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## Unintended Consequences: How the Reformation Expanded Theology

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## Unintended Consequences: How the Reformation Expanded Theology

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### Christopher Ocker on how the Reformation changed theology

It all began with propositions “for a disputation for the sake of disclosing the power of indulgences” – the Ninety-Five Theses. Ninety-five counted as a relatively large number for such an academic exercise. The theses were composed by Martin Luther, “doctor of sacred scripture” in the University of Wittenberg, and the exercise was supposed to be supervised by him. The text must have been printed at Wittenberg in October or November 1517. As far as we know, the disputation never took place, and neither the original manuscript nor that first edition has survived. Nevertheless, before the end of the year, Luther’s theses were circulating in manuscript. They were printed three more times, eagerly picked up by publishers at Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Basel, who had a finger on the pulse of a literate market interested in novelty and controversy. Although written in Latin, still the primary language of learning throughout Europe, a German translation was also circulating by the beginning of March 1518.

The novelty of the Ninety-Five Theses was not just their number but also the character of their subject matter. They touched on a more concrete element of religious practice than most university disputations normally would, namely, the preaching and distribution of writs of prospective forgiveness – indulgences. Indulgences were official clerical pronouncements of time off from Purgatory, and since they could sometimes be gotten in exchange for gifts of money, they were a highly visible, if relatively modest, source of church revenue. For a few decades, the papacy had been issuing special “papal indulgences.” These were recently used – not very successfully, as it happened – to encourage participation in western crusades against the Ottomans, but their political use expanded with the discovery that the papal court could encourage cooperation in other endeavors, like the reconstruction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, by sharing their earnings with temporal rulers. And so they did.

Indulgences naturally commanded the interest of people in the administrative class to which German theologians and humanists belonged. Their appetite for religious controversy had been whetted in recent years by Latin and vernacular satirists like the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus and the Strasbourg Franciscan Thomas Murner. Indulgences were part of their comedic-ethical repertoire. Erasmus thought indulgence-sellers exaggerated papal authority beyond even what popes claimed, and he alleged that religious orders sold indulgences to draw public support away from competing monks and priests. Murner, a monk himself, criticized the political uses of indulgences by popes cutting deals with princes. Another popular German satirist, the Franciscan monk Johannes Pauli, argued that aggressive indulgence-sellers destroyed two of the three essential steps in the sacrament of penance. Remorse, the first step, improved indulgence sales, but ordinary people concluded that the second and third steps, contrition and restitution, were cancelled by the purchase of an indulgence. Indulgences symbolized a degrading commercialization of spiritual life, one of many degradations that the satirists documented. Erasmus, who drew on the Italian intellectual movement that promoted the study of Greek and other ancient languages and literature, including the New Testament, encouraged students of the liberal arts, law, theology, and medicine to think that a great number of common religious practices, from pilgrimages to fasting, led the church away from the moral teachings and spirituality of Jesus.

What really moved young scholars against old-fashioned theologians, however, was a specific controversy that began seven years earlier, in 1510, around another humanist named Johannes Reuchlin. It would continue after Pope Leo X censored Reuchlin in late June 1520, one week after the pope signed the papal bull threatening excommunication against Martin Luther, *Exsurge domine*. The controversy began when Reuchlin opposed recent attempts by

Dominican theologians to persuade the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, to expel Jews, but it quickly became a flashpoint in arguments for the freedom to study ancient literature. Inspired by the Italian Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin promoted the Christian study of Hebrew language and books. The “Reuchlin Affair” droned on for most of the 1510s, and it contributed mightily to the marriage of a spreading reformist’s discontent with anti-scholastic polemics. Luther, in effect, added to the turbulence already produced by the Reuchlin Affair.

**A**s the Ninety-Five Theses circulated, there soon followed, in rapid succession, the publication of counter-theses, a response by Luther, and additional rebuttals of him, including one by Johannes Tetzel, the Dominican indulgence preacher who apparently provoked Luther to write the Ninety-Five Theses in the first place. The intellectual texture of the new debate can be seen in early 1518, just as those first editions were making the rounds, when a professor of the University of Ingolstadt named Johannes Eck wrote critical annotations on the Ninety-Five Theses for his bishop. He gave the annotations a Latinized Greek name, calling them *Obelisci*, obelisks, “skewers,” in a gesture toward the humanistic enthusiasm for ancient languages that gripped young scholars at the time. The *Obelisks* then travelled from friend to friend, reaching Luther in Wittenberg that March.

