Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform
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The 500th anniversary of the onset of the Protestant Reformation is receiving global attention, both from the public and from academic researchers. However, the significance of the year 1517 has been an issue of scholarly debate for quite some time, and its importance as a caesura in European history has been questioned. The popular picture, in particular, of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg church doors on 31 October 1517 and thereby unleashing both the Reformation movement and the modern era has been successfully challenged by research. Our understanding of the Reformation has become more differentiated and complex, and this has been and will be documented in the context of the quincentenary in many events, publications and exhibitions around the world.

The acknowledgement of plurality and dissent within early modern Protestantism is one key aspect of this differentiated picture of the Reformation. The symposium “The Protestant Reformation and its Radical Critique”, which was held at the German Historical Institute in London from September 15–17, 2016, concentrated on radical currents within the Reformation movement, most of which were inspired by a critical engagement with Luther and the other magisterial reformers. These radical groups and theologies are of particular interest because they link British, German, Dutch, French and North American experiences and historiographies. The period on which the essays in this volume focus extends from the early Reformation of the 1520s to the Pietist movement of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. This broad chronological perspective will help to shift the anniversary discussions from their predominant focus on the sixteenth century. A public lecture given at the British Museum within the framework of this symposium positioned the various strands of early-modern religious radicalism within an even wider temporal framework and linked them to those of the 20th century. The symposium itself was structured thematically around issues such as group formation, religious radicalism in politics, gender and family relations, missionary activity, radicalism across borders, and radical history writing.

Most of the papers given at the symposium are contained in this book. Warm thanks go to all our excellent speakers and chairs for their contributions and thoughtful comments and to Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers for having taken on the task of editing this volume. It was a great pleasure to host this symposium and we hope that the book will inspire future discussions and research.

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Radicalism was central to the Reformation story. Martin Luther was the greatest rebel of his day and preached a profoundly radical message. He appeared at the Diet of Worms on 17 April 1521 as a courageous renegade, defying the greatest monarch in Christendom and the ecclesiastical and secular estates of the Empire.¹ His attacks on the authority of the papacy, his rejection of the clerical estate, his belief in a priesthood of all believers, his call to arms against Roman tyranny: all threatened the established order. He put the Bible, and the authority to interpret it, into the hands of the laity. For all his willingness to accommodate himself to political realities, for all his later compromises and conservatism, for all his intolerance and authoritarianism, there can be no denying the subversive potential of Luther’s message of spiritual equality and freedom. As two of the opening essays in this volume emphasize, Luther’s teachings, and the inflammatory rhetoric that he used to convey them, were profoundly radical.²

The radical Reformation however, as it has been defined and debated over the decades, has very particular connotations. It is associated not with Luther and with the state churches that grew from his Wittenberg movement, but with the reformers who went even further in their theological teachings and in their challenges to established political and social hierarchies. The radical reformers, as classified by George Williams in his encyclopaedic *The Radical Reformation*, were the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists and the Anti-Trinitarians.³ They were the evangelicals who introduced the most startling, the most unconventional, doctrinal innovations of the Reformation era: the abolition of infant baptism and its replacement by believers’ baptism; spiritualist critiques of biblical literalism, of external sacraments and of the formal structures of the church; and rationalism that speculated about questions such as the immortality of the soul and the Trinity. For Williams, these groups, despite their different points of origin and their different theological emphases, constituted a tradition that was set apart, by virtue of shared ideals, from the magisterial reformations that emanated from Wittenberg, Zurich and Geneva.

¹ Lyndal Roper, Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet (London, 2016), especially chapter 8 on the Diet of Worms.
² Thomas Kaufmann, Radical Political Thought in the Reformation Era; Gerd Schwerhoff, Radicalism and ‘Invectivity’: ‘Hate Speech’ in the German Reformation, both in this volume.
There is no need to rehearse here, in detail, the broader historiography of Anabaptism and of the radical Reformation. For all the legitimate criticisms that have been aimed at Williams’ work – in particular at its assertion of an underlying ideological unity amongst the so-called radicals – it remains seminal. Hans-Jürgen Goertz’s understanding of early modern radicalism, as defined not by religious belief but by rejection of the status quo in the ecclesiastical, social and political spheres, is also of particular importance here. Ultimately, however, attempts to reach a fixed definition of what constituted religious radicalism, or to categorize its different manifestations, are doomed to failure. As John Coffey points out in his essay for this volume, producing taxonomies of radicalism, as Williams did, is analogous to ‘fixing butterflies on a wall rather than tracking their unpredictable movements through the air’. Radicalism was situational, closely dependent upon the historical context in which it emerged, and it encompassed a great diversity of religious and political opinions.

The symposium that generated this volume of essays sought neither to define radicalism, nor to examine it as a distinct ecclesiastical tradition. Rather, it set out to consider, across the early modern period and across Protestant Europe, radical critiques of mainstream Reformations, of their doctrinal settlements and of the ways of life that they promoted. The symposium started from the undeniable premise that there were always ‘some Protestants who thought that the existing church was not Protestant enough’. This was true in Germany and in the Swiss Confederation during the 1520s; it was true in England, where the Elizabethan and Jacobean religious settlements attracted criticism and where, in the mid-seventeenth century, revolution unleashed a bewildering variety of radical views; it was true in the Netherlands, where Mennonite communities survived throughout the early modern period; and it was true in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when early revivalist movements began to emerge. There was, it seems, a pattern that repeated itself throughout the history of early modern Protestantism: wherever orthodoxies established themselves, forces of opposition gained momentum. These forces offered alternative sets of beliefs, and also, in many cases, alternative modes of family and social life and alternative senses of identity and belonging.

