'PROTESTANTISM' AS A HISTORICAL CATEGORY

By Alec Ryrie

READ 6 FEBRUARY 2016

ABSTRACT The term 'Protestant' itself is a historical accident, but the category of western Christians who have separated from Rome since 1517 remains a useful one. The confessionalisation thesis, which has dominated recent Reformation historiography, instead posits the two major Protestant confessions and Tridentine Catholicism as its categories, but this can produce a false parallelism in which the nature of relationship between the confessions is oversimplified. Instead, this paper proposes we think of a Protestant ecosystem consisting of self-consciously confessional Lutheranism, a broad Calvinism which imagined itself as normative, and a collection of radical currents much more intimately connected to the 'magisterial' confessions than any of the participants wished to acknowledge. The magisterial / radical division was maintained only with constant vigilance and exemplary violence, with Calvinism in particular constantly threatening to bleed into radicalism. What gives this quarrelsome family of 'Protestants' analytical coherence is neither simple genealogy nor, as has been suggested, mere adherence to the Bible: since in practice both 'radical' and 'magisterial' Protestants have been more flexible and 'spiritual' in their use of Scripture than is generally allowed. It is, rather, the devotional experience underpinning that 'spiritual' use of the Bible, of an unmediated encounter with grace.

How should we speak about the Christians in the Latin tradition who have separated themselves from communion with Rome over the past five centuries? On one level this is a trivial, semantic question, but there are deep and murky waters below it. Religious labels are very often problematic, not only because they tend to originate either as terms of abuse or as contested claims which groups make about themselves, but also because they imply the coherence or even existence of a particular group when that may not be obvious. So it is with 'Protestantism'.

When Luther's movement first erupted in Germany in the years around 1520, the labels first associated with it were immediate split into self-serving definitions such as Gospel preachers or evangelicals, and hostile terms which implied heresy – either existing heretical labels such as Hussite, or the neologism 'Lutheran' which Luther himself so disliked.[1] As well as being terminologically unstable, this made defining who was in the movement and who was not very difficult. So when, in April 1529, six German princes lodged a formal 'protestation' against the Second Diet of Speyer's reinstatement of the Edict of Worms, they set in train the creation not only of a well-defined anti-papal party, but of a genuinely useful label. *Protestant* quickly became as much a political as a religious label, meaning, simply, a member of or sympathiser with the Schmalkaldic League. As such, it might have been expected to disappear after the destruction of the League in 1547, or at least after the Peace of

---

[1] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 45: The Christian in Society II*, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia, 1962), 70.

Augsburg in 1555 rendered the 1529 Protestation moot. And indeed, since the world of anti-papal Latin Christianity, for want of a better term, was by then becoming sharply divided between two mutually antagonistic factions of Lutherans and a self-styled Reformed Christianity which was already being labelled Calvinist, to say nothing of the small but high-profile radical communities whom those two main factions both anathematised, the term 'Protestant' didn't seem to be of that much use any more.

It eventually became useful again for polemical reasons. First, Catholic polemicists were keen to turn *Protestant* from a political to a religious term, and to apply it more widely to the constellation of heresies they faced. As Peter Marshall has pointed out, it fitted with the core accusation that the Luther and his fellow-travellers taught newfangled human inventions rather than the faith once revealed to the apostles. A name which implied that the movement only began in 1529 was grist to this mill. So the now-routine division of western Christendom into 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' first emerged as a polemical gambit, in which the ancient, true and universal church was opposed to a quarrelling farrago of heretical innovators. Naturally, this use did not carry with it any claim that 'Protestantism' existed as any kind of coherent doctrine: the very opposite. The English Jesuit Lawrence Anderton made the point succinctly enough with the title of his 1633 tract *The Non-Entity of Protestancy: or, A Discourse, Wherein is Demonstrated, that Protestancy Is . . . a Meere Nothing*.[2]

Marshall has traced the process by which the word slowly insinuated itself at least into English usage by sheer utility, for want of any better umbrella term to describe non-papal Christians. Even so, for a long time it retained two negative connotations: first, for a generation or more it still seemed foreign, and second, its inclusiveness was derogatory. If members of England's Reformed establishment used it, they did so contemptuously, to refer to the widest possible group of their countrymen who had gone along with the Reformation as a cultural phenomenon, many of them without having embraced the gospel in any way that a preacher would find acceptable. The adjective most readily attached to the noun 'Protestant' was 'carnal'. Yet while this inclusivity was potentially embarrassing, it was also an opportunity. For those who wanted to deny Catholics' claim that their opponents were a sackful of ferrets, 'Protestant' was a useful word, potentially allowing a united front to be formed against them – if, that is, enough common denominators could be found to prove that Protestantism was *not* a nonentity. The most enduring, and slippery, attempt to do this was another English tract of the 1630s, William Chillingworth's *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*, which famously declared that the Bible alone was the religion of Protestants, a banner behind which all could unite against Rome.[3] As that example implies, the use of the word 'Protestant' as a self-description over the following centuries is usually an index of the ambition to build a broad anti-Catholic coalition. In post-Restoration England, a religiously plural society united by anti-Catholic paranoia, 'Protestant' became a sufficiently useful glue-word that it was written into the Coronation Oath in 1689. In Ireland 'Protestant' became and remains a way of welding together Anglicans, Presbyterians and others against popery. In Bismarck's Germany, following the forced mergers of Lutheran and Reformed churches earlier in the century, Protestantism was opposed to Catholicism as a hallmark of German identity. In the United States, even when confessional tensions were easing in the mid-twentieth century, the tripartite division of the country into three acceptable religions – Protestants, Catholics, Jews – remained proverbial.[4]

---

[2] Peter Marshall, 'The Naming of Protestant England', *Past and Present* 214 (2012), 87–128, esp. 112.

