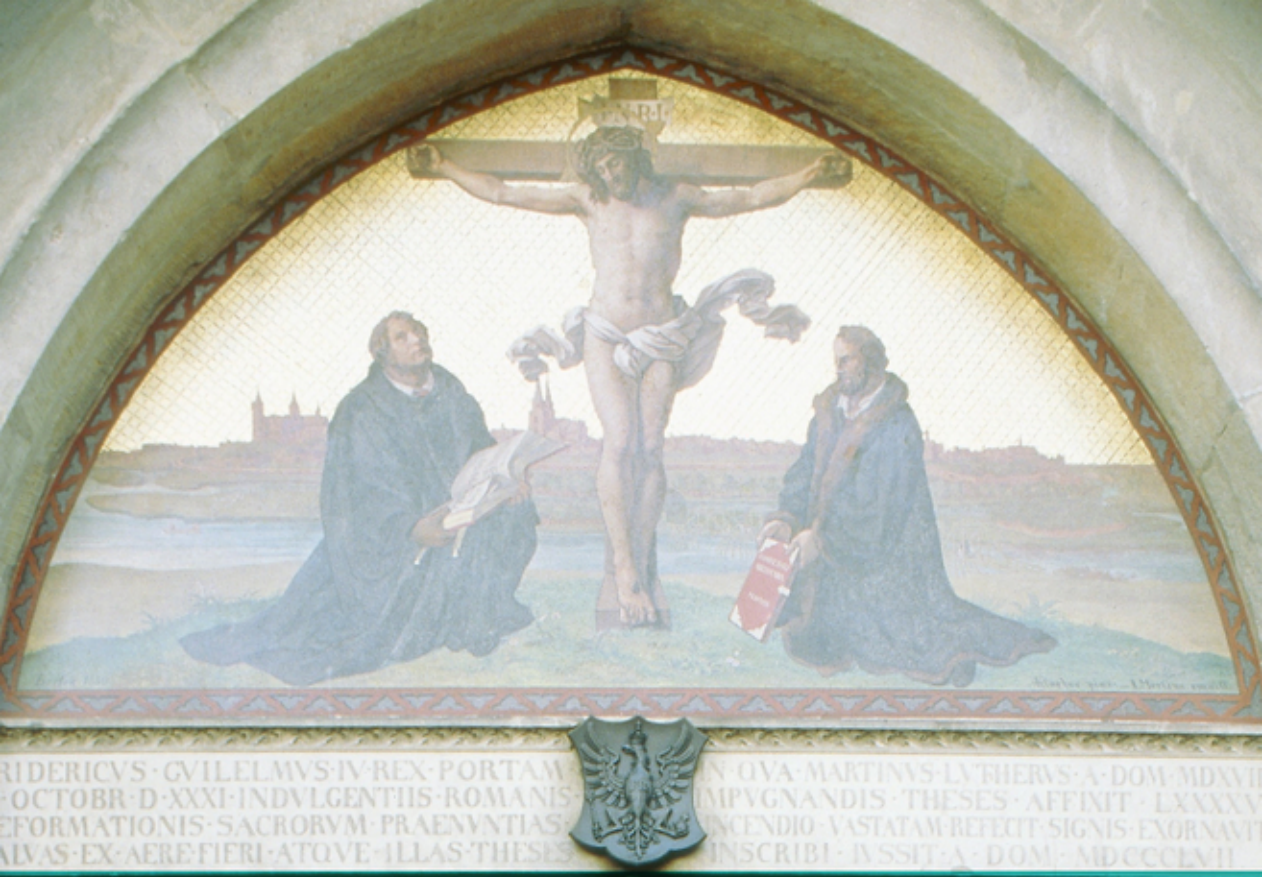

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Reformation Thought

Fourth Edition

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Reformation Thought

An Introduction

Fourth Edition

Alister E. McGrath

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

The European Reformation of the sixteenth century is one of the most fascinating areas of study available to the historian. It also continues to be of central importance to anyone interested in the history of the Christian church or its religious ideas. The Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity: the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, new approaches to political issues, shifts in economic thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality, and the reform of Christian doctrine. It was a movement based upon a more or less coherent set of ideas, which were believed to be capable of functioning as the foundation of a program of reform.

