

Catholics and Lutherans in Dialogue

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Papers and statements from the dialogue in the USA have been published by Augsburg Press (Minneapolis) in the series, *Lutherans and Roman Catholics in Dialogue*, treating the following topics:

The Nicene Creed (1965),
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The first report of the international joint study commission for Lutheran/ Roman Catholic dialogue was published as "The Gospel and the Church," *Lutheran World* 19 (1972), 259-273. Subsequent statements of this body have been published by the Vatican Secretariate for the Promotion of Christian Unity, *Information Service*:

The Eucharist, n. 39 (1979), 22-35,
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The Eve of the Reformation

The sixteenth century, in which Luther was such a towering figure, opened amid notes of both buoyant expectation and plaintive longing for the renewal of society and the church. To suggest something of the tone and texture of the times immediately before Luther came on the European stage, we offer here a sketch of the economy, of some intellectual currents, of conditions in the church, and of aspects of popular religion as the sixteenth century opened. - The brevity of what follows is in part justified by the existence of a good number of excellent recent books and articles on aspects of life, thought, and religion on the eve of the Protestant Reformation. We list these works, from which we have drawn much, in the Bibliography for this chapter.

An Era of Recovery

Even a brief survey of Western Europe around 1500 must include a glance back at Europe's fourteenth century tribulations. The period from 1300 to 1420 had been

marked by disaster and chaos affecting many sectors of life. Economic growth ceased about 1300; famine struck northern Europe in 1315-17; populous France was ravaged by war from 1337 on into the 1450s; forms of bubonic plague, "the Black Death," decimated many cities in 1348-50 and recurred during the next century after unpredictable intervals; peasants rose in bloody revolts against overbearing feudal lords in France in 1358 and in England in 1381. The papacy had entered the fourteenth century locked in stubborn contention with the King of France over the right to tax properties and transactions of French churchmen. Early in the fourteenth century, a newly elected pope settled in Avignon, where he and his successors remained for nearly seventy years, giving an egregious example of episcopal non-residence. Within months of the pope's return to Rome in 1378, a disputed election led to a perilous state of confusion with two, and after 1408 three, claimants to supreme jurisdiction in the church - a malaise ended only with the Council of Constance in 1414-18.

But, by 1500 recovery was well along in many sectors. Tensions there were in plentiful variety, but many of these were tensions of growth and development. Population began rising steadily about 1450. The half-century between 1480 and 1530 brought new prosperity for the merchants, bankers, and early capitalists of northern European towns. Mining and urban manufacturing of cloth, leather, and metal goods flourished. Imports from the Orient and the New World began to circulate. Rising prices exerted pressures on the land-owning gentry, who in turn, especially in Germany, increased demands on the smaller peasant farmers paying them rent, taxes, and tolls. Governmental practice in the fifteenth century became more efficient; national centralized administrations hastened along the process by which people were coming to think of themselves as French, English, or German, rather than members of Christendom.

One of the most characteristic intellectual responses to

the European prosperity at the turn of the sixteenth century came in ethical treatises on credit and money-lending with interest. Medieval teaching had taken Luke 6:35 ("Lend, expecting nothing in return.") as Christ's prohibition of gaining any profit on a loan or on delayed payment. Late medieval preachers, such as Saints Bernardine of Siena and Antoninus of Florence, fervently inculcated the duties of charity and Christian brotherhood, while unmasking and excoriating the deceptions by which the wealthy tried to avoid the stigma of usury. But about 1500 changed economic conditions, new attitudes toward investment as a social boon, and more astute analyses of money and credit conspired to produce a significant revision of the prohibition of interest-taking. A Tiibingen thinker, Conrad Summenhart, published his views in 1499, and one of his former students, Johann Eck of Ingolstadt, defended in 1515 the liceity of 5% interest on transactions involving commercial credit. Writing about 1515, the Dominican Master General, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, stressed the loss incurred from potential investments by one providing cash or credit to another and so argued for legitimate compensation through a moderate interest. - New possibilities were opening for more rapid and more extensive circulation of goods and products.

