I

THE CONTINENTAL BACKGROUND

LOOKING BACK over a century of upheaval and revolution in theology and scholarship, the English philosopher-statesman, Francis Bacon, with his accustomed percipience, rightly pointed to the effect which Martin Luther had had upon the study of the past. He had been obliged, Bacon argued, "to awake all antiquity and to call former times to his succours . . . so that the ancient authors both in divinity and humanity, which had a long time slept in libraries, began generally to be read and resolved".[1]

This was not because Luther would have regarded himself as a historian. Certainly it was not because he based his doctrine primarily on a study of the past. On the contrary, his convictions sprang from an agonizing personal experience in the present and an intense and searching meditation on the Scriptures. It was they, not any awareness of history, which gave birth to his passionate sensitivity to an individual relationship between God and man; to the sinner's desperate need for grace, to his redemption not by any external act or works prescribed by the Church or devised by the imagination of man but by an inward act of faith responding to the inscrutable mystery of divine grace. He found all this in himself and in the Word, and not in any historical works or chronicles. And he was convinced, with the single-minded faith of a man who believed himself transported from the unimaginable despair and isolation of the God-deserted to the ecstatic liberty of the God-redeemed, that did he but convey to others his experience they must inevitably share a heavenly rapture which was so real to him.

But—and this is the point where we at once begin to see the force of Francis Bacon's comment—almost as soon as Luther came to communicate his sensibilities to others he began to realize that defenders of orthodoxy would denounce them as an intolerably presumptuous threat on the part of a single misguided monk to fifteen hundred years of established authority in the Church. In the famous Leipzig debates of 1519 Luther's opponent, John Eck, quickly sensed—more swiftly and clearly than Luther himself at first—what the implications of the

reformer's views on papal supremacy were. Eck asserted that the pope's position of primacy was of divine origin: "The Holy Roman and Apostolic Church obtained the primacy not from the Apostles but from our Lord and Saviour himself, and it enjoys pre-eminence of power above all of the churches and the whole flock of Christian people."[2] In reply to this and similar arguments Luther was forced to deny the historical origin and continuity of power which Eck claimed for the papacy. Luther's fundamental counter-argument was his scriptural exegesis, but he was not content to rely solely on this. Even now he advanced an historical argument, based on the Early Fathers, the great church councils, and such historical authors as Platina who had written a well-known *Lives of the Popes*, published in 1479, in order to prove his own contention that the papal primacy was a phenomenon of human, not to say diabolical, inspiration and one of comparatively recent development in many respects. In the course of the next twenty or thirty years, Luther's conviction of the value of the historical arguments was greatly strengthened. Thus in 1535, in a preface to the *Vitae Pontificum* published in Wittenberg by the Englishman, Robert Barnes, he could write:

> I for my part, unversed and ill-informed as I was at first with regard to history, attacked the papacy, *a priori*, as they say, that is out of the Holy Scriptures. And now it is a wonderful delight to me to find that others are doing the same thing *a posteriori*, that is from history—and it gives me the greatest joy and satisfaction to see, as I do most clearly, that history and Scripture entirely coincide in this respect.

"That history and Scripture entirely coincide in this respect!"—we could easily take this to be the essential keynote of all those views of history that are subsequently to be discussed in this volume.

But the implications of Luther's appeal to history could look very different to other eyes. Quite apart from the counter-arguments raised by a clerical controversialist like Eck, there was the obvious and very serious objection voiced by an intelligent layman like the Emperor Charles V: "For it is certain", he protested, "that a single monk must err if he stands against the opinion of all Christendom. Otherwise Christendom itself would have erred for more than a thousand years."[3] Charles summed up the reactions of a great many of his contemporaries. His were reservations which might give pause even to a man of temperament as leonine and beliefs as white-hot as Luther's. And Luther himself had doubts from time to time on this score—he would

have been less than human if he had not! While he was in the Wartburg Castle, his "Isle of Patmos" as he termed it, in hiding after the Diet of Worms, destructive doubts assailed him. "Are you alone wise?" he nagged himself. "Have so many centuries gone wrong? What if you are in error and are taking so many others with you to damnation?"[4] He overcame these perplexities, but they were to return many times before the end of his life. Nor need we wonder at such misgivings that all the history of Christendom might be testifying against him. The boldest minds in the sixteenth century shuddered at the prospect of breaking with established authority. None cared to pose as a revolutionary; every innovator, however radical, disguised the fact from himself and his contemporaries by seeking to present his ideas as a return to the truth: Utopia must be found in Eden.