But what were those ideas? How may their origins be accounted for? And how were they modified by the social conditions of the period? One serious difficulty – indeed, perhaps the most serious difficulty – facing today's historian of the sixteenth-century Reformation is the strangeness of the ideas underlying it. The term "theology" has been used by Christians since the third century to mean "talking about God." The word can be used to refer to both the core ideas of the Christian faith, and the academic discipline which reflects on these ideas.

Many modern students of the Reformation know little about Christian theology. For example, the great theological slogan "justification by faith alone" seems incomprehensible to many students of this era, as do the intricacies of the sixteenth-century debates over the Eucharist. Why should these apparently obscure issues have caused such a storm at the time? There is an obvious temptation for the student of the Reformation to avoid engaging with the ideas of the movement and to treat it as a purely social phenomenon.

This book is written in the conviction that there are many who will not be prepared to rest content with this superficial engagement with the ideas of

the Reformation, and wish to deal with them seriously – but who are discouraged from doing so by the formidable difficulties encountered in trying to understand its ideas. Christian theology will always hold a place of importance in the study of the Reformation. To fail to have at least some degree of familiarity with theology is to lack an understanding of the culture and self-consciousness of the Reformation era. Religious ideas played a large part in the development and expansion of the Reformation. To study the Reformation without considering the religious ideas that fueled its development is comparable to studying the Russian Revolution without reference to Marxism. Historians cannot cut themselves off from the language and ideas of their era of study.

A further difficulty placed in the path of such a student is the remarkable advance made within the last generation in our understanding both of the Reformation itself, and of its background in the late Renaissance, particularly in relation to late medieval scholasticism. Some of this work has yet to filter through to the student, and there is a pressing need for a work which will explain the findings of recent scholarship, and indicate its importance for our understanding of the Reformation during the sixteenth century.

The present work aims to do just that. It assumes that the reader knows nothing of Christian theology, and aims to provide an entry-level guide to the ideas that proved to be so central to this movement in European history, while at the same time distilling the findings of much recent scholarship in its field. The book arose from many years' experience of teaching the field of Reformation studies to students at Oxford University, and I wish to acknowledge my complete indebtedness to those students. It is they who have taught me just how much about the Reformation, so often taken for granted, actually needs to be explained. It is they who have identified the points of particular difficulty which need special discussion. It is they who have recognized the need for precisely this work – and if the reader finds it helpful, it is those students who must be thanked. I am also grateful to my colleagues from the Oxford University faculties of theology and history for many helpful discussions concerning the difficulties encountered in teaching Reformation thought in the twenty-first century.

This book first appeared in 1988. It was immediately clear that it had met a real educational need. An expanded and revised second edition appeared in 1993. The third edition of 1999 offered substantially increased biographical coverage of major Reformation thinkers, and extended its coverage to include the thought of the English Reformation.

This new edition retains all the features which made those earlier editions so attractive to students, while incorporating additional material of direct relevance. In addition to general updating as necessary, reflecting scholarly developments since the last edition, the new edition has been reorganized to make it easier to use. The entire work has been revised to ensure that it is as accessible and useful as possible.

While some reviewers have suggested that the work would be improved if its scope were to be expanded to include seventeenth-century developments, most have asked that it retain its present focus on the sixteenth century. This wish – which makes good pedagogical sense – has been respected.

Alister McGrath
London, December 2011

How to Use This Book

Three words sum up the aim of this book: *introduce*; *explain*; *contextualize*. The book aims to introduce the leading ideas of the European Reformation during the first half of the sixteenth century. It is like a sketch map, which indicates the main features of the intellectual landscape: notes and suggestions for further reading will allow the reader to add finer detail later. Second, the book aims to explain these ideas. It assumes that the reader knows nothing about the Christian theology which underlies the Reformation, and explains what terms such as "justification by faith" and "predestination" mean, and why they are of religious and social relevance. Third, it aims to contextualize these ideas by setting them in their proper intellectual, social, and political context. That context includes such great intellectual movements as humanism and scholasticism, the alternative religious ideologies of the radical Reformation and Catholicism, and the political and social realities of the imperial cities of the early sixteenth century. All these factors affected the thought of the reformers and its impact upon their public – and this work aims to identify that influence and assess its effects.

