

# 'CATHOLIC REFORMATION' OR 'COUNTER-REFORMATION': HISTORIOGRAPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEBATE

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## *Abstract*

In this paper we shall investigate the meaning and implications of the term 'Counter-Reformation' in the historiography of the Reformation. The main argument that we put forward is that the broader context in which the historian writes, his or her personal as well as national interests, and the methodology that he or she chooses determine, to a great extent, the historiographical slant of his or her study. In the article, we shall illustrate how these variables manifest themselves in determining the propriety or otherwise of the term 'Counter-Reformation', the period associated with it, and the alternatives that historians are prepared to adopt in order to replace it.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The study of the Reformation in its comprehensive sense is fraught with historiographical and interpretive intricacies. According to Olin (1990:X) there are differences of approach and focus, of understanding and evaluation, as well as

divergence both in general outlook and on specific points that historians grapple with. Of particular interest in this paper are the perspectives that inform historians in their views of the reform movement in the Catholic Church in the wake of Luther's 'revolt' in 1517. Two terms that have commonly been adopted to describe this movement are 'Catholic Reformation' and/or 'Counter-Reformation'. Many historians on the Reformation have expressed their opinions on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of either term. More significantly, however, for our purposes, there is need to understand what informs the diverse views expressed by historians on the two terms, and the implications that such views bear on the historiography of the reform movement within the Catholic Church since 1517.

## **2 THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE DEBATE SURROUNDING THE USE OF TERMS 'COUNTER-REFORMATION' AND 'CATHOLIC REFORMATION'**

### **2.1 Historical origins of the term 'Counter-Reformation'**

The controversy surrounding the question regarding the most appropriate term to describe the reform movement within the Catholic Church after 1517 was triggered by the coining and popularisation of the term 'Counter-Reformation'. Olin (1990:10) is of the opinion that the term 'Counter-Reformation' originated with the Father of Modern history, German historian, Leopold Von Ranke. A closer look at the history of the term, however, reveals that the term was in currency well before Von Ranke. The latter was not its originator: he only popularised it.

The term 'Counter-Reformation' originally appeared in the 1770s in the handbooks for the history of the Holy Roman

Empire published by the Gottingen jurist Johann Stephan Putter. “Used as a concept in legal history, ‘Counter-Reformation’ denotes the reversion of confessional allegiance in the Holy Roman Empire between 1555 and 1648, when Catholic emperors and princes captured and recatholicised territories hitherto under the banner of Protestant reform” (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2). In its original legal sense, the term was thus “not intended to apply beyond the confines of the Holy Roman Empire” (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2).

As already stated above, the German Protestant historian, Leopold van Ranke, popularised the term ‘Counter-Reformation’, which he used alongside the term ‘Counter-Reformations’ in the 1830s. Von Ranke was impressed by the resurgence of Catholicism during the second half of the sixteenth century, especially in Italy. In the 1870s and 1880s the term ‘Counter-Reformation’ gained greater acceptance in German scholarship ‘provoked by the *kulturkampf* in the newly united German Empire” (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2).

Nineteenth-century Protestant historians developed the concept of a ‘Counter-Reformation’ (in the singular) as a label for Catholic resistance to the Protestant Reformation. According to Davidson (1987:1), the term *Gegenreformation* in German – Counter- or Anti-Reformation in English – “clearly implied that a new era had opened in Catholic history since 1517”. In the view of these historians, the “Counter-Reformation” began as a reaction to Luther’s protest against indulgences and then continued until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Evidently, a new chronology was being drawn up by these historians. It is interesting to note that, while they agreed with Von Ranke on the *terminus a quo* of the period that the term denoted, they significantly differed from Johann Putter. However, they adopted without change the year 1648 as the *terminus ad quem* for the period that the label denoted. Together with Putter and Von Ranke, they viewed the Peace of

Westphalia in 1648 as historic in the sense that it brought a termination "to the grand struggle between Protestants and Catholics." (Von Ranke, quoted in Davidson 1987:1). It is important to note that the historians who were engaged in the process of determining the meaning and relevance of the 'Counter-Reformation' were German historians interpreting history from their national context. Apparently, the resolution of the religious and ideological struggles between Catholics and Protestants had a serious bearing on the development of the German nation. Little wonder that the Reformation is seen from the vantage point of the German nation and its welfare. For these intellectuals, the historical quest was thus part of a quest to locate national interests within the broader political and religious changes that took place in Europe, and in Germany in particular.

During the twentieth century there emerged two dominant views regarding the year when the 'Counter-Reformation' began. The first, and more acclaimed view, locates the Council of Trent in 1545 as the *terminus a quo* of a historical process that spanned just over a hundred years. Similar to the view of historians mentioned above, it adopts the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 as the *terminus ad quem* of the 'Counter-Reformation' period (Hillerbrand 1973:301).