The two professors belonged to overlapping circles. Luther was active in the reform branch of his religious order. Eck was active as a preacher devoted to reform. They knew each other, having been introduced through an exchange of letters by Christoph Scheurl, a mutual friend in Nuremberg who had taught at Wittenberg a few years earlier, one of many jurists who believed it was urgent to correct religious abuses in monastic orders and at church courts. Over the last half-year, Scheurl had recommended Eck to Luther by letter, and he sent Eck a copy of Luther’s theses for another disputation – ninety-seven this time – from September 1517, a “disputation on scholastic theology.” The “disputation on scholastic theology” did actually take place, and it showed the professor warming up to the issues around indulgences, by covering the finer points of scholastic concepts of grace. The fledgling correspondence between Eck and Luther and the circulation of Luther’s texts illustrate well exactly the kind of scholarly networks that ran among schools, church courts, monastic orders, and governments. It was along these networks that the Reformation began. They were the natural habitat of academic theology.

When the *Obelisks* arrived, Luther had just sent Eck a cordial letter. But now, reading Eck’s criticisms of the Ninety-Five Theses, he became enraged. Eck took Luther’s propositions to run too close to the edge of orthodoxy. “I don’t want to pursue the minutia or those issues

which scholastics could oppose in the matter of the present disputation on indulgences,” Eck said at the beginning of his comments. “I would rather oppose the main conclusion.” He wanted to focus on the force and intent of the argument, rather than break it down into smaller technical parts. Luther took this approach to impugn his motives. After he read Eck’s critique, he chafed, saying in a letter to another friend that Eck wrongly accused him of being a “heretical, factious, insolent man, and I omit the lighter reproaches: a drowsy, inept, unlearned despiser of the Holy Pontiff . . .,” which was not who Luther meant to be. He rifled off point-by-point rebuttals, crowning his reply with the title, “asterisks” (little stars), another Hellenized name. The *Asterisks of Luther against Eck’s Obelisks* became the first of very many brilliantly vituperative writings by the agitated – and often darkly amusing – theologian, although this particular text circulated only in manuscript until 1545. Eck’s *Obelisks* suggested that the author of the Ninety-Five Theses had not digested the opinions of scholars. Luther’s *Asterisks* shot back, don’t “make yourself entirely ridiculous every single time . . . as you do in this work.” He reminded Eck of a perspective he might earlier have thought they shared: “I don’t want, as you know, to listen to scholastic theology unless it is supported by ecclesiastical opinion and no longer scholastic! Do you want me to do nothing but mock you?” He was, he insisted, an informed, critical reader of scholastic opinion who located authority outside schoolmen’s debates. And, in what would become the precedent for the rest of his career, Luther countered the implication of error or ineptitude by acidly ridiculing his opponent.

**A**s the investigation for heresy progressed in 1518 and 1519, Luther got busy. By 1520, as his excommunication by Pope Leo X unfolded, over 700 editions of his treatises, pamphlets, and broadsheets were in circulation. The volume and amplitude of Luther’s reforming scholarship grew from there. So, too, did his sneering. He would call Eck a “jackass” who “craps” his arguments and dumps on the public, among many other things; and it continued like this for more than twenty years, until Eck died in 1543. He made similar pronouncements upon his many other opponents. By the time of Eck’s death, when Luther himself had only three more years to live, the controversy had evolved into what would soon prove to be western Christianity’s most enduring schism, and many other theologians and humanists had joined the fray.

In this manner, the Luther affair began and progressed as a theological quarrel. So what exactly did the controversy do to theology? The answer depends on what you think theology was. I think the impact of the Reformation on theology was threefold.

By one definition, the term theology may refer to any discourse that involved God, including the mythopoetic discourse of medieval mysticism and folkloric religion. The Luther affair inspired a huge amount of vernacular theological writing, much of it composed by lay people with no particular academic training, including a number of remarkable women. Through the medium of cheap print, these men and women had access to a growing literate public like never before. Accordingly, the case can be made that an expanding religious authorship enlarged theology in the broad sense. These writers, particularly the women (for example, the Strasbourg defender of Anabaptists, Katarina Schütz Zell; the mystical Marguerite of Navarre, sister of King Francis I of France; or the Italian builder of reformist networks, Giulia Gonzaga, to name only three), sometimes exhibited an astonishing creativity and insight that often seemed to break through the constraints of orthodoxy, just as medieval vernacular religious authors did before them.