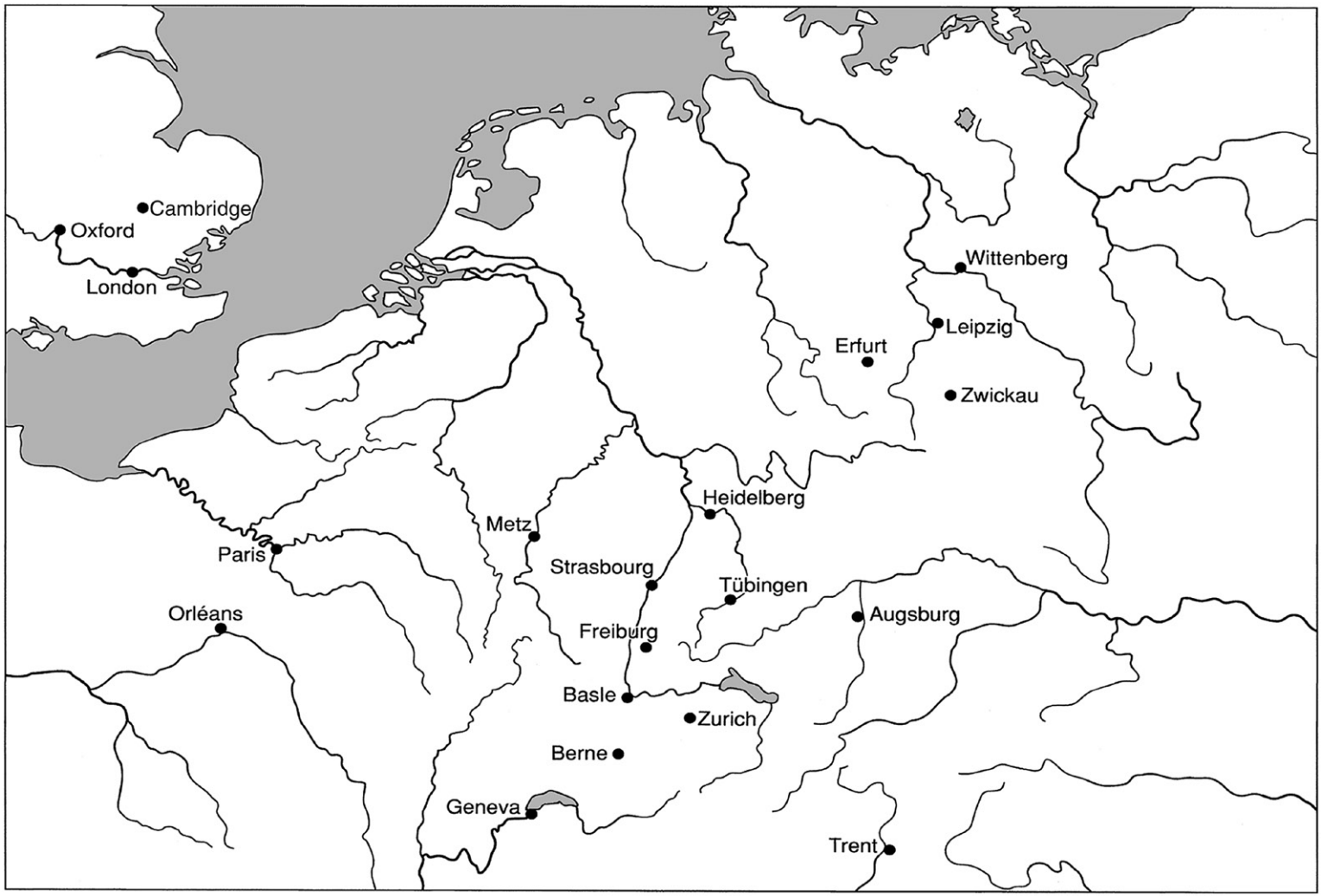
A series of appendices deal with difficulties which experience suggests most students encounter as they read works relating to the Reformation. What do these abbreviations mean? How can I make sense of those references to primary and secondary sources? What does "Pelagian" mean? Where should I go to find out more about the Reformation? These questions and others are dealt with at length, making this book unique. It will be assumed that the reader speaks no language other than English, and all Latin quotations or slogans will be translated and explained. Although the text of the work draws extensively upon foreign language scholarship, unavailable in English, a select bibliography of works available in English is provided for the benefit of such readers.

On Notes and Further Reading

Notes are kept to a minimum, and are limited to identifying the source of extended quotations or scholarly studies explicitly identified in the text. For abbreviations and forms of reference to primary sources, see Appendices 3 and 4.

The best reference resource currently available relating to the thought of the Reformation is H. J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Reformation* (4 vols; Oxford, 1996). This is an essential resource for anybody concerned with any aspect of the Reformation, and includes substantial bibliographies.