7 C. Scott Dixon, Protestants: A History from Wittenberg to Pennsylvania 1517–1740 (Chichester, West Sussex, 2010), p. 94.
8 On identity and belonging see in particular Michael Driedger, Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age (Aldershot, 2002); Kat Hill, Baptism, Brotherhood and Belief: The meaning and development of identity in central German Anabaptism (Oxford, 2010). On gender and family relations see, for example, the work of Mirjam de Baar and Xenia von Tippelskirch, both of whom took part in the symposium from which this volume originated.
The notion of ‘a Reformation’ on the one hand, and its ‘radical critique’ on the other, is, however, problematic. It preserves, as a number of the contributions to this volume suggest, an artificial division between a respectable, magisterial Reformation and an unruly, radical Reformation. This division was originally a creation of the early decades of the German evangelical movement, of Luther and his invective against the Schwärmer or false enthusiasts, especially Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer. It was reinforced by mainstream reformers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as they sought to shore up their own authority. Heresiographies and confessional histories imposed hostile categories on individuals and groups seen as threats to orthodoxy and order, controlling the narrative of the Reformation as it progressed. The division continues to shape scholarship: Michael Driedger speaks in his essay for this volume of the ‘sublimation or translation of early modern anti-heretical literature into academically acceptable forms’ by Williams and by much more recent commentators.

If there is one key, unifying theme to this volume, then, it is that the division between the radical and the magisterial, the marginal and the mainstream, the wild and the housetrained is artificial and unsustainable. As Alec Ryrie argues in his essay, it ‘tends to dissolve into ambiguity when examined closely’. In perpetuating it we, as historians, risk underestimating the extent to which radical critique was, as Ethan Shagan shows here, immanent within mainstream Protestantism. We risk elevating the ‘left wing’ of the Reformation, with its often virulent attacks on established order, above the supposedly conformist confessional churches. We must not lose sight of the radicalism of those who became the leaders of established churches, and of the ongoing desire of many of the evangelicals who were sheltered by the protection of the secular authorities to make society conform to the unrelenting demands – religious, but also political and social – of the gospel.

Does the notion of a radical Reformation, of radical critique, have, therefore, any continuing interpretative relevance? The radical Reformation was certainly not a historical reality: it had no underlying unity. But then neither were the confessional churches – Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican – as settled as their progenitors would have wished. Subscription to a statement of faith did not necessarily lead to lasting uniformity of belief and practice, as recent work on Lutheranism during and beyond the age of orthodoxy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has emphasized. This volume argues, therefore, that scholars should adopt an open-ended understanding of evangelical reform, and recognize that the boundaries between radicalism and its opposites (the magisterial reformations, the confessional churches, orthodoxy) were

9 See in particular Alec Ryrie, Scripture, the Spirit and the Meaning of Radicalism in the English Revolution, in this volume.
11 Ryrie, Scripture, in this volume.
12 See, for example, Robert Kolb (ed.), Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550–1675 [Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 11] (Leiden and Boston, 2008).
not firmly drawn. In considering those boundaries we come to the core question of how we, as historians, define the Reformation. Europe’s Reformations were shaped, of course, by the national contexts within which they unfolded. But the Reformation was never, at heart, a political or legal settlement. It was, as Shagan reminds us here, an ‘ongoing project to remake Christian society from the ground up’, a project in which all reformers, both radical and moderate, played a part.13

The Essays

The volume opens with an overview by Hartmut Lehmann of the long-term ramifications of the Lutheran and radical Reformations. Against the backdrop of the 500th anniversary of the Ninety-Five Theses, Lehmann reminds us of the revolutionary potential of Luther’s key messages: spiritual equality and lay access to the Bible. Ultimately, however, it was not the Wittenberg reformer but his ‘unruly offspring’ who disseminated these messages around the world. While Luther retreated behind the protection of the state and condemned those who challenged the divinely ordained order, the evangelicals whom he derided as unreliable enthusiasts succeeded in unforeseeable ways. Despite persecution, Anabaptism and Spiritualism survived, and during the seventeenth century the Reformation’s ‘left wing’, its dissenting and non-conformist groups, flourished. Into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these groups played a crucial role in the Christianisation of American society and in spreading Protestantism further afield. It is, Lehmann points out, the Baptist, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, rather than their Lutheran or Reformed counterparts, that flourish today in Europe, North America, Africa and parts of Asia.

The first set of detailed case studies focus on the German-speaking lands during the early decades of the Reformation. Thomas Kaufmann explores the relationship between the Reformation and its early radical manifestations. The so-called radical Reformation was, he argues, created during this key period of upheaval through a deliberate process of theological and social differentiation on the part of Luther and his supporters. The distinction was not obvious, and should not be overstated: Luther’s 1520 tract, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, traditionally seen as one of the founding documents of the magisterial Reformation, was, for example, profoundly radical. But while Luther remained loyal to a vision of the social order based upon the three estates, which could accommodate differences and ambiguities, other evangelicals proved more prepared to instigate political change and adopted (or sought to adopt) more radical strategic measures to achieve a reform of Christian life.

