

# ‘Remembering Reformation and Forgetting Luther’<sup>1</sup>

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Five hundred years ago an obscure Augustinian monk from the small university town of Wittenberg carried out an act of protest that is widely recognised as a watershed in Western European history. While scholars now debate what exactly took place on 31 October 1517, the nailing of Martin Luther’s 95 theses against indulgences and the papacy’s power to pardon sin to the door of the Castle Church has acquired a pivotal place in the historical imagination in the centuries since. It has become a shorthand for the beginning of the movement that we call the Reformation and dignify with a capital R, signalling its status as a crucial turning point on the path towards the modern world. The mythology of enlightenment and progress that still clusters around it is a flattering projection of the values that our society claims to hold dear: freedom of conscience, reason, and principled resistance to corruption and tyranny. It has helped to create a vision of the Middle Ages as a period blighted by superstition, intolerance, and fear. Whether we are atheists or people of faith, professional historians or members of the general public, this is a story that has helped to shape our culture and outlook. How we remember the Reformation reflects who we think we are.

Half a millennium on, the idea that Luther’s provocative challenge to the ecclesiastical establishment marks a fork in the road of our civilisation shows little sign of waning. Indeed, the big birthday that the Reformation celebrated in 2017 may even be helping to entrench it further.<sup>2</sup> Flooding Wittenberg and other sites associated with the famous reformer with visitors, it is providing a welcome boost to the German tourist industry and to the manufacturers of the Luther-themed memorabilia that spills out of the shops in these places of thinly-disguised Protestant pilgrimage—from t-shirts, socks, and biscuit-cutters to chocolate sculptures, porcelain figurines, authentically dressed teddy bears and Playmobil toys replete with miniature bibles and pens. Many of the commemorative events organised across the globe were conducted in a spirit of ecumenical understanding. Much of the literature, scholarly and popular, that emanated from the presses subjected enduring, confessionally-coloured legends about the Reformation to a



healthy dose of critical scrutiny. Some made the very invention of this tradition and its infiltration of public memory the subject of sophisticated investigation.<sup>3</sup>

And yet there is a distinct danger that the anniversary has served to perpetuate a Luther-centric version of Reformation history, along with its attendant myths. Elevating the charismatic and overpowering figure of Martin Luther onto a pedestal once more, it has overshadowed other agents, actors and aspects of the multiple and competing movements for religious reform that germinated, sprouted, and grew over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It has arguably eclipsed the significance of initiatives and impulses that did not have their taproot in Wittenberg in the autumn of 1517, even if they were energised by opposition to them. In short, it has encouraged us to remember some dimensions of the Reformation at the expense of others.

In England, this anniversary of the *Lutherjahr*, like its predecessors in 1617, 1717, 1817, and 1917, was comparatively subdued. There was a late surge of activity in the lead up to 31 October—academic conferences and workshops, concerts, exhibitions and theatrical re-enactments, commemorative services and special lectures—but it cannot be denied that the event that allegedly took place on this date lacks the resonance that it has elsewhere. Luther may be a household name, but he does not occupy centre stage in accounts of the idiosyncratic version of Reformation that changed religious life in England forever after Henry VIII broke with Rome in 1534.

This is partly because Lutheranism was only one phase in the messy, haphazard and protracted process by which England became a Protestant nation. The illicit Lutheran books teaching the doctrine of justification by faith that were smuggled across the Channel did help to sow the seeds for a grassroots movement that the authorities inadvertently strengthened rather than extinguished by burning them on bonfires of vanities.<sup>4</sup> Despite Henry VIII's own learned Latin attack on the teachings of the Wittenberg monk published in 1521,<sup>5</sup> Luther's agendas did leave their mark on the legislation laying out a programme for liturgical and ecclesiastical reform and on the government propaganda that justified the king's claim to royal supremacy over the Church and the largest land grab in this country's history, the Dissolution of the Monasteries. They not only provided a legitimating rhetoric that concealed the king's need for an urgent solution to his marital and financial problems; they also bolstered Henry's own sense of himself as a godly monarch following in the footsteps of the illustrious Old Testament kings.<sup>6</sup>

