

Catholic Theological Association 2017 Conference Papers

## The Age of Reform

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### INTRODUCTION

For Protestants, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation – or at least its initiation with the (alleged) posting of Luther’s 95 theses on indulgences at the Wittenberg church – is something to celebrate: nothing less than the rehabilitation of Christianity. For Catholics at an earlier time, it would have been something to deplore. For Catholics now, it is more ambiguous. Something to be marked but perhaps not celebrated. Either way it has had profound and lasting effects on the Catholic Church and it is this that was explored by the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain at its annual conference in September 2017, for it had the lengthy sub-title: reflecting critically on the significance of the Reformation for theology in the churches today. None of the conference’s papers are historical studies of the Reformation, though inevitably there are attempts to understand aspects of its theology. Of greater concern is the attempt to understand our situation today in the aftermath of that sixteenth-century reform. Where are we today?

**Simeon Zahl** opened the conference with a discussion of whether it can be said that there is a single principle that makes all Protestant churches Protestant. He considers two possibilities: justification by faith alone and the criticism of externals as channels of grace. Neither principle is accepted without reservation by all Protestant churches, so Zahl looks at the motivation behind the development of both justification and externals, which he claims is “affectivity”, that is, how believers are *affected* psychologically in their religious life and their relationship with God. **Eamon Duffy** follows this with a historical study of the development of Catholic scholarship on Martin Luther, from ignoring him completely to damning him in the nineteenth-century, to seeing him as a partially justified Catholic dissident. But here we have a more critical edge that refuses to see the Reformation as an unfortunate accident, initiated by a man who remained essentially Catholic. **Anthony Carroll** also focuses on Luther in order to contrast his anthropology and spirituality with those of Ignatius Loyola. With the Protestant we have, he says

(contrasting with the interpretation of Simeon Zahl) an intellectualisation of faith that distances God and places him in a fantasy land, what Carroll calls a La-la-land. Loyola, on the other hand, embodies the presence of God in the human person: “Loyola depicts these interactions [between grace and (human) nature] as occurring in the inner spaces of our human freedom, porous to the dimensions of transcendence, which influence and shape our emotions, desire and will.”

**Judith Champ** analyses the historical development of the priesthood in the Catholic Church in England from penal times when we had a missionary priesthood. She makes a plea for historical study that would promote a return to many of the characteristics of that missionary priesthood to rescue us from the clerical caste that developed in the early twentieth-century. She thinks that the Catholic Church is undergoing a change as profound as that at the Reformation but insists that decline is not the only option. **Kevin McDonald**, writing from extensive experience as former Archbishop of Southwark, asks where the Catholic Church has got to in its admittedly late involvement in ecumenism. Far from it being a question of pragmatism in a secular age, he roots the outreach of ecumenical involvement in the nature of the Catholic Church itself. From ecumenism he takes us towards inter-religious dialogue, which is the concern of Sister **MariaOlisaemeka Rosemary Okwara** who writes about the possibilities but also the difficulties in conversations with Islam, a discussion that has become necessary in her own context in Nigeria. **Martin Maier SJ** follows this by using a South American context to explore how far the church still needs reformers. He takes the example of the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and relates him to the Argentinian Pope Francis and the reform that he is attempting (despite some serious resistance) in the Catholic Church.

The Reformation brought important changes to the liturgy with the use of vernacular languages and the availability of the Bible, which instigated a baneful reaction from the Catholic authorities that held Catholics back for centuries. **Bridget Nichols** shows how the Anglican Communion, and the Church of England in particular, is dealing with liturgical issues in a world that finds traditional language increasingly unintelligible. Lessons might be learned here by Catholic Bishops' Conferences if they are to deal with current infelicities in the mass. Finally **Johannes Hoff** relates some of the social changes that were brought about at the Reformation to social changes that we have to deal with in a digital age with an increased reliance on artificial intelligence. Failure to confront these changes is likely to lead to new forms of religious and social alienation.

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