

1. 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 was a revolution that redefined language and national identity also.

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 observes. These range from fundamentalism, social media and the digital age to a hard Brexit, embracing issues of nationalism and sovereignty. Precisely half a millennium apart, there is an uncanny resemblance. Diametrically opposing views today use rhetoric, guile and violence too, whilst harnessing the power of media and digital technology.

At issue in the Reformation was not seeking reform as a benign aspiration, but ratcheting up an unequivocal stance and then taking action through force, revolt and rebellion. As a result, Europe was left fractured along religious lines with England, paradoxically, richer in use of the English language with greater access by the populous. At last, they could read and think for themselves in their own language and identify totally with their own nation.

Opportunity, timing and luck came into play. Erasmus first produced a Greek version of the New Testament in 1516, more elegant and accurate, with a Latin translation also. It offered 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 are testament 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 special happened in Wittenberg with the exception of 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 an extremely ambitious university, initiated by Frederick the Wise, ruler of Saxony, who had long sought to found his very own university. Luther was a monk, an academic and professor of theology who now had at his disposal the one facility he required. The university had its own Gutenberg printing press, vital for mass circulation, and with three-colour printing too.

Luther stood out as different. He possessed supremely high intelligence, great courage and a forceful personality, combined with "an extremely earthy approach to life that went to the darkest and dirtiest parts of human nature." Especially notable was the violence of a striking personality, venting fury and 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 searing heat of his rage, intense 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 pieces 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. Having the means to tap into evidence of the day he was spurred into action. Shortly, he would have access to the New Testament produced at Cambridge by Erasmus, the goose laying the golden egg, convincing Luther he was reading the word of Jesus himself. Luther intended to communicate this directly to the populous to set the record straight and to follow his doctrine, 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 on entering. In wishing to stir debate, Luther wrote a sermon on indulgences and grace in German. Containing twenty short propositions, it was not intended as a diatribe but a missive for action. Luther had a gift with words and for conveying intent. His instinctive brilliance in concise and meaningful expression could be read aloud in ten minutes. It was circulated widely and reprinted, such was demand.

The genius and far-sightedness of Martin Luther was he could achieve his aim as a university teacher, especially in using the printed word 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 all Germany was Lutheran. With lofty and noble motives, unspeakable things were done to imprint Luther's strong views. The entire apparatus of faith, whole structure of the Catholic Church and ritualistic ceremonies were to Luther filthy and idolatrous. They must be eradicated and by force as necessary.

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, elevating scriptures to the native tongue and with high scepticism about the Catholic Church, its wealth, extravagance and power. Crucially, the Hussites did not have printing, by now well established – 50-60 years old. Luther's dictum could be read by all, and repeated.

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 to beguile the reader. Religion was now accessible to the masses, easy to produce and snapped up. 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, religious homilies encouraged and convinced 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 Papal influence. Frederick was highly ambitious, shrewd, calculating, and cunning. With his polished diplomatic skills, analytical ability and peaceful intent he was the complete opposite of Luther, lacking any finesse whatsoever.

Frederick thought slowly, was cautious and extended a protecting arm, ideal and necessary qualities to complement a bulldozing Luther, 'thought to be a precious oddity.' As broker and a conduit, this helped explain the depths of Luther's obligations to him. The Catholic Church, though wealthy and powerful, had scant choice but to co-operate with secular authorities. It had to fight at a distance, given the strong sense of regional identity and localism. Germany was a patchwork quilt of different jurisdictions and it was this mosaic that protected Luther. He could now impose his will and a unifying religious diktat.

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. Far from repenting, Luther felt energised and produced a manifesto to rescue Germany from the clutches of Rome. He was ordered to renounce his heretical writings in a Papal decree which he burned in public on 10 December. The whole of Germany was in revolt. Fearing reprisals, 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 published in 1522 and was based on the second edition of the work of Erasmus, published in 1519. The entire Bible of Old and New Testaments was published by Luther in 1534 and printed by Hans Lufft, Bible printer in Wittenberg; over 100,000 copies in three years. It was 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 as well as religion. Erudite, skilful and articulate, Luther wrote for his audience in the vernacular. This enabled all German-speaking Christians to read and hear the word of God directly for the first time, crucially in their own language. It was a masterstroke.

