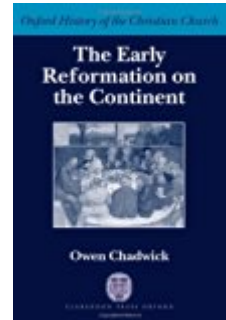


**Owen Chadwick.** *The Early Reformation on the Continent*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 446 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-826902-1.



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The 1520s in the 1970s (narrated in the 2000s)

When was the Reformation? In the late 1980s, Heinz Schilling declared that although most Reformation research had focused on the years before 1555, this period was over-researched and intensive attention should be directed to the more crucial and interesting later period.[1] The burden of new Reformation research, in the wake of this statement, followed the path Schilling charted. So any new survey of the early Reformation comes as a welcome reminder of the status quo ante in research about the previous era, a focus that is particularly valuable for students and teachers, since most university courses still deal most intensively with it. This is a period of which Chadwick's account of the years to 1555 on the continent provides a well-written, erudite, and skilled, but nonetheless extremely traditional, picture, heavily reminiscent of the condition of the field in the 1970s and 1980s, with brief forays into subsequent research. As such, it offers a comfortable, erudite read that does little to excite the imagination about renewed possibilities for research in this period.

There are virtues to this stance. Around 1970, in the wake of the ecumenism of the previous decade, the field had shed many of the confessional prejudices that made it suspect to secular historians. Thus, as younger Reformation historians abandoned theology and books for social history and archives, it seemed that the Reformation had joined the historical mainstream and would no longer be the province of arcane theological battles or dusty antiquarianism. In many ways, Chadwick's book illustrates the best qualities of this historiographical moment; in his writing, we see the emerging connections between intellectual and social history; and we find again lucid recountings of historical chestnuts like the Johanne Comma, which were once standard loci of educated knowledge of the Reformation that have sadly faded from scholarly awareness since. In some places, Chadwick has updated this traditional stance for the new century; Thomas Brady's works on Strasbourg and the Swiss Reformation, highly controversial at their publication twenty years ago, are now presented as orthodoxy.[2]

The best chapters of the work concern the most traditional topics, like introductory chapters on the Bible and "Scholarship and Religion," although even here recent work that has heavily impacted the field such as that of Erika Rummel on humanism and the rapidly proliferating studies on Christian Hebraism are not reflected in the narrative; none of the work of the eminent Heiko Oberman published after 1981 appears, either. Still, wonderfully written comments reflect the ways that the push toward ecumenism affected historians. For instance, when commenting on Erasmus's 1518 edition of the *Enchiridion*, Chadwick writes, "In it there was an oblique reference to Luther, though without naming him; and it was clear both that Erasmus approved of him and that he warned him not to be in such a hurry but to go more cautiously" (p. 48). In a similar comment on the Luther-Erasmus connection from Luther's perspective, Chadwick writes, "Erasmus thought Luther to risk success by extremism, Luther doubted whether so funny a man could be serious" (p. 59). Taken together, these statements and others like them present the view of the Reformation now presented by many scholars, which was then only emerging: that in many ways, both Reformers and their opponents sought the same goals, and the Reformation was not necessarily the revolutionary challenge to the traditions of the old faith that most contemporaries found it to be and around which so much intense conflict emerged. Particularly in Chadwick's subtle and witty depiction of the Luther-Erasmus connection, we can see the ways in which the Reformation emerged as a disconnect or failure in communication between the different parties involved.

The traditional picture, as conciliatory as it appeared in comparison to the past, was still not without its thorns, and in this work retains some of the remaining baggage of confessional history writing. Chadwick restates the once-common position on the insupportable quality of indulgences, a stance that a generation of revived research on the social and cultural history of late medieval

piety has largely erased among scholars (even if it persists in the popular memory of the Reformation among many Protestants). He reiterates the stereotypical view (challenged in the work of Charles Parker, Thomas Max Safley, and Timothy Fehler) that changes in sixteenth-century poor relief were primarily due to confessional conflicts and transformations. The intense discussion of the characters and conversions of the individual reformers (especially Erasmus, Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin) also represents a holdover from the traditional interests of Reformation history before the 1970s. The chapters on how the Reformation affected rural areas are heavy on discussion of how high politics affected them and light on rural life itself; this is particularly noticeable for the section on Prussia. The omission of relevant secondary work on certain topics in the last fifteen to twenty years created these infelicities and gaps, which are noticeable throughout the book. Some sections are more troublesome in this regard than others, particularly the pages on unbelief and tolerance (a pastiche of Febvre and Popkin, Lecler and Guggisberg) and those on religious drama (which draw on secondary works of the nineteenth century).[3] Another reflection of the traditional picture on this topic is the way in which "on the continent" is expressed in the work: it means primarily the Holy Roman Empire (and its rebellious territories, i.e., Switzerland) with very occasional forays into France and Eastern Europe. With this focus, it is particularly unfortunate that no chapter on constitutional arrangements in the Empire is provided, a field in which German scholars in particular have made strong progress in the last decades.

The book jacket, of course, makes large claims about the originality of the book: "the structure of the book is distinctively original. Rather than following a conventional chronological progression, Chadwick takes a much broader perspective and arranges his material thematically." But the thematic approach (which is similar to one that is followed in many lectures on the Reformation, in-

cluding mine) still reflects some of the problems of the chronological approach. The structure of this work reflects Chadwick's acknowledgement that a degree of chronological narrative is necessary to tie the work together, and certain themes (education, women, radicals) fail to fit well into the consecutive chronology. Chadwick's work emphasizes the burden of the Reformation on the continent as being concerned with the emergence of the confessions, so that the radical reformation appears marginalized; as it happens here, on this view, the radicals are logically treated later in the narrative. Still, by the time Chadwick reaches the radicals at the end of the work, whose activities of the 1520s and 1530s were vital in influencing the directions taken by the confessions, he has already treated the Lutheran political reverses and advances of the 1550s. Thematically, then, this organization has a tendency to leave even the experienced reader a bit dizzy.

Taken together, Chadwick's chapters provide a useful picture of the early Reformation and are apparently designed to appeal to a fairly conservative readership. At the same time, the presentation of older consensus views as opposed to the raising of new questions underlines the reasons that many scholars have now turned to developments after 1555.

#### Notes

[1]. Heinz Schilling, "Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich: Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620," in *Historische Zeitschrift* 246 (1988): pp. 1-45.

[2]. The same is not true for Lyndal Roper, whose arguments in *The Holy Household* (1989) are piteously demolished by the author on p. 177, suggesting that perhaps feminism is still more controversial than materialist theories of class conflict.

[3]. Although admittedly the most exciting new work on this subject, that of Glenn Ehrstine

and Dorothea Freise, probably appeared too late to be considered by Chadwick.

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