PART I
THE REFORMATION CONTEXT OF ENGLISH THOUGHT
CHAPTER ONE
THE REFORMATION AND ITS IDEAS

The European Reformation

William J. Bouwsma in his study of early-modern Europe describes a transitional period ‘from the rigidities of social organization and from arbitrary and oppressive government’. Surely the Reformations on the Continent and in England were central to that transition, yet the social and political effects of the Reformation of the sixteenth-century were almost certainly unanticipated by its earliest advocates. Luther’s attempts to free the laity from the authority of the priesthood (sacerdotium) would eventually lead to an egalitarianism extending far beyond the walls of the cathedral. By attacking the penitential cycle, the Reformers raised doubts in the minds of many regarding the need for the institution of the church. If the church existed as a mechanism to dispense the infinite grace stored up in heaven by the work of Christ and the saints, and now such grace could appropriated by anyone with a simple faith and a contrite heart, then wherefore the church? The new theology also introduced a novel individualism into the European consciousness. Ernst Troeltsch pointed out early in the twentieth-century that ‘the really permanent attainment of individualism was due to a religious, and not to a secular movement, to the Reformation and not to the Renaissance’. Luther’s rejection of the idea of an institutional mechanism dispensing saving grace removed the possibility of a spiritual hierarchy on earth. No Christian was in any way dependent on another for salvation. All would now fear and tremble before God, individually and directly. The awe generated by the sacerdotium was under siege. Indeed, ‘The notion of society as forming a huge pyramid,