

THE IMAGINATIVE WORLD OF THE REFORMATION by Peter Matheson *T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000. Pp. x + 153 incl. 35 illustrations, £14.95 pbk.*

'Protestantism itself appears, in the Western world at least, to have reached its sell-by date'. This is an arresting opening sentiment for a study of the Reformation, particularly from a leading Reformed Church historian; perhaps also a thought congenial to many readers of this journal. Faced with the serried ranks of Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Pentecostals and the like, who form such a powerful and noisy constituency in the world's only superpower, the United States, one may feel that the death of Western Protestantism has been greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is probably true that even where old Reformation certainties are still proclaimed most stridently, the upheavals of the 16th century are imperfectly understood and often viewed through lenses donned in later conflicts. It is the work of this engaging little book, product of the 1998 Gunning Lectures in the University of Edinburgh, to recapture the spirit which inflamed the early phases of the Reformation, and to explain just why it proved so destructive to the Western Church of the Latin Rite. Much recent scholarship has sought to minimise the popular impact of the Reformation, by emphasising the popular support enjoyed by what Eamon Duffy has called 'traditional religion', and equally by emphasising the role of Protestant state coercion and propaganda from official bodies. Peter Matheson has tart words for such efforts: 'Important half-truths are the bane of good history'. He succeeds in providing substantial answers to the question which must confront the broadly successful revisionist enterprise of demonstrating the richness and vitality of late medieval religion: given that the old Church was not in terminal decay and that it largely satisfied consumer demand, why did the Reformation devastate its life and succeed in transforming the social rhythms of much of Europe? The answer which Matheson gives is borrowed from Berthold Brecht's strategy for drama. In Brechtian fashion, the early Reformers went about a task of *Verfremdung*, which Matheson glosses as making the familiar alien. Most obvious, shocking and fundamental was Martin Luther's reclassification of the Holy See of Rome as Babylon, the archetypal place of exile, rather than Jerusalem, the happy home of the faithful. So all Western Christians, in the title of his revolutionary manifesto of 1520, were in the alienation of 'Babylonian captivity'.

Matheson is interested in these metaphors of transformation: they organise his text, which is garlanded with contemporary engravings — the Reformation had its vivid imagery in the early years, produced by some of the most brilliant artists of the day — Dürer, Lukas Cranach, for instance. He describes various metaphors which he sums up in the trope of 'a new song'. He discusses utopias, those visions of a better

society already common before the explosion of 1517, at their most sardonic and enigmatic in the writing of Thomas More. Utopian talk was linked to the idea that the world was in its last day — it was not Luther who renewed the obsession with this ancient expectation (so often disappointed), but the impulse came earlier, from the sudden disruption of Europe's most advanced society, northern Italy, in the outbreak of Valois-Habsburg wars in the 1490s. What Luther did was to give an urgent purpose to the work of envisaging new societies.

Much of the excitement of the future ended in the bitter disappointment, repression and suffering which marked the aftermath of the Peasant Wars of 1524-25, and appropriately one of Matheson's chapters deals with the theme of nightmare. After that, he moves from general survey to the particular: the study of a remarkable evangelical German noblewoman, Argula von Grumbach, whom he has done much to restore to public view in his earlier research. Von Grumbach was an articulate, brave and resourceful woman who had publicly challenged the male domination of the written word in the early 1520s. After her brief period of fame, she continued, without a husband's help, to live out the life of the evangelical Christian mother protecting her children, an example to the next generation of Protestants who sought to make the family the foundation of their new society. A last chapter surveys the changes which the Reformation brought to everyday spirituality, and with its continuing emphasis on the spirituality of women, challenges the frequent assertion that Protestantism suppressed the feminine side of Christian devotion.

It is worth observing that Matheson's *Reformation* is remarkably circumscribed in time and place. The fashion now is to extend the Reformation --- long Reformations abound in contemporary religious historiography, sometimes running from the 15th to the 19th century. Here the focus is the time and place which Matheson has made his own: Germany in the early 1520s. At one point (p.120) Matheson explicitly contrasts the 'Reformation' which he is describing with the 'confessional and puritan era' which followed it. That prescriptive era took its beginnings in the defeat of the peasants in 1525, which closed down so many possibilities for the future in the developing mainstream Protestantisms. If this may seem to take the shine off the idealism and excitement which make Matheson's Reformation truly popular, it is worth observing that one of the characteristics of the Reformation is the way in which popular energy and excitement kept bursting through the official confessional forms. Cool post-Protestants in Western Europe may find it difficult to sympathise with the Christian snake-handlers of the American Deep South, but such enthusiastic folk would find no problem in recognising the rich variety of metaphors of freedom presented in this concise but thought-provoking work. Liberation theologians should take note.

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