Part 1
The Intellectual Context

1

The Shape of Late Medieval Religious Thought

The intellectual, social, and spiritual upheavals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries define the context within which the development of the Reformation of the sixteenth century must be approached. Although it has often been suggested in the past that the late Middle Ages was merely a period of general cultural and theological disintegration,[1] it is now appreciated that it was also a period of remarkable development which sets the scene for the Reformation itself.[2] In this chapter, I propose to present a general survey of the religious situation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a prelude to an analysis of areas of continuity between the late medieval and Reformation periods.

The Rise of Lay Religion

It is now generally agreed that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not witness the general decline in interest in the Christian religion in western Europe that was once thought to have taken place.[3] A careful examination of parameters such as church attendance or religious bequests and endowments – not to mention the new interest in pilgrimages and personal devotion – points to the vitality of Christian life in pre-Reformation Europe.[4] The remarkable number and variety of books published for private devotional purposes is a clear indication of how important lay piety had become within an increasingly articulate and affluent laity.[5] Although it is clear that there was a growing anticlericalism in many European cities,[6] the development of this phenomenon was not solely a reflection of growing irritation with clerical privilege.[7] The rise in piety and theological awareness on the part of the laity – particularly evident in the manner in which speculative

theology was subordinated to Marian devotion in popular literature[8] – inevitably led to a growing dissatisfaction with the role allocated to the clergy in the order of salvation.

The close relationship that existed between education and lay piety in the later Middle Ages is indicated by the fact that the remarkable growth of interest in education in the fifteenth century was primarily associated with monastic houses, particularly those of the *devotio moderna*. The Brethren of the Common Life occupy a strategic location, historically and theologically, in that their distinctive conception of the nature of the religious life can be argued to mediate between the cloister and the world, engendering values and attitudes that can be seen as characteristic of the transition from the medieval to the early modern period.[9] The *devotio moderna* can be regarded as the distinctive spirituality associated with the order, which undergirded its programs of education and monastic reform.[10] Although the early *devotio moderna* was not primarily concerned with popular education, but rather with the reformation of monasteries,[11] it rapidly assumed a major pedagogical role in the fifteenth century. The student hostels attached to the major monasteries of the Brethren of the Common Life extended their interest in the pastoral welfare of their students to include their education. Inevitably, the piety of the *devotio moderna* was transmitted in this education process. The monastic educational program resulted in an increasing consciousness of the rudiments of a well-established spiritual tradition, as well as the elements of Latin grammar, in the laity of the later medieval period.

The connection between the *devotio moderna* and individuals such as Erasmus,[12] and institutions such as the universities of Paris[13] and Tübingen,[14] serves to indicate how piety and pedagogy were intermingled in the period. Although there are indications that the educational standards of the clergy were themselves improving toward the end of the fifteenth century, the new educational movements were steadily eroding the advantage the clergy once enjoyed over the laity. All the indications are that piety and religion, if not theology itself, were becoming increasingly laicized toward the end of the medieval period.

The impact of the rising professional groups in cities throughout Europe in the late fifteenth century was considerable. No longer could a priest expect to satisfy his urban congregation by reading a Latin sermon as an adjunct to the reading of the mass – an intelligent and fresh sermon was required, if the priest was to be seen to justify his

position within society. No longer could he expect to justify his privileged position in urban society merely with reference to his calling.[15] At a time of economic depression there was widespread criticism of priests, who were both supported by the public and exempted from the often punitive taxes they faced.

The phenomenon of anticlericalism was widespread, and not specifically linked to any area of Europe. In part, the phenomenon reflects the low quality of the rank and file clergy. In Renaissance Italy, it was common for parish priests to have had virtually no training; what little they knew they gleaned from watching, helping, and imitating. Diocesan visitations regularly revealed priests who were illiterate, or had apparently permanently mislaid their breviaries. The poor quality of the parish clergy reflected their low social status: in early sixteenth-century Milan, chaplains had incomes lower than those of unskilled laborers. Many resorted to horse and cattle trading to make ends meet.[16] In rural France during the same period, the clergy enjoyed roughly the same social status as vagabonds: their exemption from taxation, prosecution in civil courts, and compulsory military service apart, they were virtually indistinguishable from other itinerant beggars of the period.[17]

The French situation illustrates especially well the growing alienation of the laity from their clergy. The fiscal privileges enjoyed by clergy were the source of particular irritation, especially in times of economic difficulty. In the French diocese of Meaux, which would become a center for reforming activists in the period 1521–46, the clergy were exempted from all forms of taxation, including charges relating to the provisioning and garrisoning of troops, which provoked considerable local resentment. In the diocese of Rouen, there was popular outcry over the windfall profits made by the church by selling grain at a period of severe shortage.[18] Clerical immunity from prosecution in civil courts further isolated the clergy from the people.

In France, the subsistence crises of the 1520s played a major role in the consolidation of anticlerical attitudes. In his celebrated study of Languedoc, Le Roy Ladurie pointed out that the 1520s witnessed a reversal of the process of expansion and recovery that had been characteristic of the two generations since the ending of the Hundred Years War.[19] From that point onward, a crisis began to develop, taking the form of plague, famine, and migration of the rural poor to the cities in search of food and employment. A similar pattern has now been identified for the period in most of France north of the Loire.[20] This

subsistence crisis focused popular attention on the gross disparity between the fate of the lower classes and the nobles and ecclesiastical establishment.