Unlike the view that we have referred to above, the second view targets 1535 as the beginning of the 'Counter-Reformation'. Proponents of this view do not place much significance on the Council of Trent as such, but on the brain behind the Council, that is, Pope Paul III (1534-1539) In 1535, the Pope appointed Gesparo Contarini, then a layman, as a cardinal. Immediately thereafter, he summoned him to Rome to be one of his closest advisers (Olin 1990:19). "Under the aegis of the new Pope the Catholic Church now began to put its house in order, in full recognition of the religious crisis that was under way, and the desperate efforts of Catholic reformers

began to coalesce." It was Pope Paul III who approved the founding of the order of the Society of Jesus (later popularly known as the Jesuits) in 1540. The Jesuit Order became one of the greatest success stories of Catholic reform movement that was gathering strength in Rome (Olin 1990:25). More significantly, however, is the fact that it is the same pope Paul III who convoked the Council of Trent, four years before his death in 1549. It is clear from this view that the 'Counter-Reformation' could not have initiated with the founding of the Jesuit Order or with the convocation of the Council of Trent in 1545. It had started much earlier, and should be viewed more in terms of the strategic planning taking place in the offices of the Vatican than in the simplistic terms of events.

## **2.2 What the term 'Counter-Reformation' denotes**

In spite of the differences among historians pertaining to the chronology and periodisation surrounding the question as to when the 'Counter-Reformation' began, a general consensus exists regarding what the term/label denotes. Essentially, the 'Counter-Reformation' is believed to have consisted of many components which, together, constituted a Catholic response to the Protestant challenge. They ranged from defending traditional Catholic doctrine, condemning heresy, checking and suppressing Protestantism, to maintaining and restoring the Church. Protestant historians have become accustomed to calling this 'reflexive or defensive movement' the 'Counter-Reformation' (Olin 1990:10).

Evennett (1968) contends that the concept of the 'Counter-Reformation' is essentially reactionary and backward-looking when viewed against the Protestant Reformation which is portrayed in progressive light. Mullett (1999:1) concurs with this view, and argues that the term essentially sums up a process characterised by a defensive, as well as aggressive, and somewhat delayed, reaction to Protestantism, without whose

challenge the Catholic Church could hardly have revived itself out of its own depleted moral and spiritual resources.

Since the sixteenth century, Protestant historiography has amassed significant arsenal in defending the position that the 'Counter-Reformation' was the most formidable strategy that the Catholic Church used to stem the Protestant revolt. Dominating this historiography, among other factors, is the role played by political rulers of Europe such as Philip II, who used their power to keep many areas Catholic (Donnelly 1977:137), the terror instilled into citizens by the Spanish Inquisition, and the suppression of freedom of conscience through the Index by the papacy (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:3).

### **3 THE RESPONSE OF CATHOLIC SCHOLARS TO THE 'COUNTER-REFORMATION' APPROACH**

Catholic scholars have generally objected to the term 'Counter-Reformation' because of what they regarded as "passive and reactionary connotations" in this term (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2). In place of the term, they prefer to use terms such as 'Catholic Reform', 'Catholic Reformation', or 'Catholic Restoration'. The former two are more popular than the latter. Thus Catholic historiography on the Reformation period invariably emphasises the "positive and creative aspects" (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2). However, as in the Protestant camp there are significant differences which we highlight below.

The first group of Catholic historians emphasise the need to highlight two Catholic phases of reform, the first one which should be seen as preparation for, and the second which should be read alongside, the Protestant Reformation. Viewed in this manner 'Catholic Reformation' denotes what Gordon Rupp sums up as:

... the renewal of the Catholic Church which at least in Spain and Italy had begun before Luther's protest, and which with persistent growth brought into being new religious orders, new forms of spirituality, new saints, and achieved a real measure of reform of the Church in head and members, in life and discipline". (Cited in Po-Chia Hsia 1998:2)

In an apparent attempt to promote this historiographical trend, there has been a concerted effort to write monographs that portray the fifteenth century as a gestation period wherein the egg that Luther finally hatched in 1517 was laid. As far back as 1970, Catholic scholars such as Gordon Rupp were calling for more monographs and more research on this 'tunnel period' which, they believed would yield important clues towards a better understanding of both the Catholic and Protestant Reformations (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:116; Davidson 1987:2).

By using the term 'Catholic Reformation', Catholic historians contend that reform in the Catholic Church not only predated Martin Luther in 1517, but survived the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and inspired a revived spirituality in the eighteenth century and beyond (Davidson 1987:1).