[3] William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants a safe vvay to salvation* (RSTC 5138.2. Oxford, 1638); "Chillingworth, William (1602–1644)," Warren Chernaik in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford, 2004); online ed., ed. David Cannadine, January 2010, http://www.oxforddnb.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/view/article/5308 (accessed June 26, 2016).

[4] Kevin M. Shultz, *Tri-Faith America* (Oxford, 2011).

This is, then, an accidental word, drafted into service by polemicists on both sides who found an umbrella term of this sort indispensable. That process cut any real connection to the events of 1529, so that the modern term 'Protestant' is almost empty of intrinsic meaning. The Chinese terms equivalent to 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' – respectively *tianzhujiao*, 'the religion of the Lord of Heaven', and *jidujiao*, 'the religion of Jesus' – may have very different literal meanings, but they differentiate between the two groups at least as effectively as the western labels.[5] This paper's aim is not to parse the implications of the word 'Protestant', or indeed *jidujiao*, but to argue that the category which both describe is a historically useful one: that the non-papal Christianities which emerged from the Reformation era retain enough common features that analysing them as a group is meaningful. It will also argue, however, that if we look at 'Protestantism' (for want of a better word) historically rather than theologically, its definition becomes unstable. That is, if we look at what Protestants have actually done, believed, experienced and felt, rather than at what their theologians and apologists have argued they ought to have believed, we end up somewhere different from where any of the polemicists would have sent us.

After Confessionalisation

It needs to be said that this suggestion runs against the main current of (in particular) German Reformation scholarship for the past generation. The so-called confessionalisation thesis developed by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling appears to render the term 'Protestant' redundant for the study of the Reformation era, by suggesting that the category of all non-papal western Christians is simply not useful. Reinhard and Schilling have from the 1970s onwards challenged us to see the Catholic and Protestant Reformations as parallel rather than opposed forces, and in particular as instruments of state-building.[6] Religious reformations of all kinds allowed early modern states and princes to deepen their authority over their territories, using sharply and antagonistically defined religious identities as a means of social control. The work of definition was done at a formal level by confessions of faith which large sections of some populations were required to profess, and which were increasingly drafted, redrafted and refined with the aim of unambiguously excluding outsiders. On this view there are two sensible scales on which to examine the religion of the period: the scale of the individual confession, which means, predominantly, the trio of Orthodox Lutheranism, Reformed Calvinism and Tridentine Catholicism; or comparatively across all the confessions. A category such as Protestant, which attempts to yoke together two of these groupings while excluding the third, courts the accusation not simply of arbitrariness but of special pleading.

The confessionalisation thesis has been an enormously helpful tool of historical analysis. It has forced us to think, not only of the parallels between the confessions, but of the dynamics that tied them together, such as the arms races which forced very different entities to adopt parallel strategies in order to counter one another. The thesis' explanatory power is that this competition itself becomes one of the engines driving modernity. The model has also

---

[5] Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China: AD 600 to 2000*, trans. M. N. L. Couve de Murville (San Francisco, 2007: cf. French edition 2002), 352. There is no common Chinese equivalent to the generic term 'Christianity'.

[6] H. Schilling, *Konfessionskonflikt und Staatsbildung* (Gütersloh, 1981); H. Schilling, *Religion, Political Culture and the Emergence of Early Modern Society* (Leiden, 1992); W. Reinhard, 'Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the Early Modern State: a Reassessment', *Catholic Historical Review*, 75 (1989), 385–403; W. Reinhard and H. Schilling (eds), *Die Katholische Konfessionalisieung* (Gütersloh and Münster, 1995). The literature on the confessionalisation thesis is vast. Amongst the most useful in English is J. M. Headley, H. J. Hillerbrand and A. J. Papadas (eds), *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555–1700* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2004) and Ute Lotz-Heumann, 'The Concept of "Confessionalization": a Historiographical Paradigm in Dispute', *Memoria y Civilización* 4 (2001), 93–114.

managed at least partly to outgrow its inbuilt limitations. Although its focus is on state-building, it has been plausibly extended to to explore the way some populations without state backing in effect self-confessionalised, such as Mennonites in Denmark or, indeed, Catholics in Ireland.[7] Although it was designed for the German lands, where it closely reflects the legal status granted to the two or three confessions by the imperial treaties of 1555 and 1648, there have been useful attempts to apply its insights beyond the Empire.[8]

For all this explanatory power, however, the confessionalisation thesis was a child of its times, that is, the latter part of the Cold War. In what could have been a model of 1970s détente, it emerged from the collaboration of a Catholic scholar, Reinhard, trying to shake off the negativity of the term 'Counter-Reformation', and a Protestant scholar, Schilling, who had worked on both Lutheran and Calvinist confessional states. Hence the self-consciously comparative nature of their work from the beginning, and the attempt to move away from the direct religious confrontations. This work was conceived during a period when most thinking people honestly expected the stalemate between eastern and western blocs to endure indefinitely, unless of course it ended in mutual annihilation. In those circumstances, it was both natural and analytically useful to think of opposing forces as mirror-images and even as unwilling collaborators, carving a continent up between them. What was not at all plain at the time was that the apparent similarity between those opposing forces was an illusion. That only became clear when the Soviet bloc went from superpower to virtual collapse within six years, almost entirely due to its own internal dynamics. The decades since have given us a very different paradigm of conflict: asymmetric warfare, in which entities that are in no sense parallel to one another fight at cross-purposes, with weapons, tactics, strategies, logistics and motivations which may have virtually no contact with those of their opponents.