Luther’s own radicalism is the theme of Gerd Schwerhoff’s essay, too, which focuses on the Wittenberg reformer’s use of invective. Schwerhoff draws our attention to the

13 Ethan Shagan, Radical Charity in the English Reformation, in this volume.
ways in which Luther used language to achieve intellectual clarity in the presentation of his arguments and to distance himself from the corrupt Roman church and from opponents within his own camp. Lutheranism may ultimately have proved to be the middle-way faith, the conservative counterpart to Reformed Protestantism as well as to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, but there was nothing moderate about Luther’s rhetoric. He used language to mobilize emotions and establish group consciousness, to burn bridges and escalate hostilities. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and the use of language to define group identities, are also important themes of Kat Hill’s essay on naming strategies. Hill explores the significance of the Reformation tradition of naming opponents – Luther’s Schwärmer, and the Anabaptists, for example – and of the ways in which radical evangelicals named themselves, their children and the places in which they lived and worshipped. Names were not only, she argues, polemical weapons, but could also create a sense of identity and belonging. The importance of naming for understanding the so-called radical Reformation is an important theme throughout the volume.

The next set of essays move away from Germany, to England and the Netherlands. All four argue, in various ways, against the notion that the Reformation and its radical critique were distinct phenomena; all argue for the adoption of an analytical framework that recognizes radical critique as part of the Reformation itself. Ethan Shagan focuses on concepts of economic radicalism articulated in England during the 1540s and 1550s. Here he challenges established paradigms that associate economic radicalism – the common ownership of goods – with figures such as Thomas Müntzer and suggest that mainstream evangelicals sought merely to reform charity and welfare provision. In England under Edward VI, however, leaders of the Reformation advocated a thoroughgoing redistribution of wealth, a taming of market forces and the exclusion of capitalists from the Christian community. Such radical ideas informed, Shagan argues, the Book of Common Prayer, one of the foundational documents of the English ‘magisterial’ Reformation. Susan Royal’s article also emphasizes the radicalism inherent within England’s early evangelical movement, this time through an examination of the writings of John Bale and Thomas Becon on oath swearing and tithes. These reformers demanded, like those discussed by Shagan, a reimagining of Christian society that challenged the political and ecclesiastical regimes established by England’s Protestant rulers.

Alec Ryrie’s essay moves us on to the mid-seventeenth century, to the period of the English Revolution. It focuses on the authority of Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring its interpreters, an issue that supposedly separated magisterial reformers from their radical brethren. Here, Ryrie challenges the artificially constructed distinction between radicals – for example, a Colchester mechanic who claimed that the Scriptures were ‘no more than a ballad’ – and orthodox Protestant bibliophiles. Ryrie points out, for example, that in their understanding of Scripture as a secondary, external confirmation of a truth that was primarily received inwardly,
the supposed radicals stood well within the traditions of the mainstream sixteenth-century Reformations. Debates about Spiritualism and the authority of Scripture also played out in the Dutch Republic, and constitute an important theme of Gary Waite’s essay on Mennonites in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Here, against a backdrop of religious pluralism, defining boundaries was very difficult. Waite shows that within liberal Mennonite communities, spiritualism flourished alongside an appreciation of Scripture and reason. His essay also points us towards key themes for some of the later contributions to the volume: the association between the radical Reformation, in its various forms, and individual freedom and liberty of thought; and radicals’ criticism of confessional enmity and conflict. Here we find points of contact with other forms of radicalism that emerged on the eve of the Enlightenment.

The next three essays examine the radical-magisterial divide through the prism of history writing. Michael Driedger focuses on accounts of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, exploring the construction and maintenance of an anti-sectarian textual culture. Lurid and richly illustrated accounts of polygamy and communism and of violence and executions served, he suggests, to distinguish heretical groups from the main body of the civil, well-ordered Christian society. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these accounts provided warnings from history, shoring up orthodoxy in times of threat.

Mirjam van Veen examines Dutch Anabaptist accounts of the trial of Michael Servetus, the Anti-Trinitarian burned as a heretic in Geneva in 1553. She shows the extent to which these accounts responded to changing circumstances, and drew to differing degrees on the plea for toleration that the trial had engendered from Sebastian Castellio. Dutch Anabaptists at first criticized Calvin’s role in the Servetus affair, but then during the seventeenth century, as ‘Socinian’ became an increasingly dangerous label, distanced themselves from Servetus.

Dmitri Levitin’s essay examines the radical re-evaluations of theological method and doctrine penned by John Beale, a clergyman and scientific writer, in England during the 1650s. In terms of deviation from the norm, Beale’s ideas, which were outlined in letters written to Samuel Hartlib, were the most radical of any discussed in this volume. Beale’s vision of early Christian history, his pantheism, and his assertion that Islam was morally and theologically superior to modern confessional Christianity, were unusual in the extreme. His ideas did not, however, constitute a serious threat. Even had they been published, they would have caused little more than a temporary shock, Levitin suggests, for what counted in the writing of Reformation (and other) history writing was technical skill and scholarship, which Beale lacked. Innovation in history writing was occurring within the orthodox mainstream, Levitin argues, rather than at the radical fringes.