Catholic historians adopt a common position that the 'Catholic Reformation' was not just the reaction of an institution under threat. Instead, they argue, the reform movement was animated by more than a response to Protestantism (Davidson 1987). According to Davidson works by historians such as Outram Evennett, Jean Delumeau and John Bossy have gone a long way towards demonstrating this position. As a result some historians are calling for the abandonment of the term 'Counter-Reformation' altogether. Interestingly, Davidson is one of the key historians who believe that, owing to the breakthrough studies on early modern Catholicism, "the assumptions that lay behind the concept of a 'Counter- Reformation' are

no longer acceptable" (Davidson 1987). Historians who identify with this school of thought further hold the view that the purpose of the 'Catholic Reformation' was to correct the ills in the Church and to invigorate its life and mission. Although, on the one hand, they view Catholic reform as a parallel movement to the Protestant movement, they believe, on the other, that it was profoundly affected by the crisis and schism that developed after 1517. "It was, however, given new urgency and a new dimension by the problems that were now posed and a complex pattern of Catholic activity unfolded under the shock of widespread dissension and revolt" (Davidson 1987). For this reason, Olin argues that to label such a movement the 'Counter-Reformation' is "too narrow and misleading" (Davidson 1987).

The same school refers to the formation of many religious orders in the period after 1517 as a manifestation of on-going currents of reform and renewal that was independent of Protestant developments. Such religious orders include the Theatines, the Jesuits and the Capuchin, among others (Olin 1990:11).

In their historiography, Catholic historians have come up with alternative ways of periodising the Reformation movement. Below, we analyse some of the chronological permutations that they proffer. The first group emphasises the reforms that spanned the period 1495 to 1563, that is, from the time of Archbishop Francesco Ximenes de Cisneros up to the conclusion of the Council of Trent. According to Olin the Council's achievements were "a culmination in a sense of all that went before" (Olin 1990:X). The achievements thus close an era and open a new and important one in the history of the Catholic Church. Olin further observes that, "we have thus a period of almost seventy years of profound historical change and years of crucial importance for the survival and revival of

the Catholic Church". Hence, in Olin's view, the latter constitutes the high-tide of the 'Catholic Reform'.

However, there is no gainsaying that there were complications within the Catholic reform movement. Certain features of Catholic reform prior to 1517 become "either suspect or inappropriate or more difficult to sustain as religious controversy widened and positions became more rigid and extreme" (Olin 1990:11). Erasmus' sharp criticism of the monks, for instance, seemed more dangerous and subversive in opponents' eyes under the conditions that prevailed after 1517.

The other group puts emphasis upon the stormy period from 1559 to 1610 (see O'Connell 1974). However, German and French historians have generally extended their investigation of Catholic reform to the eighteenth century. Po-Chia Hsia (1998) notes that, "In Germany ... the new approach in Catholic historical scholarship was not so much to contest the term Gegen-Reformation" as to elevate the concept to a par with 'Reformation' (Po-Chia Hsia 1998:3).

### **3.1 Catholic Reformation as an inclusive term**

There is a group of Catholic historians such as John P Donnelly (S.J.), who view the Catholic Reformation as a more inclusive term that encapsulates the 'Counter-Reformation'. However, they hold a less adversarial posture regarding Protestant historians who favour the term 'Counter-Reformation' to characterise the mainstay of Catholic reform. Donnelly (1977:146-147), for instance, agrees that a significant part of the 'Catholic Reformation' was a reaction to Protestantism. He contends that, "the dogmatic decrees of Trent were obviously directed against Protestantism, as were the Index of forbidden books and the Inquisition, but the moral and spiritual renewal owed little to the rise of Protestantism". On the basis of this argument, one can deduce that, according to Donnelly, the

'Counter-Reformation' was subsumed in a wider and more comprehensive reform movement initiated by the Catholic Church. In an attempt to amplify this argument, Donnelly (1977:147) argues that:

Catholics in those countries most threatened by Protestantism seemed lethargic compared to reformers in Italy and Spain, which were more insulated. Most of the major Catholic reformers committed themselves to action independent of any Protestant impulse.

A historian who belongs to this school of thought, Michael Mullett (1999:X), stresses the need to be aware of the "causal and simulative link between, on the one hand, Luther's movement of protest and renewal, and on the other, the acceleration and intensification of a reformist upsurge within the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century and on into the early modern period".

## 4 EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE TERMS

### 4.1 Catholic Reform and Counter-Reformation

Hillerbrand (1973) has expressed unhappiness with the term 'Counter-Reformation' and 'Catholic Reformation/Reform' when used separately. He has thus proposed the use of an alternate term that combines the two. The dual term 'Catholic Reform and Counter-Reformation' is meant to stress the dual characteristic of sixteenth century Catholic life, its indigenous self-renewal, and its reaction against the Protestant Reformation. Furthermore, he argues that "while it is a bit clumsy and raises the question of chronological priority it is useful and deserves acceptance" (Hillerbrand 1973:179). This alternative term would perhaps be acceptable to historians

such as Olin (1990:1) who stresses the point that “after 1517 the varied currents of this age of religious ferment and crisis inevitably began to cross and mingle. Catholic reform was influenced and given new urgency and force by the Protestant challenge, and regeneration came about only after widespread revolt and disruption had occurred”. Hence, owing to the conviction that Catholic reform would not have been effective without the cataclysmic events unleashed by Protestant reformers, Catholic historians such as Olin, Hillerbrand, among others, are comfortable with coining a dual term such as ‘Catholic Reform and Counter-Reformation’.

