Abstract

This article assesses A. G. Dickens’s contribution to the study of the continental Reformation, and of German Lutheranism in particular. Dickens’s main theses, as formulated in a group of five thematically linked major works that were published between 1964 and 1974, concerned the cultural and historical significance of European Protestantism as an emancipatory national movement whose urban, ‘bourgeois’ variant was subject to constraints of far-reaching historical consequence in Germany. Dickens’s further writings, war diaries and private papers are adduced to illustrate the conceptual assumptions underlying this interpretation, which are shown to have been influenced by his Protestant religious convictions and an apparent fascination with Oswald Spengler’s theory of civilizations. The article questions Dickens’s account of the link between humanism, Lutheran thought and incipient German nationalism, but stresses the relevance of his critique of contemporary German scholarship for adopting a too narrowly national perspective.

Readers wishing to focus on specific aspects of A. G. Dickens’s wide-ranging and voluminous work on early modern British and European religious history are immediately confronted with the problem of determining the very boundaries of their enquiry. Students of the English Reformation, for example, who trustingly follow Dickens’s account of the ascending path from late medieval ecclesiastical corruption to the unique and singularly fortunate English solution to the dilemmas of state-Church relations and late medieval spiritual crisis, may be surprised to find the story interrupted by a digression on the ‘fountains of living water’ which English monasticism still supplied through the members of the select Carthusian order.¹ ‘The Tudor age’, they are instructed, ‘bred no nobler Englishmen than these’.² To pursue this intriguing reference to the spiritual vitality and resilience of monasticism further, readers must quit the track of Dickens’s narrative of the English Reformation and turn to his assessment of Carthusianism in relation to late medieval monasticism in Europe and the reform potential of the new Italian reform orders, as set out in his inquiry into the origins and course of the European

Reformation. To round out the picture, they are also asked to ponder the pristine state of the Observant Augustinians in Germany, whose spirituality exerted a formative influence on the young Luther, and the Danish Carmelites, who were the most learned pre-Reformation order in that country and supplied the Lutheran movement with at least seven reformers. These scattered hints are collected into a conclusive argument in Dickens’s full-length account of the Counter Reformation, in which he depicted the monastic revival as induced by these nuclei of reform and the new religious orders, of whom the Jesuits were the avant-garde.

More examples could be supplied to demonstrate the existence of recurrent themes in Dickens’s work, the most pervasive of which are the centrality of Luther as prophet and agent of the Reformation and his spiritual kinship with Christian humanism. The centrality of the urban factor in the success or failure of the continental Reformation is another example. When reading, in consecutive order, the five major studies which Dickens published in the decade 1964–74, and in which he dealt with the English and European Reformations, the reader gains the impression that the author was striving to sum up the universal drama of the Reformation, of which the Counter Reformation was but part, by viewing it from different angles – English, European, German. His conclusively argued individual works are closely linked by unifying themes and become part of a general picture, although integration occasionally required some adjustment, as will be shown.

Dickens’s approach raises questions concerning its underlying assumptions about the workings of history and about his own agenda in writing. The first question, at least, cannot be answered without speculation, but Dickens’s autobiographical notes in his diaries from post-war Germany provide some clues. Thus, it emerges that Dickens was familiar with Oswald Spengler’s theory of civilization, set out in detail in his Decline of the West. Reflecting on the scale of destruction which the Nazis had inflicted on the sites and populations of urban, bourgeois Europe, Dickens expressed his fears at the ‘threatened approach of Spengler’s cultureless society’. As an outspoken Christian scholar, Dickens would