In the reign of his evangelically inclined son Edward VI, however, the theological centre of gravity of the English Reformation shifted in a decidedly Swiss direction. The infant Church of England increasingly took its bearings from reformers other than Luther—from Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, and from exiles such as Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli who found asylum and held



prestigious posts in Cambridge and Oxford during this period. In the cities in which English Protestants themselves sought refuge in the reign of Queen Mary I, including Frankfurt and Geneva, they in turn were exposed to a new set of influences emanating from John Calvin, which left their imprint on the religious settlement of 1559.<sup>7</sup> The ‘strange death of Lutheran England’ of which some historians speak was the product of swirling political, dynastic and ecclesiastical contingencies that collectively reset the compass of Protestantism in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> People elsewhere in Europe, meanwhile, seem to have been slow to catch up with these developments. In Spain, *ingles* and *luterano* were virtually interchangeable terms for several decades.<sup>9</sup>

Back at home, by the 1560s and 70s, the process by which England, in common with her Continental cousins, had cast off the papacy had already become the subject of myth-making. Tracing the origins of Protestantism back to the pristine purity of the primitive church and heralding the succession of heretics who had resisted its descent into ‘error’ as heroes, John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* was an emphatic riposte to the Catholic taunt, ‘Where was your Church before Luther?’<sup>10</sup> It presented the Reformation as a providential act to liberate the people from spiritual thralldom and to open their eyes to the truth. Propelled by divine force, this was a swift and popular revolution whose success was never in doubt, for all the fires of persecution it faced and the bitter internal wrangles that Foxe quietly airbrushed out. International in scope, Foxe’s history allocated Luther’s protest a prominent place in the drama, though it distanced itself from his views on the real presence in the Eucharist, suggesting that readers should not be too exercised by ‘one small blemish, or for a little stooping ... in the sacrament’. It also injected further ambiguity and a degree of muddle into his memory by absorbing an unfortunate mistranslation that dated the posting of the 95 these two days later than 31 October to 2 November.<sup>11</sup> The *Actes and Monuments* was simultaneously an empowering patriotic narrative whose defining moment was the accession of Elizabeth I, whom it celebrated as a latter day Constantine, even as it sought to admonish her into perfecting what puritans regarded as a half-baked and mongrel Reformation.<sup>12</sup> Although this was a strategy that she firmly resisted, to the frustration of a number of her subjects, after her death this monarch of ‘blessed memory’ became a useful stick with which to beat her Stuart successors, whose own credentials as ‘defenders of the faith’ came under growing suspicion.<sup>13</sup>

In time Elizabeth’s refusal to abolish the institution of episcopacy and determination to uphold a ‘via media’ between Geneva and Rome itself became the subject of legend. With the rise of Laudianism in the 1630s, the English Reformation was recast as a movement that only reluctantly resorted to schism and that steered a safe course between the equally pernicious extremes of popery and radical Calvinism. In this climate its Lutheran legacies and points of parallel might be



expected to have undergone a revival, but the longer term effect of these trends was to set English Protestantism in an increasingly insular mould. It was to distance it, both diplomatically and historiographically, from the reformed sister churches on the Continent with which it had previously cultivated strong links and felt a deep sense of affinity.<sup>14</sup> Reinforced following the Restoration, the status of England's Reformation as *sui generis* was never uncontested, but the myth of its unique moderation gathered strength within Anglicanism over the course of the next century, reaching a peak against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholicism. The Victorian reinvention of the Reformation entailed forgetting the influence exerted by foreign reformers in favour of dwelling upon its indigenous character.<sup>15</sup> It involved another form of amnesia too: a glossing over of the heady and intoxicating sectarian experiments that had turned the world upside down during the Civil War and Interregnum. An attempt to reincarnate apostolic Christianity, these constituted a robust critique of the empty and hollow Reformations of their rivals and predecessors themselves.

