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The Dawn of the Reformation

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The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Modern Thought

Heiko Oberman

Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986

296 pp.

This costly volume contains twelve essays written between 1962 and 1978 which reflect the wide research interests of Heiko Oberman. The essay topics reveal an agile mind at work, ranging from the psycho-intellectual contribution of Copernicus to modern culture to the twentieth century Roman Catholic reappraisal of the theological concept of tradition. The bulk of the essays, however, are firmly rooted in the late medieval and early modern eras.

One of Oberman's longstanding quarrels is with Gilson and his school who regard the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a period of disintegration. Against these Thomists who posit intellectual and spiritual decline during the waning of the middle ages, Oberman vigorously asserts a general renewal of spirituality in the form of lay fraternities and learned sodalities. Oberman enumerates (16) a catalog of fourteenth century initiatives which, he argues, provided posterity with the moral targets for reform and the conceptual tools needed for the new sciences.

Oberman is similarly concerned to extricate Luther from the morass of misinterpretation. Dismissing the dating of Luther's *Turmerlebnis* as a fruitless question, Oberman is also unimpressed with Roman Catholic reappraisal of Luther as the victim of an *ignorantia invincibilis*. In other words, so long as Roman Catholic historians remain committed to viewing Thomas as the apex of normative Catholic thought, then Luther will inevitably be tarred with the confessional late medieval brush. Instead of reducing Luther to the level of the intellectual contours on which he was raised, Oberman stresses the originality and independence of Luther's thought which developed in a complicated fashion on a variety of different levels.

The so-called Peasants War of 1524-25 also comes under historiographical scrutiny. Oberman prefers to interpret it as a religious movement, ignited by a "Gospel of Social Unrest" whereby Luther and the Reformation merely accelerated an age old demand for divine justice and improved social conditions. Oberman, in contrast to more recent social history, takes *prima facie* the religious content of the propaganda of the uprising. The underlying drama of the revolt, as Oberman points out to good effect, was the squandering of the religious potential of the enormous lower socio-economic layers of Central European society.

The discomfiting feature of Oberman's argumentation is his tendency to cast a late medieval shadow over the happenings of the early modern era. This is a curious variation on his oft pronounced complaint of the

Thomist rainmakers on the late medieval parade. Oberman's protective enthusiasm for his chosen era aside, the quality of scholarship in these essays is formidable, his erudition is obvious, although the prose is somewhat stilted by the intrusion of Latinisms at every conceivable juncture. Less transparent than the learning displayed in these essays is the reason for purchasing them. As a testament to the development of Oberman's research interests they serve admirably; readers desirous of locating the state of current debates will have to look elsewhere.

Timothy R. Cooke
St. Peter's Anglican Church

The Churches and the Third Reich: Volume One: 1918-1934

Klaus Scholder

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988

This is the first of a massive two-volume history of the German churches under Hitler written by the late church historian Klaus Scholder of Tübingen, who unfortunately died prematurely in 1985 and was unable to complete the work. Both have now been ably translated from the German by John Bowden.

The first volume, almost ten years in the making, was completed and published in Germany in 1977. *Volume Two: The Year of Disillusionment 1934: Barmen and Rome* was virtually finished before his death, except for the final editing done by Scholder's students Gerhard Besier, Dieter Kleinmann, and Jörg Thierfelder. In October, 1984, Scholder handed the work over to his students and asked them to continue the project. They envision three further volumes in the same spirit and method covering the period from November, 1934, to May, 1949.

As Vice-Chair of the German Evangelical Church's commission for contemporary history, Scholder was especially well-qualified to write the definitive history of period from 1918-1949, with access to many previously unknown or inaccessible archival sources. He has published numerous short essays interpreting this epoch in German history. There are a number of factors which make Scholder's history such an important scholarly contribution, especially for an English-speaking public.

This is the first major study which examines the Catholic and Protestant churches' response to National Socialism side by side. This approach throws new light not only on the separate attitudes of the two confessions to the "revolution" occurring in German society, but also on Hitler's own flawed church policy. As a Catholic, Hitler understood the Roman Catholic Church and planned his church strategy accordingly. After almost uniform