



a Pelican Original

# The Reformation

Owen Chadwick



The Pelican History of the Church : 3

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THE PELICAN HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

*Volume Three*

OWEN CHADWICK



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## *The Pelican History of the Church*

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*Part One*

THE PROTEST



## *The Cry for Reformation*

### THE IDEA OF REFORMATION

AT the beginning of the sixteenth century everyone that mattered in the Western Church was crying out for reformation.

For a century and more Western Europe had sought for reform of the Church 'in head and members' and had failed to find it.

If you asked the thinkers and publicists of the year 1500 what they meant when they proclaimed the Church to be in need of reform, they would not all have found it easy to be practical and definite. There might be excellent reasons for permitting an incumbent not to reside in his parish. The theoretical authority of the Pope might need practically to be diminished and confined within whatever bounds were considered expedient and legitimate. But in fact that authority was already limited, and limited drastically, by the rights of the governments in the various states; and its absolutism in theory was useful in practice as a dispensing agent, a necessary loophole by which princes and bishops might evade the rigorous working of canon law. Everyone confessed that the sale of benefices was deplorable. But the payment of legal fees in connexion with entry upon an ecclesiastical office might be justified as necessary to the running of the legal system. It was at first sight disgraceful that the Bishop of Worcester should be an Italian continuously resident at and engaged upon administrative duties in the court of Rome. But the King of England needed an ecclesiastical agent at the Vatican and thought it not unreasonable that an English ecclesiastical office should pay his stipend. What one honest man believed to be an abuse, another honest man defended.

Everyone wanted reform, or professed to want reform. How to reform and what to reform was not so clear. The energies of some reformers went to create new religious orders, or little groups of prayer and study. Bishops tried to be stricter against ordaining ignorant men, or to compel monks and canons to live according to their rule. But at the administrative level the quest for reform limped along like a lame man who does not know where he is going. From 1512 to 1517 a great Council of the Church, called Ecumenical (though few besides Italians were present), was sitting in the Lateran church at Rome. Its members listened to long and eloquent speeches, and sat for many hours. They agreed, amid much else, that schism and heresy should be suppressed; that the Turks were a danger to the Christian nations; that bishops should have more power over the monks, and that no one might preach except by lawful authority; that the Roman mobs must not sack the cardinals' houses on the Pope's death; that professors in their lectures must establish the truth of the soul's immortality; that the printing of unsound books should be stopped. The men of a reforming spirit might think these conclusions edifying. But some at least did not recognize in the decrees of the Council a fulfilment of the vague and elusive phrase, 'reform in head and members'.

The feeling, diffused through Europe, that the Church must be reformed was as diversified as possible. For Italian bishops it might mean that the constitutional machinery of the Vatican was top-heavy, that the power of the cardinals had increased and should be diminished. For preaching friars it might mean that the lives of their congregations were evil when judged by the ideals of Christian sanctity. For secular lawyers it might mean that the ecclesiastical courts and ecclesiastical exemptions were intolerable obstacles to effective administration. For churchmen it often meant that, amid the creaking and cumbersome mechanisms of clerical bureaucracy, the incidence of church taxation was efficient and burdensome; while a long history of papal

warfare or politics or misgovernment had made men sceptical whether the kingdoms of God or of man were receiving any benefit from the revenue. Was it right that a dispensation from Scriptural decrees about marriage should be available, and if it was right, was it right that the dispensation should be so expensive to obtain? Was it not equivalent to one law for the rich and another for the poor? Was it right that a man with money could obtain permission to be married between Septuagesima and Ash Wednesday, and a man without money could not? Why should the centralized administration at Rome have the power to supersede the rights of local patrons in the appointment to benefices, and particularly when the administration seemed to use its power for the interest of its dependants? Was it justice that an ecclesiastic who committed a felony should be immune from the normal jurisdiction of the secular magistrates? When a government urgently needed money for the defence of the realm against Turkish invasion, was it expedient that churchmen should claim their vast endowments to be exempt from the duty of contributing? Was it worthy of the spiritual censures of the Church that the grievous weapon of excommunication should be wielded to collect debts and souls should be driven to desperation for trivial reasons? Why should the curate of a parish starve while his non-resident rector lived in comfort upon the stipend of the benefice? Were not too many of the clergy secularized – brawlers, drunken, adulterous, unworthy of their sacred office? Was not (if the critic was extreme, and perhaps in a pulpit) the modern Church a harlot, selling her beauty to anyone who could pay?

When churchmen spoke of reformation, they were almost always thinking of administrative, legal, or moral reformation; hardly ever of doctrinal reformation. They did not suppose the Pope's doctrine to be erroneous. They supposed the legal system and the bureaucracy to breed inefficiency, graft, injustice, worldliness, and immorality. If they were educated men, humanists of the Renaissance, these desires

were sometimes mingled with a plea for intellectual improvement. They not only wanted popes and bishops to be less secularized, monks to practise their rule, parish clergy to be more instructed. They sometimes talked of a theology which should be less remote from human beings, more faithful to the Gospel, a faith which should be less external and more akin to the teaching of the Lord. But to gain this end they had neither desire nor expectation of anything which could be called a change in doctrine.