The vast majority of late Renaissance bishops in France were drawn from the nobility,[21] a trend illustrated by diocese after diocese. In Meaux, the higher echelons of the ecclesiastical establishment were drawn from the urban patriciate, as were the senior clergy throughout the Brie.[22] In the province of Languedoc, the senior clergy were generally outsiders, often nobility imposed upon the dioceses by royal patronage. Rarely resident within their dioceses, these clergy regarded their spiritual and temporal charges as little more than sources of unearned income, useful for furthering political ambitions elsewhere. The noble background and status of the episcopacy and senior clergy served to distance them from the artisans and peasants, and to insulate them from the economic subsistence crisis of the 1520s.

This increasing anticlericalism must not, however, be seen as a reaction against the Christian religion itself, but merely as a growing dissatisfaction with the role and status of the clergy within an increasingly professional urbanized, yet still Christian, society. Similarly, the rising hostility toward scholasticism in theology must not be thought to imply a decline in popular interest in religion,[23] but actually reflects both a growing theological competence on the part of some of the laity (and Erasmus may serve as an example), and increasing interest in nonacademic forms of religion (often expressed in pietistic, sentimental, or external forms) on the part of others.[24] To dismiss this latter form of religious expression as "superstition" is for the historian to impose improperly a modern *Weltanschauung* upon this very different period in history.

The advent of printing led to works of popular devotion becoming increasingly accessible to the intelligent and literate laity, and appears to have contributed considerably to the promotion of popular piety, particularly through the growing body of devotional material that now began to appear.[25] This technological development was of particular importance in contributing to the remarkable success of Erasmus's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* in the first decades of the sixteenth century, a success that unquestionably reflects the fact that it was addressed to precisely such an articulate lay piety, expressing that piety in an intelligent and intelligible form.[26] Thus Erasmus's criticisms of scholastic theology were directed against the form in which it was expressed – particularly the rather inelegant forms of Latin employed by linguistically

challenged scholastic theologians – rather than against the religious ideas that it articulated.[27] The remarkable impact of the *Hortulus Animae* at Strasbourg – which went through 25 editions in the 19 years following its publication in 1498 – is a typical testimony to the vitality of the interiorized piety characteristic of the urban professional classes of the later medieval period.[28] It is also clear that there was an essential continuity between the piety of the *devotio moderna* and that of the Reformation,[29] thus indicating the fertile ground upon which the new religious outlook associated with the sixteenth century movement would fall.

The Crisis of Authority Within the Church

While the challenge to the authority of the church posed by the rise of the lay religious consciousness must not be underestimated, a more serious challenge to that authority had arisen within the church itself. The late medieval period witnessed a crisis in ecclesiastical authority that would ultimately find its expression in the astonishing doctrinal diversity of the fifteenth century. The fourteenth century appears to have opened without any real awareness of what the future held in this respect. The Jubilee of 1300 constituted a splendid backdrop to the publication of *Unam sanctam* in 1302, marking the zenith of medieval papal ecclesiastical ambitions.[30] The apparent moral victory that the Pope had secured over the French monarch was, however, shown to be hollow through the humiliation of Anagni, and the establishment of the Avignon papacy in 1309.[31] The fact that the theological authority of the Avignon popes was largely based upon that of the theology faculty at Paris serves to demonstrate the severe restrictions placed upon them in this respect. Although the Parisian theology faculty supported the condemnation of William of Ockham in 1339,[32] in 1333–4 it had forced upon an unwilling John XXII a humiliating alteration of his pronouncement on the beatific vision.[33] The condemnation of Ockham is faintly ironical, in that one of Ockham's chief targets in his *Tractatus contra Johannem* was none other than John XXII's pronouncement on the beatific vision.[34] Ockham has, however, added significance on account of his theory of the sources of Christian doctrine. In his *Opus nonaginta dierum*, Ockham developed a theory of doctrinal authority that denied the pope (or, indeed, an ecumenical council) any right to legislate in matters of faith.[35] There was thus no fundamental

means by which the pope might resolve the contemporary diversity of belief concerning the eucharist or the assumption of the Virgin,[36] or legislate to eliminate the doctrinal diversity that ensued from the erosion of papal authority.

The death of the last Avignonese pope (Gregory XI) led to the Schism of 1378–1417, culminating in the recognition of three rival claimants to the papacy in the aftermath of the Council of Pisa (1409).[37] It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy at Avignon and the ensuing schism upon the medieval church. To whom should believers look for an authoritative – or even a provisional – statement concerning the faith of the church? In a period of unprecedented expansion in theological speculation within the university theological faculties and religious houses of western Europe, guidance was urgently required as to the catholicity of the new methods and doctrines that were emerging. The traditional method of validation of such opinions was by reference to the teaching of the institutional church, objectified in the episcopacy and the papacy, yet the theological and moral integrity of the institution of the church itself appeared to many to be called into question by the events of the Great Schism, and the period immediately preceding it. Furthermore, Ockham had called into question the role of both the papacy and ecumenical councils in such a process of validation, and initiated a debate over this matter continued by Pierre d'Ailly, Jean Gerson, and Johannes Breviscoxa.[38] The development of the astonishing doctrinal diversity of the late fourteeth and fifteenth centuries is probably due to the apparent suspension of the normal methods of validation of theological opinions, together with an apparent reluctance (or possibly even an inability) on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities to take decisive action against heterodox views as and when they arose.[39]

The weakening in the fifteenth century of the means by which orthodoxy might be enforced became more pronounced in the first half of the sixteenth century, as factors such as the continued rise of nationalism in northern Europe, the Franco-Italian war, and the Hapsburg–Valois conflict combined to make the suppression of heterodoxy by force considerably more difficult. The nationalist overtones of the early reforming movements and growing independence of the Swiss and southern German cities, to name no other factors, considerably diminished the ability of the curia to respond to the growing ideological and political threat from north of the Alps. Furthermore, Hadrian

VI failed to press for the convening of diocesan and provincial synods in northern Europe during the years when the possibility of suppressing the new movements was greatest (1522–3). The factors leading to the erosion of such centralized power as had previously existed at this crucial period in history are not fully understood; however, the consequences of this erosion of power are all too obvious, in that the new reforming movements were allowed to develop with minimal hindrance.