The analogy should not be pushed too far. However, if the Cold War revealed one face of early modern religious conflict to us, so the period since can help reveal another. The Reformation period's various religious groupings were not simply providing different answers to the same question. As Thomas Kaufmann and other critics of confessionalisation have emphasised, the thesis tends to flatten out the different confessions' individuality, and efface the extent to which they did not share a common theological or devotional language. In interconfessional 'debates', the parties mostly talked past one another, and more regularly mocked or caricatured than seriously engaged each others' views: they were living in different mental worlds, with different concerns, priorities, patterns of reasoning and emotional substructures.[9] Comparable asymmetries can be seen in the confessional conflicts themselves. In the struggle for Europeans' souls, the Catholic establishments held enormous strategic advances: inertia, collective memory, loyalty, ceremonial richness, and not least, money. The Protestant insurgencies had a very different set of advantages: no awkward track record to defend; a willingness to invite whole populations to participate in theological argument; and a much lighter material footprint, which not only made Protestantism cheap but made the destruction of Catholicism's expensive material complexity such an effective ploy.

These are not new critiques, and Reinhard and Schilling have given interestingly different responses to it. Schilling's liberal-Protestant response is to integrate the differences between confessional actors into the thesis without fundamentally changing it. Reinhard, by contrast, has argued that that examination of the confessions' distinct cultures is another

---

[7] Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age* (Aldershot, 2002).

[8] See, for example, Peter Marshall, 'Confessionalization, Confessionalism and Confusion in the English Reformation' in *Reforming Reformation*, ed. Thomas F. Mayer, (Farnham, 2012), 43–64.

[9] Thomas Kaufmann, 'Die Konfessionalisierung von Kirche und Gesellschaft', *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 121 (1996), 1008–25, 1112–21.

subject and should be kept separate. My suggestion, likewise, is that confessionalisation's attempt to slice post-Reformation religion into parallels has done its work. The thesis has blurred distinctions which we need to understand. The thesis has broken Reformation history's long habit of crass partisanship, but we now risk falling into the opposite error, of treating all religious parties with scrupulous even-handedness. The risk is a kind of BBC impartiality, in which conscious balance leads us to conjure matching parties into existence when the reality may be much messier; and in which we feel unable, for example, to say something which could be construed as praise or criticism of one set of early modern religious actors without a nod to the other side too. We need to recognise that the confessions were not only different from each other, but different in different ways.

The Protestant Ecosystem

By arguing for the utility of 'Protestant' as a category I am not, therefore, trying to downplay the differences between the different Protestant confessions. On the contrary, I am arguing that the confessionalisation thesis has underplayed Protestantism's plurality and diversity in two key respects: first, in its treatment of the two magisterial confessions, Lutheranism and Calvinism, as parallel cases, and second, in its inadequate account of radicalism.

Anyone who has tried to teach the Reformation to undergraduates knows how difficult it is to explain the distinction between Lutheranism and Reformed Protestantism. We tend naturally to dwell on the litmus-test issues such as, above all, the Eucharistic presence, but those issues are in the end simply symptoms of deeper, subtler differences of mood, flavour and intellectual tramlines. The manner in which the Eucharistic arguments were conducted is as revealing than their substance. Luther's outrage at the intolerable blasphemy of Zwingli's doctrine, which not only robbed Christians of the comfort of the sacrament but implicitly denied the Incarnation itself, was badly mismatched by the condescension from Zwingli and his successors, who saw their doctrine as self-evidently reasonable, and who believed that Luther was still half-sodden in the dregs of popery and implied that he simply had not thought it through. While the canonical account of this dispute focuses on the Marburg colloquy, the further rounds of the battle over the decades that follow are equally revealing. And in this context, it makes sense to use the somewhat anachronistic term *Calvinists* for the Reformed Protestant party: since Calvin was more directly responsible than anyone else for bringing and keeping together the disparate spectrum of magisterial reformers which stretched from Bullinger to Bucer, and forging them into something that could reasonably be called a single confession, above all in the Zurich Consensus of 1549.[10]

Calvin's intention was that the Consensus should be only a step on the way. A vital part of the purpose of his *Institutio*, from its first, 1536 edition, was to unify the Reformation, chiefly by persuading Lutherans and Zwinglians that in their sacramental argument both sides were missing the point. He never met either Luther or Zwingli, though he did treasure reports that Luther had spoken kindly of him.[11] He did meet Philip Melanchthon, several times, and maintained an intermittent correspondence with him which was almost equally frustrating to both men. What made it so was Calvin's conviction that he and Melanchthon were essentially in agreement. Repeatedly, he challenged Melanchthon to admit that they shared similar doctrines of predestination, of *adiaphora* and above all of the Eucharist. Melanchthon, as

---

[10] Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, 2009), esp. 161–80.

