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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, presented in a clear and critical way by someone who is closely concerned himself 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 historians, like scientists, feel as they work away in the vanguard of their subject.

The format of the series conforms closely with that of the companion volumes of studies in economic and social history which has already established a major reputation since its inception in 1968. Both series have 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.

A Note on References

References are cited throughout in brackets according to the numbering in the general bibliography, with page references where necessary indicated by a colon after the bibliography number.