As we sweep the European horizon in 1500, we sense a quickening of the pulse of life. For, along with the upswing on the material side, a remarkable generation for energetic and effective individuals was born or grew up in the last quarter of the fifteenth century: humanist intellectuals like Erasmus of Rotterdam; printers zealous to disseminate the new learning like Aldus Manutius of Venice and Johann Froben of Basel; navigators and explorers like Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, and Magellan; able administrators, civil servants, and rulers like Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell, and Henry VIII; and religious reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and Ignatius Loyola. Such men applied higher standards of performance to themselves and to the institutions of their society. Their

vision and energy made it inevitable that the world was about to change significantly.

Tensions in Intellectual Life

Late medieval universities were to a considerable extent identified by the local predominance of one or other of the major currents of speculative thought in philosophy or theology. At Oxford and the University of Paris, the system of William of Ockham (d. 1347), called "the modern way" held sway. In Germany Ockhamist thought predominated at Tübingen, where the respected Gabriel Biel (d. 1495) had lectured. To the East, Erfurt, attended by Luther 1501-05, had a tradition of Ockhamist professors, while the new University of Wittenberg, founded by the Prince-Elector of Saxony in 1502, planned to give equal status to Ockhamist, Thomist, and Augustinian professors. Thomism was predominant in Cologne, a Dominican stronghold, and had been influential at Heidelberg and in the eastern universities of Leipzig and Frankfurt/Oder.

The vitality of the Ockhamist tradition at the turn of the sixteenth century was evident in Paris, in the work of Jacques Almain (d. 1515), and in the exertions of a Tübingen professor, Wendelin Steinbach, in bringing out editions of important works of the modern way for dissemination through printing: William of Ockham's commentary on Part I of Lombard's *Sentences* (1483), Gabriel Biel's *Exposition of the Canon of the Mass* (1488), Pierre d'Ailly's commentary on the *Sentences* (1490), and Biel's systematic work, the *Collectorium* (1501).

The systematic views inspired by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) were being especially cultivated by Dominicans in Renaissance Italy in the late fifteenth century. The Cardinal and papal advisor, Johannes Turrecremata (d. 1468) used Thomist principles in his papal-centered ecclesiology, the *Summa de ecclesia* (1453). John Capreolus completed his extensive *Defensiones* of Aquinas' doctrine in 1433, a

work then disseminated in stately folios printed in Venice from 1483 onward and by handy abridgements for students, such as that issued by Sylvester Prierias in Cremona in 1497. Thomas de Vio Cajetan made influential statements of Thomist principles while teaching at Padua in the 1490s, and then in grand fashion in his commentary on St. Thomas' *Summa theologiae*, published 1507-23. Italian Thomists such as Cajetan and Prierias did battle on another front in the early sixteenth century, against the naturalistic interpretation of Aristotle's thought expounded at Padua by followers of the Arab Averroes. This controversy led in 1515 to the condemnation of the Averroist Pietro Pomponazzi by the Fifth Lateran Council for his doubts about the cogency of arguments for the immortality of the human soul.

The clash between Ockhamists and Thomists came down in many cases to the divergence of an accentuation of divine will and positive mandate from an emphasis on the rational order and system in reality and its laws. The Ockhamist sensed that God, the sovereignly free Creator, had in freedom bound himself to the given present order of morality, church and sacraments, and the grace of salvation. Intrinsic necessities were rare in the Ockhamist system. In contrast, Thomists preferred to expound the systematic harmonies of the present dispensation of nature and grace, in which they found similarities and analogies linking angels, humans, and the rest of creation. Fatefully, Ockhamist thinkers tended to see human beings as given a notable share in the freedom which their system accentuated in God. Humans were attributed wide responsibility for initiating and carrying through the process of their own conversion. One comes to God mainly by wanting to do so. Even in the fourteenth century, these Ockhamist emphases had occasioned outspoken protests by thinkers inspired by St. Augustine's stress on the paramount influence of God's Spirit and grace in directing the weak human will. Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349) and Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358) saw a heretical optimism here, even a revival of Pelagian-

ism, but at the end of the fifteenth century the Ockhamist theses on human capabilities were an accepted part of the theological landscape - one which Martin Luther will attack decisively.