The final set of essays focuses in various ways on radicalism in a national and transnational perspective. Continuing the theme of history writing, John Coffey’s contri-
bution opens with a discussion of heresiography in seventeenth-century England. As Protestantism splintered during the Revolutionary period, Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Anti-Trinitarians resurfaced. Like those examined by Driedger, English histories of the Anabaptists served to warn contemporaries of the dangers of heresy. They constructed genealogies, tracing the origins of seventeenth-century groups back to early sixteenth-century Germany. Coffey shows, however, that these genealogies were false, and that English ‘Anabaptism’ was, in fact, an indigenous phenomenon. English Spiritualists and Anti-Trinitarians did read European texts. But the lasting products of this period of turmoil, the Baptists and Quakers, grew not from Continental roots but from the English Puritan tradition. In his discussion of French Quakers, Lionel Laborie also investigates questions of influence and the transmission of ideas. He traces contacts between the English Quakers and the Huguenots from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, and emphasizes their importance for the development of prophetic and charismatic movements such as the Couflaïres or Swellers in eighteenth-century Languedoc. Developing further the theme of the construction of histories and genealogies, Laborie also shows the extent to which French radicalism was shaped by the memory of religious violence.

As Ulrike Gleixner reminds us in her essay on Pietist missionary activity during the eighteenth century, the global expansion of Protestantism emerged from the margins of the state churches, from the radical rather than the magisterial Reformations. Gleixner focuses on millenarianism – one of the hallmarks of radical Protestantism – which she argues served as a way of articulating a Pietist reform programme both at home and abroad. August Hermann Franke and his followers sought to realize a better future on earth, starting in Halle and spreading outwards. In the early eighteenth century their endeavours extended as far as Tranquebar in south-east India, and they constructed a transnational and transconfessional network of supporters and donors in their efforts to establish Lutheran Christianity there.

Jon Sensbach’s essay, which closes the volume, examines in a very different context the power of the Reformation’s message of spiritual equality. In eighteenth-century America and in the Caribbean, religious radicals and non-conformists – in particular Quakers and the Moravian Brethren – played an important role in debates about slavery. Here, where religion and global capitalism converged, the radical Reformation showed, once again, its potential to disrupt the status quo. Quakers and German dissenters from within the Anabaptist and Pietist traditions were amongst the most vocal critics of slavery, and Sensbach emphasizes in particular the lasting impact of the Moravian missions of the 1730s and 1740s, with their emphasis on egalitarianism. This final essay returns us, then, to the key theme of Lehmann’s opening salvo: the importance of the message of spiritual equality and freedom promulgated by Luther and perpetuated by his ‘unruly offspring’.
Twenty years ago, in 1996, on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of Martin Luther’s death, the doyen of German Reformation scholars, Bernd Moeller, professor at the University of Goettingen, gave a lecture with the title: *Luthers Erfolge*, in English: Luther’s success, or, perhaps more appropriately, Luther’s impact, or, Luther’s fabulous impact.¹ Moeller described what he called Luther’s overwhelming success (‘Massenfolg’); he stressed that his writings spread all over Germany like an explosion (‘explosionsartige Verbreitung’) and explained that Luther had huge numbers of followers (‘massenhafte Anhängerschaft’). Even after Luther had passed away, millions of his books and pamphlets were printed and sold. In Germany, generation after generation engaged in commemorating and celebrating Luther, beginning in 1617 and leading up to the present. For Moeller, Luther’s success, or impact, was a completely new and unique historical phenomenon. Love was a decisive factor, he argued, just as was hate. While some people adored the rebel against the pope, others, whom Moeller identified as the majority, were touched by Luther’s religious views and his theological arguments. Moeller did not fail to observe limits to Luther’s success. Germans were always closer to him than non-Germans, he remarked, and Luther had not been able to complete his main project, the reform of the whole Christian church. According to Bernd Moeller, however, within European history, when one speaks of success, or impact, no other figure even comes close to Martin Luther.

As we are approaching the quincentennial commemoration of the Protestant Reformation in 2017, let me take a look at the state of Christendom five hundred years later, in the second decade of the twenty-first century. True, Protestantism, has become a major world religion, with congregations on all continents. In the course of the twentieth century, however, not all branches of the Protestant family grew at the same rate. In Europe and North America, Lutheran churches, that is the churches directly descending from the German reformer, stagnated. Some are in decline, like many other mainstream churches. In contrast, the various branches of Baptist churches blossomed and attracted many new members, and so did numerous Pentecostal churches. In Africa and some parts of Asia, in particular, congregations that can best be described as charismatic, fundamentalist, or evangelical (I am

Hartmut Lehmann

aware that all of these terms are disputed), are strong and vibrant. While Europe’s traditional Protestant churches are afflicted by progressive secularization, the much younger Protestant churches in the southern hemisphere experience vitality, and their leaders speak of unheard blessings.

