

The Reformation: a revolution in religion, language, & national identity

Introduction

In a BBC 2 programme, preceded by a podcast, David Starkey explores the Reformation. He describes this as a Holy War from the standpoint of Lutheran Germany and England too, with Henry VIII beset by marital problems. The break with Rome was more than a religious revolt or rebellion; it created a revolution in language and national identity as well as in religion.

This paper, augmented by other references for clarification, combines the two programmes to provide an account of the Reformation, the legacies that endure and similarity with events of our time as David Starkey contends. These range from fundamentalism, social media and the digital age to the equivalent of a hard Brexit, nationalism and sovereignty. Precisely half a millennium apart, there is an uncanny resemblance with diametrically opposing views today that utilise rhetoric, guile and brutal violence and harness the power of media and technology.

At issue was not merely seeking reform, implying a rather benign aspiration, but to ratchet up an unequivocal stance and to take whatever action necessary through revolt and rebellion. Europe was left fractured along religious lines with England, paradoxically, richer in the use of English with greater access by the populous. At last, they could read and think for themselves. In this broader sense the Reformation was a revolution. Opportunity, timing and luck came into play. Erasmus first produced a Greek version of the New Testament in 1516 with a Latin translation also, more elegant and accurate and an alternative to the traditional Vulgate. This gave Luther the idea and impetus to produce his own bible in German – and embody strongly held views on a personal connection with God through Jesus Christ, rather than Rome.

The Reformation is usually considered to have started with the Ninety-Five Theses, nailed to a church door in Wittenberg. Previous attempts at reforming Rome had been made by Jan Hus in Prague, John Wycliffe at Oxford and others but Martin Luther was pivotal in creating the schism with the Roman Catholic Church. He knew the risks. Hus was executed by burning whilst Wycliffe was condemned posthumously. His body was exhumed and burned in 1428. They were hardly alone. 'Oxford Martyrs' Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer can testify to Catholic retribution. All met their death in gruesome fashion. These were deeply troubled and highly dangerous times, whatever your religious affiliation and belief.

Emergence of Lutheranism

Situated in the enormous plain south of Berlin, nothing especially happened in Wittenberg, except one thing concerning one man, Martin Luther, and a moment in history. There was a fundamental reason why Martin Luther went to Wittenberg. It had become a very ambitious university, initiated by Frederick the Wise, ruler of Saxony, who had long sought to found his own university. Luther was a monk, an academic and professor of theology who now had the one facility he required at his disposal. The university had its own Gutenberg printing press, vital for mass circulation, and with three-colour printing too.

Luther was a peculiar oddity, possessing great courage and with great force of personality. He combined this with supremely high intelligence and an extremely earthy approach to life that

went to the "darkest and dirtiest parts of human nature." Especially striking was the sheer violence of his personality in venting his disgust with the Roman Catholic Church. Erasmus, Thomas More and others expressed their feelings too but Luther was like a blast furnace, such was the intense heat of his laser focus, single-mindedness and blunt directness.

The Catholic Church ruled over an enormous empire and shaped every aspect of religious life. Latin was the universal language. Controlling and bureaucratic, the expectation of Rome was to swear obedience to the Pope. The greatest power was over minds with paintings of The Last Judgement, extolling the joys of heaven and torments of hell. It was a terrifying image. Purgatory was twixt heaven and hell with a missive to rid oneself of sin by good works to be fit to enter paradise. Indulgences were bits of paper to absolve the soul in return for cold hard cash. By doing so you had your passport.

For Martin Luther, this was the starting point with the Catholic Church portraying the sale of paradise and eternal salvation, its authority over purgatory and other manifestations. Luther insisted it was not what Jesus had said. He had the means to tap into evidence of the day and was spurred into action. In a few years he would have access to the New Testament produced by Erasmus at Cambridge. Erasmus was the goose laying the golden egg in convincing Luther he was reading the word of Jesus himself. Luther intended to communicate this directly to set the record straight, and for others to follow his doctrine and not that of Rome.

Incandescent with rage, on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther denounced the scandal of Rome and strode to All Saints Church in Wittenberg. Armed with the Ninety-Five Theses, written in Latin, he nailed the document to the church door for all to see when entering. Luther wished to stir up debate and wrote a sermon on indulgences and grace in German, containing twenty short propositions. He had the ability to express his points forcibly, simply and succinctly. His instinctive brilliance in expression could be read aloud in ten minutes. It was circulated widely and reprinted.

