Introduction to First Edition

In the decade between the end of the sanguinary Great Peasants’ War in Germany in 1525 and the collapse of the polygamous Biblical commonwealth of misguided peasants, artisans, and burghers in Münster in 1535, the gravest danger to an orderly and comprehensive reformation of Christendom was Anabaptism, which because of a profound disappointment with Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, their clerical associates, and their magisterial supporters, withdrew into separatist conventicles. Anabaptists were regarded as seditious and heretical. The revival of the ancient Code of Justinian made this explicit. It was midway in the decade, at Speyer in April 1529, in the same diet at which (April 19) six princes and the delegations of fourteen Upper German towns first took the name “Protestant” as stout adherents of Luther’s reforms, that an imperial law (April 22) was published against the Anabaptists, in which both Catholics and “Protestants” concurred. The following day a mandate of Charles V gave specific instructions to the higher officials of the Empire as to how to deal with the baleful combination of sedition, schism, and heresy combated long ago in the ancient imperial laws against the Donatists and other separatists and willful puritans. For a brief season, however, the Anabaptists were in otherwise respectable company, for the diet included in its censure also the sacramentarians, that is, the followers of Zwingli, because the Swiss seemed to be doing, in their interpretation and observance of the second of the two principal sacraments of the church—the Eucharist—what the Anabaptists were doing with the first—Baptism. By October of the same year, however, the Lutherans and the sacramentarians from Switzerland, along with representatives of the mediating position on the sacrament of the altar—notably, Martin Bucer of Strassburg—had met under the patronage of Landgrave Philip of Hesse at Marburg to compose the differences between the two reform movements issuing respectively from Wittenberg and Zurich. Although the two
factions continued to disagree even violently on article 15 concerning the Lord’s Supper, the over-all effect of the epoch-making colloquy was to extend the meaning of “Protestant” to include the Swiss and other pedobaptist sacramentarians. The Lutherans and the Zwinglians agreed at least, over against the Anabaptists, in interpreting the one sacrament, Baptism, as roughly equivalent to circumcision under the Old Covenant. They were alike disturbed by, and prepared to take stern measures against, the threat of the Anabaptists and the Spiritualists to the integrity and the durability of an orderly reformation with the sanction and support of the town councils, the princes, and the kings of Christendom. We may speak, therefore, of the Lutheran and Zwinglian movement and its analogues across the Channel and elsewhere as the Magisterial Reformation or, when one has in mind more its doctrine than its manner of establishment, as classical Protestantism.

It would be a mistake, of course, to assume that the theology of the Magisterial Reformation was incapable of propagation without the assistance of magistrates: witness the extraordinary conquests of the Huguenots in Catholic France, the Helvetians in Catholic Poland, and the Calvinists in the rise of the Dutch Republic; nevertheless, Reformed Christians, wherever they were compelled to organize in a hostile environment, presupposed or proposed a truly Christian state, and always carried the seed of a complete Christian commonwealth within the temporary and protective husks of their clandestine conventicles. They did not, on principle, eschew fighting for the word of God, given a favorable conjuncture of events.

Over against magisterial Protestantism, and its provisionally “sectarian” outposts in Catholic lands, stood the Anabaptists, who, with their determination to clear away the old abuses root and branch and at the same time to dispense with earthly magistrates and prelates, were only the first major threat of what proved to be a three-pronged movement constituting the Radical Reformation, the further definition and delineation of which constitutes the burden of this book.

This Radical Reformation was a loosely interrelated congeries of reformations and restitutions which, besides the Anabaptists of various types, included Spiritualists and spiritualizers of varying tendencies, and the Evangelical Rationalists, largely Italian in origin. In contrast to the Protestants, the exponents
of the Radical Reformation believed on principle in the separation of their own churches from the national or territorial state, although, in three or four instances (i.e., Müntzerites, Münsterites), they were misled into thinking that the regenerate magistrates from their own midst would prove more godly than Protestants or Catholics. With these exceptions, followers of the Radical Reformation in all three sectors denounced war and renounced all other forms of coercion except the ban, and sought to spread their version of the Christian life by missions, martyrdom, and philanthropy. No less confident than the fighting Calvinists that they were the chosen remnant of the Lord, having “through their covenant with God in a good conscience” worked out their own salvation in fear and trembling, these followers put their trust in the Lord of the quick and the dead, who would soon come and judge between the saints and the sinners.