[11] Timothy George, 'John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich (1549)' in his *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform* (Louisville, KY, 1990),

Timothy Wengert has shown, usually responded to these appeals by falling silent: he reportedly tore up one of the these letters in frustration.[12]

Calvin, and the Reformed in general, found Melanchthon's reticence mystifying and infuriating. That itself shows the gulf that already separated Calvinism from Lutheranism. Reformed Protestantism understood itself as a broad, centrist reformism drawing on the best humanist and evangelical scholarship. It was, in its own eyes, self-evidently reasonable. Its international reach, its lack of a single overweening theological voice, its self-consciously formidable learning: all of this contributed to a patrician sense of itself as the natural intellectual centre of gravity, and to a sense of its doctrines as the faith which has been believed everywhere, at all times and by all people. It was the theological consensus of the best minds of the age, excepting only those who were enslaved to the popish Antichrist. Or it would have been if only Melanchthon and the Lutherans would admit that in truth they belonged to it too.

Which is to say, Calvin and the Reformed in general failed to take Lutheranism seriously. They may have been at least partly right about Melanchthon and Philippist Lutheranism in general, and for that very reason it would have been politically lethal for Melanchthon to admit to common ground with Calvin. The so-called Gnesio-Lutheran party, however, looked at Calvinism's broad, complacent consensus, and saw themselves as the voice of a prophet crying in the wilderness. It was bomb-throwing idealism versus soothing pragmatism. Flacius Illyricus and his allies went beyond simply despising Melanchthon's compromises. They deeply distrusted the humanist, Erasmian principles which so thoroughly infused Calvinism, and which risked selling Protestantism's *sola fide* birthright for a mess of civic virtues and pragmatic ethics, and contaminating Gospel purity with a brackish rationalism. The distinct attitudes to the two groupings' respective confessions of faith are instructive. There was never a single Reformed confession of faith. The Heidelberg and the Second Helvetic confessions came close, but repeated attempts to produce a single, harmonised version failed. Yet it did not seem to matter very much, and it certainly did not prevent the Reformed family from recognising one another as brethren. Their confessions were understood to be limited, provisional documents, subject to revision and improvement. No Reformed Protestant came close to claiming what Georg Spalatin claimed for Lutheranism's grounding document, the Augsburg Confession: that the presentation of the Confession back in 1530 was 'the most significant act which has ever taken place on earth'.[13] Spalatin was perhaps over-excited. Johannes Mathesius, more soberly, merely reckoned the Confession as the most important event since the time of the Apostles. It was certainly routine for Lutherans to class it alongside the ancient Creeds, and the Book of Concord explicitly did so.[14]

Lutheranism in the age of orthodoxy was, then, precisely, a Confession, with its spiritual parameters defined at Augsburg in 1530 and its legal parameters at the same city in 1555. As such, it confessed. It bore witness constantly to the truth once revealed, a truth it burnished lovingly, guarded jealously, and defended fiercely, a truth in which it trained its population and beyond whose doctrinal or geographical boundaries it showed little desire to venture. It was orthodox Lutherans, not predestinarian Calvinists, who taught that Christ's

[12] Timothy Wengert, '"We Will Feast Together in Heaven Forever": The Epistolary Friendship of John Calvin and Philip Melanchthon' in *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag, (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), 19–44.

[13] Robert Kolb, 'Luther, Augsburg, and the Concept of Authority in the Late Reformation: Ursinus vs. the Lutherans' in *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate, 1559–1583*, ed. Derk Visser (Allison Park, PA, 1986), 36.

[14] Kolb, 'Luther, Augsburg, and the Concept of Authority', 36, 38.

command to make disciples of all nations had expired with the Apostles' own generation.[15] This persisted until Pietism seeped into the joints. Calvinism was something completely different, except where the political pressures of the age of Orthodoxy forced it into a Lutheran-shaped mould. It was open-ended, discursive and profoundly unstable, yet convinced even as it argued with itself that the world revolved around it. The surest sign of that difference was that many Calvinists continued to cherish an unrequited love for Lutheranism, or at least for what they Lutheranism imagined to be. They dreamed schemes for reunion, usually beginning with an intra-Reformed agreement into which the Lutherans could then be invited. These schemes are reminiscent of a child's plan to dig a hole to the other side of the world: that is, very easy to begin. They always and quickly foundered on Calvinists' effortlessly generous assumption that everyone should be invited to join their loose, quarrelsome family of faith, and to do so strictly on their hosts' terms.[16] Calvinism, then, should be seen not as a unified 'confession' in any strict sense, but as an ecumenical movement for Protestant unity. Yet it never properly understood the Lutherans' different world-view, and as such (and perhaps in any case inevitably) the project failed.

The attempt had some significant consequences, however. The most notorious took place in Geneva in 1553. The execution of the anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus should not be overread: no territory in Europe would have openly tolerated Servetus' ideas. Yet Calvin's determination to pursue a trial and execution, as opposed to the easy option of banishment, must be understood in the context of his wider ecumenical project, which that autumn was at a critical stage. It was strategically vital for Calvin to demonstrate his essential orthodoxy both to Lutheran and to Catholic Europe, and therefore to draw a line against the wild excesses which Servetus, perhaps more than anyone else then alive, embodied. What clearer way to draw a line than in someone else's blood?