However, the major ferment marking European intellectual life around 1500 arose from the drive of the humanist movement to call in question the educational and intellectual enterprise of the scholastic university establishment. In Italy this protest had first been voiced by Francesco Petrarch (d. 1374) in his appeal for a more person-centered, poetic, and overtly religious form of intellectual nourishment. Humanist successes in the diffusion of new rhetorical and artistic ideals, modeled on the achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, gave spirit and power to a mighty cultural reawakening in fifteenth century Italy. The more religious philosophy sought by Petrarch developed in Florence in the fertile mind of Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499), whose neoplatonist system, with its incisive demonstration of human dignity and immortality, offered a devout doctrinal alternative to the analytic and technical Aristotelianism of both Ockhamists and Thomists.

North of the Alps the new humanist methods of literary criticism and rhetorical formation created a series of ferments. Johann Reuchlin's career stands as a reminder that the humanist return to ancient models and sources included an avid retrieval of the Christian source *par excellence*, the Bible. To promote exact knowledge of God's word, Reuchlin mastered Hebrew and published a manual of Hebrew grammar in 1506. His fascination with the tradition of Jewish mystical interpretation led to his *De arte cabalistica* in 1517, which raised the ire of Dominican inquisitors active in the Rhineland, who regularly consigned to the flames the Jewish books studied by Reuchlin. Two younger German humanists, Rubeanus and Hutten, mounted a campaign on Reuchlin's behalf to discredit his Dominican opponents. Their popular attack on Dominican traditionalism took the form of satirical *Letters of Obscure Men* (1515, 1517), which served to signify and deepen the chasm between humanists and representatives

of the older theological establishment in Germany.

In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, humanists of all lands looked to Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) for leadership and inspiration. Clearly the dominant European intellectual on the eve of the Reformation, Erasmus was contributing works of high quality and influence across an amazing variety of fields. He had taught laypeople a robust ethical piety in his *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, first printed in 1503 and reprinted forty-seven times in Latin and five vernaculars between 1515 and 1530. Erasmus' treatises on education synthesized classical and recent methods, applied new standards to the literary and moral formation of the young, and spread the unconventional notion that learning must be made interesting and attractive to students. The *Colloquies*, which Erasmus revised and expanded throughout his lifetime combined instruction in exemplary Latin with incisive satire on the ills of church and society. Erasmus' *Adages*, frequently expanded in revised editions from 1500 to 1533, interpreted and disseminated the wisdom capsulized in classical maxims and sayings while offering attractive portrayals of sane living and peace-promoting government. The *Praise of Folly*, first printed 1511 but reissued over forty times in Erasmus' lifetime, held up a mirror to church and society, especially to professional men, while directing critical barbs at shortcomings and malfeasance in public service.

Erasmus saw himself above all as dedicating his superb literary talents to the renewal of theology and preaching by his editorial work on the church Fathers and by editions of and commentaries on Scripture. Froben's press in Basel brought out Erasmus' *Novum Testamentum* in 1516, thus making the Greek text of the New Testament easily accessible for the first time to the wider world of scholars desiring direct contact with the central Christian source. Biblical paraphrases and commentaries flowed from Erasmus' pen after 1516, as did his programmatic plan for Christ-centered and practical theological education, the *Ratio verge theologiae* (1518).

The intellectual ferments affecting literate Europeans on

the eve of, the Reformation were all accentuated and intensified by the great communications revolution initiated by Gutenberg in the 1450s. The old medieval world, marked by the slow diffusion of ideas by oral exchange and hand-copied texts, had given way by 1500 to a new cultural matrix in which intellectual contributions - instruction, propaganda, classical texts, theorizing, criticism, prayer books and Scripture itself - were quickly delivered to a far-flung public in lasting form. For instance, Amerbach's Basel edition of the works of St. Augustine (11 volumes, 1490-1506) brought to Luther the text of the treatises on sin and grace which spurred him on in his polemic against Ockhamism in 1515-18. Printers must accordingly be given a key place in our view of European life and thought around 1500. They were not simply pioneers in new techniques of producing and marketing a coveted product, but more importantly were agents catalyzing the new system of swifter and more exact communications. The cultural and religious movements of the sixteenth century gained thereby a tenacious power over the minds and hearts of European men and women - a fact just as true for Erasmus' pious and critical humanism as for Luther's religious renewal and the more conservative reforms of Tridentine Catholicism.

