



Secondary Sources

What Was the Reformation?

Euan Cameron

Historians usually agree that the Reformation comprised the general religious transformations in Europe during the sixteenth century. However, they often disagree on what exactly was at the core of the Reformation. In the following selection Euan Cameron argues that the essence of the Reformation was a combination of religious reformers' protests and laymen's political ambitions.

CONSIDER: *How the protests by churchmen and scholars combined with the ambitions of politically active laymen to become the essence of the Reformation; what this interpretation implies about the causes for the Reformation.*

The Reformation, the movement which divided European Christianity into catholic and protestant traditions, is unique. No other movement of religious protest or reform since antiquity has been so widespread or lasting in its effects, so deep and searching in its criticism of received wisdom, so destructive in what it abolished or so fertile in what it created. . . .

The European Reformation was not a simple revolution, a protest movement with a single leader, a defined set of objectives, or a coherent organization. Yet neither was it a floppy or fragmented mess of anarchic or contradictory ambitions. It was a series of *parallel* movements; within *each* of which various sorts of people with differing perspectives for a crucial period in history combined forces to pursue objectives which they only partly understood.

First of all, the Reformation was a protest by churchmen and scholars, privileged classes in medieval society, against their own superiors. Those superiors, the Roman papacy and its agents, had attacked the teachings of a few sincere, respected academic churchmen which had seemed to threaten the prestige and privilege of clergy and papacy. Martin Luther, the first of those protesting clerics, had attacked "the Pope's crown and the monks' bellies," and they had fought back, to defend their status. The protesting churchmen—the "reformers"—responded to the Roman counter-attack not by silence or furtive opposition, but by publicly denouncing their accusers in print. Not only that: they developed their teachings to make their protest more coherent, and to justify their disobedience.

Then the most surprising thing of all, in the context of medieval lay people's usual response to religious dissent, took place. Politically active laymen, not (at first) political rulers with axes to grind, but rather ordinary, moderately prosperous householders, took up the reformers' protests, identified them (perhaps mistakenly) as their own, and pressed them upon their governors. This blending and coalition—of reformers' protests and laymen's political ambitions—is the essence of the Reformation. It turned the reformers' movement into a new form of religious dissent: it became not a "schism," in which a section of the catholic Church rose in political revolt against authority, without altering beliefs or practices; nor yet a "heresy," whereby a few people deviated from official belief or worship, but without respect, power, or authority. Rather it promoted a new pattern of worship and belief, publicly preached and acknowledged, which also formed the basis of new religious institutions for all of society, within the whole community, region, or nation concerned.