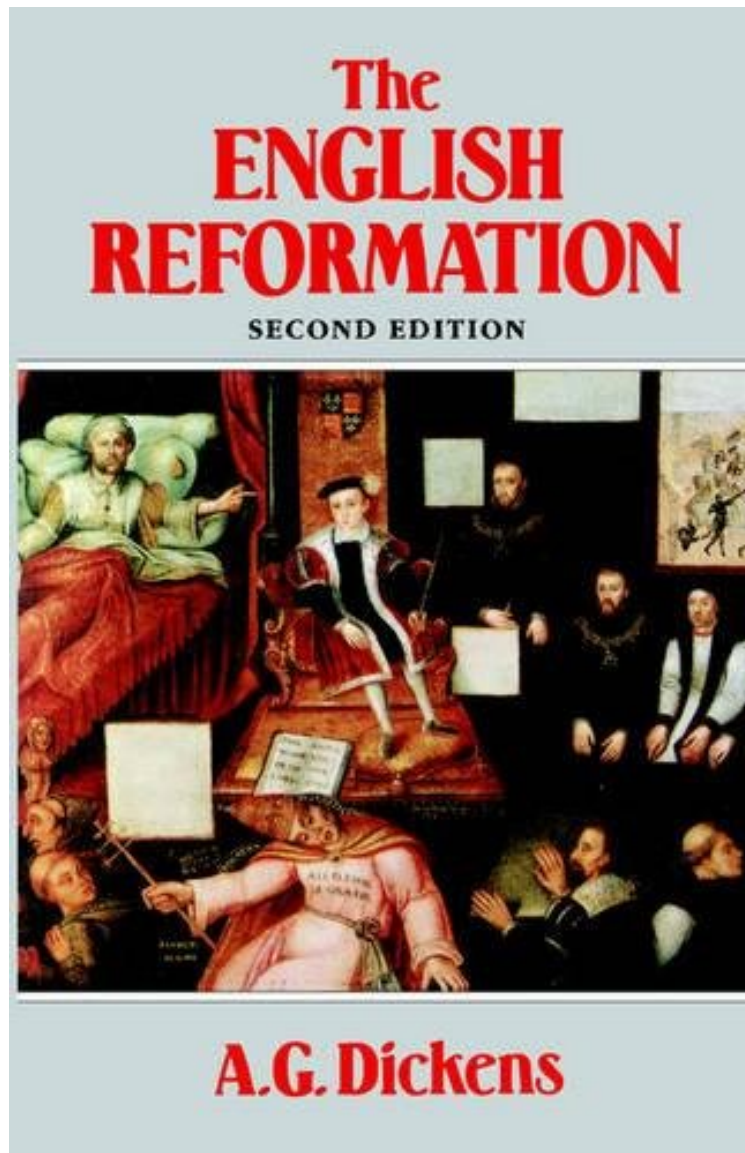


The English Reformation

A. G. Dickens

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A. G. Dickens : The English Reformation before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The English Reformation:

32 of 36 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful Book-must read By C-Rock A.G. Dickens book, the English Reformation, is one of the most influential books on the Reformation ever written, and this fact makes an evaluation very difficult. For Dickens, the Reformation had much less to do with the divorce of Henry VIII than with the corruption and decay of the Catholic Church and the rising expectations of a literate, educated laity. When