In insisting on believers’ baptism, or on the possession of the gifts of the Spirit, or on the experience of regeneration, and in being often quite indifferent to the general political and social order, the various exponents of the Radical Reformation not only opposed the Magisterial Reformation tactically and on principle but also clearly differentiated themselves from sixteenth-century Protestants, that is, the Lutherans and the Reformed (the Zwinglians and the Calvinists), on what constituted both the experience and the conception of salvation, and on what constituted the true church and proper Christian deportment. They saw in Luther’s doctrine of salvation by faith alone a new indulgence system more grievous than that which he had attacked in ninety-five theses on the eve of the Reformation Era. They usually declined to use the theologically complementary term “sanctification,” preferring, instead, to stress regeneration, or the new being in Christ, or the drive of the Spirit, or the quickening of the moral conscience, or, in veiled language, deification. In any event, the exponents and martyrs of the Radical Reformation, whether Anabaptists, Spiritualists, or Rationalists, were alike in their dissatisfaction with the Lutheran–Zwinglian–Calvinist forensic formulation of justification and with any doctrine of original sin and predestination that seemed to them to undercut the significance of their personal religious experience and their continuous exercise of those personal and corporate disciplines by which they strove to imitate in their midst what they construed from the New Testament texts to have been the life of the original apostolic community.
From the *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier* of Erasmus in 1504 and the Sacramentist *Epistola Christiana* of Cornelius Hoen, through Benedetto of Mantova’s anthological *Benefit of Christ’s Death*, to the *De Jesu Christo servatore* of Socinus in 1578, the whole tapestry of the Radical Reformation was interwoven with a loosely twined bundle of threads that were giving a new configuration to the doctrine of salvation. In this explicit or more often merely implicit reconstruction or replacement of the Anselmian doctrine of the atonement, there was a characteristic stress on the divine compassion and an elaboration of a devout and detailed doctrine of the *imitatio Christi* or the discipleship of the reborn Christian, a corresponding alteration in the doctrine of the incarnation (variously formulated in terms of the celestial flesh of Christ), and frequently also an alteration in the traditional formulations of the relationship of the Father and the Son. The variations in incarnational theology cut across the whole Radical Reformation. The various stages in the explicit opposition to the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity were largely limited to the Evangelical Rationalists. In their intense eschatological convictions, some of the Spiritualists, many Anabaptists, and almost all of the Evangelical Rationalists adhered to the doctrine of the sleep or the death of the soul prior to the resurrection (psychopannychism).

The range and types of spirituality in the Radical Reformation suggest successively the rigor of the medieval monastery, the prim devotion of the Catholic Evangelicals, and the passion of the orders of the counter-reformed church far more than the hearty affirmation of life in all its vocational fullness that was characteristic of Lutheranism. Since there was, in fact, some continuity of Catholic Evangelism in Evangelical Rationalism, the brief interlude of Catholic Evangelism that burgeoned and then withered between 1500 and 1542 in the Romance lands has been included in the following account. Some of its early exponents joined the Protestants, others the Radical Reformation, while still others, after the introduction of the Roman Inquisition in 1542, turned their energies into the Counter Reform.

Constitutionally, the Radical Reformation was, of course, equally distant from classical (magisterial) Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism. The reformers among the Old Believers and the Magisterial Reformers alike worked with the idea of *reformatio*; the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Rationalists labored under the more radical slogan of *restitutio*. 
To be sure, the Protestants in their *reformatio* differed widely in the extent of their break from the medieval church.

To be specific, the progress of Lutheranism through a patchwork of territories and jurisdictions that seldom coincided even roughly with the medieval diocesan and provincial boundaries encouraged its leaders, in so many other respects conservative (where the Bible did not expressly speak against a traditional doctrinal formulation or institution), to minimize the significance of bishops and archbishops, so many of whom were, of course, temporal princes and thus integrally a part of the imperial constitution as prince-bishops and even imperial electors. With the expedient of the prince as *Notbischof*, Luther and his associates separated the whole question of polity from the core of essential Christian doctrine, although they were willing to utilize the office and traditions of episcopacy in organizing Lutheranism nationally, as in Sweden.