In this sense, at least, we are compelled to recognise that Servetus' execution succeeded. It helped to inscribe a fundamental distinction to which most scholars still faithfully subscribe, between magisterial and radical reformers. Hence my second quarrel with the confessionalisation thesis. By focusing on the relationships between religion and state power, it has perpetuated the magisterial reformers' artificially sharp and ultimately self-serving distinction between themselves, the 'mainstream' of Protestantism, and the Anabaptists and other radicals whose status as Protestant is sometimes denied altogether. Recent research is making clear, however, quite how many reformers pitched their tents astride this supposed gulf. Susan Royal has demonstrated how no less mainstream and respectable a magisterial reformer than John Foxe, the English martyrologist, had a distinct whiff of radicalism hanging around him, giving houseroom to some very radical-sounding views on issues like pacifism, the use of oaths and the validity of tithes. In this context, Foxe's well-known opposition to the use of the death penalty for religious crimes begins to look less like an isolated quirk.[17] Similarly, Foxe's mentor John Bale, a man who was amongst other things surprisingly polite about the Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier, did not actually prohibit juridical oaths like Anabaptists did, but was sufficiently affected by the Gospel warnings against swearing to classify oaths as morally equivalent to homicide, that is,

[15] James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis, 1987), 66–9; James Tanis, 'Reformed Pietism and Protestant Missions', *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974), 65–73.

[16] Alec Ryrie, 'The Afterlife of Lutheran England' in *Sister Reformations: The Reformation in Germany and England*, ed. Dorothea Wendebourg (Tübingen, 2011), 213–34; W. B. Patterson, *James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge, 1997), 165–80; J. Minton Batten, *John Dury: Advocate of Christian Reunion* (Chicago, 1944).

[17] Susan Royal, 'John Foxe's "Acts and Monuments" and the Lollard legacy in the long English Reformation', Durham University PhD thesis (2014).

damnable unless explicitly required by a magistrate.[18] A contemporary of Bale's, Katharina Schütz Zell, the most distinguished female Protestant theologian of the early Reformation, put considerable effort in the early 1540s into bringing Caspar Schwenkfeld, whom we conventionally class as a 'radical', into conversation with the Lutheran Johannes Brenz and the Zwinglian Conrad Pellican on the basis of a common adherence to Scripture.[19]

Those efforts were never going to succeed, not because of any unbridgeable theological gulf, but because, after the bloody disaster of the kingdom of Münster in 1534–5, the label Anabaptist was politically toxic. Even so, the newly-drawn boundary between radical and magisterial reformers was still subject to cross-border raiding. Before Münster there had been some genuinely debatable land. Some Anabaptists had embarked on ventures that look decidedly magisterial, that is, territorial, comprehensive and coercive. As well as the Münster kingdom itself, there is the tantalising example of Balthasar Hubmaier's state Anabaptism in Nikolsburg in Moravia in 1526–7, which hinged on the conversion of the town's nobleman and its evangelical pastors. It only lasted three months before the Habsburgs crushed it. However, Hubmaier's expressed intention to create 'a Christian government at whose side God hung the Sword' sounds very like a magisterial Reformation.[20] Later Anabaptists were embarrassed about it, but if they had had other opportunities to enact territorial Reformations with the aid of princes, are we really to imagine that they would have forgone them?

Traffic went in the other direction, too. Martin Bucer had openly wondered whether infant baptism was Scriptural in 1524, back when such thoughts were still thinkable. He concluded that it was prudent and expedient to retain infant baptism, but not, apparently, necessary.[21] Indeed, Bucer, with his commitment to congregational discipline and his willingness to separate that from magisterial oversight, continued to have a whiff of radicalism about him. Separatism, indeed, would become a consistent feature of underground Reformed congregations in France, England, Scotland, the Netherlands and elsewhere across the mid-sixteenth century, congregations which Luther reviled as 'the work of rats and sects'. Indeed, in social terms, how different is a self-policing underground Calvinist congregation from a Mennonite one? Reformed theologians might tell their people that Catholic baptisms remained valid, but in practice many believers refused to submit their children to popish baptismal rites, even at the risk of their lives.[22] In mid-seventeenth century England, the radical-magisterial distinction broke down altogether. English Independents; New England Congregationalists; the antinomian groups which emerged in both settings; Particular Baptists; General Baptists – where can we confidently draw a line?

In particular, as the Servetus case itself reminds us, the repeated surfacing of anti-Trinitarianism in Reformed Protestantism is no coincidence. Even Calvin had found himself in a tangle on this point in 1537, when he rashly tried to defend the doctrine of the Trinity without resorting to the precedents or terminology of the fourth- and fifth-century Councils,

---

[18] John Bale, *Yet a course at the romyshe foxe. A dysclosynge or openynge of the Manne of synne* (RSTC 1309. Antwerp, 1543), fo. 51v; [John Bale], *A christen exhortacion vnto customable swearers* (RSTC 1280. Antwerp, 1543), fo. 6v.

[19] Elsie Anne McKee, 'A Lay Voice in Sixteenth-Century "Ecumenics": Katharina Schütz Zell in Dioalogue with Johannes Brenz, Conrad Pellican, and Caspar Schwenckfeld' in *Adaptions of Calvinism in Reformation Europe*, ed. Mack P. Holt (Aldershot, 2007), 81–110.

[20] James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS, 1976), 141–3.

[21] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1992), 52, 54–6.

[22] See, for example, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, 6 vols (Edinburgh,1846–64), I.298–300; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 335.

and even refused to sign the Athanasian Creed.[23] That was simply brash overconfidence, but the same qualms that led him there took others further. It was among the Reformed and the Reformed-influenced, from the Italian *spirituali* through to Transylvania and Poland, that serious anti-Trinitarianism first began to appear, and to garner such markers of establishment respectability as, in the Polish case, a university and a printing press. Some of the Dutch Remonstrants were drawn by anti-Trinitarianism, and some aligned themselves with the Mennonite offshoot, the Collegiants. William Chillingworth was accused of it. It was a Dutch Reformation theologian, and suspected Remonstrant sympathiser, Gerardus Vossius, who first proved that the Athanasian Creed was not actually written by Athanasius.