The Great Schism was ended by the Council of Constance (1414–17), which elected Martin V as pope on November 11, 1417.[40] The circumstances under which this council was convened, however, were to occasion a further crisis of authority within the church. In that there were several claimants to the papacy, it was widely held that the only manner in which the matter might be settled was through the convening of an ecumenical council. The fifth session of the Council enacted the decree *Haec sancta*, which affirmed that its authority was derived directly from Christ, and was to be respected even by popes. Although it was on the basis of this presupposition that the election of Martin V took place, the assumption that such authority was invested in a council (rather than the pope) led to disagreement concerning its ecumenicity.[41] The subsequent undermining of the conciliarist position,[42] culminating in Pius II's bull *Execrabilis* (1460), did not defuse the crucial theological question arising from the rise of the Conciliar Movement: who had the authority to validate theological opinions – the pope, a council, or perhaps even a professor of theology? It was this uncertainty that contributed to no small extent to the quite remarkable doctrinal diversity of the late medieval church.

An additional threat to the authority of the church, understood at both the political and theological levels, arose from the rapid expansion of printing. This new technology permitted the transmission of ideas from one locality to another with unprecedented ease, and posed a formidable challenge to those wishing to ensure conformity to existing ecclesiastical beliefs and practices.[43] The hapless task faced, for example, by the French religious authorities as they attempted to stem the flood of evangelical pamphlets and books in Paris from 1520 onwards is an important indication of the general difficulty of controlling ideas in the later Renaissance.[44] The enforcement of intellectual conformity became an increasingly difficult business throughout western Europe, as the widespread distribution of books broke down traditional social and political barriers to the dissemination of new ideas.

The Development of Doctrinal Diversity

The doctrinal diversity so characteristic of the later medieval period cannot be explained on the basis of any single development. However, of the various factors contributing to this development, in addition to the absence of magisterial pronouncements, several may be singled out as being of particular importance. First, it is clear that a number of quite distinct theological schools emerged during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, with differing philosophical presuppositions and methods. These schools tended to be based upon, or associated with, specific religious orders. As a result, various quite distinct approaches to theology, differing both in substance and in emphasis, may be discerned within the late medieval period. Second, there was considerable disagreement on the nature of the sources of Christian theology, and their relative priority. Of particular importance in this respect is the absence of general agreement concerning the status and method of interpretation of both Scripture and the writings of Augustine of Hippo.[45] Third, the tension between the rival logico-critical and historico-critical methods became increasingly significant in the later fourteenth century, with a concomitant polarization in areas of doctrine sensitive to methodological presuppositions (such as Christology and the doctrine of justification). Fourth, the rise of lay piety – an important phenomenon for many reasons – proved a near-irresistible force for development in certain areas of theology, particularly Mariology, as an expression of the beliefs and attitudes underlying popular devotional practice and reflection. Fifth, in certain areas of doctrine – most notably the doctrine of justification – there appears to have been considerable confusion during the first decades of the sixteenth century concerning the specifics of the official teaching of the church, with the result that doctrinal diversity arose through uncertainty over whether a given opinion corresponded to the teaching of the church or not. Some of these factors may conveniently be considered at this point, before being developed further in later chapters.

   Although the development of theological schools may be traced to the establishment of Tours, Reims, St Gall, Reichenau, and Laon as centers of learning in the ninth century,[46] the rise of the great theological schools is especially associated with the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the aftermath of the Gregorian reforms. By the end of the

twelfth century, Paris had become established as the theological center of Europe.[47] Its theological schools propagated both the views of, and the disagreement among, masters such as Peter Abelard, Gilbert of Poitiers, Peter Lombard, and Hugh of St Victor. It was, however, events of the thirteenth century that are of decisive importance for our present purposes. The Dominicans and Franciscans arrived at Paris in the second decade of the thirteenth centuries, and gradually wrested three chairs of theology from the control of secular masters to that of their orders.[48] The opinions of the first Dominican and Franciscan professors (Roland of Cremona OP and John of St Giles OFM) came to be perpetuated in the teachings of the early Dominican and Franciscan schools, culminating in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure respectively.[49] A distinct school appears to have developed slightly later within the Augustinian Order, based upon the writings of Giles of Rome.[50] The impact of the teaching of Duns Scotus, and subsequently that of William of Ockham and his followers, in the early fourteenth century, led to further diversification within these schools, with the rise of the later Franciscan school, the *via moderna* and the *schola Augustiniana moderna*, to name but the most significant. Although these schools tended to be linked with specific religious orders, it is clear that there was considerable diversity of belief within such orders.