The genius and far-sightedness of Martin Luther was he could achieve his aim as a university teacher, especially as he could use the printed word, and in German not Latin. By this time the university had broken with the academic convention of discourse in Latin. This enabled Luther to turn from a purely academic focus to the German people, much as William Tyndale did in England and John Wycliffe before him. Incredibly, within ten years, half of Germany was Lutheran. With lofty and noble motives, unspeakably horrible things were done to imprint Luther's strong views. The entire apparatus of faith, the whole structure of the Catholic Church and ritualistic ceremonies were to Luther filthy and idolatrous.

He provoked violent German nationalism and anti-Semitism. In answer to the question, could the Reformation have happened a century earlier, it did to the Hussites in Bohemia. This was similar in elevating the scriptures to the native tongue and with high scepticism about the Catholic Church, its wealth, extravagance and power. Crucially, it did not have printing that by now was well established – 50-60 years old. Luther rescued and revived printing. What he came up with were great works but produced as pamphlets, not books. This required huge ideas which he reduced to a simple core of an argument in the native language with stories, excitement and gossip. Religion was now accessible to the masses, easy to produce and sold like hot cakes. Mass printing meant producing much larger editions with longer print runs,

quickly and cheaply and of high technical quality, complete with impressive illustrations. Far from turgid, these religious missives enticed the reader – and their beliefs.

There was a sense of indulgence of the Renaissance with the extravagance of Catholic Rome that juxtaposed with Luther's preaching and pleading - and this infuriated him. A slap in the face was having works of great beauty paid for by the pennies of German peasants who could ill-afford to do so. Luther was fortunate in having Frederick the Wise of Saxony who would oversee disintegration of the Papal influence. Frederick was immensely ambitious, shrewd and calculating, the complete opposite of Luther who had ebullience, drive and little finesses.

Here in Frederick was a man who thought slowly, was cautious and who extended a protecting arm. They were ideal qualities to complement the bulldozing Luther, thought to be a precious oddity. The Catholic Church, though wealthy and powerful, had no choice but to co-operate with secular authorities. Frederick the Wise was a broker which showed the depths of Luther's obligations as he was the conduit. The Catholic Church had to fight at a distance, given this strong sense of regional identity and localism. Germany had never been centralised. It was a patchwork of different jurisdictions and this mosaic protected Luther.

Publish and be damned

On 15 June 1520 Luther issued a formal decree in pamphlet form. Rome was incensed and Luther was given sixty days to repent or be ex-communicated but Luther felt energised and produced a manifesto to rescue Germany from its clutches. He was ordered to renounce his heretical writings in a decree from Rome which he burned in public on 10 December. The whole of Germany was in revolt. Luther required protection that came from Frederick the Wise who promised safe passage.

The Luther Bible, a translation of the New Testament into German, was first published in 1522 and was based on the second edition of the work of Erasmus, published in 1519. The entire Bible, containing Old and New Testaments, was published by Luther in 1534. Hans Lufft, Bible printer in Wittenberg, printed over 100,000 copies in the following three years, a staggering output. Coupled with his pamphlets and papers, Martin Luther became the most published author in the history of printing up to that time. He had a profound influence on the German national identity and language. Highly skilled and articulate, he wrote for his audience in the vernacular, enabling all German-speaking Christians to read and hear the word of God directly.

In England, Cuthbert Tunstall well understood the threat posed by Luther. Apart from content, style, prose and format, he wrote in German and not Latin and this turned him into a mortal enemy. Cardinal Wolsey in Whitehall was watching events carefully and ordered all printers and booksellers not to bring this subversive material into England; nor were they to print any of Luther's works. In a show of contempt his books were tossed into a fire on the steps of St Paul's Church, a fate that Tyndale was to experience.

In order to curry favour with Rome, and enhance his personal status, King Henry VIII wrote a manuscript in Latin in defence of the seven sacraments, thereby striking against Luther. He ensured that, given its royal authorship, the book was shown to the faithful. Rome responded by declaring Henry defender of the faith. Written by 1525, the printing of William Tyndale's English version of the Bible was interrupted by a wave of anti-Lutheranism. The following year

a complete edition appeared in Worms. The battle-lines with Henry were drawn. So were the contradictions as Henry split from Rome but never relinquished his affinity with Catholicism.

Reflecting on the Reformation

The violence of the Reformation has been downplayed, insists David Starkey. Disinfected and sanitized, the Reformation was profoundly violent. It was the equivalent of ISIS with gruesome interrogation and horrific death for those who would not renounce Catholicism. It was also characterised by intrigue, espionage and plotting. The Reformation led to a century and a half of the greatest violence Europe had known and, in England, destruction on an immense scale with the seizure of treasuries, including important cultural items such as music and vestments.

