In 1971, Harvard University Reformation historian, Steven Ozment, edited a volume of essays suggestively entitled *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*. It was intended to show that contrary to our predisposition to think otherwise, the ties that bound the Reformation age to what had preceded it were substantial. Luther, for instance was shown to have owed a debt (of sorts) to German mystics who went before him. Ozment’s aim was not to undermine the Reformation’s significance, but only to show that the Protestant Reformers were men of their times with links to the past.

This is the theme on which the distinguished Cambridge University historian of medieval Europe, Gillian R. Evans has focused in her *Roots of the Reformation*, now available in its second edition. Known for her earlier works, *Law and Theology in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2011) and *John Wycliffe: Myth and Reality* (IVP, 2006), Evans is surely as well qualified as any medievalist of broadly Protestant sympathies to take up this task. It is a very ambitious undertaking!

Her aim is to show that in addition to the eventual Reformation of Luther’s time standing in substantial continuity with the doctrinal consensus of early Christianity, expressed in early ecumenical creeds and councils, there was also another aspect of the story. In the rough and tumble of Christian history over the fourteen centuries intervening between the death of the last apostle and the dawn of the Reform, there were many disputes and protest movements which—because never patiently adjudicated—contributed to a pent-up demand for changes in Christianity in Western Europe. When it came, the Reformation, like the proverbial torrent over the dam, represented the confluence of numerous pre-existing streams. Three examples will prove helpful.

First, sharp disagreement about the relationship between the elements of bread and wine and the all-important words of institution, given by Jesus in his establishing the Lord’s Supper, had gone on for centuries. Christians were reproved for denying the alleged transformation of the two elements into the realities they symbolized as early as the ninth century. The important Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made the denial of this transformation something punishable by death, provoking still further protests against it in the fourteenth century (chap. 7). The eventual Reformation protests over the abuses of the Mass were to a large extent ‘replays’ of controversies earlier played out.

Second, the Reformers were not the first to protest against the exaggerated claim of the bishop of Rome to be Christ’s supreme representative on earth, and Peter’s intended successor (chap. 8). An argument in support of a diffused leadership shared by the Mediterranean churches of Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople (as well as Rome) had been forcefully made since before the sixth century. Rome’s impatience at the refusal of these major churches to submit to its supreme authority had fueled mutual decrees of excommunication in 1054. Even in Western Europe, later frustration over the existence of rival popes and papal abuses gave rise to an important ‘conciliar movement’ in the fifteenth century; this sought to define and limit papal power.

Third, the wider circulation of the Bible in the languages of the European people had been eagerly desired long before the invention of the printing press in the age of Gutenberg (which immediately preceded the Reformation). The work of the church father, Jerome (347-420) in standardizing and improving older Latin versions of the Bible into a common Latin Vulgate – read in all the churches of the Latin-speaking West and available to be purchased by believers in hand-copied portions – had been the norm in centuries following. But the decline of Latin as a popular, spoken language in those same regions produced a population which could no longer read the Bible in its
own language. This dearth of the vernacular Word was subsequently targeted by medieval believers such as Waldensians and Wycliffite Lollards (chap. 14), who produced common language Bibles to roll back the plague of biblical illiteracy. The Reformation, when it came, only saw to completion this centuries-old Christian aspiration that the Word would be restored into the hands of the people.

Yet Roots of the Reformation is by no means simply designed to make Rome look ‘bad’ and the Reformation look ‘good.’ Evans shows a spectrum of concerns regarding contested questions raised before, during and after the Reformation; she demonstrates that extremists could be located in each camp. Having said this, it is only right to acknowledge the author’s willingness to allow that Rome provoked a Reformation because of its deaf ear towards earlier protest movements over a succession of centuries.

The book has weaknesses. At 500 pages, it will tax many readers. Both in its multi-chapter format, and extended conclusion, there is repetition. The author is on much firmer ground in her portrayal of Christianity between the fall of Rome (circa 476) and the dawn of the Reformation (1517) than in her treatment of themes and doctrines earlier and later. Geographically, the focus of the book is most of all on English, Italian and Germanic lands (reflecting her own researches) with little said of other European regions. English Reformers are regularly praised, while those of other Reformation lands are very often depicted as extreme. Sources quoted are occasionally obtained from websites of no reputation, rather than from the solid sources one would expect to be drawn on by a Cambridge don. But with all that said, I will also say that I know of no other book which so effectively demonstrates that the crisis of the Reformation was a crisis addressing accumulated grievances and protests which Rome had done its best to stifle. Evans’ The Roots of the Reformation deserves the widest reading.

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