Towards Understanding the Reformation

The meaning of the German Reformation of the early sixteenth century did not become clear when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses of 1517, nor with his major Reformation writings, nor with the deliberations of the Diet of Worms of 1521, nor with the ensuing Wittenberg Movement of 1521–1522. Various tones reached the ears of a broad public: critical voices which noisily and vehemently attacked the clergy; complaints against the flow of treasure to Rome; objections against the propriety of the indulgence trade and the proliferation of ritualized forms of works righteousness; timid efforts to gather in small circles for Bible study and, in this way, to seek answers about the reform of Christendom; iconoclasm and sermon interruptions; biblically-grounded demands for the abolition of serfdom, for equitable access to the natural necessities of life, and for the right of ordinary people to choose their own pastors in their congregations. The courageous and the hesitant, the far-sighted and the deluded, the impetuous and the cautious, all struggled in disputations, pamphlets and many forms of direct action to arrest the decay of Christendom and to realize their diverse notions of a better life. Above everything, they sought the salvation of their souls against the horizon of the imminent end of this world. Everything—at least until 1525 and the end of the Peasants’ War—was still in flux.

Dorothea Wendebourg, in a controversy about the unity and plurality of the Reformation, argues that it was only through “the judgment of the Counterreformation” that the “whole development” became recognizable as the “Reformation.” Only within such a

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developmental framework can the conflicts, quarrels and uprisings that led to the renewal of Christendom be appropriately understood. Those whom the historical tradition usually excludes as outsiders—Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Thomas Müntzer, Jakob Strauß, the insurrectionary peasantry, Anabaptists, Spiritualists and Anti-Trinitarians—are all participants in this development. It makes little sense to label these persons and groups “outsiders of the Reformation,” since the Reformation was not yet conceived as an event that had happened in the past when these first figures emerged, but as something that was yet to occur. In this developmental process all were participants in the project of Christendom’s renewal.

With this concept Wendebourg offers an alternative to Bernd Moeller’s notion of a “Lutheran,” or an “Evangelical narrowing” of the Reformation in its earliest years. “To a remarkable extent,” wrote Moeller, “[we find] a unified doctrine, unified teachings and slogans, unified rejections and demands, a partisan disposition.”2 Berndt Hamm advanced another alternative. Emphasizing the multiplicity of Reformation figures and movements, Hamm argued strenuously against the notion of “outsiders” to the Reformation. The so-called outsiders did not endanger the Reformation with their critique, but they clearly contributed to its contours.3 Just as emphatically, Hamm searches for the “common Reformation element” within the multiplicity of its expressions. That common element, he concludes, can be found in the rupture with the late medieval church’s gradualistic understanding of the world and of salvation (the hierarchical ideas of nature and grace, reason and faith, laity and clergy, etc.), a rupture that expressed itself in “the radicalism that explodes the system.”4 From this standpoint it makes no sense to distinguish between a moderate (genuine) Reformation and a “radical Reformation.” Radicalism is not a helpful typological principle for distinguishing among various impulses of renewal in the early years of the Reformation. The Reformation is in its very nature the “radical Reformation.”5 Radicalism, however, is not a unified expression of the character of the Reformation; it expresses itself differently depend-

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2 Moeller (1984), 193.
4 Ibid., 65, 86.