In equal or perhaps even greater measure, the growth in religious authorship also triggered a strong reaction, in the form of censorship and social discipline, and not just among Catholics reacting against Protestant reforms. True, opportunities for education and literacy were growing in the cities of Reformation Europe, and Luther's followers benefitted from and, in Protestant cities, contributed to the momentum of these trends. But in most of Europe, a very small fraction of the total population lived in towns. A larger number of readers, for example, the users of illustrated broadsheets and pamphlets, are best described as semi-literate. A significant portion of Reformation polemical writing was aimed at that semi-literate audience; and yet unquestionably, the vast majority of people remained unlettered, and the Reformation, contrary to nineteenth-century and later Protestant claims, did very little to inspire universal literacy until two centuries after Luther's death. The role of the Reformation in creating new vernacular theologies was, therefore, real, distinct, but limited. This was the first impact of the Reformation on theology.

By another definition, theology was an academic discipline. Since schools began to collaborate in what would become the first European universities at the end of the twelfth century, the term theology referred to a discipline cultivated through four basic exercises: biblical commentary, the critical discussion of religious themes in lectures, formal thematic orations (*sermones*), and formal debates (*disputationes*). It is often forgotten that biblical commentary remained a consistent element of the curriculum of late medieval theology, even after c. 1300, when extremely technical, logical expositions of ideas came to dominate the other three exercises – lectures, orations, and debates. By 1512, when Luther became a professor of sacred scripture in Wittenberg, this “scholastic” theology was sometimes

extremely speculative. In fact, academic theology was the discipline in which late medieval intellectuals most energetically used logic to test the limits of reason in virtually any subject area. What does it mean for the universe to begin in a point of time? Is the created universe a limited space or infinite, and can space be empty? How can a physical entity occupy more than one place, such as Christ's corporeal substance in the Eucharist was believed to do? What is the nature of light and sight? How exactly do projectiles travel? Are people free agents or determined by the conditions of physical and mental life or other wills, such as the will of God or the devil? Does the future occur randomly or by necessity, and can the past be changed? For over two generations now, historians of philosophy have shown how these late medieval discussions contributed to the early development of modern philosophy and science. No serious scholar today would ridicule late medieval theologians for fretting over "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin" (a caricature, by the way, that poorly represents scholastic debate over angelic bodies and their relationship to physical place). Yet the critique of scholastic obtuseness has a source in the culture of medieval schools themselves. All through the late middle ages, and in Luther's own day, there were theologians who decried the digression of theology away from its purposes of spiritual regeneration, moral reform, and pastoral care. Some theologians accused their peers of "vain speculation." Luther was one of these, and so was Eck.

**M**ost German humanists formed an especially energetic company of critics of scholasticism. With roots in late thirteenth-century Italy, humanism refers to an intellectual movement that prized the study of ancient literature in its original languages. Buttressed by a western influx of Greek-speaking scholars after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, the movement, famous for its appreciation for pagan learning and its criticism of traditional religion, was strongly promoted at the courts of Renaissance popes. Now, finally, in Luther's generation, humanist methods gripped scholars across northern Europe, too, and practically every learned person was affected to one extent or another by the new scholarship.

When the controversy over Luther began in late 1517, the effect of humanism on academic theology was just beginning to be felt in northern Europe. Its impact was quite specific. Humanism expanded the repertoire of sources of religious knowledge, such as the Bible, and it encouraged a new method of study. The new method was promoted in one form by the Tübingen philosopher, Rudolf Agricola. It was promoted in another form by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, and after 1520 by very many writers expanding upon these and other early northern adaptations of Italian method. Erasmus settled in Basel in 1514 and

