

# The **Essence** of the **Reformation**



The people, events and ideas  
that reshaped our world

KIRSTEN BIRKETT

**500<sup>th</sup>**  
ANNIVERSARY  
EDITION

The **Essence** of  
the **Reformation**

KIRSTEN BIRKETT



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## About the author

**Dr Kirsten Birkett**, who studied the Reformation and its effects on science for her PhD, was the editor of the quarterly journal *kategoria: a critical review* from 1996 to 2003, and now teaches philosophy, ethics and church history at Oak Hill College in London. She is a cat lover and voracious reader, and has written books on psychology, feminism, the family, and the relationship between science and Christianity.

# Preface

**T**here are millions of people alive today who believe what they believe because of what happened in Europe 500 years ago. The fights of the Reformation have shaped Protestant churches ever since. Christians who have been taught within those traditions are inheriting ideas that were formulated in the sixteenth century.

However, most Protestants today know very little about the earth-shattering events and debates of the Reformation. We casually recite words that cost people their lives when they were first uttered. And we take many ideas for granted that were once fiercely contested.

Why did the Reformers think their doctrinal ideas were worth dying for? And do they still matter today?

Certainly the truths of doctrine rediscovered in the Reformation are still *true*. We are still saved by God's generous grace alone, by faith alone, trusting in Christ's death alone, not our religious works or even our best efforts. The glory goes to God alone, and we cannot boast except in Christ. Scripture is still our sole authority for knowledge of this saving grace.

As we come to the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his theses to the door at Wittenburg, the

theological debates of the Reformation are just as relevant as they ever were; indeed many of them need to be fought over and over, as sinful humans keep making the same doctrinal mistakes. We are shaped by our history, and this very important part of our history should not be forgotten.

Kirsten Birkett

February, 2017

# Part I

What was  
religion like  
in medieval  
Europe?





**W**hen Christianity first spread across Europe during the sixth century, it came face to face with a variety of ancient pagan religions. The missionaries were often in danger, either rejected outright or asked to prove the greatness of their God in some contest against the pagan priest. How were they to deal with this? Should any compromise be made, or should all the trappings of pagan worship be denounced and destroyed?

In 601, Pope Gregory wrote on this matter to Abbot Mellitus in England:

*To my most beloved son, Abbot Mellitus,  
[from] Gregory, servant of the servants of God.*

*Since the departure of our companions and yourself I have felt much anxiety because we have not happened to hear how your journey has prospered. However, when Almighty God has brought you to our most reverent brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready*

to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given them in exchange for this. So on the day of the dedication or the festivals of the holy martyrs,



Pope Gregory

whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision. Thus while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings.

Pope Gregory followed the policy that the medieval church generally adopted—to ease the missionary process a little by allowing potential converts to keep

some things they had previously venerated. For better or worse, it was decided that many pagan holy sites would survive, and be made into Christian places of worship.

This kind of background helps to explain how the medieval church came to be such a diverse and immense structure. It not only grew and developed over more than a thousand years, it also encompassed people of vastly different class and education, different native customs and regional traditions. What was taught by the local priest was commonly mixed with beliefs from the old religions, even though it all went under the same name.

Most European people in the middle ages were very religious; but what precisely they believed, and what it meant to them, is not necessarily found by studying official doctrine of the church fathers and the medieval universities. If we are to understand a little of what the Reformation accomplished, and the differences it made, we need a brief glance at some of the many different ways in which medieval religion operated.

## **1 | Pagan beliefs and medieval religion**

Where did medieval magic stop and medieval religion begin? The line was hard to draw. There was no doubt what the difference was in the mind of medieval theologians: magic was of the devil, and evil; whereas

religion was of God. Whatever activity was not authorized by the church was magic, and therefore evil. In practice, however, the line became fuzzy, because church activities were often remarkably similar to those activities labeled magical; indeed, there was occasionally some confusion as to precisely which activities were to be condemned.

