

Introduction

We have to begin with an explanation, in case the nature and purpose of this book should be misunderstood. The following chapters are about the reforming of the Christian Church during the sixteenth century. They are not about all the other changes which took place in the wider society of those times, or in the political sphere, or in the cultural awareness of the population at large. Writers such as G.R. Elton and, more recently, Diarmaid MacCulloch have quite properly reminded us that what we now call the Reformation affected not only the Church and its institutions but also ordinary people's everyday lives, and that of course is an important and perfectly proper point to make. It is no doubt true that the origins of the Reformation are to be found as much in social and political unrest as in ecclesiastical problems, but we must be very careful, when presenting this diffuse picture of the changes that took place in the sixteenth century, not to lose sight of how the Church in particular was affected. To try to survey too many aspects of the Reformation at once inevitably puts us in danger of becoming confused by excessive complexity. So this book points quite specifically and directly at the Church alone, allowing, of course, for occasional necessary excursions into the wider issues. It deals with what happened *to the Church* as a result of the challenges and pressures which it faced during one singularly turbulent century, and thus prepares the way for a clearer understanding of why things in the Church are as they are today, in the twenty-first century.

The approach which has been adopted in structuring this book also needs to be explained, in case that, too, is misunderstood. It examines the influence of particular people who stand out as having made important contributions to the process of reforming the Church. Of course they did not stand alone, nor were theirs the only voices raised in protest at what was going on, but in their own ways they were able to put into words (and sometimes into action) certain insights which others were less able to articulate. If they did not always provide the fire-power for change, they did at least point the way for others to take. However, there is a danger in adopting this approach: it could very easily create the impression that the Reformation was nothing more than a procession of angry and disillusioned men, passing across the stage of history and saying rude things about the Papacy. That would be a grave misconception. Behind and around these men were countless others

who inevitably remain nameless, but whose part in the re-shaping of the Church was of great importance. The particular personalities chosen in these pages represent those who, in the opinion of the author, sounded the clearest notes to which others would respond. They were themselves also responding to the needs of their time, so in that sense they were just as much followers as leaders, and we do well to keep that constantly in mind.

The sixteenth century was one of the most momentous periods in the entire history of the Christian Church. Within those hundred years its shape was changed almost beyond recognition, as a result of movements and events which together are commonly referred to as the Reformation. The following pages describe what took place during that century, in straightforward and non-technical language. But obviously the course of history does not run in tidily organised periods of time, and we cannot jump straight into the sixteenth century without first providing a general account of what preceded it: so the reader will find in the earlier chapters a sketch of the prevailing circumstances in the Western Church, as they stood at the close of the Middle Ages, together with some reference to the personalities who sowed and nurtured the seeds of change. Nor can we sensibly claim that the Reformation came to an abrupt halt when the sixteenth century ended, so (conveniently, but somewhat artificially) this account closes at the point when Queen Elizabeth I of England died in 1603, to be succeeded by King James I, and the survey ends with a broad summary of the religious situation as it stood at that point in time.

The way in which events are recorded is always subjective, and can never be otherwise. All historians are selective in what they choose to report, and that process of selection inevitably reflects a particular outlook and evaluation of what went on. Even the use of the word "Reformation" is itself open to challenge, because it suggests a process of correction or purification, and there are many who would claim that what took place in the sixteenth century was not in fact a reformation at all, but a rebellion, or even a revolution within the ranks of the Church. It is left to the reader to decide where the truth actually lies.

It is hoped that this book will appeal to those who wish to gain a general understanding of what happened to European Christendom during the Reformation. However, no apology is offered for the almost total omission of the conventional footnotes and other similar intrusions which one commonly finds in books of this nature. Although these have a proper place in learned dissertations and scholarly works, where accuracy and precision are paramount, for the general reader they can quickly become a serious irritant. They interrupt the flow of the narrative, and frequently impose an altogether different literary style upon the whole book. The author's main aim here is to present an account which is both informative and at the same time enjoyable and stimulating to read.