Blurring the boundary between radical and magisterial Protestants (and especially between radicalism and Calvinism) does not change the fact that radicalism was numerically small during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It does mean we cannot treat it as marginal to the story, as, especially, Anglophone historians are too inclined to do. The contemporary panic about radicalism was not minor, any more than the panics about witches and atheists were minor. And perhaps this panic, at least, was rational. There may not have been many actual radicals, but the ideological boundary between magisterial and radical reformers was porous and to a degree arbitrary. The *potential* for radicalism was everywhere. Only constant vigilance could keep it in check. With hindsight, Servetus' execution looks like an act of wanton brutality. In the early 1550s, when the very stability of the still-fragile Reformed Protestant identity was still unclear and radicals were turning up like, as the witch-hunters would say, worms in a garden, it seemed like a stand had to be taken against a mortal threat.

To allow the confessionalisation thesis to set the terms in which we describe post-Reformation Christianity is to risk assuming that a contingent set of politically-determined divisions had some deep religious logic underpinning them. There is a good case to be made that the long alliance between magisterial Protestantism and the state masked, rather than revealed, Protestantism's nature. The best evidence for this is what happened when the alliance began to break down. Spener's *Pia Desideria*, the 1675 tract that launched Lutheran Pietism, now reads as a collection of bland platitudes. This was one of the reasons for its success: no revolutionary manifesto has ever been so reassuring. But it is also because one of the things which made it so shocking was an omission, a shuddering, gonging silence running through the book: in this call for renewal of the Church, Spener made no mention of the magistrate at all. Pietism did have powerful princely sponsors, but it did not depend on them for its successes, and indeed it had much the most impact beyond their territories. It successes in reaching populations who had been left without any access to Protestant ministry after the Thirty Years' War was a striking embarrassment to the princely churches of Protestant orthodoxy, which simply had no way of tackling such an enterprise.[24]

It is to some extent a matter of taste how we see the established Protestant churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: as the result of a real alignment of interests between churches and princes; as a Faustian pact; or as a simple power-grab by emerging states. Examples to fit each case could be rehearsed. My point, however, is that the alliance with temporal power profoundly shaped magisterial Protestantism, but did so in ways that often had nothing to do with its theology. The plainest example of this is how, when Protestant state churches were set up was, large amounts of church property were seized by the state and secularised. The consequences of that act of asset-stripping resonated for centuries. Amongst its many long-term consequences was the problem of overseas mission. It is well known that

---

[23] Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Calvin: Fifth Latin Doctor of the Church?' in *Calvin and his Influence, 1509–2009*, ed. Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (Oxford, 2011), 33–45.

[24] W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge, 1992); Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, 1964).

pre-18th century Protestants did very little missionary work. To be more precise, some individuals and some theologians did, but no institutions did. The problem was not essentially a theological one. Although Calvinist doctrines of predestation have sometimes been blamed for lack of missionary zeal, in fact Calvinists showed more concern for mission than Lutherans. The deeper problem seems to have been institutional. There were no Protestant equivalents to the Catholic religious orders, which could provide the continuity, the training, the logistics and above all the funds necessary to run a missionary enterprise. Serious missionary work is expensive, and the money was gone. Such Protestant missionaries as there were moonlighting from jobs with trading companies. A handful of Dutch ministers in Sri Lanka and Taiwan were actually employed to minister to the local populations, but were pitifully under-resourced. Generally, though, state- or commercially-controlled Protestant establishments were reluctant to permit missionary work even if someone else was paying. It could stir up local trouble with either local or colonial populations, as would-be missionaries from Sri Lanka to New England discovered. It could also be politically risky: hence the fierce opposition of the orthodox establishments in the Empire to any kind of cross-border missionary work. Protestant missions only took root once they developed the institutions necessary to bypass the state. In the religious free-for-all of 1640s England, there was a wave of donations to support missionary work in New England, providing a very respectable annuity to two missionaries to the Native Americans, and endowing an admittedly shortlived Indian College at Harvard. And it was the Pietist University of Halle which both undertook the initiative of and raised the money for sending missionaries to India in 1706, the first Lutheran overseas mission.[25]

The Nature of Protestantism

Instead of mapping Protestantism in the confessional age as a pair of tidy confessional entities and a scattering radicals out beyond the pale, I am, therefore, suggesting we think of confessionalised Lutheranism rubbing up against a broad, discursive and dangerously soft-edged Calvinism, with the latter especially tending to leak into radicalism – especially when an active state was not on hand to keep piling up the sandbags. In which case, what is the rationale for treating this whole messy ecosystem as a single entity, which can usefully be described as *Protestant*?

There are several possible features that could be seen to unite Protestantism. There is simple genealogy, common descent from the Reformation moment – which is true, but not in itself very useful. Another, more significant argument, a longstanding claim which has been central to influential recent interpretations of Protestantism, is that it is Bible-Christianity: the religion of *sola Scriptura*, which finds ultimate authority in the unmediated Word of God. For Alister McGrath, that is Protestantism's underpinning genius. For Brad Gregory, that is what condemns Protestantism to irresoluble chaos.[26]

But this is not so. Protestantism is both less and more fluid than this approach suggests. Less so, because in practice it is of course much less theologically open than *sola scriptura* implies. *Sola fide* is logically and chronologically prior to *sola scriptura*. Although the dating of Luther's theological insights is perennially disputed, it is at least clear that he arrived at something very like his mature doctrine of salvation before he accepted, in 1519,

---

[25] Alec Ryrie, 'Mission and Empire: an Ethical Puzzle in Early Modern Protestantism', in *Sister Reformations II: Reformation and Ethics in Germany and in England*, ed. Dorothea Wendebourg and Alec Ryrie (Tübingen, 2014), 181–206.