In looking at what the British-American historian Philip Jenkins, in his book *The Next Christendom*, has called ‘The Coming of Global Christianity’, one may ask, what has become of Luther’s heritage and what of his theological legacy. Luther never accepted the baptism of adults and was among the fiercest opponents of the early Baptist movement. Furthermore, Luther strongly rejected any kind of charismatic or emotional religious performance. For him, those who believed that they should follow sensational inspirations, were nothing but enthusiasts who could not be trusted. However, not in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, but over the centuries, these unreliable enthusiasts have succeeded in unforeseen ways. By the twentieth century, ‘Martin Luther’s unruly offspring’ could proudly claim ‘mass’ success, or ‘Massenerfolg’, to use Bernd Moeller’s phrase.

In deciphering the various stages of this most astonishing story, let me first take a look at the early years of the Protestant Reformation. By 1519, Luther’s theses had become public knowledge in many reform-minded religious circles in Central Europe, and the Wittenberg professor had become something of a celebrity beyond his local university. For many, he spoke the truth that had been suppressed far too long. For others, he behaved like a wild boar in God’s vineyard. In his *Address to the German Nobility*, composed in the summer of 1520, Luther argued that the three walls protecting papal power in Rome should tumble down like the walls of Jericho. No, he wrote, the spiritual power is not above the temporal, and priesthood has been given not only to the clergy but to all believers. No, he continued, the pope does not possess the exclusive right to interpret Scripture. Rather, lay Christians are also able to understand God’s word. No, Luther thundered finally, church councils cannot only be called by the pope; in a case of emergency they can be called by anyone, also by civil authorities.

A year later, in 1521, the situation had completely changed. The papal bull *Exsurge Domine* had been published. At the Diet of Worms, the imperial court officially banned Luther. This meant the German Hercules, as some admirers called him in 1520, was excommunicated and had become an outlaw, at least within the territories loyal to the emperor. Luther would not have been able to survive this double attack, had he not been protected by Frederick the Wise, the elector of his native Saxony. Saxon noblemen had been around him during his stay in Worms, and Saxon horsemen kidnapped him on the way back from Worms to Wittenberg and brought him to the Wartburg. There can be no doubt that Luther knew how precarious his personal situation had become.

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During the time he spent in protective custody, Luther continued what he considered his mission, though not as aggressively as a year earlier. By translating the *New Testament* into German, he fulfilled the promise that every lay Christian should be able to gain direct access to the word of God. In this way, his slogan of the priesthood of all believers gained substance and credibility. However, he was shocked when he was informed that during his absence his friend and colleague Karlstadt and some of his Wittenberg followers had introduced radical reforms with what he considered disconcerting rapidity. Let me follow the description given by the great American Reformation scholar Roland H. Bainton. During Luther’s absence, Bainton remarks, priests married, monks married, nuns married. The tonsured permitted their hair to grow. During mass, wine was given to lay people. Priests celebrated mass in plain clothes. Portions of the mass were recited in German. Vigils ceased, vespers were altered, images shattered. Meat was eaten on fast days. Patrons withdrew their endowments. In other words, the consequences of what Luther had started, was deeply affecting the daily religious life of people in Wittenberg.

As we know, after receiving this news, Luther instantly intervened in Wittenberg, and he did so effectively. From then on, his top priorities were control and discipline, not unlimited iconoclasm. After he had knocked down most of the traditional ecclesiastical walls and some theological ones as well, he now began to erect new walls himself, new walls that should secure that his initial success had not been in vain, walls that should protect what he had achieved. Luther’s Wartburg episode, therefore, was nothing less than a decisive turning point in his life and work.

No wall that Luther erected was high enough, however, to prevent some of the ideas that he had formulated and propagated from spreading. The centrality of the Scriptures for all Christians, for example, captured many people’s minds, in towns and in the countryside. For Luther, this notion was closely tied to his most effective form of defense against papal arguments. As a professor of biblical studies he was convinced that he knew, and understood, God’s words at least as well, and in fact much better than anyone else. Early on, in 1518 or 1519, when being attacked, he asked his opponents to base their arguments on scriptural evidence. No doubt this method worked very well to his advantage, for example at the hearings in Worms. In keeping with this, Luther demanded that future pastors should receive a solid university education in biblical studies. As a result, what he created, together with Melanchthon, was nothing less than a new clerical elite, a professional corps of theological experts trained to explain the true meaning of God’s word to the uneducated, thus eroding the foundation of his very own slogan of the priesthood of all believers. Within just a few years he dropped the idea that anyone could simply go ahead and read and understand the message of the Bible.

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Let me repeat that since the early 1520s no wall has been able to contain the
dynamic expansion of some of Luther’s propositions. Just as Luther claimed direct
access to the true meaning of God’s word, anyone, if one followed Luther’s trust in
the priesthood of all believers, literally anyone, could do the same, that is read the
Bible and draw conclusions, conclusions for his or her own personal life, but also
conclusions affecting Christian communities and the secular world. This claim was,
and remained, absolutely central to Luther’s unruly offspring. In interpreting God’s
word, they did not hesitate to challenge the Wittenberg professor.