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4 A. G. Dickens, Martin Luther and the Reformation (1967), pp. 10–11.
5 Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 115.
8 The works in question are Dickens, English Reformation; Reformation and Society in 16th-Century Europe; Martin Luther and the Reformation; Counter Reformation; and A. G. Dickens, The German Nation and Martin Luther (1974). Dickens’s textbook survey, The Age of Humanism and Reformation: Europe in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries (1972), will be dealt with later but is omitted here as it does not belong with or add to his Reformation studies.
10 Quotation from A. G. Dickens, Lübeck Diary (1947), p. 25.
not have adopted Spengler’s secular cultural pessimism wholesale, and
he would have objected strongly to its racial assumptions. He might,
however, have gone along with Spengler’s ‘organic’ view of history and
the concomitant belief in its cyclical movement, marked by stages of
birth, growth, maturity and decline. This would be consistent with
Dickens’s account of the decline of the Church as an institution in
the late middle ages, culminating in its ‘despiritualization’ during the
Renaissance, when it acted as a supplier of careers and favours and
became in effect a mere parasitical excrescence of the Christian body.\(^\text{11}\)
Spengler’s interpretation would also be in line with Dickens’s insistence
on a long period of gestation for the Reformation, as opposed to any
explanation derived from a combination of short-term causes and arbitrary
princely intervention.\(^\text{12}\)

As a Christian scholar, however – and this brings up the second
question about his underlying agenda – Dickens shrank from Spengler’s
pessimistic predictions about the destiny of western culture. He did
not share the sanguine ‘enlightened’ assumptions of some of his liberal
and Marxist contemporaries about the linear progress of mankind, but
emphatically asserted his belief in a ‘redemptive rationality’ which, while
curbing the politically destructive potential of Christian religion, ensured
its survival as a guide to an otherwise precariously ‘self-reliant humanity’.\(^\text{13}\)
From this perspective, the Protestant Reformation, and even the recovery
of the Catholic Church effected by the Counter Reformation, testified
to the self-regenerating capacity of Christian religion.\(^\text{14}\)

Within a Christianized Spenglerian conceptual framework, Christian
religion would be the redeeming agent which counterbalanced the cultural
disruption of cyclical historical change by supplying an element of continuity
and helping to establish equilibrium at the next stage of historical
development. Although Dickens conceded that Catholicism to some
extent shared in this regenerative quality, it was captured in its pristine
form in Lutheran sola-fideism only, which to Dickens seemed to have
presented not just the pivotal Reformation doctrine but the quintessential
expression of self-sustaining Christianity.

The argument about Dickens’s Christian agenda holds even if his views
on Spenglerianism cannot be clarified entirely from the available evidence.\(^\text{15}\)
As his statements on religion and redemptive rationality illustrated, Dickens

\(^\text{11}\) Dickens, *Reformation and Society*, pp. 35–6, 38–40.
\(^\text{12}\) Dickens, *German Nation*, pp. 17–18, and the account of the late medieval crisis of religion
and anti-papal criticism from within and outside the institutional Church in Dickens,
*Reformation and Society*, pp. 9–51, and *Counter Reformation*, pp. 9–44.
\(^\text{13}\) Dickens, *Reformation and Society*, p. 200.
\(^\text{14}\) This is the main argument of Dickens, *Counter Reformation*.
\(^\text{15}\) A study of his private papers, kept in the University of London Archives, MS. 923 (29
boxes), may shed light on this issue. The present author was allowed to have a preliminary
glimpse of boxes 1–3, but the material still awaits cataloguing and regrettably remains
unavailable for research until further notice.

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made no secret of the fact that his thought and writing were rooted in Christian belief and that, in his view, history was not a series of random occurrences. Moreover, in spite of his general reverence for Rankean historical objectivity, he did not believe in value-free history. At the time when he was publishing his set of five book-length studies, continental Reformation and Counter Reformation scholarship had yet to achieve a full emancipation from the heritage of nineteenth-century Kulturkampf historiography. Dickens explicitly rejected any partisan confessional approach and insisted that his was an attempt at a ‘balanced and human account of the Reformation in its social, political and intellectual setting’. However, this did not mean that he waived his right to comment on the moral dimension of human action. There is, for example, no mistaking the note of strong moral disapproval in his account of the Renaissance papacy. Dickens was equally frank in denouncing Luther’s response to the German Peasants’ War as a sizeable blot on the Protestant hero’s escutcheon. Thus, although he cannot be labelled a partisan scholar, Dickens was writing with a clear and not exclusively academic purpose, and he deliberately took his place within rather than above the confessionalized scholarship of his time.