[26] Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* (2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

that an Ecumenical Council cannot authoritatively determine the interpretation of Scripture. Of course, he already had a high doctrine of Scripture, and it was through his encounter with Scripture that he arrived at the doctrine of *sola fide*: but that doctrine then became, for him, not only the key to Scripture but its beating heart. He rejected ecclesiastical authority over the interpretation of the Bible because that authority had contradicted the doctrine he had learned from the Bible, and had therefore – in his eyes – proven itself to be false.

If Protestantism's starting point had genuinely been a blank slate of *sola Scriptura*, it could have gone in far more and more varied directions than it in fact has. As various syncretistic movements that emerged in various parts of the world in the twentieth century demonstrate, only a minority of a set of all possible Bible-based religions are recognisable variants on historic Christianity. Protestantism's plurality is both extensive and irreducible, but it is not infinite. As Gregory has argued, it is characterised by proliferating doctrinal chaos, but the chaos is more fractal than random in nature; that is, the same patterns continuously recur, albeit in new configurations. Or, to use a different image: we can talk meaningfully about Protestantism not because of a shared genealogy, but because of shared genes.

Yet Protestantism is also more fluid than the Bible-Christianity model suggests. Plainly the Bible has been crucial to Protestants, but its authority has operated in many ways. Luther's idiosyncratic use of the Bible is well-known. As well as notoriously dismissing the epistle of James as mere straw is often quoted, he also reportedly told a student that 'I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove'. He could be equally robust with the rest of the canon. He reckoned that Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, like James, were not of apostolic authorship, and sent all four to a relegation zone at the end of his New Testament. He also wanted to expel the book of Esther. He doubted whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch; he reckoned that the books of Chronicles were less reliable than the books of Kings; he thought that Job was largely fiction, that the prophets had made mistakes, that the numbers in some Old Testament accounts were exaggerated. And he was favouritist about other books, notably John's gospel and the epistle to the Galatians.[27] No other mainstream reformer was quite so brazen, but Luther's libertine intimacy here demonstrates that this is more than self-serving caprice. Luther treated the Bible this way because it fits with his understanding of what the Bible was. In 1530, he advised Bible-readers to

> search out and deal with the core of our Christian doctrine, wherever it may be found throughout the Bible. And the core is this: that without any merit, as a gift of God's pure grace in Christ, we attain righteousness, life, and salvation.[28]

That was the message: the Gospel. The reason he called the epistle of James straw was that, although it contained sound moral teaching, 'it contains not a syllable about Christ'. Luther applied the doctrine of the Incarnation not only to the Eucharist, but to the Word of God: 'The Holy Scripture,' he wrote, 'is God's Word, written, and so to say "in-lettered", just as Christ is the eternal Word of God incarnate in the garment of his humanity'; he even called

---

[27] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia, 1960), 317; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia, 1960), 361–2, 397; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 54: Table Talk*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadephia, 1967), 79–80, 373, 424, 452; Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, MI,, 1958–61), II:300–1.

[28] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 14: Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis, 1958), 36.

the Bible 'the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies'.[29] As such its incidental content is almost insignificant.

Calvin was more cautious, but he did not fundamentally disagree. He was happy to accept that the creation story in Genesis did not fit the science even of his own day, and to explain that the account was written to fit what its original readers could understand. He was apparently untroubled by the textual glitches he found in Scripture. When in schoolmasterly mode, he could not only chide St Luke for mistaking the name of a high priest or St Paul for writing an almost incomprehensible sentence, but also point out that the New Testament writers were sometimes very sloppy in quoting the Old Testament. Calvin's comment on these regrettable lapses, which he clearly did not regard as very important, tells us a good deal about his own attitude to the Bible: 'with respect both to words and to other things which do not bear upon the matters in discussion, [the apostles] allow themselves wide freedom'.[30] So for Calvin, too, the authority of Scripture was the authority of its core message, not its incidentals. Hence his strange reluctance to argue that the Bible is authoritative. All he will say is that, through 'the secret testimony of the Spirit … Scripture is indeed self-authenticating. … We feel that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there, … a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation.'[31] Likewise, as Scott Hendrix has suggested, 'the authority of Scripture for Luther was not like a mathematical theorem which can be proven … by the use of self-evident axioms. ... Rather … Luther approached Scripture as we would approach a great work of art.'[32] This is an authority which cannot be demonstrated by argument. Either it is perceived, or it is not.

Such views have been seized upon by liberal Protestants keen to look for historical justification for nonliteralist views of Biblical authority, which is fair enough, although these are crumbs of liberal comfort gathered from beneath a vast table groaning with evidence that the early Reformers used the Bible as a proof-text with precise literalism. Fortunately, historians can keep out of that fight. For our purposes, some more modest observations will suffice. The view that the Bible's authority derives from its message, and that, as Luther put it, Christ is king over Scripture, is distinguished from the literalist view less by logic than by function. The former view is devotional and inspirational rather than polemical. It is also primary: it is how the Reformers learned their theology, and how Scripture first authenticated itself to them. However, it works much better for one believer's spiritual crisis than for building an institutional church or for fighting a religious war. So, inevitably, as Luther and his colleagues were pressed on their doctrine of authority, the polemical use of Scripture came to the fore. Yet this meaning too was, in origin, not strictly about textual literalism either. It was about exclusion: Luther's declaration that he rejected all authorities *except* Scripture, and Scripture as understood by his own conscience, a double negative echoed by Lutheran and Calvinist formularies throughout the sixteenth century.[33] This doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is a claim, not about the authority of the Bible, but about the absence of authority outside the Bible. *Sola scriptura* began as a polemical tool for rejecting all authorities from which any contradiction might arise.