That Luther should suffer a crisis of confidence from time to time at the thought of rejecting the all-pervasive influence and jurisdiction of the Church should not surprise us. He was emboldened to make the break, however, because he believed he was appealing to a still higher fount of authority—the Word of God. In the first and last resort, he and every other Protestant reformer believed that a challenge as daring and disruptive as they were offering was justified by an overriding need to bring about a reversal of priorities in contemporary religion: to give it a God-inspired authority in place of a man-centred one.

The appeal, then, was primarily to the nature of the relationship between God and man as revealed in the Scriptures. There, too, would be found the authentic pattern established by the divine founder of Christianity for continuing his purpose of revealing God's intentions for men among succeeding generations. But what if, as Luther claimed, the faith had become by his time obscured and distorted by the inventions of men? What if the Church, as it existed in the sixteenth century, was a hindrance, indeed an enemy, to truth? Then it followed it must be of crucial interest and value to sincere Christians to learn when, where and why the Church had come to depart from the pattern laid down by its founder. The stark and startling contrast, as it seemed to the reformers, between the Church of the Apostles and that ruled over by the contemporary popes would be *justified* by the appeal to the Scriptures. It would be *explained* by the appeal to history.

It was this which accounted for Luther's growing regard for the testimony of history. He was not a historian, nor a humanist, still less an intellectual system-builder. But he was capable of some remarkable historical insights; and he had an implicit view of history more signifi-

cant and compelling than has often been supposed. It has recently been the subject of careful analysis. These studies may, in the nature of the case, have given Luther's view of history more shape and coherence than ever they assumed in the tempestuous and often inchoate writings of the reformer himself. But they do establish conclusively the value and importance of Luther's intuitive recognition of the importance of the historical process as interpreted by the Christian, both for his own and subsequent generations of reformers.

However, there were other major Continental reformers who were in many respects even more concerned with the historical implications of their doctrine than Luther. Some of them had a better equipment in humanist training than he. As such, they were more drawn to the study of early texts, particularly to the writings of the great Latin and Greek Fathers. In Luther's own church his colleague, Melanchthon, particularly appreciated the value of the doctrine of the early Church, which he was very fond of regarding as *ecclesia doctrix*, the teaching church. Some of the great Swiss reformers were also steeped in the learning and methods of the humanists. One may be specially picked out; not because he was by any means the greatest among them but because of the particular influence he wielded among reformers in England. This was Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor at Zurich and author of a very voluminous correspondence with a large number of English reformers who looked, and not in vain, to this wise and moderate Swiss leader for guidance and counsel in all matters spiritual. Bullinger also published a series of fifty sermons in five parts of ten each in a book called *The Decades* which was greatly admired and widely read in England. In his fifth and last decade, where he treats of the nature of the Church, Bullinger brings out most sharply the contrast, as he saw it, at all points between the true Church founded on the warrant of scriptural truth and that of the papists, dependent in so many vital points on human tradition. Of their attitude in this context Bullinger wrote:

> But they do know well enough that the chief points of popery can be proved with no expressed scripture, or with reasons deducted out of the Scripture; therefore they feign unwritten matters, or traditions that were never written, whereby they may clout up and supply fitly that which they see want in the Scripture, and cannot be proved thereby. . . . To be short, whatsoever the whole Church of Rome hath hitherto kept shall be a tradition, although it be neither found, nor painted, nor written anywhere in any book canonical, yea although it be quite contrary to the Scripture. And so that shall be a tradition what they list.[5]

Hence the urgency, in Bullinger's eyes, of bringing to light how these "traditions" had been successively devised and introduced.

Bullinger's *Decades* was very similar in the general treatment of its argument to an infinitely greater and more influential book, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin, like Bullinger, treats of the nature of the Church in the last section of his book, but argues his case with much greater concentration and intellectual power. It was typical of Calvin that his conversion to the reformers' view of the Church should have been a slow and deliberate process. Admittedly he says in his preface to his Commentary on the Psalms that his final decision to leave the church of his upbringing was sudden. That may have been so; but it was only the last step in a long and gradual realization that the reformers' doctrines which had at first so shocked him by their apparent novelty and heresy were in reality those of the pristine Church of the New Testament from which the Church of Rome had turned away. The nature of Calvin's conversion explains much about his subsequent teaching. He grasped more readily than any of the other reformers the importance of the visible Church. His was a generation when, in Germany and Switzerland, much of the impulse of the reformed churches was being enervated and dissipated, when the Roman Church was re-forming its ranks and burnishing its weapons. To counter this, Calvin emphasized that if the Reformed Church was ever to replace Rome, or even successfully to defend itself against counter-attack, it must seek to create within itself the three sources of strength possessed by its great enemy: unity, authority and universality. But it meant also that the line between the true Church and the false Church must be drawn in the sharpest and clearest way. That was why, in the fourth and last book of the *Institutes*, the gulf which Calvin saw between the true Church founded on scriptural authority and the false Church based on the authority of Rome was so brilliantly demonstrated.

