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THE GERMAN REFORMATION

Second Edition
R. W. SCRIBNER
and
C. SCOTT DIXON

palgrave
macmillan



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Introduction to the Second Edition, Supplementary Chapter
and Supplementary Bibliography © C. Scott Dixon 2003.

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First edition published 1986

Second edition published 2003 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-0-333-66528-2 ISBN 978-0-230-21253-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-0-230-21253-4

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made
from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scribner, Robert W.

The German Reformation / R.W. Scribner and

C. Scott Dixon. – 2nd ed.

p. cm. – (Studies in European history)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-333-66528-2 (pbk.)

1. Reformation – Germany. 2. Germany – Church history –

16th century. I. Dixon, C. Scott. II. Title. III. Studies in European history
(Basingstoke, England)

BR305.3.S37 2003

274.3'06–dc21

2003051168

20 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03

Contents

<i>Editor's Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Introduction to the Second Edition</i>	xi
<i>A Note on References</i>	xiii
1 Some Reformation Myths	1
2 Religion and Reform	7
3 The Reformation as an Evangelical Movement	17
4 Social Location of the Reformation	25
5 Politics and the Reformation	35
6 Varieties of Reformation	45
7 The Impact of Reform	55
8 Supplementary Chapter	
<i>C. Scott Dixon</i>	65
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	89
<i>Supplementary Bibliography</i>	103
<i>Index</i>	119

Editor's Preface

The main purpose of this new series of studies is to make available to teacher and student alike developments in a field of history that has become increasingly specialised with the sheer volume of new research and literature now produced. These studies are designed to present the 'state of the debate' on important themes and episodes in European history since the sixteenth century, in a clear and critical way by someone who is himself closely concerned with the debate in question.

The studies are not intended to be read as extended bibliographical essays, though each will contain a detailed guide to further reading which will lead students and the general reader quickly to key publications. Each book carries its own interpretation and conclusions, while locating the discussion firmly in the centre of the current issues as historians see them. It is intended that the series will introduce students to historical approaches which are in some cases very new and which, in the normal course of things, would take many years to filter down into the textbooks and school histories. I hope it will demonstrate some of the excitement that historians, like scientists, feel as they work away in the vanguard of their subject. The series has an important contribution to make in publicising what it is that historians are doing and in making history more open and accessible. It is vital for history to communicate if it is to survive.

R. J. OVERY

Introduction

The aim of this pamphlet is to provide for student use a survey of recent work on the German Reformation. The past decade of research has seen a retreat from a narrowly confessional ‘religious history’ of the Reformation, and much greater discussion about the broader context of religious reform. Many new questions have been asked, about the relationship of religion to society, about the antecedents of the sixteenth-century religious reform, about how it spread and how it was received, as well as about its social and political impact. Much of this recent discussion has been concerned with the broadly ‘sociological’ conditions of the Reformation, although increasingly a number of anthropological questions have been explored, many under the heading of ‘popular belief’ or ‘popular culture’ (see Bibliography nos. 2–3, 9–10, 18–19). The implications of such discussion for a general interpretation of the German Reformation have not yet been drawn out, and they often find little mention in general textbooks. However, they signal a radical change in our understanding of the Reformation and its importance for early modern European history.

It is not my intention therefore to retell, yet again, the familiar story of ‘Luther’s break with Rome’ – to retrace the question of indulgences, Tetzl, the campaign against the Papacy, Luther’s condemnation at Worms, etc., etc. This is more than adequately done by traditional textbooks. Moreover, since A. G. Dickens’ groundbreaking *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, it is unnecessary to apologise for addressing issues in a general text analytically rather than chronologically. Similarly, I do not intend to offer any systematic account of Reformation theology – that has been quite adequately done elsewhere in a recent text by Bernard Reardon (7).

A survey of this kind is bound to be very provisional. Much of the material on which it is based is 'work in progress'. It consists either of general hypotheses which have yet to be subjected to rigorous investigation, or else of scattered case-studies from which it is difficult to generalise with complete confidence. Since every synthesis is bound to be a very personal matter, I have sought to make a virtue of necessity by presenting it as an interpretation of the German Reformation. In doing so I am conscious, as the reader should be, that it will be subject to amendment as Reformation studies progress further on the many fronts on which research is now being conducted. In what follows, I hope that where the argument is tentative or controversial, I have indicated the grounds on which it is based. The general bibliography serves this purpose, as well as providing a guide for more specialised further reading. For reasons of space, I have kept foreign language references to a minimum. I hope that many colleagues from whose work I have benefited greatly will forgive me if my debt to them is often tacitly rather than explicitly acknowledged.

Introduction to the Second Edition

Sixteen years have passed since *The German Reformation* was first published. Given the amount of research that has been done since, there is now need for an additional commentary on recent developments. It is deeply regretted that this cannot be undertaken by the author himself, as Bob Scribner died on 29 January 1998, not long after taking up his appointment as Professor of Modern European Christianity at Harvard University. Instead, the editors of the series have asked me, as one of Bob's former students and a historian of the German Reformation, to provide an additional chapter synthesising the latest developments in the field along with a bibliography of recent works.

In keeping with the spirit of the first edition, the supplementary chapter is a synthesis of work in progress. The original lines of enquiry have been followed up, and in general the entire analysis remains true to the initial design, moving through the various themes raised in the seven chapters. At the same time, however, many of the research concerns that have evolved since 1986 have been integrated into the discussion, with a list of associated literature in the supplementary bibliography at the end of the book. Part of Bob Scribner's lasting legacy to Reformation studies was his ability to draw on a broad range of theories, disciplines and concepts and use them to bring aspects of the past to life. Quite often that meant returning to the details of local history or focusing on the unusual features of an image or a text in the search for new ways to think about the Reformation. And quite often that meant that work was always being revised and reformulated, always in progress.

In its way, the supplementary chapter attempts to do just that, to bring together a fairly wide range of related literature, much of it in the form of case studies and unexamined hypotheses, in the hope that it will incite interest and encourage the reader to think in different ways about the German Reformation. In this, as well, the chapter hopes to emulate the spirit of the original book, just as it hopes to do justice to the historical imagination of its author. He is greatly missed.

C. Scott Dixon, 2002

A Note on References

References are cited throughout in brackets according to the numbering in the select bibliography, with page references where necessary indicated by a colon after the bibliography number. Titles referred to in the supplementary chapter are numbered in bold and listed in the supplementary bibliography.