Dickens’s interest in the wider cultural and ideological implications of his subject had consequences for his method: for his books on the continental Reformation and Counter Reformation, he did not engage in archival research, but strove to keep up with the fast-growing flow of relevant publications. He was in touch with the leading Reformation scholars in the field, and in particular acknowledged the influence of James Atkinson, Gordon Rupp, Geoffrey Elton, Patrick Collinson and Gerald Strauss. He likewise quoted the German historians Bernd Moeller, Hubert Jedin and Ernst Walter Zeeden. Dickens was scrupulous in recording his debts to fellow scholars, and his revered master Ranke in fact was ticked off posthumously for being somewhat slipshod in indicating the extent to which his masterpieces were indebted to the diligent, if less imaginative, work of his German contemporaries. Above all, Dickens brought his expert knowledge of the leading reformers’ writings to the task. On this basis, he developed broad but detailed images which gave prominence to the basic structures and main actors. Dickens was aware that the ever-growing number of specialist studies in the field

\[\text{[17] Dickens, Reformation and Society, p. 7.}
\[\text{[18] Dickens, Reformation and Society, pp. 34–7.}
\[\text{[19] Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 70.}
\[\text{[20] Dickens, Ranke as Reformation Historian, pp. 16–17. Dickens would acknowledge his debts in the preface of his works as well as in the text (cf. Dickens, Reformation and Society, p. 7; German Nation, pp. vi, 157, 163, 170 n. 13, and pp. 59, 177, 178, 180, 181, 194, 218 for his main source, Bernd Moeller).}
meant that, in opting for this approach, he laid himself open to charges of reductionism. Nor could he hope to achieve ‘invariable precision and consistency’. However, he believed his objective of providing ‘balanced and human’ syntheses for a wider readership well worth the sacrifice. As he somewhat defiantly insisted, his books were not written for ‘pedants’. ‘In short, synthesis must involve writing books which will inevitably be replaced, attacked and patronized by others which climb upon their shoulders.’

Dickens was, in general, outspoken about the ideological assumptions on which he operated, the methods he accepted or loathed – Erikson’s psychoanalytical interpretation of the young Luther was his pet hate and the primary and secondary messages that he was trying to convey to his readers. His work is arguably best measured by its own standards, and by taking account of the lingering confessional sentiment that marked much of the academic discourse on Christian history at the time. Conversely, problems arise from any attempt to judge Dickens’s contribution by the research-saturated and, for the most part, fully-secularized standards of present-day Reformation and Counter Reformation scholarship. The following is an attempt to trace the main lines of Dickens’s argument relating to the German Reformation and its place in sixteenth-century Europe.

Dickens’s two major studies of the German and European Reformation discussed the success or failure of Protestantism in the context of the rising nation-states of north-western Europe. The formation of national Churches in the western monarchies, according to his central argument, was spurred on by anticlericalism and anti-papalism that cut across class boundaries. The elite variant of this movement based its claim to legitimacy on conciliarist theory and a ‘spirit of patriotism’ that was given an ideological underpinning by Europe’s humanist intellectuals. There is a strong Eltonian flavour to the first part of this argument, which is reinforced by references to the importance of the common law and the lawyers’ contribution to this process in England, where ‘the whole legal fraternity was striving to erode clerical power long before the name of

21 Dickens, Counter Reformation, p. 7.
22 Dickens, Reformation and Society, p. 7.
23 Dickens, Counter Reformation, p. 7.
25 See his comments in Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 13, and German Nation, p. 209. His handwritten notes for a lecture on ‘What Luther taught’ have a point on ‘Luther and the psychologists’, in which he briefly summarizes his criticism of the pleading by Erikson and others for the applicability of psychoanalysis to historical subjects. Dickens’s main objections related to the scarcity of sources and their unsuitability for retrospective investigation. As he pithily put it: ‘This is all very praiseworthy but there are grave difficulties in psychoanalysing the dead.’ He also deeply resented Erikson’s dissection of the ‘great man’ and prophet Luther (University of London Library, MS. 923, box 2, lecture notes).
26 Dickens, Reformation and Society and German Nation.
27 Dickens, Reformation and Society, pp. 22, 29–35.
Luther resounded throughout Europe’. On the continent, by contrast, canon law, as administered by the Roman curia through the multitude of ecclesiastical courts, ‘held all Christian men in its firm grip’. Dickens mentioned the ‘patriotic’ efforts of German lawyers like Gregor Heimburg and his former student Martin Mair, who initiated the formulation of the first German *gravamina* by the electors at the imperial diet in 1456. He also broadly referred to those German humanists who became legal counsellors to princes and magistrates, and in this capacity propagated notions of civic humanism derived from the Florentine Renaissance. However, the subject was then effectively allowed to drop as Dickens made no effort systematically to investigate the links between law and Protestantism outside an English context, although the case of the German Protestant lawyers’ opposition to the claims of Roman and canon law would have considerably strengthened his argument.