Given the differing patterns of belief, the imposition of Lutheranism proved to be unpopular in England but in Germany there was a powerful groundswell. The Reformation in England was entirely due to Henry's marital problems with its top down nature and power of king over the church that became the dynamic of religious change. We may want to believe it was about popularity but this was a myth, and act of self-deception. Henry VIII formulated a strategy as a counter-attack on Rome. It was a volte-face but not for religious reasons.

England emerges as a pariah state. Ideological and profound changes were taking place with dissolution of the monasteries and removal of church wealth. England was also turned into a defensible country from Europe. Here was one comparison with Brexit. There are many. For over 1,000 years, England was part of the Catholic Church, having converted to Christianity by Rome, the epicentre of European Christendom. Henry ruptured all that to prevent a system of jurisdiction with its locus of Rome. The parallels of today are astonishing. Take as an example the trial of Thomas More who raised the issues we are debating now but England did not go fully Protestant. People navigated through all this, swapping religions, committing apostasy and going with the tide – as did Henry. Most coped by doing what they were told, including cessation of rituals and practices of the damned, but fear played its part. So did secrecy.

How Henry was able to carry out such change is a recurring question. The answer is Henry himself. History has underestimated him as a skilled political operator in handling the failure of divorce from Rome. His personal happiness had suddenly collapsed. Henry paused, set up a think-tank, and used academic researchers to delve, ferret out and identify flaws in Church governance by Rome. Henry devised a strategy. His pursuit of a strategic goal and ends & means was impressive. He then gets it all through Parliament. As today it was a fractious and difficult assembly and, as with Brexit, the clock was ticking. He managed to achieve this within six months. The separation with Rome began in 1529 and was completed by 1537.

Timing is everything but so is the opportunity, starting with a simple but explosive narrative by Luther and in England, led by a king who faced a predicament. Suddenly, events turned on a pinhead. What we learn is that big historical changes may simmer but happen quickly, with huge upheaval as the EU Referendum illustrates. From those in high favour to imprisonment and execution was an extraordinary and swift reversal. It resembled a scene from Blackadder but with brutal ferocity replacing farce. It has been repeated many times in history.

We are more aware of huge destruction, unpopularity and the ambitions of William Tyndale, in a language a ploughman could read and understand. Tyndale, an obscure priest, was a superb writer who, from clumsy language created dignified and coherent prose, simply expressed. He communicated the full beauty of the Gospels in England through language. In literature, this heralded the power, emotion and richness of vocabulary using words, phrases and expressions penned by Tyndale such as: ye of little faith, fight the good fight, signs of the times, eat, drink and be merry and let there be light. English was no longer a marginal language.

The Reformation was instrumental in nostalgia usually associated with Shakespeare but we can thank William Tyndale for many sayings still familiar today. Language governed rules of the time. Oxford and Cambridge were slow to process changes that were eventually adopted by the colleges. This was by any yardstick an extraordinary period with acts of public destruction and objects of ridicule. The 16th century was like our own. Instead of the digital age, media revolution and liberation of Brexit we had the revolution of printing, undermining of values and imposition of new ones, such as what it is to be a Christian. In so doing we created a far richer language. About 80% of words used in the King John Bible, published in 1611, were those of William Tyndale, opening the floodgates for public access, literacy and education.

In an attempt to draw parallels we may think of ISIS and contrast this with apocalyptic violence carried out 500 years before, with burning and disembowelling. Most people were believers and we have to recognise the place and power of religion and importance. Communicating all this today is difficult with a difference of chronology. Henry dominated the church. For some, all this reads like a fairy tale and bedtime story concludes David Starkey. We have the cushion of a welfare state with little to worry about – or have we as “the times they are-a-changin.”

The Reformation as with Brexit, terrorism and other world events, overturns the apple-cart of complacency. History shows that seismic events tend to occur quickly, changing the political, social, religious and economic landscape. As with the financial crash of 2008, they may come as a huge shock to those unaware of the signs and signals or misled by facts, propaganda and omission of data. The Boiled Frog syndrome is a metaphor. A frog sits in a pan of cold water that is slowly heated. It remains impervious to incremental temperature rises - until too late!

In Conclusion

Whilst these two programmes form the basis of this paper, in the context of Revolution, other sources enrich and expand on these. Together they have provided a springboard for my own further thoughts that go well beyond these programmes.

My intention is to show that the Reformation sparked far more than a fierce religious divide. It went to the heart of language and national identity in Britain and Germany. The Reformation had a profound effect on society then - and still does today. Through the distant lens of time we try to make sense of epochs in history - and enduring legacies shaping society and culture.

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