The sense that reformation was needed, though diffused and often vague, derived its strength from particular occasions. A priest who was observed to be publicly drunken in the taverns was allowed to continue his ministry without rebuke; the scandal was notorious; and it was hardly noticed that in some other cases of drunkenness pastoral discipline was enforced. A corporation engaged in a suit over property with a monastery found settlement to be impossible without such an expenditure of time and money as rendered the distant verdict futile. A cleric known to be guilty of homicide was seen to escape with a modest imprisonment on bread and water. A parish priest kept a concubine openly and was unrebuked. An illiterate devoid of any knowledge of the Latin tongue was ordained to the priesthood, and could be heard mumbling nonsensically through his prayers at the altar; and the parishioners knew nothing of learned and devout men whom elsewhere bishops might be ordaining. Too many scandals; too many inconveniences; too many injustices; too much inefficiency unremedied and apparently irremediable – these lent force to the cry of churchman and of politician for reformation.

The first question, then, in the public mind was not the question: 'Is the teaching of the Catholic Church true?' That teaching was believed to be unaltered through the long centuries of the past, unalterable into the future to eternity. In Bohemia there were Hussite heretics who exercised authority unrepressed. Hidden in the English countryside or in the Alpine valleys there were a few ignor-

ant groups of Lollards or of Vaudois; in Germany a few strange meetings assembled to study the Bible and to frame, as men imagined, a wild medley of sedition and blasphemy. The cry for reformation meant the suppression, not the encouragement, of these secret discontents.

Many of the obvious abuses were abuses by the highest standards of churchmen but were useful to the sovereign of the state or his servants. Linacre, the physician of King Henry VIII, had been rector of four parishes, a canon of three cathedrals, and precentor of York Minster before he was ordained priest. He was receiving payment for his medical services by this variety of rectories and prebends.

These were rather corruptions of the State, perhaps, than of the Church. The king was more responsible than the Pope. The king must reward his servants richly if he were to be well served. Since the Church possessed a big part of the wealth of every country, he could reward many of them only if he placed them in ecclesiastical offices. The great French diplomat, Antoine du Prat, was elevated to the archbishopric of Sens and entered his cathedral for the first time in his funeral procession. Bishops were often more eminent as courtiers than as pastors. When King Louis XII of France entered Italy in 1509, he was accompanied by three French cardinals, two archbishops, five bishops, and the abbot of Fécamp; and the presence of this galaxy owed nothing to an unusual anxiety about the royal conscience. During the second quarter of the sixteenth century, there were twenty-two bishops in the province of Languedoc in southern France, and only five or six were resident in their sees. Graft was no less to be blamed upon the Church when it was royal graft; and yet abuses seemed worse when they were perpetrated by clergymen to the advantage of clergymen. The clergy were the keepers of the public conscience. It was their duty to restrain avarice, to sanctify poverty, to denounce the usurer and the simoniac and the adulterer, to excommunicate even kings if kings fell impenitent into mortal sin, to do justly and to love mercy,



and to walk humbly before God. To these purposes their pulpits were sacred. If reform was needed, and everyone was so agreed, it was the duty of the clergy to proclaim its necessity and to demonstrate by deed and example that this world was still subject to the Church. They looked upwards to the Pope, set (they believed) by Christ or by Constantine over kings and princes, and expected that by his word he could still bring peace and justice and integrity to the peoples.

No Pope, not even a Hildebrand or an Innocent III, could have satisfied these loose, uninformed aspirations. For two hundred years the Pope's power had been sinking before the power of the kings. Though Christendom was still an idea which could command armies, they were mean little armies compared with the crusading hosts which once has assembled to conquer Palestine from the infidel. The conscience of Christendom was shocked when after 1525 the most Christian King of France was observed to ally himself with the Turks; shocked when Pope Alexander VI was among the first of Christian rulers to conduct such a negotiation. And yet the shock was shallow. Though men still believed in Christendom and still expected the Pope to be the head of Christendom, they looked for political leadership and security to their state and their prince. For two hundred years the kings and governments had been limiting the Pope's authority in their territories, restricting his powers to the confines which suited their purposes, and securing the effective right to appoint bishops. The authority of the Pope was still far-flung. Every ruler of western Europe must still reckon with it. The legal system of Latin Christendom continued to depend upon the papal courts. The prestige of vicar of Christ and head of Christian society continued to command a confused assent and respect among the peoples. But the States of Europe were restricting papal authority. To expect the Pope to reform the Church was to expect a miracle which he had little power to perform. He might give impetus to reform by example, or by