Protestantism emerged, according to Dickens, it was rapidly taken up by the average Englishmen who was tired of Catholic ritual and hungry for preaching and direct experience of reading Scripture. There was a "magnetic process" that attracted the English to Protestantism because of its intrinsic merits, something that Dickens argues makes it a viable religion today (81). That Dickens' argument found a warm reception in the twentieth century should come as no surprise, for it made the Reformation not an act of state--imposed by fiat on an unwilling populace--but the natural progression of a literate, rational, hence modernizing society. To make his argument, Dickens relies on varied primary and secondary source material, ranging from parish records, prayer books, to the state papers of Henry VIII, and even the memoirs of a Venetian ambassador in England. However, Dickens' favorite and most problematic source is doubtless John Foxe's propagandistic martyrology, *The Acts and Monuments* (1563). Foxe an early Protestant who saw first hand the Marian persecutions, recounts the history and the development of the English Church from the time of John Wycliffe through the "Marian reaction" to Elizabeth I. Dickens shows the English Reformation to be "an integral part of the European movement," which was propelled by the new learning of the Renaissance (13). Its emphasis on philology and history revealed the medieval church's estrangement from biblical teaching and, therefore, deviation from the teachings of the purer, early Christian church. According to Dickens, this humanist critique foreshadowed the later criticisms by Lutheran reformers against the "superstitious" doctrines of the medieval church and the authority of the papacy. The emphasis on history and Scripture inherent in humanism superseded churchly, Aristotelian, scholasticism. Dickens shows that this spirit of reform found a warm reception in England, as the followers of John Wycliffe were already advocating a Bible-based Christianity and denouncing the hierarchical corrupt Catholic Church. That Lollardy was a precursor to the Reformation, according to Dickens, is indisputable, but rampant anti-clericalism among all social classes also contributed to the ground swell of popular sentiment against the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church after all, according to Dickens, was in total decay, which contributed to England's inevitable happy separation. In Dickens, the bishops and higher clergy were secular figures and solely concerned with enriching themselves at the expense of the parishioner: Christian teaching was dismissed and the Catholic administration, "hard, mechanical, and institutional" (66). The monasteries, once a central part of the vitality of medieval Catholicism, had become "an uninspired and lukewarm establishment," secular in nature and a haven for "rogues and vagabonds" (78-79). Dickens sets this state of the Catholic Church in stark contrast to the emergence of a literate laity imbued with knowledge of the Bible engendered by Lollardy and humanism. This rift between the laity and the Catholic hierarchy is central to Dickens' thesis that Catholicism was as unpopular as it was unedifying and superseded by a popular Protestant Christianity. The machinations of Henry VIII merely began a political process which fulfilled the aspirations inherent in English culture and society since the fourteenth century. The Second Edition of Dickens' book, published in 1989, contains a new chapter (13) and some ameliorations, the most significant being a new section on Thomas More. Despite the revisionist assault directed almost exclusively on this work, Dickens holds his ground that there were long term causes of the Reformation and that the "Marian reaction" was unpopular. Interestingly, the most damning criticism against him, that he engages in Whig history and accepts too wholeheartedly John Foxe's account of the Reformation, goes unmentioned. Dickens' book, although certainly diminished in stature, is still a significant and powerful explanation of the English Reformation. Paradoxically, because of the revisionist onslaught, Dickens book is still relevant to the ongoing discussion of the English Reformation.

This book presents a new edition of the classic study of the religious changes that transformed England in the sixteenth century. Henry VIII officially brought the Protestant Reformation to England in the 1530s when he severed the English Church from the Papacy. But the seeds of the movement, according to A.G. Dickens, were planted much earlier. *The English Reformation*, first published in 1964, follows the movement from its late medieval origins through the settlement of Elizabeth I in 1559 and the rise of Puritanism.

There is no alternative in sight which comes close to conveying the story of the English Reformation in narrative power and substantial information. Heiko A. Oberman, University of Arizona seized the first edition of *The English Reformation* as soon as it appeared, and it has been a dominating intellectual presence ever since. It was a wonderful book, elegant, incisive, and humane, it dealt fairly with politics and legislation, but above all it revealed the dynamic appeal of early Protestant ideas to academics and artisans, preachers and parishioners. It was by far the best survey of its subject, and it has not been overtaken since. . . . This second edition is a response to recent revisionist suggestions that the old Church had vitality and appeal, that its rituals and beliefs were supportive and supported, that Protestants had a hard time making converts, and that political machinations, not protest movements, were the agent of change. . . . In a new introduction, (Dickens) insists that the English Reformation was no little local difficulty, explained by specific political circumstances; it was part of the European Reformation, a wave of Christian renewal. . . . It is the old book only more so! Christopher Haigh, *Times Higher Education Supplement* About the Author A.G. Dickens is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of London and co-author of *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (1985).