In the course of the 1520s, several episodes demonstrate the growing difference
between Luther’s position and the position of lay people who had discovered the
religious and also political potential hidden in the Scriptures. In 1524, when the
leaders of discontent peasants formulated their political claims in twelve articles,
they explicitly underscored their arguments with biblical references. Through this,
they took great pains to prove that their demands were not egoistic or arbitrary, but
strictly in accordance with God’s word. Luther, whom they had nominated as one of
the conciliators in the conflict, could not be convinced. For him, the argumentation
of the peasants was the argumentation of dilettantes, who should mind their own
business and go back to work. As the conflict escalated, Luther did not hesitate to
support the princes as they rushed to restore what they considered the divine order
with brutal force.

Many of the demands of the peasants were closely connected with the religious
ideas of those who believed in adult baptism. In the early 1520s, some concerned
Christians came to the conclusion that true Christian congregations should consist
only of people who understood what Christian life implied and who decided to join
such communities fully aware of all duties and obligations. Belief in adult baptism,
therefore, was nothing but a consequence of two of Luther’s main appeals: the priest-
hood of all believers and trust in God’s word as it could be found in the Scriptures. As
students of the so-called left wing of the Reformation know, different groups propa-
gated the belief in adult baptism, particularly in southern Germany.

Two years after the blood of thousands of peasants had been shed, some of those
who denied the validity of infant baptism met in the village Schleitheim in northern
Switzerland. Under the leadership of Michael Sattler, they formulated the Schleitheim
Confession of Faith, which consisted of seven articles. In brief: baptism should be given
only to those who had repented and who truly believed that Christ had taken away
their sins. Those who fall into error should be admonished and, if they continued
sinking, excommunicated. Only faithful children of God should be allowed to take
part in the Eucharist. There should be no fellowship with the wicked. Only persons of
good reputation should serve as pastors. Violence must not be used; both the sword
and the swearing of oaths were forbidden.

As the seven articles of the Schleitheim Confession demonstrate, the belief in adult
baptism was part of a much larger program of religious, social and political reform. The
core idea was the withdrawal from the controversies of those considered children of
the world, that is, a strict attitude of non-engagement in worldly affairs. The contrast to Wittenberg, and later also to Geneva, could not be greater. While Luther trusted secular authorities, the early Anabaptists tried not to get involved in secular matters and attempted to lead a holy life. While Luther developed his famous theology of the two realms or two regiments, which contained no, or hardly any, element of resistance and gave a free hand to princes to pursue whatever they chose to do, early Anabaptists wanted to protect their small congregations so that their members could concentrate on sanctification, thus securing God’s mercy on the day of the Last Judgment.

In the following decades, the Wittenberg group, since 1528 labeled Protestants, succeeded much better than the early Anabaptists. Princes in more and more territories, and the magistrates of more and more cities within the Empire, distanced themselves from Rome and joined the Saxon elector’s camp. But early on, the followers of Luther were involved in violence and warfare. More importantly, even in times of peace, the emerging new Lutheran communities had to follow what the political powers considered best. As a consequence, within just a few decades, the new Protestant churches had become part of the domestic administration of their respective territories and cities. Pastors became a kind of civil servant, with duties far beyond their ministry, for example duties concerning public order, social welfare and schools. Pastors and their congregations were supervised regularly to ensure that non-conformism did not begin to take root. As absolutism thrived in most territories, so did hierarchical thinking within the churches. For two centuries, Lutheranism survived in the form of state churches. Historians of Lutheranism have yet to comprehend the full impact of the heavy mortgage which state protection implied.

By contrast, the lives of those engaged in communities celebrating adult baptism were much harder. Less than ten years after the Peasants’ War they were struck by another catastrophe, caused by the rise and fall of Anabaptist rule in the city of Münster. After Münster had fallen, most of those surviving fled to the North, where Menno Simons attempted, like a shepherd, to collect the sheep that had run away in despair in all kinds of directions. They realized, in shock, that their using the sword at Münster, had brought disaster. Menno Simons therefore taught and exercised pacifism, even if it were to lead to more hardship and more persecution. All through the sixteenth century, Catholic and Protestant propaganda accused the Anabaptists of such crimes as polygamy and communism, exemplified by lurid examples from Münster.

In the decades before and after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, even though they were at odds on most other matters, Catholic and Protestant princes within the Holy Roman Empire were united in wiping out any kind of influence the Anabaptists had, or appeared to have. To be an Anabaptist meant to be on the run, therefore, it meant

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to go underground and look for a place of refuge; it meant to lead the life of an outcast, at once discriminated against and constantly endangered. By 1580, when most Lutherans overcame internal disputes and signed a Book of Concord, very few Anabaptists had survived in Central Europe. Luther’s unruly offspring in the tradition of Anabaptists found places of refuge in some areas of East Central Europe, on the estates of Polish and Bohemian noble families who cherished their decency and work ethic. In the following decades, as Protestants in these regions became victims of Catholic Counter-Reformation efforts, Anabaptist communities had to flee once again.

By the early seventeenth century, in Central Europe and Scandinavia, the state-oriented, state-dominated variety of the Evangelical faith had won a complete victory over independent local groups of devout lay brothers and sisters in the tradition of early Anabaptists. But as we know, this was not the end of the story. Quite the contrary. During what has been called the ‘Crisis of the Seventeenth Century’, the children of the left wing of the Protestant Reformation experienced a remarkable revival, first in England and then on the continent. The notion of the priesthood of all believers could not be completely suppressed, neither could the belief that anyone, in particular lay persons, could read and understand God’s word.