In England, Cuthbert Tunstall, an academic and defender of the Roman Catholic doctrine, well understood the threat posed by Luther. Apart from content, style, prose and format, Luther wrote in German, not Latin, turning him into an enemy of Rome. Cardinal Wolsey in Whitehall watched events carefully. He 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, all Luther's books were tossed into a fire on the steps of St Paul's Church. It was a fate that Tyndale was to experience personally.

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 to be 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. Battle-lines with Henry were drawn. So were the contradictions as Henry split from Rome but never relinquished his affinity with Catholicism. These were dangerous times indeed and it

paid to know whose side you were on. It might literally be a matter of life or death and not just a matter of imprisonment.

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 for Starkey, with gruesome interrogation and horrific death if unwilling to renounce Catholicism. It was characterised by intrigue, plotting and espionage and led to 150 years of the greatest violence and turbulence Europe had known. In England, destruction on an immense scale included the seizure of treasuries and loss of important cultural elements 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 and power of the King over the Church, the dynamic of religious change. Henry VIII formulated a strategy as a counter-attack on Rome. It was a volte-face but not for religious reasons.

England emerged as a pariah. Ideological and profound changes were taking place, not least dissolution of the monasteries and removal of church wealth. England was also turned into a defensible country from Europe. Here was one of several comparisons with Brexit. Since its conversion by Rome, for over 1,000 years England had been part of the Catholic Church but no more. Henry ruptured all that, preventing a system of jurisdiction with its locus of Rome.

England did not go fully Protestant as people navigated by going with the tide - swapping religions and committing apostasy, as did Henry. Most abided by diktat, ceasing the rituals and practices of the damned. Fear and secrecy went hand in glove.

How Henry was able to carry out such change is a recurring question. The answer is Henry. 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 in modern parlance 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 got it all through Parliament. As with today it was a fractious and difficult assembly and, similar to Brexit, the clock was ticking down. Yet he managed to achieve this within six months. The full 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 facing a predicament. Suddenly, events turned on a pinhead. What we learn is that big historical changes may simmer and then happen all in a rush. The result is huge upheaval. The EU Referendum and Brexit illustrates and decisions made in the hope promises will come true, in this case trading agreements. In Henry's time, from being in high favour to imprisonment and execution was an extraordinary and swift reversal. It resembled a scene from *Blackadder*, with brutal ferocity replacing farce. It has been repeated many times in history. Along the way convenient scapegoats are found.

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 highly skilled 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, sign of the times, eat, drink and be merry and let there be light. The English language could no longer be considered 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 these and other 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 in the King John Bible, published in 1611, were those of William Tyndale. It was he who opened the floodgates for public access to literacy and education, no longer mandated in the classics of Greek and Latin, except in public schools and higher universities.

In seeking to draw parallels with ISIS and Taliban too, we may contrast this with apocalyptic violence carried out 500 years before, with burning and disembowelling. Most people were believers. We need to recognise the place and power of religion and its massive importance. Communicating all this today is difficult with a difference of chronology, culture and a very different lens. Henry dominated the church. For some, all this reads like a fairy tale and a 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.” He was perhaps alluding to the bubble in which we live and our own sense of reality, making it hard to empathise fully with the full impact of the Reformation in Britain and in Germany.

In Conclusion

The Reformation as with Brexit, terrorism and world events such as climate change, overturns the apple-cart of complacency. History shows 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 or immune to signs and signals, or who are misled by stated facts, propaganda, denial and convenient omission.

Whilst these two programmes form the basis of this paper, other sources enrich and expand upon these. The Reformation sparked far more than fierce religious divide. It went to the heart of language and national identity in Britain and Germany. It had a profound effect on society then - and does today as the UK leaves the EU for an uncertain future. Through the distant lens of time we struggle to make sense of epochs in history and legacies that endure. These shape society and culture, such as who we are as a nation and what it is to be British.

References

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