Although Carl Stange argued, in a study dating from the beginning of the twentieth century,[51] that late medieval theology was essentially and fundamentally a theology of religious orders – so that Dominicans followed the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, the Franciscans those of Bonaventure, and the Augustinians those of Giles of Rome or Gregory of Rimini – subsequent more detailed studies have demonstrated that this judgment cannot be sustained. Other factors were readily identified as significant influences on shaping schools of thought. Of particular importance was the role of local universities in molding distinctive intellectual identities. Thus Hermelink pointed out how the Dominicans at Cologne were significantly influenced by the *via antiqua*, whereas those at Vienna and Erfurt were more responsive to the ideas of the *via moderna* – these differences corresponding to the philosophical and theological schools that were dominant within the local university faculty of arts.[52] Robert Holcot OP exemplifies the tendency for leading Dominicans to be influenced by currents of thought (in this case, the *via moderna*) originating from outside their specific religious order.[53] A similar observation might be made concerning the influence of the

via moderna on the Augustinian priory at Erfurt in the final years of the sixteenth century.[54] Furthermore, it is clear that there was considerable tension within the later medieval Franciscan Order concerning the relative status of Bonaventure and Duns Scotus, each of whom could lay claim to the title of doctor of that order. This became particularly apparent at the Council of Trent, where the occasionally wide differences between the two doctors on points of theological importance could no longer be ignored.[55] Indeed, there are reasons for supposing that the chief contribution of the Franciscans to the intellectual life of the late medieval period was primarily its distinctive and influential spirituality,[56] rather than any coherent theological system. It will therefore be clear that there was potentially a remarkably broad spectrum of theological opinions current within the universities and religious orders of Europe on the eve of the Reformation, simply on account of the diversity of theological schools and the absence of well-defined and strictly enforced spheres of influence (such as specific countries, universities, or religious orders) by which their teachings might be restricted or controlled.

A further contributing factor to the development of rampant doctrinal plurality in the later medieval period was the controversy between the *via antiqua* and *via moderna* concerning the merits of the logico-critical method in theology. This conflict – exemplified in microcosm in the fourteenth-century disputes within the Augustinian Order[57] – was pregnant with theological significance in relation to numerous areas of doctrine, including Christology and the theology of justification. The use of the dialectic between the two powers of God by theologians of the later Franciscan schools – the *via moderna* and the *schola Augustiniana moderna* – called into question the foundations of certain traditional doctrines. The appeal to the dialectic between the two powers of God was based upon the distinction between the ordained (*potentia Dei ordinata*) and absolute (*potentia Dei absoluta*) powers of God.[58] A dialectic was set up between things as they might have been, and things as they actually are, corresponding to the absolute and ordained powers of God respectively.[59] In view of the widespread misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of this dialectic, a brief account of this device is called for, before moving on to consider its implications for doctrinal pluralism.

The essential point made by those who appealed to the dialectic between the powers of God was that the present created order, including

the order of salvation, did not result from God acting *of necessity*. Out of the initial set of potentialities open to actualization by God, only a subset was actualized. The argument runs as follows. Before any decision concerning which potentialities should be actualized, God was at liberty to select any from among them, subject solely to the condition that this should not involve logical contradiction. The fact that it is impossible to construct a triangle with four sides is thus not understood to involve any restriction upon God's course of action in this respect. God has determined which potentialities shall be actualized, and has executed this decision. As a result, God is now under a self-imposed restriction in regard to future actions. In other words, once God has decided to create and work within a certain order, God is under an obligation to respect this order. Yet this is not a case of God being under external constraint, or acting of necessity. Having chosen to act in certain ways, God remains faithful to those decisions. If God is constrained, it is by none other than God.

Duns Scotus thus points out that the present established created order is essentially an expression of the divine wisdom and benevolence, rather than the result of a necessity imposed upon God from outside.[60] This point is taken up and developed by Ockham, who emphasizes that the dialectic between two powers of God does not imply that there are two *present* courses of action open to God;[61] but simply that the moral and physical ordering of creation must be recognized to be contingent, rather than necessary, in that God could have ordained a different ordering within the world. The effect of this kind of analysis was to focus attention on the apparent weaknesses of the foundations of certain significant doctrines, which were now revealed to be less rigorous than many had believed. Consideration of two such doctrines will illustrate this point in a little more detail.

The theologians of the thirteenth century were virtually unanimous in their opinion that justification involved certain "created habits of grace."[62] This opinion was substantiated on the grounds that such a created habit was intrinsically necessary, on account of the natures of sin and grace – in other words, that such a habit of grace was necessary *ex natura rei*. The appeal to the dialectic between the two powers of God called this alleged "necessity" into question: had God so desired, a completely different means of justifying humanity could have been devised. While not actually calling into question the *de facto* necessity of such habits, the original grounds upon which their necessity had been

deduced by an earlier generation of theologians were now completely eroded.[63] As a result, the main theological schools of the fourteenth century – such as the modern Franciscan school, the *via moderna*, and the *schola Augustiniana moderna* – now regarded the divine acceptation itself, rather than any created habit of grace, as the immediate cause of justification. God was free to do things – such as justifying humanity – *directly* that might otherwise be done through created intermediates (such as habits of grace). This significant shift in opinion is important for two reasons. First, it indicates how the new logico-critical method posed a powerful challenge to received doctrines and their original theological foundations, and thus contributed significantly to the doctrinal pluralism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Second, it suggested that the present order of salvation was radically contingent, merely one of a number of possibilities, thus undermining its permanent significance. Far from being determined by the intrinsic nature of the realities involved, it was now seen to rest upon the sovereign will of God.

This impression was confirmed by Ockham's analysis of the doctrine of the incarnation, which recognized the possibility that God could have become incarnate in the form of a stone, a block of wood, or even as an ass – rather than as a human being.[64] To many critics, the application of the logico-critical method seemed to lead directly to the complete disintegration of the traditional structure of Christian doctrine, resulting in a Nestorian Christology and a Pelagian soteriology.[65] The rise of the logico-critical method thus led not merely to a diversification in late medieval theological opinions, but also to the laying down of an implicit yet fundamental challenge to the foundations of much traditional Christian theology. Diversification was inevitable; a loss of theological confidence was also a distinct possibility.

