Europe there is still the twofold division between the Lutheran and Reformed Confessions, and in the English-speaking world the division between the Episcopal and non-Episcopal Churches; and in both the tension remains between 'Conservative' and 'Liberal' theologians.

We do not entirely agree with the 'demoniacally' logical French Professor Hauser when he says that 'Orthodox Protestantism' is a contradiction in terms.<sup>3</sup> But he is surely not at fault in seeing the future of the Reformation bound up with a mutual love and understanding between its children, a cessation of ancient rivalries among members of the same family, and a reconciliation of kindred spirits, who are One in Christ Jesus, against whose Church the gates of Hell itself can never prevail?

**MICHAEL DEWAR** has served all his Irish Ministry in the Diocese of Down and Dromore, where he was an Examining Chaplain in Church History, and was elected to a Canonry of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. He is now in 'active retirement' in Cheltenham.

## NOTES

1 Lord Birkenhead, *Turning Points in History* (London, 1930) p. 96.

2 Henri Hauser, *La Naissance du Protestantisme*, (Presse Universitaire de France, Paris, 1940) p. 115.

3 *Op. cit.*, p. 116.