An example taken from the Anglo-Saxon church illustrates this confusion. Magical remedies, such as chanting charms, were clearly condemned. However, it was quite legitimate for monks at a shrine to wash the bones of a saint in water and then give the water to a patient to drink as a healing remedy. Even when the water was poured on the earth, the dust there when the water dried was held to have the same healing power. “No-one shall enchant a herb with magic”, wrote Aelfric, an early medieval cleric, “but with God’s word shall bless it, and so eat it”. The guidebooks for priests about what to ask a confessor and what penances to give (called ‘penitentials’) taught a similar message: “Hast thou collected medicinal herbs with evil incantations, not with the creed and the Lord’s prayer, that is, with the singing of the ‘credo in Deum’ and the paternoster?” This distinction—between ‘evil incantations’ and things such as the Lord’s prayer—may sound quite plain until it is realized that most incantations *included* the Lord’s prayer and blessings from God’s word. In practice, magic and religion were very similar. In fact, it was not only the practices that

were similar, but the world view that the practices were built on—namely, *that the supernatural interacted daily with the natural and could be manipulated, or at least affected, by words and ritual*. The medieval church condemned magic: but the church itself was tied up in the framework of thought that made magic possible, and so implicitly encouraged the practices it condemned.

How did this situation come about? After the New Testament era, Christianity began spreading into a world already occupied by a multitude of other religious beliefs and systems. Christianity came into sharp conflict with these other religions. As Christianity spread, pagan religions were denounced and condemned as demonic. However, the problem frequently arose of how to persuade pagans to transfer their allegiance from their traditional pagan gods to the Christian one. Often the evangelistic process came down to a battle of power, a contest of the miracles of the evangelist against the powers of the pagan priest. For instance, it is told that Alban, an early English saint, miraculously parted the waters of a stream on the way to his execution and then caused a spring to appear at his feet as he stood about to be beheaded. Unfortunately for Alban, he was beheaded nonetheless, but his executioner immediately and miraculously lost his eyes and the local ruler ordered persecution of Christians to cease.

As history shows, frequently the Christian missionaries must have been victorious, for Christianity did

indeed spread throughout Europe with remarkable speed. The Christian God had triumphed over pagan gods, which gave the church authority to denounce paganism and forbid the worship of its gods. However, the very nature of the miracle contests meant that the idea of supernatural power available in the world was reinforced. Technically, the missionaries may have been only God's instruments, unable to control the power God gave them, or even to determine whether he would give it: but in practice, they appeared as stronger magicians. Also, the contests demonstrated that although the pagan gods may have been defeated, they were still there. The medieval church had gained dominance as a stronger religion, but not an essentially different religion from the more magical faiths it was replacing.

What is more, pagan culture and even religion was frequently not destroyed, but assimilated. Probably the most famous example of this policy is seen in the letter that begins this chapter, in which Pope Gregory advises Abbot Mellitus to tolerate pagan practices for the sake of peaceful relations with the new converts and an easier transition for them into Christianity.

This approach led to the existence of holy wells, which were previously magical wells connected with pagan worship. It also led to pagan festivals becoming Christian: the celebration of the winter solstice, which became Christmas; the spring fertility rites that were turned into Easter.

It was not that pagan religion was approved of—medieval penitentials show much evidence of outright rejection of paganism and its ceremonies. “If anyone makes, or releases from, a vow beside trees or springs or by a lattice, or anywhere except in a church, he shall do penance for three years on bread and water, since this is sacrilege or a demonic thing”, declares one medieval penitential. Worshipping the moon or the stars was specifically condemned. Taking offerings to a pagan site was out of the question.

Despite these examples, there was a deliberate inclusion of much from paganism, which broadened Christian doctrine considerably and significantly affected its practice. Some historians argue that far from this process of inclusion being a weakness or carelessness on the part of the medieval church, it was a careful policy of assimilation, part of a plan enabling the church to survive and expand in a diverse culture. That is, confrontation with paganism could only go so far: in order to win the battle, the church also took the ground away from the ‘enemy’ by taking over magical elements of paganism and transforming them into an acceptable form. Thus the medieval church became a channel of supernatural power into the world, and was moreover able to establish itself as the only legitimate means of doing so. The church could not realistically destroy magic; it divided magic into the legitimate and the illegitimate, and transformed the legitimate into religion. It was a successful policy, and the church