Church and Papacy

To all appearances, the monarchical headship of the Roman pontiff was in 1500 the dominant characteristic of the Western church, both for understanding its structure and for locating the central nerve of many important functions. However, the high-papalist ecclesiology and Roman centralization of 1500 were a recent development. A century before, amid the tribulation of schism, the constructive and healing forces in the church were those associated with the conciliarist view of the church, which in specific ways sought to subject the pope to general councils. Con-

iliarist thinkers associated with the University of Paris, like Pierre d'Ailly (d. 1420) and Jean Gerson (d. 1429), had led the Council of Constance both to forthright declarations of conciliar superiority and to the achievement of unity. Constance's decree, *Frequens* (1417), prescribed the holding of general councils every ten years in order to effect general reform. But future dominance belonged to the Roman pontiffs, as the eventual result of a complex set of developments between 1420 and 1440. The squabbling and pretensions of the Council of Basel in the 1430s did much to discredit the conciliar ideal; Pope Eugenius IV successfully reestablished unity with the Greek church in 1439; and the popes of this restoration period (1440-1460) proved adept in negotiating satisfactory arrangements by concordat with national rulers.

Cardinal Johannes Turrecremada formulated in his *Summa de ecclesia* (1453) the ecclesiological theory earlier espoused in the ambience of effective papal monarchs like Gregory VII (1073-85) and Innocent III (1198-1216). The Renaissance and modern papacy received cogent theoretical underpinning in Turrecremada's account of how all jurisdiction in the church flows downward by derivation from the papal plenitude of authority. In teaching Christian truth, the Pope's doctrine is guarded from error by his endowment of infallibility. Turrecremada's doctrine undercut any appeal from the Pope's decision to a general council, a practice explicitly prohibited by Pius II in 1460.

However, it would be wrong to think that conciliarist thinking was snuffed out by the resurgent papacy of the fifteenth century. The sense of the church as a corporate reality did live on, fueled from strong currents in medieval canon law and by St. Paul's texts on the ecclesial body of Christ. A corporate reality calls for its highest articulation in a representatively corporate assembly. The problem of appropriate procedure if a pope did fall into heresy or repeatedly acted contrary to the good of the church had been broached in the medieval canonical tradition and even staunch papalists like Turrecremada in 1453 and

Cajetan in 1512 came to include a general council in their treatments of how the church would deal with these pesky issues. Conciliarism was not wholly underground, as became apparent in the efforts sponsored by King Louis XII of France, backed by Parisian theorists like Jacques Almain, to hold an anti-papal reform council at Pisa in 1511. In March 1518, responding to an alleged encroachment by Pope Leo X in the affairs of the French church, the theologians of Paris did not hesitate to issue a formal appeal for redress at a future general council.

Under the "Renaissance popes" from the mid-fifteenth into the early sixteenth centuries, the central bureaucracy of the Roman curia grew enormously. Ecclesiastical appointments were made in increasing numbers by Roman instead of local authority. This involved power over local churches' financial resources and led to much litigation before Roman authorities. Numerous bishops were perforce required to reside in Rome in order to defend the legitimate interests of their dioceses. Cardinals were frequently nominated from the popes' own families and the dynastic struggles of mid-Renaissance Italy embroiled the popes who also regularly sought to extend their own secular rule over income-producing territories in central Italy. The sixteenth century opened with Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) holding the papacy, a man whose philandering and promotion of his Spanish parvenu family insured him long-lasting infamy. In 1503, Julius II, of the delta Rovere family, was elected pope, a man famous for his delight in military affairs and for initiating the construction of the grandiose basilica of St. Peter's, for which funds were to be raised by offering indulgences in Germany. The next pope, Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici), sprang from the powerful Florentine banking family. Leo was a good-hearted Renaissance prince, less flamboyant than his papal predecessors, although enamored of lengthy vacations at his hunting lodge, La Magliana. As pope, Leo lurched about the field of international politics in maneuvering among the great powers, seeking to combine the best interests of the Apostolic See and the House of Medici.