The bibliographies to be found at the end of each chapter do not aim to be exhaustive; their task is to identify potentially valuable studies in the English language, in order to allow readers of this work to take the topics of each chapter further.



Centers of theological and ecclesiastical activity at the time of the European Reformation

1

The Reformation: An Introduction

Many students approach the Reformation in much the same way as medieval travelers approached the vast dark forests of southern Germany – with a sense of hesitation and anxiety, in case what lay ahead should prove impenetrable, or in case they should find themselves hopelessly lost. They are often like explorers venturing into new terrain, unsure what there is to find, at times bewildered by the unmapped wilderness, at others exhilarated by unexpected vistas and valleys. Many find themselves longing for a guide who will lead them through what sometimes seems like a dense jungle.

It is tempting for such students to ignore the *ideas* of the Reformation altogether in order to concentrate upon its social or political aspects. The price of making the Reformation easier to come to grips with in this way, however, is to fail both to capture its essence as a historical phenomenon and to understand why it remains such an essential reference point for much contemporary debate in the religious world and far beyond.

It is understandably difficult for a student sympathetic to the secularism of modern western culture to come to terms with a movement that was so clearly motivated by religious ideas. It is tempting to marginalize these ideas and approach the sixteenth century with the worldview of the modern period. Like any historical phenomenon, however, the Reformation demands that its interpreters attempt to enter into *its* worldview. We must learn to empathize with its concerns and outlook, in order to understand how these affected the great flux of history. The Reformation in Switzerland and Germany was directly based upon religious ideas which demand and deserve careful consideration. Even in England,

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where local conditions led to political factors having a greater influence than religious ideas, there was still a significant core of such ideas underlying developments. This book aims to explain as clearly as possible what the religious ideas underlying the Reformation actually were and how they affected those who entertained them.

The present introductory chapter aims to deal with some preliminary matters, preparing the ground for more detailed discussion of the thought of the Reformation in later chapters.

The Cry for Reform

The term "Reformation" immediately suggests that something – namely, western European Christianity – was being reformed. Like many other terms used by historians to designate eras in human history – such as "Renaissance" or "Enlightenment" – it is open to criticism. For example, the twelfth century witnessed a comparable attempt to reform the church in western Europe – but the term "Reformation" is not used by historians to designate this earlier movement. Other terms might be thought by some to be more appropriate to refer to the sixteenth-century movement we shall be studying in this work. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the term "Reformation" *is* generally accepted as the proper designation for this movement, partly because the movement was linked with the recognition of the need for drastic overhaul of the institutions, practices, and ideas of the western church. The term helpfully indicates that there were both social and intellectual dimensions to the movement which it designates.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century it was obvious that the church in western Europe was in urgent need of reform. The popular cry for "reform in head and members" both summed up the problem and pointed to a possible solution. It seemed to many that the lifeblood of the church had ceased to flow through its veins. The church legal system was badly in need of overhaul, and ecclesiastical bureaucracy had become notoriously inefficient and corrupt. The morals of the clergy were often lax and a source of scandal to their congregations.

Clergy, even at the highest level, were frequently absent from their parishes. In Germany, it is reported that only one parish in 14 had its pastor in residence. The Frenchman Antoine du Prat, archbishop of Sens, turned up for only one service at his cathedral: moreover, his presence and role at this service was somewhat passive, since it was his funeral. Most higher ecclesiastical posts were secured through dubious means, generally relying upon the family connections or the political or financial status of the candidates rather than their spiritual qualities. Thus Duke Amadeus VIII of Savoy secured the appointment of his son to the senior position of bishop of Geneva in 1451; if anyone had misgivings about the fact that the new bishop had never been ordained and was only eight years of age, they were wise enough to keep quiet about them. Pope Alexander VI, a

member of the Borgia family (famous for its lethal dinner parties), secured his election to the papacy in 1492 despite having several mistresses and seven children, largely because he bought the papacy outright over the heads of his nearest rivals.

Niccolò Machiavelli put the loose morals of late Renaissance Italy down to the poor example set by the church and its clergy. For many, the cry for reform was a plea for the administrative, moral, and legal reformation of the church: abuses and immorality must be eliminated; the pope must become less preoccupied with worldly affairs; the clergy must be properly educated; and the administration of the church must be simplified and purged of corruption. For others, the most pressing need concerned the spirituality of the church. There was an urgent need to recapture the vitality and freshness of the Christian faith.