The more radical varieties of Reformation that the puritans and sects strove to consummate in the middle decades of the seventeenth century was likewise one from which Martin Luther was largely excluded, though for different reasons. In so far as he featured in this millennial vision it was as a stooge. When his *Table Talk* was republished by Captain Henry Bell in 1651, a note in the preface referred to Luther's as 'the first Reformation' and said that it could not 'rationally be expected, that at that first dawning of the Gospel light, all Spiritual Truths should be known in that perfection whereunto God hath brought the knowing professors of this Age'.<sup>16</sup> Refashioned for the politics of the 1640s and 50s, his Reformation simply served to cast the more far-reaching religious achievements of this revolutionary era into sharp relief. It was presented as merely an interim stage on a journey towards spiritual and institutional reform that would culminate with the rule of Christ on earth. Luther had become less a source of startling exegetical insight than of symbolic power, though one theme of his writing did leave a lasting mark on English Protestant thinking and insert itself firmly into popular piety—his theology of the cross and his work on Christian suffering and consolation.<sup>17</sup>

There is a further element in the forgetting of Luther that deserves attention: the Catholic counter-narrative of Reformation history that began to emerge as early as the mid-sixteenth century. This too served to occlude his part in the process by which England had abandoned her allegiance to Rome and severed herself from the Mother Church. This too saw Lutheran ideas as alien imports that had seduced the English people from the faith of their forefathers, injecting the poison of a foreign heresy into their hearts. Suffusing the pages of the Catholic martyrology and recusant history that grew out of the polemics of Nicholas Sanders, Thomas Stapleton and others, this sentiment remains an undercurrent in the revisionist



histories that now dominate our understanding of the Reformation.<sup>18</sup> These too have arguably had the effect of making us forget those who were swept away by Luther's ideas in favour of the conservative voices who wistfully recalled a world that was lost and who, actively or passively, pushed back against Protestantism's steady advance. To remember a time before and without Luther was—and remains—a mode of resisting the whole project of the Reformation itself.

There was a moment, a decade or so ago, in when it was fashionable to stress the European dimensions of the English Reformation, when the momentum for putting England on the map of Continental Protestantism was gathering apace, and when the cultural imperatives for recognising the creative reception and reciprocal exchange of religious ideas across the territorial borders that divide the British Isles from its neighbours were in the ascendancy. The lingering hold of English exceptionalism seemed to be loosening and leading scholars were confident that the fog was beginning to clear from the Channel.<sup>19</sup> The political and cultural environment that produced incentives for recollecting our common history and Christian heritage has proved to be short-lived. While recent events may make some wonder if that mist is descending once more, others will perceive no such danger.

The Reformation that we now remember in England is thus one in which Luther has been consigned to the fringes and margins. It is the consequence of a variety of complex processes that have reduced him to an emblem and a cardboard cut-out. Devoid of much theological substance, he remains a site of memory in our society and culture. If we view the past through the prism of the present, we also view the present through the prism of the past. We see it with the aid of individuals and events to which our societies have assigned historical significance. Luther is one such cultural matrix and icon who has proved to be a flexible and adaptable tool, a veritable man for all seasons and a touchstone for what inspires and troubles us in our own times. He may never have nailed 95 theses to a church door on 31 October 1517. But remembering him, and the movement that he is credited with initiating, reminds us of how we repeatedly re-make history in our own image. The memory of the Reformation is a mirror in which we see a telling, and sometimes uncomfortable, reflection of ourselves, and our assumptions and ideals. We must not, therefore, fall into the trap of forgetting it.

## Notes

- 1 An abbreviated version of this essay appeared as 'The Forgotten Reformation', in *The Tablet*, 271/9223 (28 October 2017), pp. 8–9. I am grateful to the editor, Brendan Walsh, for granting permission to republish it in extended form here. This was originally a paper delivered at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, 31 October 2017, Symposium: 'Liberated by God's Grace: 1517–2017: 500 Years of Reformation'.