It was thus clear that plurality, in at least certain areas of Christian doctrine, was inevitable. For example, the Great Schism gave rise to a range of ecclesiologies as the church's theologians attempted to grapple with the theoretical difficulties arising from the evident disunity within the church.[66] The settled ecclesiologies of the twelfth centuries no longer seemed to work, given the new ecclesiastical realities.[67] How could the true church be defined, when there was such significant disagreement over the identify of its head, and the locus of its authority? Yet even in those areas of theology where greater doctrinal coherence might have been expected, considerable diversity developed.[68]

The erosion of traditional understandings of the authority of certain individuals played no small part in this development. One such individual was Augustine of Hippo.

The influence of Augustine upon the emergence and consolidation of the medieval theological tradition was immense.[69] He is by far the most frequently cited writer in Peter Lombard's *Sententiarum Libri Quattuor*. Although practically every late medieval theologian recognized the authority of Augustine of Hippo – a consideration which might at first sight suggest a basis for theological coherence – it must nevertheless be appreciated that there was actually little agreement at the time on how Augustine was to be interpreted. The rise of the historico-critical method within the Augustinian Order during the fourteenth century is of particular importance in this respect, as it marked a recognition of the need to establish reliable Augustinian texts as a necessary prelude to their interpretation.[70] The Middle Ages was plagued by a large number of texts attributed to certain classical writers, yet whose credentials were increasingly being questioned. The spurious work on "theology" attributed to Aristotle and Constantine's *Donation* (exposed as a forgery in the fifteenth century by Lorenzo Valla) are excellent examples of such writings.[71] Many works now known to be pseudonymous were seriously attributed to such leading theologians as Jerome and Augustine of Hippo during the Middle Ages, with significant implications for theological development.

The remakable number of pseudo-Augustinian texts in circulation at the time seriously hindered the establishment of Augustine's views,[72] particularly in the critically important area of soteriology. The pseudo-Augustinian treatise *Hypomnesticon* is of particular significance, on account of its obvious sympathy for the "semi-Pelagianism" of writers such as John Cassian, which represented a significant divergence from Augustine's authentic views on this matter. Things were made worse by the general tendency among theologians of the period to use collections of *sententiae*, rather than consulting original works at first hand, which inevitably led to Augustinian citations being used out of context, and occasionally totally inappropriately. An excellent example of this phenomenon may be seen in the case of the late fifteenth-century theologian Gabriel Biel. While considering the relation between grace and free will in justification, Biel alludes to Augustine's image of a horse and its rider to make a point. By confusing this image with a similar illustration found in the pseudo-Augustinian *Hypomnesticon* a

total inversion of Augustine's meaning results.[73] It is probable that Biel derived both this illustration and its quite inappropriate interpretation at second hand from Duns Scotus.[74] Nor was it merely doctors of antiquity who proved difficult to interpret, as the controversy during the early years of the fourteenth century surrounding the true nature of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas was to prove.[75]

The rising influence of lay piety is particularly marked upon the Mariological controversies of the late medieval period. Two rival positions developed: the *maculist* position, which held that Mary was subject to original sin, in common with every other human being; and the *immaculist* position, which held the contrary view that Mary was in some way preserved from original sin, and was thus to be considered sinless. The maculist position was regarded as firmly established within the High Scholasticism of the thirteenth century. The veneration of the Virgin within popular piety, however, proved to have an enormously creative power that initially challenged, and subsequently triumphed over, the academic objections raised against it by university theologians.[76] Significantly, it was the theologians of the Franciscan Order who supported the new doctrine in the face of opposition from the Dominicans: the former are known to have had deep popular roots largely denied to their more academic Dominican opponents. The early fourteenth century saw increasing support for the immaculists, initially within the Franciscan Order,[77] and subsequently within the universities and elsewhere. Of especial interest is the rapid acceptance of the doctrine of the immaculate conception within the Augustinian Order. The earlier Augustinians, such as Giles of Rome, Albert of Padua, Augustinus Triumphus of Ancona, and Gregory of Rimini, were strongly maculist.[78] In the middle of the fourteenth century however, a remarkable shift in opinion took place, beginning with theologians such as Johannes Hiltalingen of Basel, Henry of Friemar, and Thomas of Strasbourg, and continuing into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with Jacobus Perez of Valencia,[79] Johannes de Paltz,[80] and Johannes von Staupitz[81] adopting the immaculist opinion. The fourteenth century thus witnessed remarkable fluidity in this matter.

The development of this doctrine also emphasized the prevailing uncertainty in matters of authority, on account of the declaration of the 36th session of the Council of Basle (September 1439), which stated that the immaculate conception was a "pious doctrine, in conformity with the worship of the church, the catholic faith, right reason and

Holy Scripture."[82] By that point, however, the Council was in serious disagreement with the Pope, so that this decision was not treated as canonically binding. It is, however, clear that at least some later fifteenth-century theologians regarded this conciliar decision as magisterial, and appealed to it in their defense of this doctrine.[83]

There is growing agreement that the late medieval period saw considerable and widespread confusion develop within western Christendom concerning the official teaching of the church. Although there was a general consensus that it was necessary that there should be agreement – indeed, that no deviation could be permitted – concerning the fundamentals of the faith, as expressed in the Apostles' Creed,[84] it was also widely recognized that there was a need to distinguish these fundamental teachings of the church from the mere *opinions* of theologians, which could be debated and challenged in academic contexts. These "opinions" were tolerated, in that they did not pose a threat to the unity of the church. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that the distinction between "explicit catholic doctrine" and "theological opinion" was becoming confused, with wide uncertainty concerning to which of the two categories in question the increasingly wide range of theological views in circulation should be assigned.

