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Journal/Yearbook

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Issue

Page

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ISSUES

☐ VOLUME 108 (2017)

Issue 1 (Oct 2017) , pp. 1-274

☐ VOLUME 107 (2016)

Issue 1 (Oct 2016) , pp. 1-368

☐ VOLUME 106 (2015)

Issue 1 (Oct 2015) , pp. 1-325

☐ VOLUME 105 (2014)

Issue 1 (Jan 2014) , pp. 1-313

☐ VOLUME 104 (2013)

Issue 1 (Oct 2013) , pp. 1-320

☐ VOLUME 103 (2012)

Issue 1 (Oct 2012) , pp. 1-312

[< Previous Article](#) [Next Article >](#)

Books, Reform and the Reformation

Richard Crofts

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Books, Reform and the Reformation

By Richard Crofts

One of the questions which has intrigued historians of the German Reformation since the sixteenth century is whether the presence of reform sentiment was either a vital element of the historical context or an important causative factor of the Reformation. Students of the Reformation are familiar with the prevailing views in secondary and textbook literature that all of Germany was crying for reform.¹ Frequently these views culminate in the argument that this "cry for reform" was one of the causes of the Reformation. The weakness of that prevalent viewpoint is revealed by analyzing the imprecise, subjective, and impressionistic evidence put forward on its behalf. However, research on the subject of ecclesiastical conditions on the eve of the Reformation is increasingly based upon more objective evidence such as wills, church building and repair,

1. Perhaps the best-known of this group is Roland Bainton: *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston, 1952), p. 21: "This was the situation on the eve of the sixteenth century. All serious spirits were disturbed and recognized the need for reform." Owen Chadwick writes in *The Reformation* ("Pelican History of the Church," vol. III; Baltimore, 1964), p. 11: "At the beginning of the sixteenth century everyone that mattered in the Western Church was crying out for reformation." Gerhard Ritter in *Die Weltwirkung der Reformation* (2nd ed.; München, 1959), p. 39, describes the extent to which the question of the reform of the church "stirred all hearts:" "So war die ganze deutsche Welt schon lange vor der Reformation erfüllt von leidenschaftlichen kirchlichen-religiösen Interessen, aber auch von heftiger Kritik an der Kirche als Institution. Die Frage nach ihrer Reform bewegte alle Herzen, war das weitaus stärkste öffentliche Interesse in allen Ständen, vom einfachen Bauersmann bis in die Sphäre der höchsten Bildung." Roman Catholics, in general, agree on the extent of reform sentiment though they tend to see it as a natural expression of the vitality of the Catholic Church that was disrupted by the drastic and revolutionary turn of events known as the Reformation. See for example Karl Bihlmeyer: *Church History*, trans. by Victor E. Mills and Francis J. Muller (3 vols.; Westminster, Md., 1966), III, pp. 1-2, 6-7; Henri Daniel Rops: *The Protestant Reformation*, trans. by Audrey Butler ("History of the Church of Christ," vol. IV; New York, 1961), p. 274; Philip Hughes: *A Popular History of the Reformation* (Garden City, New York, 1957), pp. 76-77. Daniel Rops bases his study of Catholic reform on the presupposition that the reform effort within the church "was undertaken, not by way of answering the 'reformers,' but in obedience to demands and principles that are part of the unalterable traditions of the Church and proceed from her most fundamental loyalties." See his *The Catholic Reformation*, trans. by John Warrington ("History of the Church of Christ," vol. V; New York, 1962), p. 1.

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