- 2 Cf. G. R. Elton's critical reflections on the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1483: 'Commemorating Luther', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), pp. 614–19, esp. p. 616: 'One began to wonder whether Luther would ever recover from his quincentenary celebrations'.
- 3 See Dixon, C. Scott, 'Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and the Origins of the Reformation Narrative', *English Historical Review*, 132 (2017), pp. 533–69; Marshall, Peter, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (Oxford: 2017).
- 4 Clebsch, W.A., *England's Earliest Protestants, 1520–35* (New Haven: 1964); Trueman, Carl, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525–1556* (Oxford: 1994); Eucler, Carrie, 'Does Faith Translate? Tudor Translations of Martin Luther and the Doctrine of Justification by Faith', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 101 (2010), pp. 80–113; Wendebourg, Dorothea, 'The German Reformers and England', in Wendebourg, Dorothea (ed.), *Sister Reformatins/Schwesterreformationem: The Reformation in Germany and England/Die Reformation in Deutschland und in England* (Tübingen: 2010), pp. 94–132; Hope, Andrew, 'The Printed Book Trade in Response to Luther: English Books Printed Abroad', in Gillespie, Vincent and Powell, Susan (eds), *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476–1558* (Cambridge: 2014), pp. 272–89.
- 5 Henry VIII, *Assertio septem sacramentorum* (London: 1521).
- 6 Rex, Richard, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (Basingstoke: 1993).
- 7 See Collinson, Patrick, 'England and International Calvinism, 1558–1640', in Prestwich, Menna (ed.), *International Calvinism, 1541–1715* (Oxford: 1985), pp. 197–223; Pettegree, Andrew, 'The Reception of Calvinism in Britain', in Neuser, W.H. and Armstrong, B.G. (eds), *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion* (Kirkville: 1997), pp. 267–89; MacCulloch, Diarmaid, 'The Church of England and International Protestantism 1530–1570', in Milton, Anthony (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism*, vol. 1 *Reformation and Identity, c.1520–1662* (Oxford: 2017), pp. 316–32.
- 8 Ryrie, Alec, 'The Strange Death of Lutheran England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 53 (2002), pp. 64–92.
- 9 See Marshall, Peter, 'The Other Black Legend', in his *Religious Identities in Henry VIII's England* (Aldershot: 2006), pp. 103–23.
- 10 See Fritze, Ronald H., 'Root or Link? Luther's Position in the Historical Debate over the Legitimacy of the Church of England, 1558–1625', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (1986), pp. 288–302; Barnett, S. J., 'Where was your Church before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined', *Church History*, 68 (1999), pp. 14–41.
- 11 Foxe, John, *The Ecclesiastical History* (London, 1570), pp. 992–3; Foxe, John, *Actes and Monuments* (London: 1563), p. 455.
- 12 Freeman, Thomas S., 'Providence and Prescription: The Account of Elizabeth in Foxe, John "Book of Martyrs"', in Doran, Susan and Freeman, Thomas S. (eds), *The Myth of Elizabeth I* (Basingstoke: 2003), pp. 27–55.
- 13 Walsham, Alexandra, "'A Very Deborah'? The Myth of Elizabeth I as a Providential Monarch', in Doran and Freeman (eds), *Myth of Elizabeth I*, pp. 143–68.
- 14 See Milton, Anthony, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: 1995), esp. Chs 6, 8.
- 15 Nockles, Peter and Westbrook, Vivienne (eds), *Reinventing the Reformation in the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural History*, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 90/1 (2014).
- 16 *Dris Martin Lutheri Colloquia Mensalia: or, Dr Martin Luther's Divine Discourses at his Table*, trans. Henry Bell (London: 1651), sig. a4v.



- 17 See Ryrie, Alec, 'The Afterlife of Lutheran England', in Wendebourg (ed.), *Sister Reformatins/Schwesterreformationem: The Reformation in Germany and England/Die Reformation in Deutschland und in England*, pp. 213–34; Trueman, Carl S. and Euler, Carrie, 'The Reception of Martin Luther in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England', in Ha, Polly and Collinson, Patrick (eds), *The Reception of Continental Reformation in England*, Proceedings of the British Academy 164 (Oxford: 2010), pp. 63–82.
- 18 See Duffy, Eamon, 'From Sander to Lingard: Recusant Readings of the Reformation', in his *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England* (London: 2017), pp. 287–324.
- 19 MacCulloch, Diarmaid, 'Putting the English Reformation on the Map', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 15 (2005), pp. 75–95; Collinson, Patrick, 'The Fog in the Channel Clears: The Rediscovery of the Continental Dimension to the British Reformation', in Ha and Collinson (eds), *Reception of the Continental Reformation*, pp. xxvii–xxxvii.