The works and pomps of the Renaissance papacy did not go unchallenged, for clamorings for church reform were periodically heard around 1500. German officials drew up a list of complaints over the administrative, judicial, and fiscal methods of the Roman curia. These *gravamina* were first formulated in connection with the Council of Constance in 1417 and sporadically repeated through the following century. Also at Constance, the influential Pierre d'Ailly presented key sections of his comprehensive *Treatise on Reform of the Church*, originally drafted in 1403. As Pope Pius II began his pontificate in 1459, he solicited a reform plan for the Roman curia from Domenico de' Domenichi and a sketch of reform of the whole church from the experienced Nicholas of Cusa. Forceful and ominous sermons on reform were preached in Florence by Girolamo Savonarola, O.P., in the early 1490s - until his voice was silenced by his execution after a falling out with the Florentine powers and Pope Alexander VI. In Spain, reform became more than just a word under the able leadership of Cardinal Ximenez, through renewal of pristine discipline in religious orders, upgraded clerical education, and more careful assessment of candidates for the episcopate. The sponsor of the Spanish reform, King Ferdinand, outlined in 1512 the key steps and instructed a group of his bishops to propose a general reform on the Spanish model at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17). The climax of these clamorings for reform of papacy, curia, episcopate, and people came in the booklet submitted in 1512 to Pope Leo X and the Fifth Lateran Council by two Venetian aristocrats, Paolo Giustiniani and Pietro Quirini, who had recently betaken themselves to the solitude of the Camaldolese order of hermits.

These proposals were in general agreement on the abuses to be rooted out by reform. Some of the frequent headings were the following: papal neglect of pastoral responsibilities and excesses of luxury at the papal court; avaricious cumulation of offices by high churchmen; long absences which impede bishops from supervising pastoral work and morals in their dioceses; appointment of ill-prepared

bishops and pastors; ignorance, vice, and involvement in business by parish priests; breaches of poverty in the religious orders; and superstitious reliance on sorcery and talismans by the laity.

It would, of course, be simplistic to take these reform clamorings as accurate and objective accounts of ecclesiastical realities in 1500. The proposals were not produced on the basis of methodical surveys of the Roman curia and select dioceses. The reform documents presume decline from the better days of old and often adopt a lugubrious rhetoric calculated to shock leaders into responsible action. The primary witness of the clamorings for reform is more immediately to the development of rising standards of expectation among a scattered elite in the Western church.

A further common element in the reform proposals was the repeated linking of reform to the work of general and regional councils. However, around 1500 the popes were fearful that councils would make inroads into their authority and curtail the ambit of their rights to appoint to office and levy taxes. The popes did not effectively side with the reform-minded elite until the late 1530s. By then, however, reform ideals were being translated into reality in Northern Europe under protection of princes and town councils no longer acknowledging papal authority. A more radical elite, led by Martin Luther, had burst on the scene and formulated reform programs that were being initiated - but at the high cost of fracturing the unity of the Western church.

The Religion of the People

There is good evidence that Western European townspeople had frequent opportunities to hear sermons at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In Germany, numerous town councils were setting aside endowments for the support of an appointed preacher who had to have university

training in theology. The printing presses were turning out model sermons for the Sundays and feast-days of the year, which a literate pastor could use in preparing his own homilies. Gabriel Biel's sermons came out in four volumes in 1499-1500 and were reprinted in 1510, and there were numerous editions around 1510 of the sermons of the highly-respected Strassburg cathedral preacher John Geiler of Kaisersberg. In content, Biel gave clear and orderly expositions of doctrine that often remind one that he was a professor and university lecturer. Geiler, in contrast, was more frequently the censorious moralist. We know from recent research that the sermons given regularly before the Renaissance popes and their court were of a high rhetorical quality in their expositions of the central Christian doctrines of providence, the Incarnation, and human dignity. The best sermons in Europe in 1500 appear to have been those given in Rome for the benefit of Pope Alexander VI and his entourage.