The introduction of the new methodologies of the *via moderna*, particularly the logico-critical method, gave rise to a plethora of new theological ideas, which rapidly achieved a wide circulation in northern Europe. It was, however, far from clear what status these views enjoyed. Were they just the ideas of a few maverick theologians, or were they to be treated as catholic truth? In an age of confusion, it was inevitable that doctrinal plurality would flourish, and the distinction between "opinion" and "catholic truth" become increasingly blurred. Indeed, it could be argued that Luther's comprehensive theological protest against the church of his day was the consequence of an improper identification of the theological opinions of the *via moderna* concerning the justification of humanity before God (opinions which he came to regard as Pelagian) with the official teaching of the church. For Luther, it seemed that the entire church of his day had fallen into Pelagianism, and thus required doctrinal reformation as a matter of urgency – a judgment based upon the confusion of "opinion" and "dogma."

The uncertainty in the early decades of the sixteenth century in relation to the official teaching of the church on a number of matters is

particularly evident in relation to the doctrine of justification, thus lending some weight to Luther's misgivings. The Pelagian controversy had been brought to an end with the decisions of the Council of Carthage (418), which were subsequently clarified by the pronouncements of the Second Council of Orange (529).[85] Between this date and that of the sixth session of the Council of Trent (1546) – a period of more than a millennium – the church made no magisterial statement concerning the doctrine of justification. Furthermore, the decisions of Orange II were not available to the theologians of the Middle Ages: from the tenth century until the opening of the Council of Trent, the existence of the council, as well as its decisions, appear to have been unknown.[86] The theologians of the medieval period thus based their doctrines of justification upon the decisions of the Council of Carthage, which proved incapable of bearing the conceptual strain that came to be placed upon them. In a period of intense speculation, such as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the orthodoxy of a new approach to the justification of humanity – such as that of the *via moderna* – had to be determined with reference to the Council of Carthage, which used terms such as "grace" in a less precise sense.[87] As a result, a wide spectrum of theologies of justification, all of which could be regarded as legitimated by the standards of the Council of Carthage, passed into general circulation. Had the pronouncements of Orange II been available, a much more restricted range of such theologies would have resulted.

Two examples may be given to illustrate this confusion. In 1510, a group of young Italian humanists, intensely concerned with ensuring their personal salvation, adopted two very different courses of action. One section of this group, led by Paolo Giustiniani, felt that the only hope for their assured salvation lay in a monastic life of extreme austerity and piety; the other, led by Gasparo Contarini, felt that it was – or must be – possible to be justified by remaining in secular life.[88] But which corresponded to the teaching of the church? In a period of doctrinal confusion, a definitive answer to the question was not immediately forthcoming. Both groups believed that their position was correct, and adopted lifestyles consistent with these beliefs. Yet these beliefs and their associated lifestyles were diametrically opposed. A second example is provided by Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his controversy with Martin Luther over the question of the freedom of the human will. In his *Hyperaspistes*, Erasmus appears to show himself as

being quite unaware of *any* official teaching of the church concerning the question of what people must do to be saved – a fact that must be taken into account when assessing the "catholicity" of Erasmus's views on justification.[89]

Such was the confusion concerning what constituted the official teaching of the *magisterium* and what was merely theological opinion that an astonishing diversity of views on the justification of humanity before God were in circulation at the opening of the sixteenth century. Those within the *via moderna* espoused a theology of justification that approached, although cannot actually be said to constitute, Pelagianism, while their counterparts within the *schola Augustiniana moderna* developed strongly – occasionally ferociously – anti-Pelagian theologies of justification. For the theologians of the *via antiqua*, still influential in the late medieval period, the formal cause of justification was the intrinsic denomination of a created habit of grace; for the theologians of the *via moderna* and *schola Augustiniana moderna*, the formal cause of justification was the extrinsic denomination of the divine acceptation. There was no agreement on the cause of the predestination of humanity, or upon the related question of the nature of the human and divine roles in justification. In short, an astonishingly broad spectrum of theologies of justification existed in the later medieval period, encompassing practically every option that had not been specifically condemned as heretical by the Council of Carthage. In the absence of any definitive magisterial pronouncement concerning which of these options (or even what range of options) could be considered authentically catholic, it was left to each theologian to reach his own decision in this matter. A self-perpetuating doctrinal pluralism was thus an inevitability.

This point is of importance for a number of reasons. First, it can be shown that Luther's theological breakthrough involved his abandoning one specific option within this broad spectrum of theologies of justification, and embracing another within that spectrum. In other words, Luther's initial position of 1513–14, and his subsequent position (probably arrived at in 1515), were both recognized contemporary theological opinions, regarded as legitimate by the doctrinal standards of the time. Luther does not appear to have appreciated this point, apparently confusing the theological opinions of the *via moderna* (which he would reject) with the official teaching of the catholic church (which he would also reject, apparently on the assumption that it had universally lapsed into a form of Pelagianism, such as that which Luther saw in the

teachings of the *via moderna*). Why, it may reasonably be asked, was Luther unaware of this point? And why, it must also be asked, should Luther's changed views on justification have led to a doctrinal Reformation? (If, indeed, they did lead to such a Reformation – the relationship between the *initia theologiae Lutheri* and the *initia Reformationis* is still far from clear at present.) After all, Luther's "new" views on justification were still well within the spectrum of contemporary catholic theological opinion. Even if Luther did not recognize this point, there must have been others at the time who did.

Second, when the Council of Trent met to define the catholic position on justification in relation to that of the Protestant churches, it found itself in the position of having to legitimize a wide range of theologies of justification, rather than legitimating or defining *one* specific theology. In fact, it is quite misleading to refer to "*the* Tridentine doctrine of justification," in that there is no such single doctrine, but a broadly defined range of such theologies (note the deliberate use of the plural). The Council of Trent was not concerned with resolving the theological disputes between the *via antiqua* and *via moderna*, nor between Thomists or Scotists, but was primarily charged with the task of drawing a clear line of demarcation between catholic and Protestant teachings. In effect, Trent was therefore obliged to acknowledge and endorse the doctrinal pluralism of the late medieval period.