Three interrelated factors played a decisive role. First, as European Christendom was hit by waves of famine, disease and war, apocalyptic fantasies captured the minds of many people. They asked themselves if what they were experiencing was the real story of what they had read in the Revelation of St. John? Second, the pluralization of non-conformism and dissent possessed an irreversible quality. Scores of self-appointed prophets rose and explained the biblical message against all odds and even when persecuted. These lay preachers felt a divine calling and needed neither pastors nor the church hierarchy protected by state power. Third, apocalypticism and prophecy were spread not by common people ready for social and political revolt, as the British historian Christopher Hill argues, but rather by members of the middle class desperately searching for ways of saving their souls. These people were able to read and write and, more importantly, they were following the news and observing what was going on in a world turned upside down.

Seventeenth-century dissent and non-conformism can be described as a rapidly expanding international network, energized by a widely travelled elite, and fuelled by the message contained in a vast and rapidly growing body of devotional literature. Those eager to save their souls and avoid purgatory read works by Kaspar von Schwenckfeld, Jakob Böhme, Johann Heinrich Alsted and many others, and they made

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sure that these texts were handed on to members of the next generation. In opposition to the state churches, multiple new traditions were created. But not all groups within radical dissent held the same beliefs. Rather, by the middle of the seventeenth century, non-conformism and dissent were characterized by an extreme degree of pluralization and fragmentation, by a plethora of voices and arguments, relaying prophetic and spiritual divinations. Adult baptism became a central issue among circles of separatist Puritans in early seventeenth-century England.  

What the members of all of these religiously inspired groups abhorred, however, was very similar: they disliked church officials in close connection with state power in the form of absolutist arrogance and demonstrative luxury. On this point, radical critique of established Protestantism had changed little since the sixteenth century.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, obvious differences between religious developments in England and on the Continent can be observed. After what has been labeled the Glorious Revolution, radical dissent was tolerated in England. As a result, new religious movements like Methodism could be accommodated. In contrast, in Central Europe, and in particular in the German Protestant churches, emerging Pietism faced strict control. As long as Pietists agreed to limit their efforts to moderate reforms, they were accepted. But those Pietists who criticized the whole system of state churches were considered dangerous separatists. If they did not conform after they had been warned, they were persecuted. Thousands upon thousands of those who did not find a place of refuge somewhere in the Netherlands, for example, decided to emigrate to the New World. Some years ago I argued that German Protestantism has never recovered from the loss of these self-confident, committed believers.

What evangelicals interpret as divine providence, occurred in nineteenth-century America: namely the break-through of nonconformist Protestants to national and to global importance. As immigrants of many European countries occupied the wide, open spaces beyond the Appalachian mountain ridge, Methodist and later Baptist preachers found rich opportunities to spread their message. True, as denominations, side by side with other churches, the members of European state churches, Anglicans turned into Episcopalians and even Lutherans also found a place in the rapidly expanding American society. But no one was more successful in carrying Christ’s message to the frontier than those who had been persecuted in Europe. To the American historian Jon Butler we owe the insight that the nineteenth century is the era of a thor-
ough and complete Christianization of American society. Somehow, but in a most astonishing manner, the Baptist heritage of adult responsibility for one’s belief, and the Methodist legacy of hard work and rigorous ethical demands, seemed to match the aspirations of those who attempted to make a living in strange new places. From the middle of the nineteenth century, both Methodists and Baptists have devoted their lives to missionary work in all parts of the world, thus becoming world religions. On a smaller scale, Mennonites and Adventists achieved the same.

Baptists did not return to Germany until the 1830s. Even then, they had to suffer discrimination, just like the Methodists attempting to build communities in nineteenth-century Germany or Adventists and other religious groups who did not belong to the territorial state churches. Nineteenth-century Protestant church leaders never considered these newcomers as equals, as legitimate children of the Reformation, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and labeled them ‘sects’, thus signalling that they were not proper churches. Official, state-oriented Protestants, and in particular liberal heirs of the Enlightenment, forgot that it had been their own Martin Luther who had called for the empowerment of lay people, that Luther had encouraged common people to read the Scripture for themselves and had, by translating the Bible, made sure that they could do so.

In the world at large, non-denominational Protestantism was exposed to dramatic changes in the course of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. First, fundamentalist evangelical groups discovered that revivalism could be organized in the form of campaigns. Preachers coming from the outside shook regular congregations with their dramatic appeals for repentance and revival. Some of those congregations fell apart when the preacher who posed as a prophet moved on to the next location. With his emotional sermons in post-1945 Germany, Billy Graham was able to fill soccer stadiums with people longing for a message that they believed their own pastors were unable to give. As television began to dominate the media, some Evangelical preachers rose to become public stars. Religious sociology has yet to find out whether televised services can influence or stop the progress of secularization. Second, after modest beginnings in pre–1914 Los Angeles, Pentecostalism succeeded in becoming one of the fastest growing world religions. The last remnants of traditional belief were thrown overboard in favor of charismatic and emotional forms of religious expression. Wherever charismatic fervor triumphed, even the descendants of the first generation of nonconformist dissenters were in shock. No doubt, Martin Luther would have been appalled and the churches still celebrating in his tradition suffered once again.