In contrast to Lutheranism, the Reformed churches (which began their career in breaking from episcopal authority with the sanction of the town councils) stressed polity as co-ordinate with doctrine; and, although basing the constitution of the Reformed Church (especially in Calvinism) on the polity of the New Testament, they unconsciously absorbed a good deal of the usage and political theory of the Swiss Confederation of city republics and reworked ecclesiologically the civic institutions of local councils and diets.

Over against Lutheranism and the Reformed Church, Cranmerian Anglicanism preserved episcopacy on principle, but primarily as a constitutional necessity in the magisterial reformation of a national kingdom, with its lords temporal and lords spiritual in the upper house of its Parliament, interpreted as at once the national diet and the national synod. Only belatedly did Anglicanism turn to the task of providing the threefold ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops with an adequate theology of orders.

Though the Magisterial Reformation was far from unified in its conception of the sacraments in general and the place of polity in particular, it was one in the general conviction that behind the national, territorial, and the cantonal church organizations there existed the one holy Catholic Church, made up of the predestined saints (Calvin) or the assembly of the true believers (Luther).
In contrast to the three major expressions of the Magisterial Reformation, the proponents of the Radical Reformation, for the most part, rejected the doctrine of absolute predestination and the doctrine of an invisible church, and took seriously the ordering of their churches, conventicles, or fellowships of regenerate saints on the principle of voluntary association.

The proponents of the Radical Reformation, espousing the faithful restoration of the apostolic church as it existed in the age of the martyrs before it was prudentially supported by Constantine, differed among themselves, however, on the procedure for restoring or reassembling such a church. They also differed on the question of the constitutional significance for Christians of the role of the judges and the kings in the Scriptures of the Old Covenant.

Of the three radical groups, the Anabaptists were most confident in being able to reproduce the structure of apostolic Christianity from the New Testament, supplemented by texts they regarded as comparably primitive, or authoritative, for instance, the descriptions of the early churches preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, a spurious epistle of Clement of Rome, and the works of early fathers. The Anabaptists differed among themselves as to the degree to which the pattern and institutions of the people of the Old Covenant and their Scriptures were appropriable. The Anabaptists of Münster, for example, with their eschatological intensity, easily combined the readings of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament and thereby justified their reintroduction of the Old Testament constitution of warrior saints.

The Spiritualists likewise differed among themselves in their use of the Bible as a pattern for the church. Thomas Müntzer, with his zeal for prophetic reform of the whole of society, like the Anabaptist Münsterites, used the Old Testament in his blueprints for the reformation of church and commonwealth.

The contemplative Spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld, despairing of any valid restitutio without some clearer guidance from God than had been apparently given thus far, preferred, amidst the violent claims and counterclaims of Protestants, Catholics, and Anabaptists, to follow a “middle way” and to suspend the sacrament of the altar and interiorize it as an inward eucharist and communion until such a time as God himself would intervene and usher in the church of the Spirit. Other Spiritualists, such as
the Libertines and isolated Rationalists, suspended the use of all the sacraments (forerunners in this respect of the Quakers).

The Evangelical Rationalists from Camillo Renato to Faustus Socinus tended to be individualistic in their Christianity and were, like the Evangelical Spiritualists, distressed by the divisiveness and acrimony attendant upon the organization of religion; and some might have preferred the half-enunciated ideal of Erasmus, namely, a “Third Church,” neither Protestant nor Catholic, devout but not doctrinaire. In Poland, Lithuania, and Transylvania, the Evangelical Rationalist ferment permeated the local reformed churches to create three well-integrated and inwardly disciplined ecclesiastical bodies, one of them destined to survive intact to the present day as the Unitarian Church in Rumania.

The doctrine of the inwardly disciplined but externally free “apostolic” church has therefore been rightly recognized as one of the common marks of the whole of the Radical Reformation.

A consideration of ecclesiology and polity must, of course, include specific reference to the theory and practice of the ministry and ordination thereto. The fact that the proponents of the Radical Reformation were frequently laymen has obscured the no less interesting fact that the movement was in part reordinationist as well as in its main sector ana-baptist. Among the Magisterial Reformers there were several who, like Zwingli, having already been ordained under the ancien régime, declined on principle to be reordained on becoming Protestant.