Although a similar doctrinal diversity and confusion may be demonstrated in the spheres of theology other than the doctrine of justification, this particular doctrine is clearly of outstanding importance in relation to this present study. There is still every reason to suggest that the theological issue over which the Lutheran Reformation began was that of justification, and the doctrinal diversity within the late medieval church in relation to this doctrine, when linked to the apparent inability to distinguish catholic dogma from theological opinion, may be regarded as the backdrop to Luther's reforming vocation. Although, as will be emphasized later in this chapter, it is improper to extrapolate from Luther's personal theological concerns to those of the Reformation as a whole, it is nevertheless significant that the intellectual origins of the Lutheran Reformation appear to be linked with the doctrinal pluralism of the later Middle Ages.

Briefly stated, then, the later medieval period may be regarded as characterized by a twofold crisis of authority. First, there was an evident lack of clarity concerning the nature, location, and exercise of

theological authority at a time when rapid intellectual development led to considerable diversification of theological opinions, and confusion concerning the precise status of these opinions. The views of the Reformers initially appear to have paralleled views entertained elsewhere in the period, and thus not to have attracted attention until the situation had developed to a point at which forcible suppression of their views was necessary. Second, it is clear that the church, whether through inability or disinclination, did not move to suppress the views of the Reformers during the period when such suppression was a real possibility. The provincial and diocesan synods, established by the Fourth Lateran Council as the means of enforcing theological orthodoxy, appear to have failed to exercise such authority when it was most required.

Forerunners of the Reformation

The search for the intellectual origins of the Reformation has traditionally been conducted within the framework of "Forerunners of the Reformation." This tendency may be traced back to the work of Karl Heinrich Ullmann, who identified Johannes Pupper of Goch, Johannes Ruchrat of Wesel, and Wessel Gansfort as chief among such "Forerunners."[90] Inevitably, Ullmann's understanding of the nature of the Reformation was heavily influenced by his Lutheran presuppositions. The search for such "Forerunners" has, in fact, met with little success.[91] There has, for example, been a tendency to treat the Reformation as a homogeneous phenomenon, essentially defined by Luther's doctrine of justification. "Forerunners of the Reformation" are thus categorized as medieval thinkers who anticipated one or more determinative aspects of Luther's theology of justification.[92] It is, however, quite unacceptable to limit such an inquiry in this way. In particular, two objections may be made. First, why should the inquiry be restricted to Luther's *doctrine of justification*? Second, why should the inquiry be restricted to Luther? The relation between the *initia theologiae Lutheri* and the *initia Reformationis* is now appreciated to be of such complexity that it is quite improper to regard Luther's personal theological preoccupations as identical with, or even coterminous with, those of the Lutheran Reformation as a whole.[93] Nor can the quest for the intellectual origins of the Reformation be limited to Luther, when there is such an

abundance of evidence that Zwingli's reformation at Zurich owed its historical and theological origins to quite different currents of thought.

It is quite clear that the search for "Forerunners of the Reformation" owed its origins to confessional and essentially *polemical*, rather than scholarly, considerations. Far from representing an objective exercise in intellectual history, the question of forerunners has been conceived in terms of demonstrating that "Lutheran" ideas were either the revival of existing heresies or the repristination of authentic trends in late medieval theology. The former approach underlies much of the early catholic critique of Luther, particularly within France. In condemning as heretical or heterodox Luther's early theological theses in the sixteenth century, the University of Paris attempted to establish the essential continuity between earlier heresies and the ideas now being expounded by Luther. Luther's ideas were thus not to be regarded as original, but were essentially the republication of older heresies. Thus Luther was a Hussite in his theology of contrition, a Wycliffite in his doctrine of confession, and a Manichean in his theology of grace and free will.[94] According to the University of Paris, there were "Forerunners of the Reformation" only in the sense that the Reformation represented a reappearance of older heresies: the polemical rhetorical device of *reductio ad haeresim* was sufficient to establish the heretical spiritual lineage of the movement.

Lutheran apologists, on the other hand, attempted to establish continuity between the Reformation and the *testes veritatis* – the authentic Christian tradition, which had survived in the medieval period, despite the corruptions of scholasticism.[95] The charge to which the Lutheran Reformers were particularly sensitive was that of doctrinal innovation, and the most persuasive means of countering this charge was to demonstrate the continuity of the theology of the Reformers with that of the patristic era via the representatives of the *testes veritatis* in the medieval period. The most significant exposition of this continuity was Flacius Illyricus's *Ecclesiastica Historia secundum singulas centurias*, better known simply as the *Magdeburg Centuries*.[96] Based on Flacius's earlier work *Catalogus testium veritatis*,[97] the *Centuries* developed its method in an increasingly sophisticated direction. Whereas the *Catalogus* was primarily concerned with identifying those who had opposed papal claims or had suffered as a result of them in the past, the *Centuries* adopted a different approach by emphasizing the positive criterion of theological continuity between the Reformers and their forerunners

with such effect that it was dubbed *pestilentissimum opus* by the opponents of the Reformation. In that it was the Luther Reformation that was subjected to the most persistent and penetrating critique by contemporary catholic academics, it was inevitable that the question of the theological antecedents of the Reformation should be discussed solely with reference to it, rather than to the Reformed church. Catholic anti-Reformation polemic appears to have focused on Luther, rather than on Zwingli or the Rhineland reformers of the 1520s.