Many looked back with nostalgia to the simplicity and excitement of the apostolic Christianity of the first century. Could not this Golden Age of the Christian faith be regained, perhaps by pondering anew the New Testament documents? This program of reform was the wistful pipe dream of intellectuals throughout half of Europe. Yet the Renaissance popes seemed more interested in secular than in spiritual matters, and managed between them to achieve a hitherto unprecedented level of avarice, venality, immorality, and spectacularly unsuccessful power politics. The words of Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola (not to be confused with his uncle, Giovanni), spoken in March 1517, sum up succinctly the thoughts which preyed on many educated minds at the time: "If we are to win back the enemy and the apostate to our faith, it is more important to restore fallen morality to its ancient rule of virtue than that we should sweep the Black Sea with our fleet."

There were others, however, who added another demand to this list of long-overdue reforms – a reformation of Christian doctrine, of theology, of religious ideas. To critical observers such as Martin Luther at Wittenberg and John Calvin at Geneva, the church had lost sight of its intellectual and spiritual heritage. It was time to reclaim the ideas of the Golden Age of the Christian church. The sad state of the church in the early sixteenth century was simply a symptom of a more radical disease – a deviation from the distinctive *ideas* of the Christian faith, a loss of intellectual identity, a failure to grasp what Christianity really was. Christianity could not be reformed without an understanding of what Christianity was actually meant to be. For these men, the obvious decline of the late Renaissance church was the latest stage in a gradual process which had been going on since the early Middle Ages – the corruption of Christian doctrine and ethics.

The distinctive ideas which thinkers such as Luther and Calvin held to underlie Christian faith and practice had been obscured, if not totally perverted, through a series of developments in the Middle Ages. According to these and other reformers of that age, it was time to reverse these changes, to undo the work of the Middle Ages, in order to return to a purer, fresher version of Christianity which beckoned to them across the centuries. The reformers echoed the cry of the humanists: "back to the sources" (*ad fontes*) – back to the Golden Age of

the church, in order to reclaim its freshness, purity and vitality in the midst of a period of stagnation and corruption.

Contemporary writings unquestionably paint a picture of growing ecclesiastical corruption and inefficiency, indicating how much the late medieval church was in need of reform. It is necessary, however, to enter a note of caution on the manner in which these sources are to be interpreted. It is quite possible that they document growing levels of expectation within the late medieval church as much as declining levels of performance.

The growth of an educated laity – one of the more significant elements in the intellectual history of late medieval Europe – led to increasing criticism of the church on account of the obvious disparity between what the church *was* and what it *might be*. The growing level of criticism may well reflect the fact that more people were, through increasing educational opportunities, in a position to criticize the church – rather than any further decline in the ecclesiastical standards of the day.

But who could reform the church? By the first decade of the sixteenth century, a fundamental shift in power within Europe was essentially complete. The power of the pope had diminished as the power of secular European governments had increased. In 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was established, with power over clergy and religious orders (and eventually also over bishops). Yet this was an instrument of the Spanish state, not the Spanish church. Control of this system of courts rested not with the pope, but with the Spanish king. The Concordat of Bologna (1516) gave the king of France the right to appoint all the senior clergy of the French church, effectively giving him direct control of that church and its finances.

Across Europe, the ability of the pope to impose a reformation upon his church was steadily diminishing. Even if the will to reform had been there in the later Renaissance popes (and there are few indications that it was), their ability to reform the church was gradually slipping away. This diminishment in papal authority did not, however, lead to a decrease in the power of local or national churches, which continued to exercise major influence over nations. It was the ability of the pope to control such local or national power that declined during our period. The German, Swiss, and English reformations illustrate this point well.

It is therefore important to notice the manner in which Protestant reformers allied themselves with regional or civic powers in order to effect their program of reform. Luther appealed to the German nobility and Zwingli to the Zurich city council for reform, pointing out the benefits which would accrue to both as a consequence. For reasons we shall explore presently (pp. 223–5), the English Reformation (in which political factors tended to overshadow theological issues, which were generally treated as being of secondary importance) is not typical of the European movement as a whole.

The continental Reformation proceeded by a symbiotic alliance of reformer and state or civic authority, each believing that the resulting Reformation was to

their mutual benefit. The reformers were not unduly concerned that they gave added authority to their secular rulers by their theories of the role of the state or the "godly prince": the important thing was that the secular rulers supported the cause of the Reformation, even if their reasons for doing so might not be entirely straightforward or praiseworthy.