In contrast, within the Radical Reformation there are several instances of former priests who felt the need for a recommissioning and who finally repudiated their Catholic ordination (e.g., Menno Simons). In other instances, leaders to the end were obsessed with the question of a valid apostolic vocation, that is, the problem of being authentically sent to proclaim, to baptize, and to organize in the latter days of the world (e.g., Obbe Philips). In some cases the Radical Reformation leaders seemed to connect the continuity of missionary authority with the baptismal succession, at times with the direct outpouring of the Spirit. Thus, though many “lay” leaders within the Radical Reformation, such as Conrad Grebel, Schwenckfeld, and Socinus, were, so far as we know, never formally ordained, to overstress this would obscure the fact that the credentials of leadership in the Radical Reformation were at the beginning more often moral or charis-
matic than regular. The strongly re-ordinationist thrust within the Radical Reformation would, needless to say, become explicit only in the relatively few instances when a cleric of the old order became a leader in the new. Unordained monks and friars were, however, much more common among the recruits of the Radical Reformation than were ordained priests and prelates. Thus, a basic conflict over the conception of the nature of the church and polity between the Radical Reformation and the Magisterial Reformation came to be articulated in the debate between the two sides, not in terms of ordination, which was generally neglected, but rather in terms of formal, university theological education on the one side and apostolic, or prophetic or inspired, vocation on the other.

Akin to the prominence of the layman in the Radical Reformation and the functional extension of the priesthood of all believers in the direction of personal witness to Christ in missions and martyrdom, rather than in the diversification of the conception of vocation (as with Luther and Calvin), was the corresponding elevation of women to a status of almost complete equality with men in the central task of the fellowship of the reborn. Correlative with the enhanced role of women was the reconception of the medieval sacrament of marriage in the covenantal context of the Radical Reformation.

So much, then, by way of introduction for some of the traits common to the Radical Reformation.

Modern, and particularly American, Protestants, seeking to grasp the Radical Reformation as a whole, must try to see it as one of the two fronts against which classical Protestantism was seeking to establish its position, the other being Catholicism, which was renewing its strength and extending its global bounds.

With what they considered the papal Antichrist to their right, Luther and Melanchthon, Zwingli then Bullinger, Calvin and Cranmer, readily thought of their common foe to the left as a three-headed Cerberus and called the monster abusingly, without their wonted theological precision, almost interchangeably Libertinism, Anabaptism, Fanaticism. Today we are in a position to see much more clearly than they did the differences within the Radical Reformation. Indeed, historians within the denominational traditions surviving intact from the age of their martyrs, namely, the Mennonites, the Hutterites, the Schwenckfelders, and the (Transylvanian) Unitarians, and others in traditions indi-
rectly dependent upon it—namely, the Quakers and the Baptists—have gone so far in the direction of distinguishing in the sixteenth century the Anabaptists and the Spiritualists and the Evangelical Rationalists that there is once again a great need to see the whole of the Radical Reformation synoptically, the better to understand both the general morphology of Christian radicalism and the classical formulation of Protestantism.

As a variegated episode in the general history of Christianity, the Radical Reformation may be said to extend from 1516, the year of Erasmus’ edition of the Greek New Testament, to a cluster of events around 1578 and 1579, namely, the death of the leader of the Hutterites in their golden age (Peter Walpot); the death of the leader of the Transylvanian Unitarians (Francis Dávid); the arrival of Faustus Socinus in Poland and his conversion of Racovian, antitrinitarian Anabaptism in the direction of Socinianism; the official toleration of Mennonitism by William of Orange; and the Emden disputation between the Mennonites and the Reformed. By roughly this time, the Radical Reformation had eliminated its most obvious excesses, had softened its asperities, and had, moreover, come to differentiate and redefine quite clearly its own disparate impulses, settling down and consolidating inwardly in diverse and largely isolated sects and fellowships. Slowly gathering strength, bearers of their ideas and institutions or groups analogous to them were to become once again involved in general history, notably in the restructuring of English Christendom in the age of the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth. Again in our own times, when, in a new context at once secular and ecumenical, the European state churches are being disestablished, the large churchlike American denominations are being reorganized, and the younger churches of Asia and Africa are being challenged by renascent ethnic religions and the international religion of the proletariat, when, in short, the mission of the churches everywhere is being reconceived in a basically hostile or alienated environment, Christians of many denominations are finding themselves constitutionally and in certain other ways closer to the descendants of the despised sectaries of the Reformation Era than to the classical defenders of a reformed corpus christianum.