The historian cannot, however, be satisfied with any such polemical foundation or criterion of the notion of "Forerunners of the Reformation," whether this is interpreted negatively (that is, the Lutheran Reformation as the revitalization of older heresies) or positively (that is, the Lutheran Reformation as the restitution of the *testes veritatis*). There has been a most regrettable tendency, undoubtedly reflecting both the nationality and the confessional bias of scholars working in the field, to deal with the question of "Forerunners of the Reformation" solely in terms of the German Lutheran Reformation. The question of the origins of the leading ideas associated with the Reformed church cannot be excluded from this analysis. In fact, it could be argued that the severe limitations of the thesis of the "Forerunner" are largely due to its historical origins as a sixteenth-century polemical device in the disputes over the "catholicity" of the Lutheran Reformation. Modern scholarship, not wishing to be impeded by such considerations, is at liberty either to modify the concept, or to abandon it altogether. The polemical intentions of the thesis of the "Forerunner," as stated in its original form, make it unsuitable for the purposes of this study. It will, however, be clear that this does not call into question, still less invalidate, the basic notion of a degree of fundamental theological continuity between the Reformation and the late medieval period: it simply means that this thesis cannot be investigated on the basis of such questionable sixteenth-century presuppositions. In particular, it is no longer possible to overlook the enormously significant question of the intellectual origins of the Reformed church, which was generally overlooked on account of the polemical intentions of both the critics and defenders of early Lutheranism. It is on the basis of considerations such as these that the concept of the "Forerunners" must be recognized to require modification.

The frequent linkage proposed within the earlier literature between "medieval heresies" and "Forerunners of the Reformation" requires

much closer examination. It is manifestly obvious that the term "heresy" has changed its meaning over the years, causing no small difficulties for those who would seek to determine its essence or structure. The etymology of the term is not especially helpful;[98] the term has come to have developed associations which, though clearly related to its original meaning, incorporate additional nuances. Strictly speaking, the use of the term "heresy" in a *theological* sense must be restricted to the patristic period. The term was extensively used throughout the Middle Ages with overtones that distance the medieval usage of the term from its original associations. The case against the continuing use of the term "heresy" to designate religious movements in the Middle Ages was first made in 1935 by Herbert Grundmann, who argued that the notion was defined from an inquisitional, rather than theological, perspective.[99] "Heresy" was defined in terms of challenges posed to the authority of the church, from the perspective of those who were thus challenged.

A purely historical account of the notion of heresy in the Middle Ages is thus obliged to define orthodoxy in terms of papal teaching, and heresy in terms of dissent from such teaching.[100] Heresy increasingly became a juridical notion.[101] Where the patristic period conceived heresy in terms of a deviation from the catholic faith, the Jurists of the twelfth and thirteenth century succeeded in redefining the notion in terms of the rejection of ecclesiastical authority, especially papal authority. As Robert Moore has argued, the extension of the category of heresy was an important instrument of social control.[102] The medieval redefinition of heresy locates its essence in challenging papal power, rather than in deviating from Christian orthodoxy. Heresy became the means by which a society subsumed its endemic tensions under a notionally religious category. It ceased to be a theological notion, and was now defined legally or sociologically.[103]

There is thus no theological contradiction involved in the Reformation's insistence that many of those stigmatized as "heretics" by the medieval church were, in fact, orthodox Christians. Nor could any posited continuity between, for example, Luther and a medieval "heretic" be taken as a *prima facie* indication of heterodoxy on Luther's part, precisely because of the manner in which the Middle Ages chose to construe the notion of heresy in a sociological rather than theological manner. Yet our increased awareness of the sociological dimensions of medieval heresy raises a fundamental problem for the traditional

conception of the "Forerunner of the Reformation" on account of the communal dimensions of the concept. As Grundmann stressed, heresy is to be understood as a *Lebensform* rather than as a set of abstract ideas.[104] These heresies lacked a "definite heretical doctrine" as a point of nucleation and a means of distinguishing them from those around them; the boundaries were thus social, rather than ideational.

If this understanding of the medieval heresies to which the Reformation is alleged to be linked is conceded, the notion that Luther allied himself to certain individual thinkers of earlier generations becomes problematic. The issue concerns communities and intellectual "movements" (*Bewegungen*), in Grundmann's nuanced sense of the term, rather than the isolated ideas of individuals. The debate must therefore be concerned with how Luther and others relate to the historical aftermath of such movements, and ought, as far as possible, to be conducted on historical rather than confessional criteria. There is no longer any polemical or apologetic need to demonstrate that there exist "Forerunners" of either Lutheran or Reformed ideas; the real issue is the extent of continuity and the nature of discontinuity between the ideas and those of the later Middle Ages. It is becoming increasingly clear that, if there exist "Forerunners of the Reformation," these are not to be identified with specific individuals within the late medieval church, but with *trends within the late medieval church as a whole*.

It was the methodological and doctrinal pluralism of the later Middle Ages that gave birth to both the German and Swiss Reformations, in that the distinctive ideas associated with the Reformation in its various manifestations arose within the vortex of late medieval religious thought. The diversity of opinion concerning the sources and methods of theological speculation, the confusion concerning the *locus* of authority within the church, and other factors such as those already noted in this chapter, combined to create a significant degree of theological instability in northern Europe, which seems to have gone largely unnoticed in Italy. From this matrix would emerge the ideas and methods that would shape the intellectual foundations of the Reformation, and rupture the unity of the European church. The present study is conceived as an investigation into the continuities and discontinuities between the thought of the Reformation *as a whole* and that of the later medieval period, in an attempt to cast light upon both the intellectual origins and character of this movement, which has exercised so great an influence over the shaping of modern Europe.