The mainstream reformers were pragmatists, people who were prepared to allow secular rulers their pound of flesh provided the cause of the Reformation was advanced. In much the same way, of course, the opponents of the Reformation had little hesitation in calling upon the support of secular authorities which felt that their interests were best served by a maintenance of the religious status quo. No study of the Reformation can overlook its political and social dimensions, as secular authorities in northern Europe saw their chance to seize power from the church, even at the cost of thereby committing themselves to a new religious order.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that certain distinctive religious ideas achieved widespread circulation and influence within western European society in the sixteenth century. The Reformation was about theology, not just social and political change. These theological ideas cannot be ignored or marginalized by anyone concerned with the study of the Reformation. It is hoped that the present work will introduce, explain, and contextualize them.

The Concept of "Reformation"

The term "Reformation" is used in a number of senses, and it is helpful to distinguish them. As used in the historical literature, the term "Reformation" generally refers to four elements: Lutheranism, the Reformed church (often referred to as "Calvinism"), the "radical Reformation" (often still referred to as "**Anabaptism**"), and the "Counter-Reformation" or "Catholic Reformation." In its broadest sense, the term "Reformation" is used to refer to all four movements. Some recent studies of this age have used the plural form "Reformations" to suggest that the Reformation was a multifaceted movement – perhaps even that it was a loosely connected set of distinct reforming movements, rather than a single coherent movement with local adaptations.

Anabaptism Literally, "re-baptism." Used to refer to the radical wing of the Reformation.

The term "Reformation" is traditionally used in a somewhat more restricted sense to mean "the Protestant Reformation," thereby excluding the Catholic Reformation. In this sense, it refers to the three Protestant movements noted above. In some scholarly works, the term "Reformation" is used to refer to what is sometimes known as the "magisterial Reformation," or the "mainstream Reformation" – in other words, the type of reformation that was linked with the Lutheran and Reformed churches, rather than the Anabaptists.

The unusual phrase "magisterial Reformation" needs a little explaining. It highlights the way in which the mainstream reformers developed a generally

positive relationship with secular authorities, such as princes, magistrates, or city councils. Whereas the radical reformers regarded such authorities as having no rights or authority within the church, the mainstream reformers argued that the church was, at least to some extent, subject to the secular agencies of government. The magistrate had a right to authority within the church, just as the church could rely on the authority of the magistrate to enforce discipline, suppress heresy, or maintain order. The phrase "magisterial Reformation" is often used to draw attention to this close relationship between the magistracy and the church, which lay at the heart of the reforming program of writers such as Martin Luther or Martin Bucer.

All four senses of the word "Reformation" will be encountered in the course of reading works dealing with the sixteenth century. The term "magisterial Reformation" is increasingly used to refer to the first two senses of the term (i.e., covering Lutheranism and the Reformed church) taken together, and the term "radical Reformation" to refer to the third (i.e., covering Anabaptism). The present work is primarily concerned with the ideas of the magisterial Reformation.

The term "Protestant" also requires comment. It derives from the aftermath of the Second Diet of Speyer (February 1529), which voted to end the toleration of Lutheranism in Germany. In April of the same year, six German princes and 14 cities protested against this oppressive measure, defending freedom of conscience and the rights of religious minorities. The term "Protestant" derives from this protest. It is therefore not strictly correct to apply the term "Protestant" to individuals prior to April 1529 or to speak of events prior to that date as constituting "the Protestant Reformation." The term "evangelical" is often used in the literature to refer to the reforming factions at Wittenberg and elsewhere (e.g., in France and Switzerland) prior to this date. Although the word "Protestant" is often used to refer to this earlier period, this use is, strictly speaking, an anachronism.

The Lutheran Reformation

The Lutheran Reformation is particularly associated with the German territories and with the pervasive personal influence of one charismatic individual – Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther was particularly concerned with the doctrine of **justification**, which formed the central point of his religious thought. The Lutheran Reformation was initially an academic movement, concerned primarily with reforming the teaching of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Wittenberg was an unimportant university, and the reforms introduced by Luther and his colleagues within the theology faculty attracted little attention. It was Luther's personal activities – such as his posting of the famous Ninety-Five Theses (31 October 1517) and the Leipzig Disputation (June–July 1519: see p. 54) – which brought the reforming ideas in circulation

justification by faith Section of Christian theology concerning how the individual sinner is able to enter into fellowship with God.