Another well-documented aspect of lived religion on the eve of the Reformation was the lush abundance of popular devotional forms. Saints' feasts were celebrated with broad participation all over Europe, as homage was given to the protective patrons of lands, churches, craft-guilds, and voluntary religious associations. Most areas had a revered shrine of Our Lady or of a patron saint, some of which had collections of highly-indulgenced relics. Going on pilgrimage to such shrines entailed both tender devotion and pleasant diversion from the everyday routine. Lower-class people regularly joined confraternities dedicated to special saints or practices like the rosary from which spiritual benefit was gained for all the members. These associations observed their patronal feasts with colorful pageantry, marching with banners and candles, and topped off the celebration with a banquet. Popular religious art kept Jesus Christ and his mother before the eyes of Christians, with a special fascination evident around 1500 for the pain and physical torment experienced by Jesus in his passion. Such visual presentations supported a piety of tender com-

passion for the Savior. - The generalization can be safely made that on the eve of the Reformation devotional religion was flourishing amid a colorful and emotionally charged variety.

Since the Black Death struck in the mid-fourteenth century, the number of requiem masses had increased notably, especially through bequests made by the well-to-do in support of a priest to offer requiem masses to bring release from purgatory for the departed of their families. In towns, a significant and sometimes problematic social group was the band of mass-priests who had been ordained to say a daily requiem but had no other pastoral duties. Generally, people received Holy Communion only as an annual event at Easter. For the many other days they attended mass, they were promised grace and help if they would gaze reverently on the Body of Christ as the priest elevated it after pronouncing the sacred words of consecration.

Printing brought into wide circulation handbooks to guide priests in the hearing of confessions. Aid was offered both for treating difficult cases involving canonical technicalities and for presenting handy schemes of the principal moral obligations impinging on worship, business, daily relations with others, and sexuality. One would like to know more about the frequency with which European townspeople around 1500 experienced nagging doubts about the adequacy of their confession of sins. Was the sacrament of forgiveness in fact dominated by the acts of satisfaction imposed by the confessor to be completed afterwards to placate God for one's wrongdoing? Did this sacrament in effect teach that God is a ruthless and demanding judge, while obscuring divine grace and mercy? The Reformation would later claim that this was the case and that its religious leaders reactivated the lost Christian art of conveying consolation to anguished consciences. The Reformation claim, however, does not prove a high incidence of scrupulosity or fear.

The most difficult sector to portray in this sketch of popular religion around 1500 is the daily religiosity of the

great majority of people who lived in rural villages and homesteads. It has been argued from studies of limited areas in France that this segment of the European population had never really been Christianized, and even at the end of the middle ages was living by a confusing amalgam of superstition and rudimentary Christian externals. The rural clergy was notorious for ignorance of Christian essentials, for concubines and a generally uninspiring lifestyle, and for rote sacramental administration. It is claimed that the simple people of the land found their contact with "the other dimension" through charms and talismans, through recourse to cunning folk, sorcerers, and witches, and through devotions at potent rocks, streams, and trees. Their religion thus functioned in the earthy struggle to survive the onslaught of evil and plain bad luck threatening crops, livestock, and bodily health. The outbreak of systematic repression of witchcraft in the Rhineland in the 1480s and in southwestern Germany in the first decade of the sixteenth century indicates that some of the religious leadership found unacceptable practices going on in their surroundings. Later in the sixteenth century, lands of both Reformation and Catholic religious persuasion will witness ferocious efforts to extirpate sorcery and witchcraft. One cannot avoid the suspicion that rural religion around 1500 was still largely pre-Christian. A good test question, consequently, for measuring the success of the sixteenth-century reforms is whether they developed convincing Christian religious forms for the practical-minded people of the land. Evangelization and basic catechesis was a need of the day, but especially for a people whose sensibilities would be largely untouched by a religion of doctrine, much verbalization, and the promise of salvation located mainly in the world to come.

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