---

[29]Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco, 1979), 78; Brian A. Gerrish, 'The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority' in his *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago, 1982), 51–68 at 55.

[30] John T. McNeill, 'The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin', *Church History* 28 (1959), 131–46, esp. 143–4.

[31] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), 78–81.

[32] Scott Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Aldershot, 1996), II.147.

[33] Paul Lehmann, 'The Reformers' Use of the Bible', *Theology Today* 3 (1946), 328–44 at 329; Gerrish, 'Word of God', 59. Cf. article VI of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles.

For many Protestants, it swiftly became much more than that. Especially in the Reformed tradition, whose humanism made it more textually conservative, increasingly strong (or rigid) doctrines of Biblical authority emerged, which in the seventeenth century became close to what in modern times is called inerrantist. As Peter Harrison's shrewd history of the Scientific Revolution suggests, the paring of away of allegorical and other 'higher' interpretations of Scripture tended to change its value to a set of propositional statements.[34] However, this tendency within Protestantism has rarely been unchallenged: especially if, as we must, we allow that the radicals are genuinely a part of the Protestant family. In the first generation, Anabaptist polemicists were skewering Lutheran and Reformed theologians for defending infant baptism without Biblical warrant (proof, if it were needed, that theology trumps prooftexting). Yet they were of course doing the same thing: discerning Scripture's inner meaning and using that inner meaning to interpret and where necessary discard Scripture. In 1524, Jörg Haugk complained that 'many accept the Scriptures as if they were the essence of divine truth; but they are only a witness to divine truth which must be experienced in the inner being'. Hans Hut insisted that the Bible could only be understood through the Holy Spirit; otherwise, he argued, the text bristled with contradictions, of which he provided a substantial list.[35]

The 'magisterial' reformers were of course scathing about this, and appealed to their learning, which gave them the right to be heard when they interpreted Scripture. As Protestant universities became established, that would become a regular refrain. Equally regular, however, was the response from those who did not have access to a theological education, but who nevertheless would not accept theological disenfranchisement. For the self-taught Nuremberg Anabaptist Hans Hergot, Luther and his allies were 'Scripture wizards' whose hairsplitting subtleties blinded them to the simple truth. Very similar language resurfaced in the English Revolution, when the Ranter prophet Abiezer Coppe dismissed the voice of his own inner textual nitpicker as the 'holy Scripturian whore'. Other Ranters supposedly distinguished between the *history* of Scripture – its dead word – and the *mystery* of Scripture – its living, hidden essence. The early Quakers were scathing about the university-educated clergy whom they called ministers of the Letter, as distinct from the Word: 'not the letter, nor the writing of the Scripture, but the ingrafted Word is able to save your soules', George Fox preached.[36] A couple of centuries later again, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, we find a freed American slave and self-taught preacher named Elizabeth condemning the kind of 'great scripturian' who comes to sermons to take notes and analyse doctrine rather than to meet God.[37] All of these people took their Bibles extremely seriously, but in a spiritualising and sometimes allegorising fashion which made them sources of inspiration rather than of hard theological argument. Those who could not or would not wield the Bible as a polemical weapon tended to fall back on its primary Protestant use as a medium for God's message.

So we might accept Chillingworth's dictum that the Bible is the religion of Protestants: but neither in the polemical sense he meant, that the Bible is the banner around which the anti-Catholic cause might gather, nor in the polemical sense his Victorian enthusiasts meant, that anyone who questions Biblical literalism is not a real Protestant. We

---

[34] Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, 1998).

[35] Walter Klaassen, Frank Friesen and Werner O. Packull (eds), *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism* (Kitchener, Ontario, 2001), 19, 24–9.

[36] Klaassen et al., *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, 44–5; Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (1983), 102; A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (1970), 82; George Fox, *A declaration of the difference of the ministers of the word from the ministers of the world; who calls the writings, the word* (Wing F1790. 1656), 12.

[37] 'Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Colored Woman' in William L. Andrews (ed.), *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (New York, 1988), 16.

might, more helpfully, say that Protestantism is and has been a religion of the Bible. Better still, Protestantism is a religion within which the Bible appears to be self-authenticating. That is, it is a religion which hinges on the unmediated encounter with God's grace. Not all Protestants have formulated their understanding of that grace in the same theological terms: Luther's *sola fide* was enduringly influential but has never had the field to itself. Yet that sense of a direct meeting with grace through the individual believer's faith is fundamental, in different ways, to Lutheranism, Calvinism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, Mennonitism, Quakerism, Unitarianism, Adventism and more. There are some religious traditions which are genealogically Reformation-derived but which lack that central emphasis on unmediated grace – for example, Anglo-Catholicism or Mormonism; and these, importantly, are the traditions hardest to describe as Protestant. The remainder, for all their huge diversity, bear an unmistakable family resemblance. The best word we have for that family is 'Protestant'.