#### **4.2 The Confessional Age**

In 1977 Wolfgang Reinhard (cited in Po-Chia Hsia 1998:4) made a radical proposal to adopt a neutral term that would replace both terms ‘Reformation’ and ‘Counter-Reformation’. He suggested the term, ‘Confessional Age’. To him, the antitheses of ‘Progressive Reformation’ and ‘Reactionary Counter-Reformation’, is unacceptable. In the first instance, he argues that the dialectic was ill-conceived. Reinhard further argues that both terms ‘Counter-Reformation’ and ‘Catholic Reformation’ are inadequate concepts in understanding the totality of history (Po-Chia Hsia 1998). Hence, by proposing the term/phase “Confessional Age” he believes that historians can begin to adequately address and analyse Lutheranism, Calvinism and Catholicism as parallel developments in a still larger historical unfolding of structures. Ernst Zeeden (also cited in Po-Chia Hsia 1998) follows Reinhard’s approach and amplifies the structural balance between Tridentine Catholicism and Calvinism by elaborating a theory of confessionalisation, in which he stresses the interpretation of political power and religious spirituality on both sides.

## 5 OVERALL HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EVALUATION OF THE DEBATE

The differences of opinion in characterising and evaluating the 'Counter-Reformation' can be attributed mainly to "historians' different appreciations that depend in part on the national context in which they place it" (O'Malley 1982:304). It is apparent that French historians are predisposed to view it more favourably since it coincides with the beginning of French cultural and political hegemony. The same is true, with considerable qualification after the sixteenth century, for Spain. However, it is not at all true for Protestant Germany.

To illustrate this point, O'Malley (1982:301-302) argues that 1648 was a terminal point determined by German historians interested in German problems. Their perspectives are also informed by an older methodology that concentrates on political and military events even when dealing with the Church. It is noteworthy, however, that the year 1648 has little significance in France's social structures and the internal religious revival that concerns the presently dominant historiography. By implication, this means that the achievements and failures of the Council of Trent must now be evaluated within a broader context.

Secondly, apart from the German effort at resolving the antithesis between the Catholic Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, English and French historians have considerably expanded the terms of the discussion beyond 1648. Jean Delumeau, for instance, dismisses the significance of the 'Counter-Reformation' as such. He writes: "the Counter-Reformation existed ... but it was not essential to the transformation of the Catholic Church from the sixteenth century" (cited in Po-Chia Hsia 1998:4). Whilst Delumeau traces the origins of the Reformation to medieval Catholicism, he

views both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation (which includes the 'Counter-Reformation') as part of the massive process of Christianisation that was imperfectly completed by the eighteenth century when the Enlightenment launched its assault on the religion. According to Po-Chia Hsia (1998:6) "a rough consensus has thus emerged, at least in the English language historiography". Mullett (1999:6) concurs with Delumeau and argues that "all reforms, Protestant and Catholic, had their origins in late Medieval Christianity, and that any understanding of early Modern Catholicism must take into consideration the period after 1650".

## 6 CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, a few conclusions can be drawn pertaining to historiography. Firstly, it is important to note that historians' perspectives are always informed by their context and interest, be it personal or national. The latter is informed by the historian's ideological orientation. Secondly, the chronological demarcations and periodisation that historians come up with are provisional tools for writing history, and are also dependent on the interest(s) of the historian. Thirdly, historical terminologies are often labels, if not stereotypes, meant to fit the description of reality by the powerful. Often, historians utilise them as heuristic tools with which the study of history is made manageable. Fourthly, the methodology(ies) that the historian adopts, in large measure, influence(es) the conclusions that he or she comes up with. Needless to say, we may indeed be inclined to say, at this juncture, that history is fraught with the imperfections and foibles, interests and biases of the historians behind its writing.

Finally, from the foregoing, we can conclude that the debate over which terms to use, and the attempt to resolve the controversy surrounding the term 'Counter-Reformation' has

stimulated the production of a huge array of monographs within the field of the Reformation studies. Fresh perspectives have been added to the traditional ones that we had become accustomed to. Such fresh perspectives go a long way towards dignifying and liberating the study of Church history from parochial partisanship that once typified the academic debates between the Catholic and Protestant historians of the Reformation.

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