Most scholars, I think, will agree that the Reformation arose out of a particular emotional background. Fifteenth-century Europe was marked by a religious angst, which we see in the writings of the famously disaffected: Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson, Matthew of Cracow, Bernardino of Siena, Vincent Ferrer, John of Capistrano, Christine de Pizan, Girolamo Savonarola, and so on. The striving for reform presupposes a perception of an unsettled moral and social order. Responding to this perceived disorder, reformers tried “to re-establish comforting boundaries between purity and danger, the sacred and the profane.”

The anxieties of fifteenth-century reformers included the conviction—the feeling—of religious failure and the loss of a primitive ideal. There was, too, the recurrent sense of danger created by the identification of the pope as antichrist, which in turn gave evidence of the culmination of the world’s tired history just prior to a final outpouring of God’s ferocious, cleansing wrath. People seem to have expected an apocalypse sporadically, before, during, and especially after Luther and his controversy. In fact, as we have often been told, the Reformation seemed at times to intensify anxieties and increase their momentum.
In the Reformation, the new preachers of the 1520s and 30s alleged all manner of religious failures. To allege corruption is to allege a qualitative loss, which the preachers did in the familiar Protestant ways. The evangelicals said apostolic ideals had been abandoned by a tyrannical, greedy clerical system. The apostolic standard had been lost. The system, they said, led by the pope and serviced by monks, dragged Christians into absurd and demonic superstitions. At the same time, the new preachers threatened to impose unprecedented losses on their Catholic peers. They meant to destroy the very practices, personnel, and material goods of the church that would have been most familiar in everyday life, for example, the cult of the saints; the offices of professional intercessors (monks, nuns, and other praying “poor”); relics and other sacred objects; the mass with its sacrifice and the line of moral credit created when Christ is offered on the altars of churches; traditional memorials of the dead; the bonds of affection and benevolence between the dead and the living; and, to a great extent, the possessions of the church.

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