began a personal project to refashion theological discourse around the study of the Bible and ancient Christian literature in their original languages. This was not exactly the most ambitious program of humanistic Bible study in Europe at the time. In Castile, at the University of Alcalá, the most senior ecclesiastical figure in the Spanish kingdom, Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (or Ximenes), sponsored a far more ambitious project to establish and compare reliable versions of the Bible. It included the Old Testament in the original Hebrew and the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation; the standard Jewish Aramaic translation of the first five books of the Bible (known as the Targum Onkelos); the Greek New Testament; and the Vulgate, the standard Latin translation of the entire text. In comparison with Erasmus' Greek New Testament, the six-volume folio edition of this *Complutensian Polyglot* (*Complutense* was the Latin name of Alcalá) was by far the more impressive achievement. Ximenes could supply his team with manuscripts borrowed from the Vatican library. Erasmus relied on manuscripts available close to hand. But Erasmus had the advantage of producing a more easily usable text: *just* the Greek New Testament, with a new Latin translation and his decidedly provocative annotations. In addition, Erasmus explained a method of Bible study oriented toward the language and meaning of biblical literature in a manual called the *Ratio verae theologiae*, "the method" (*ratio*) or "reasoning of true theology." The *Ratio* was first published in 1516 with his New Testament and revised several times thereafter.

What these and a steady stream of additional annotations and paraphrases of biblical books articulated was a method that could replace the intense logical scrutiny of narrowly defined ideas in the schools. At the core of this method was the study of language and narrative. Bible commentary received a tremendous boost from the rise of humanism, as careful attention to the text's Hebrew and Greek idiom gave scholars alternatives to the Vulgate, which provided the standard theological vocabulary used in schools; and access to the original languages provided them with the confidence to distinguish an original, historical meaning of biblical texts from scholastic conclusions.

The history of method is something like the history of verb forms: the more common and useful the verb, for example the verb "to be," the more variable the form. The more useful the method, the more adaptable and variable its uses. A humanistic method of Bible study and Luther's evolving polemic converged. Some of Luther's unique ideas encouraged this convergence. Before the controversy began in 1517, in his lectures on the Bible, Luther had been emphasizing divine speech in scripture as an active and present power that eases the spiritual anxieties of souls. As the controversy unfolded in 1518 and 1519, Luther began to

juxtapose this sense of the word of God with ecclesiastical judgments that had a weak or unclear basis in biblical narrative. His idea of divine speech in the Bible came to be narrowly defined as a communication of a promise of forgiveness to those who exercised faith. In other words, when Luther insisted on the Bible's authority in theological argument, he did not merely contrast biblical sayings and scholastic viewpoints. He contrasted a kind of biblical textuality with scholastic method. It was an approach that would have had little force if scholars were not already convinced that technical attention to ancient literature could produce religious knowledge more reliably than deductive reasoning.

**A** “biblical humanism” therefore took special hold of scholars sympathetic to Luther, but its influence can be easily traced among sixteenth-century Catholic theologians, too, in the many biblical commentaries they produced, as intellectual historians working on sixteenth-century Europe are increasingly coming to understand. These Catholic scholars were surely encouraged by competition with Protestants, but the role of the Bible as theological “trump card” had been acknowledged in late medieval scholasticism, as well. In the sixteenth century, it was not just a matter of determining which authorities counted in argument, or how much the Bible counted above other sources. Humanism in the early sixteenth century promoted a style of thinking oriented toward literary criticism, or what was later often called “philology,” a focus on the diction, grammar, syntax, and historical circumstances of an ancient text in its original language(s). Luther's stress on divine speech (God's promise) as both the engine of faith and the very contents of the experience of salvation helped to make philological Bible study, in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, an essential element of academic theology, while the criticism of scholastic theology elevated the prestige of biblical study as a mode of theological thinking that was in and of itself complete, and not just an elementary step in one's course of study.

The new style of thinking gave a huge boost to the production of biblical commentaries by both Protestants and Catholics. It also gave rise, for a brief time, to a new genre of theological writing. These were books of *Loci communes*, “common places” that attempted to collect the main teachings of scripture in an ordered manner. The logic of that order was not primarily deductive, as in scholastic argument. In late medieval theology faculties, narrower opinions were logically proved as conclusions based on basic principles. In the new genre of *Loci communes*, arguments were primarily descriptive, according to which the connections and synergies of biblical ideas were explained, while the use of dialectical arguments were moved over to the rebuttal of alternative viewpoints. The first theological *Loci communes* was published by Luther's Wittenberg colleague Philipp Melancthon in 1521. The most elaborate

and influential was produced fifteen years later, by the French humanist-turned-reformer, John Calvin. Calvin's version bore the title of a classical handbook, the *Institutio religionis christianae*, "an arrangement of the Christian religion," as in the arrangement of the Bible's principal points. Even Johannes Eck produced his own *Handbook of Common Places against Martin Luther*. These summations of doctrine posed as assertions of biblical truths, but the examples of Melanchthon and Calvin make clear how, over time, when the handbooks were revised in subsequent editions, dialectical argument came increasingly to the fore, even while, at the same time, the philological study of the Bible in commentaries continued to mature.