Stage by stage, with remorseless logic, Calvin defined the Church as its founder conceived it, and contrasted this with the distortions and perversions introduced and authorized by the papacy. He began by considering the rule or government of the Church. In chapter IV he outlined the state of the Church, "as this will give us a kind of visible representation of the divine institution". Then in chapter V this was followed by an account of how "the ancient form of government was utterly corrupted by the tyranny of the papacy". Chapters VI and VII developed historically the theme of the rise of the papacy "till it attained a height by which the liberty of the Church was destroyed and

all true rule overthrown". He proceeded similarly to show how the "unbridled licence" of the papal Church had corrupted doctrine, legislation and jurisdiction. Calvin had a remarkable knowledge of the Early Fathers' works and other early records of the Church, and he brought to the interpretation of them the skill, in the highest degree, of an expert jurist and erudite humanist. He was endowed, in addition, with a keen sense of history:

> If there were no records, men of sense would judge from the nature of the case that . . . a mass of rites and observances did not rush into the Church all at once, but crept in gradually. For though the venerable bishops who were nearest in time to the Apostles introduced some things pertaining to order and discipline, those who came after them, and those after them again, had not enough of consideration, while they had too much curiosity and cupidity, he who came last always vying in emulation with his predecessors, so as not to be surpassed in the invention of novelties.[6]

At all points, Calvin held his own clear and coherent view of the true Church over and against the Roman Church which had superseded it. He defined the contrast in sharp clear-cut lines with no loose edges. And he coupled with it a categorical imperative that all the accumulated dross of the dark ages of papal usurpation be removed and the true Church restored in all its original purity. Calvin, like many another creative Christian thinker, derived much of his force from his unfaltering certainty that the consummation of human destiny lay *beyond* history; but he also cherished a superb confidence that it was both possible and necessary to realize God's will *within* history.

Naturally, in the heat of the bitter religious controversies which took place between 1517 and 1560, many of the arguments and much of the evidence used by Protestants to substantiate their view of church history were scattered widely and haphazardly in a variety of books and pamphlets. In the 1550s an attempt was made to bring this material together into a synthesis. The result was the famous work of Protestant historiography known as the *Centuries of Magdeburg*. Published in thirteen volumes between 1559 and 1574, it was the work primarily of the Lutheran, Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Each volume covered a century of history, and the controlling theme of the work was that secular history is the scene of an unending conflict between God and the Devil, between Christ and Anti-Christ, represented here as the papacy. The publication of the work was preceded by an intensive search for materials which produced a veritable arsenal of arguments on which

Protestants could draw in their attacks on Catholic opponents. Throughout there was a heavy Protestant bias, frequently uncritical in its approach to sources. But for all its limitations—in some respects because of them—the book became tremendously influential. It gave a new impetus to church history, not merely among reformers but in the Roman Church also. "The very method of the attack—the use of history to destroy the basis of justification for an ancient institution—was a stimulus to the study and development of historical research. The Catholics could not permit the attack to go unchallenged and were compelled to turn to history to find ammunition for a counter-offensive."[7] The upshot was the equally famous and influential Catholic book, Cardinal Baronius's *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588–1607).

So far, the attempt has been made to indicate various ways in which some of the Protestant leaders were driven to formulate their own appeal to history. It would not be possible, even if it were desirable, to subject the views of all the major reformers to detailed individual analysis. A more profitable approach may be to try to present first of all some of their general assumptions about the nature of history and then to examine how they proceeded to apply them to gain an understanding of the history of the Christian Church in Europe.

First, these reformers shared with many other Christians before their time and since an unshakeable conviction of the Christian meaning of history. Of all the great religions of mankind none has so central or so pervasive a sense of history as Christianity. It claims to link the events of terrestrial history to the immutable eternal scheme of things. It professes to unfold the whole of the mighty cosmic sequence enacted beyond and within history. It is grounded in the unique historical circumstances of the life of Christ. This is the pivot on which turns everything that happened before and everything which is to befall after.