Let me conclude by talking about another Martin Luther, about the black American Baptist preacher Martin Luther King Jr. who was one of those unruly offspring of the German reformer who was different from his namesake in important aspects. While the German reformer designed a theological construct, the theology of the two regiments or realms, that gave a free hand to princes in all worldly affairs, Martin Luther King Jr. did not hesitate to oppose the state when he was convinced that the laws of the state were unjust and in opposition to divine law. While the German reformer took the side of the princes against the peasants who demanded justice, the young Baptist preacher supported those who were oppressed. He marched with them, he joined their sit-ins, and he went to prison with them. While the German reformer defended his turf vehemently, especially in the last two decades of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated solidarity for oppressed people around the world longing for liberation. As we know, no one had impressed him more than Mahatma Ghandi, the great Indian philosopher, the political activist preaching non-violence. Martin Luther King Jr. never quoted any of the works of the German reformer. In pursuing his campaigns of non-violence he was aware of the century-long plight of Baptists, of the racial injustice suffered by his fellow blacks as well as of the disastrous effects of colonialism, imperialism and warfare. His belief in non-violent action set him apart from many other Afro-Americans of his time who were ready to revolt. In King’s eyes, however, non-violence was a more effective political weapon than either open rebellion or strict pacifism. Even today, almost half a century after Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered, his legacy of non-violent action remains alive as a most impressive political tool, even though it is hard to use.

If he had lived in Hitler’s Germany, Martin Luther King Jr. writes in his Letter from the Birmingham City Jail in 1963, he ‘would have aided and comforted’ his ‘Jewish

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14 According to a recent Lutheran legend, Martin Luther King Jr. was supposedly named after the German reformer. As this legend goes, his father, Martin Luther King Sr., better known as Daddy King, also a Baptist minister, had attended the Baptist World Congress in Germany in 1934 and had been so impressed by the heritage of the German reformer that he decided to name his oldest son Martin Luther. What a surprising change of religious views, one may ask, that a Southern black Baptist would want to honor the person who has a reputation as merciless persecutor of Anabaptists by naming his son after him? The true story is quite different. The brief version is as follows: In 1899, Daddy King’s father, James Albert King, a sharecropper, had given his second child the names Martin and Luther in memory of two of his brothers, who had been called Martin and Luther and who had passed away. His wife, however, gave their son the name Michael as she venerated the archangel Michael. So Daddy King grew up being called Mike. In 1929, when his first son was born, they also called him Michael, or Mike. In 1933, however, shortly before James Albert King died, he asked his son, that is Daddy King, to accept for himself and his son the names that he had always wanted, that is the names Martin and Luther. I should add that James Albert King had been a drinker but that shortly before he died he had become dry. Therefore, his last words meant a lot to his son. Daddy King granted his father his last wish. As a result, Daddy King became Martin Luther King Sr. and little Mike King became Martin Luther King Jr., even though his family and friends continued to call him Mike well into the 1950s. See Hartmut Lehmann, Martin Luther in the American Imagination (Munich, 1988), pp. 9–10.
brothers even though it was illegal’.15 He had ‘gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist’, he continued. Was ‘Jesus not an extremist in love’, he wrote, or Amos ‘for justice’, or Paul ‘for the gospel’, or Martin Luther with his words ‘Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God’, or John Bunyan, ready to go to jail, or Abraham Lincoln with his conviction that ‘this nation cannot survive half slave and half free’, or Thomas Jefferson, who believed ‘that all men are created equal?’16 I quote these sentences because they contain one of the very few places in Martin Luther King’s writings where he mentions the name of the German reformer. Why does he do so? He does so because for him the German reformer, like Lincoln or Jefferson, is an example of courage. In that respect, but in that respect only, Martin Luther King Jr., perhaps the most important among the unruly offspring of the German reformer Martin Luther, linked his own mission, and his own plight, with that of the famous Wittenberg professor.

16 Ibid., pp. 297–298.
I. Radicalism and the Early Reformation
I would like to begin by discussing the relative and contextual nature of what might be called ‘radical’ in the context of the early German Reformation. The reason for this approach is quite simple. I am interested in the historical connections and interactions between what is traditionally called ‘the Reformation’, and the representatives of its ‘left wing’, that is theologians such as Thomas Müntzer, Andreas Karlstadt, Ulrich Hugwald, Hans Hut, Ludwig Hätzer, Hans Denck, Hans Hergot and others. My approach differs both from Harold Bender’s ‘Anabaptist vision’, which had the tendency to interpret the Swiss Brethren as a kind of re-enactment of the early church and to isolate the Anabaptist movement from the main stream debates and attitudes of the Reformation era on one hand, and from George Huntston Williams’ ‘Radical Reformation’, which emphasized pre-reformatory intellectual traditions of Renaissance Platonism or mysticism as a source of the deviation and radical ideas in the 16th century on the other. Instead I want to describe the radical reformers as the result of a process of social and theological distinction and differentiation. Radical reformatory ideas and attitudes are not simply rooted in selections from multifaceted and polyvalent late-medieval Christianity. They originated in debates and conflicts beginning in the early 1520s.

1 In its written form this paper is largely that of the oral presentation. The notes are restricted to the most fundamental bibliographical references and citations.