By the 1570s, when the first two generations of reformers were almost all dead, Protestants were writing systematic books of theology that were as dialectical in form and method as anything produced in the late middle ages. By then, however, in contrast with their medieval precedents, systematic discussions of metaphysics – and physics or astronomy – were mostly gone from theological texts. The religious controversy, in effect, had refocused academic theology around pastoral and spiritual themes. The rest, everything that made late medieval theologians such challenging intellectuals, was handed over to teachers of the *quadrivium*, the mathematical segment of the liberal arts curriculum (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), and to independent scholars. Philology, meanwhile, remained the theologians' handmaiden. It now complemented the deductive-logical treatment of all the doctrines they disputed: sin, grace, faith, predestination, free will, etc. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century, a typical theological book included technical arguments about the meaning of Hebrew and Greek texts and the logic of intricately parsed religious ideas. In addition, Catholics and Protestants not only engaged the views of their contemporary opponents. They often cited arguments taken from late medieval theologians.

The Reformation transformed academic theology by challenging scholasticism and ultimately expanding theological method to include the philological study of the Bible. Although Protestants had a particular investment in these methods, the trend affected Catholics and Protestants alike. This was the second impact of the Reformation on theology.

The third impact has to do with the three competing versions of Christian orthodoxy, three "confessions," as they are often called, Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed (a preferred name for the Calvinists), that the Reformation produced. In the sixteenth century, each of the three orthodoxies were represented by official documents. In Protestant lands, these documents were summaries of doctrine called confessions or catechisms. In Catholic lands, the Council

of Trent's *Profession of Faith* often functioned as such a confessional document. To demonstrate the unity instrumentalized by confessional documents and enforced by the disciplinary regimes of confessional states, school theologians developed and refined a vast library of polemical literature, topical treatises, systematic handbooks of dogma, published disputations, and sermons, all of which displayed what the French social philosopher Michel Foucault might have called an enthusiasm for "classification practices," in this case, practices to classify the many elements of true and false belief.

It was the quantity and variety of arguments that made the theologian a virtuoso after the Reformation. A taste for volume and detail was displayed by the sheer size and number of books. For example, Martin Chemnitz (d. 1586), Lutheran superintendent of Brunswick and one of the six theologians who composed the Formula of Concord (1577), a definitive statement of Lutheran orthodoxy, published a four-volume critique of the Council of Trent (1566-1573), among many other things, and it remained a standard of Lutheran polemical theology up to the nineteenth century. In its nineteenth-century critical edition, it comprises over a thousand pages of fine print. On the Catholic side, Robert Bellarmine's *Disputations and Controversies of the Christian Faith against the Heretics of these Days*, which he composed as professor of the Jesuit college in Rome and first published between 1586 and 1593, offered a systematic rebuttal of Lutherans at the century's end. It was expanded in the next generation with notes by Veit Ebermann (d. 1675). Ebermann's revisions targeted the two most influential Protestants of the generation after Bellarmine, the Lutheran professor of Jena, Johann Gerhard (d. 1637), and the Reformed professor of Franeker, William Ames (d. 1633), both authors of standard seventeenth-century anti-Catholic works. John Jewel (d. 1571), early Elizabethan Bishop of Salisbury and a student of the Italian Protestant refugee Pietro Martyri Vermigli, composed a brief *Apology of the Church of England* (Latin 1562, English 1564), which argued that the English church under the royal supremacy was "no new thing" but a restoration of true catholic religion, while a "recusant" Catholic population and their accursed "amphibology" (the art of evading condemnation by feeding interrogators equivocations rather than outright lies) survived well into the seventeenth century.

These were arguably the most broadly influential polemical compendia of early modern Christianity, but there were very many more. The Viennese historian of Catholic apologetics, Karl Werner (d. 1888), listed thirty-four "principal" anti-Protestant polemicists on the Catholic side in the two centuries following the Council of Trent. To my knowledge, no one has counted their Protestant counterparts or tried to identify the most influential of them in this period, but a superficial survey of a convenient database suggests some two hundred

Lutheran and Reformed writers in the “polemical” genre before 1750. They strove for completeness, in either the number of errors they corrected or in the forms of logical argument they piled on. A theologian tried to handle everything wrong on the other side.