Again, the reformers laid particular emphasis on the unique authority of the Scriptures as the source of revelation of this historical *schema*. The Bible was in many senses a history, but a history of a very remarkable kind. It was a history in which the intervention of God was seen on virtually every page. He was no remote and impersonal first cause; no detached, capricious or cynical Olympian observer. He was a direct participant unmistakably revealing his will and his reactions in a highly personal—it might almost be said, human—way. Scriptural example was reinforced by the attitudes of the two most influential authors of Christian history, Eusebius and Augustine. Both taught the same moral:

that God intervened regularly in human affairs and, more important still, that his interventions followed an unmistakable and traceable pattern.

That brings us next to consider how that pattern appeared to the eyes of the reformers. They shared fully the biblical awareness of a covenant between God and his people. If it is permissible to put it in such terms, God went in very much for "stick and carrot" diplomacy in his relations with men. When the people were faithful to him and obeyed his injunctions they were blessed and rewarded. Conversely, when they went whoring after false gods they brought down condign punishment on their heads. To take but one example from the writings of the Welsh Puritan martyr, John Penry. He firmly believed that if the Elizabethan Church did not mend its ways after a Puritan fashion, God might use the military might of Spain as an instrument of his wrath to punish the English nation for its tardiness in reforming religion. Punishment might, then, take a material or physical form. But infinitely worse retribution in the view of the reformers was that of a spiritual kind: that God allowed the light of his gospel to become obscured so that men were in danger of everlasting darkness. The Church itself, the very instrument devised by God for ensuring that his truth should continue to be preached to mankind, could, as a punishment for men's wickedness, be subverted by their adversary, the Devil, and become the tool of Anti-Christ. Such a view of history necessarily heightened the tension of the moral drama of the struggle being waged between cosmic powers in an earthly arena and lent it a significance far beyond that of any contest on the purely terrestrial or secular plane.

Given the reformers' view of the incorrigibly sinful nature of unregenerate man they might have been led to near-despair. They were saved from this by their still greater emphasis on the infinite mercy of divine grace and the ultimately irresistible power of the divine will. However much the powers of evil might appear to triumph, however completely Anti-Christ might seem to have the whole Church within his grasp, divine providence ensured that Satan would never become entire master. The light of truth was never entirely extinguished; the faithful were never wholly destroyed. Always in every age, no matter how dark, there was a saving remnant. There was always a hope of restoration. It was characteristic that Luther should entitle one of his earliest and most famous tracts, *On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church.* Implicit in it was the idea not only that the Church had for long been in captivity to the enemies of God but also that he would no less surely

free it in the fullness of time. He would allow the reformers, like Nehemiah, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

All this was, inescapably, not a philosophy of history but a theology of history. It was a manifesto of God's ways with men down the ages; the working out of human affairs in conformity with the divine will and purpose. It was not only a theology of history but hardly less a history of theology; an account of how men had forwarded or thwarted a revelation of the true knowledge of God. It was, therefore, sacred or ecclesiastical history; an examination of decisive phases in the history of the Church conceived of as a series of fateful choices. The age-old notion of cataclysmic events leading to strongly defined phases of history was still very much present. Equally vivid was the consciousness of an historic choice awaiting contemporaries. The reformers had no doubt that a long dark phase in the history of the Church was over and that restoration of the true Church was possible. Such a cataclysmic view of the past, however unhistorical it may now appear, could be wonderfully potent in releasing energy and confidence in the present.

Given this much simplified but not, it is hoped, distorted conceptual framework of history within which the reformers worked, it may now be worth trying to see how they applied it to the church history in which they were interested. Before proceeding to try to answer that question, however, it is important to recognize, as many historians have recently come to do, that there is a valid and necessary distinction to be drawn between two major groups of reformers. These groups have been conveniently categorized by American historians as Magisterial Reformers and Radical Reformers. By the Magisterial Reformers is generally meant all those who believed that a state Church or an established Church could be justified. This would include Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans. The term Radical Reformers refers to those who, whatever other differences existed between them, rejected a state Church and held only to gathered congregations of believers, e.g. Anabaptists, Spiritualists and Evangelical Rationalists. It would be out of place here to embark upon an extended examination of the latter. But it is not unfair to comment that the value of their contribution to the Reformation has been increasingly recognized in recent years. It need hardly be added that their viewpoint, often misunderstood and even travestied in the past, has a particular interest for those who belong to the Nonconformist tradition.