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PRESS WATCH

It's time to celebrate the Reformation, but does it mean anything now?

Five hundred years after Luther's break from Catholicism, Christians are more united than ever, writes Charles Moore in The Daily Telegraph

An email arrives with the interesting news that Barack Obama is coming to Germany next month to help launch the "Reformation Summer". He and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who is the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, will meet at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin to discuss the relation of democracy to faith.

The occasion of this grand event is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. People have decided to take Luther's famous nailing of his 95

Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in October 1517 (an event which, many historians consider, did not actually take place) as the kick-off of the whole momentous process.

The email, which comes from the German churches, freely uses a word which has almost fallen out of daily usage in Britain – Protestantism. When I was a boy, most people who were not definitely something else – such as Catholic or Jewish – would, when asked their religion, say “Protestant”. Nowadays, many would say “Muslim”; many more would say “nothing”, “atheist” or “agnostic”. Serious Protestants would probably say “Christian”, and less serious ones “Church of England, I suppose”. Catholics would still say “Catholic”.

At her Coronation in 1953, the present Queen, as part of her oath, swore “to the utmost of [her] power [to] maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law”. It will be surprising if the next monarch uses the same form of words. The word “Protestant” has almost passed into history.

In a way, the surprise is that it lasted so long. In his famous dictionary, Dr Johnson – himself a tolerant high Anglican – defines a Protestant as “one of those who adhere to them, who, at the

beginning of the Reformation, protested against the errors of the church of Rome”. When defining “Catholic” (or rather – for this was 1755 – “Catholick”), Johnson avoids any association with Rome. He simply says, “The church of Jesus Christ is called catholick, because it extends throughout the world, and is not limited by time”.

The word “Protestant” is rather limited by time. Millions would still argue that the Church of Rome is guilty of numerous “errors”, but this assertion is no longer enough to sustain a worldwide Christian movement. For example, it has become difficult, even for the most ultra-Catholics or the most low-church Protestants, to work up hatred because of differing views about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, though these differences remain. Most can see nowadays that the chalice is half-full rather than half-empty. Protestants have tended to become more Catholic, Catholics more Protestant. In the 21st century, the most fervent anti-Catholics tend to be atheists.

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After half a millennium of internecine strife, the central debate among Christians is really about something else. The legacy of the Reformation might clarify what that something else might be.

The Reformation represents such a vast movement in the history of belief, ideas and politics that it would be rash to lay down the law about what it means today. As an interested observer rather than an expert, I find myself in the odd position of agreeing with much of what I hear, from whichever camp.

For example, I agree with the traditional Protestant account of the growth of liberty caused by permitting the Bible to be translated into the language of the people. On the other hand, “liberty” is an odd word to use of the Protestant English monarchy which burnt Catholics and imposed penal laws upon them.

The radical writer William Cobbett, though a Protestant himself, wrote a book denouncing the Reformation for its cruelties to the poor and its oppression of its opponents. Blaming Elizabeth I for murdering Mary, Queen of Scots, he said: “I blush, as an Englishman, to think that this was done by an English queen, and one whose name I was taught to lisp in my infancy as the honour of her sex and the glory of her isle.” All

Englishmen would do well to blush at much that was done and said, on both sides.

Similarly one can sympathise with liberal writers – the latest is Theo Hobson – who see the post-Reformation preference for contract over ancient hierarchies as being “progressive in its claim that even lowly sorts should be taken seriously as moral agents”. Yet at the same time, I suspect Cobbett may be correct that Protestantism is to blame for the obsessive upholding of the rights of property which, in the early 19th century, made it “a felony to take an apple from a tree”.

Last week, I visited Canterbury with the Rectory Society. We had a fascinating talk from Esther de Waal, whose husband was Dean of Canterbury in the Eighties (and whose son, Edmund, wrote *The Hare with Amber Eyes*). In her subversive account of being a woman in such a male world, she said that what always sustained her was the sense that the cathedral system in England is, despite the terrible destruction of the monasteries by Henry VIII, the living heir of the right Christian community which St Benedict designed in his Rule in the 6th century. The continuity is greater than the disjunction.

Mrs de Waal’s words chimed with me because even as a (Protestant) boy, I noticed that the

creeds spoken in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church are virtually identical. Yet the history of the two was of conflict. It did not seem to make much sense.

In the modern world, it makes less and less. The longer Christianity exists and the wider it spreads, the more it proves that it does indeed “extend throughout the world, and is not limited by time”. Its common factors become more apparent, its divisions more irrelevant.

Nowadays our evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury has a Roman Catholic spiritual director; and the Vatican approves of the evangelical Alpha course. It proves perfectly possible for the same church – even the same individual Christian – to be Protestant, Catholic and Reformed all at once.

The question today is how Christians, much more united than for 500 years, should deal with an age in which Christianity no longer holds worldly power. In a way, this change is good. One has only to look at the history of the Reformation to see how the lust for such power shed blood in the name of God. One sees it with brutal clarity in 2017 in the violence committed in the name of Allah.

But if it is true, as all Christians believe, that their founder is “the way, the truth and the life”, they cannot assume that a world run according to secular principles will know what to do next. The central Christian drama, played out every Holy Week, is partly about the cruel fallibility of worldly systems of power and law. The modern West’s political and moral order may still be bathed in the gentle evening rays of its Christian heritage, but what happens when the sun sinks below the horizon?

On this point, modern Christians divide – no longer between Catholic and Protestant, but between liberal relativists and believers in revealed religion. The first tend complacently to think that the beneficial role of religion is secured by the secular values of the modern West. The second take a view which is both gloomier about the human tendency to revert to barbarism and more hopeful about the ultimate destiny of mankind. In the coming Reformation, the second is likely to prevail.

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First published in The Daily Telegraph, April 15, 2017