For example, Conrad Schüsselburg (d. 1619) was the Lutheran superintendent of Stralsund when he published a thirteen-volume *Catalogue of Heretics* in the last three years of the sixteenth century. He began with “the principal heretics,” the anti-Trinitarians, whose error he traced from the fourth-century Alexandrian priest Arius to his own contemporary Francis David, a renegade Calvinist in Transylvania. He worked his way through very many others – thirteen volumes’ worth. His long list of heretics evokes the historical and theological complexity of religious discrimination in post-Reformation schools. Five names on his list refer to groups of Lutheran theologians (Antinomians, Synergists, Osiandrists, Maiorists, and Adiaphorists), two refer to Catholics (Jesuits and Stancarists), one refers to Calvinists (Calvinians), and three refer to groups with more radically heterodox ideas (Servitians, Anabaptists, and Schwenckfeldians). His discriminations were meant to illustrate a Lutheran “catholic” faith.

For their part, Catholics often described Protestants as revivers “of all the heresies that had appeared since the beginning of the church,” as the historian François Laplanche once said – and they could name them. Lutheran and Reformed theologians – for example, Theodore Beza (Calvin’s successor in Geneva and the most influential theologian among Protestants involved with the French Wars of Religion), Martin Chemnitz (the most important Lutheran theologian in that same generation), William Ames (an English Protestant who taught at Franeker, in the young Dutch Republic), and others – also linked their opponents’ errors to ancient Christian heresies, and they defended their own opinions as true “catholic” belief.

Examples of such treatises could easily mount to the hundreds. The evidence goes beyond the genre of apologetic and controversial theology. All academic theology was essentially a polemical technology. A majority of theological titles produced by school masters in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and there are thousands of them, involved consideration and rebuttal of false opinions harvested from past and present authors. They loved hating unorthodoxy. And yet, eschewing intellectual variety and discord, they propagated that diversity again and again in books of theology, even while they refuted it.

That diversity included divisions that had emerged *within* each competing orthodoxy. In dedicated treatises and in comprehensive handbooks of doctrine, theologians applied their “classification practices” to close enemies with the same gusto they dedicated to opponents across confessional lines. Among the Lutheran “orthodox” in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, internal opponents commonly included the same suspects named by Schüsselburg: adiaphorists, “Philippists” or “crypto-Calvinists,” Osiandrists, Antinomians, Maiorists, Flaccians, Zwinglians, Anabaptists, Socinians, and Schwenckfeldians. The first five of these “heresies” stood firmly within the broader Lutheran camp, while three of them involved people in a broadly Reformed orbit (Zwinglians, Philippists or crypto-Calvinists, and Socinians). Among the Reformed, opponents typically included Osiandrists, Anabaptists, libertines, Socinians, Arminians, Gomarists, and Amyrauldians. Teachers representing all but two of these, the Osiandrists and Anabaptists, had a clear, historical relationship to the Reformed movement. Among Catholics, differences partly fell out along the lines of religious orders, particularly the Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and, eventually, by the mid-seventeenth century, supporters of the Cistercian nuns of Port-Royal, the Jansenists. But as always, books of theology named the factions after controversial teachers: Baianists, Bañezian Thomists, Molinists, and Jansensists were the most important.

In each confession, mastering this onomasticon of heretics and heresies was high art. The names I have mentioned count for an extremely selective list. Entering the lists of discussable opinions were also the many controversialists of the early Reformation, and late medieval theologians (Thomists, Scotists, Ockhamists, and others less well known). Added to the crowded underworld of named heresies were writers debated since the second century! The knowledge produced by theological books claimed to be scriptural and logically coherent yet included a plurality of opinions minutely parsed by theologians even as they tried to resolve debates into a single orthodox stance. This was the third impact of the Reformation on theology.

So it was that theology expanded in spite of itself during and after the Reformation. It expanded as popular religious discourse, to include a growing number of lay and vernacular writers. It expanded as an intellectual enterprise, to include a new method of textual study. It expanded as a polemical technology, to express a growing pluralism in western Christianity, even while theologians tried to instrumentalize one or another particular version of universal Christian truth.

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