The reason for this would seem to be that Dickens wished, as far as possible, to steer clear of the political history of the Reformation and its legal side-issues, which he considered to have been satisfactorily dealt with by Elton and others, and instead to concentrate on the interplay of social, economic and intellectual forces. In a later assessment of research to the end of the nineteen-seventies he moreover maintained that the majority of Reformation studies could still be described as falling into the categories of either the biographical or the ‘high-political’. Dickens, on the other hand, insisted that ‘we should not unduly politicize a movement which arose from all sorts of causal factors’. As regards political outcomes, he was content to point out that the Catholic princes of Europe became the ‘chief trendsetters of absolutism’, although he acknowledged a more widespread ‘apotheosis of princes’ in Europe and Henrician England. Within the German context, he argued, with some justification, that none of the sixteenth-century Lutheran imperial princes could be represented as paving the way for modern authoritarianism, and it remained for the Calvinist great elector to become the ‘architect of modern autocracy in Brandenburg-Prussia’. On balance, the political impact of Lutheranism at the level of inter-state relations was likewise positive: ‘for a century or so after Luther’s death the political influence of Lutheranism appears on the whole beneficent. The German Lutheran states were the least aggressive in Europe. While their rulers present a

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29 Dickens, *German Nation*, p. 7.
30 Dickens, *German Nation*, p. 48
32 Dickens, *German Nation*, p. v; *Reformation and Society*, p. 7.
highly mixed spectacle, several of them . . . exemplify the paternal rule of that age at its best.\textsuperscript{34} As will be shown later, this optimistic assessment was not extended to the effects of Lutheranism on civic values and virtues, which Dickens considered to have been profoundly ambivalent and, in the German case, on the whole negative.

The primary relevance of Lutheranism as a factor in European history, as Dickens saw it, lay in its cultural achievement in liberating the peoples of north-western Europe from the spell of the declining Mediterranean. The creation of national Churches and liturgies, the translation and diffusion of the bible in the vernacular, and the boost which Protestant printing and preaching gave to education and the development or refinement of literary languages were, in fact, seen as bringing to their logical conclusion the earlier efforts of the northern humanists. Acting as agents of Lutheran dissemination were the German trade colonies and settlers in the Baltic ports and in Transylvania, which he considered conclusive evidence against any assumption that Lutheranism was imposed by the princes on a hostile population. Baltic Lutheranism, in particular, ‘found itself sitting crowned upon the graves of the Hanseatic League and the Teutonic knights’.\textsuperscript{35} The cultural significance of Lutheranism was most obvious in the Scandinavian context:

In no narrowly doctrinal sense was Luther the step-father to these adolescent nations. Small in population, relatively simple in social structure, still acquiring a sense of national identity, and never deeply involved in Mediterranean traditions, the Scandinavian peoples were well adapted to receive the Evangelical religion and its broader concomitants. As an influence upon such national cultures, especially upon their literatures, Lutheranism found itself more powerful than did Anglicanism in England, a country about this time subjected to a greater complex of forces, both secular and religious.\textsuperscript{36}

The fact that royal orders for the confiscation of church plate, for example, provoked large-scale popular uprisings in the south Swedish provinces in 1542–3 was rather dubiously explained away as the result of skilful propaganda by the Catholic clergy, who contrived to turn local economic grievances relating to trade restrictions into anti-Protestant action.\textsuperscript{37}

In any case, the extent of popular opposition had to be played down as the sweeping triumph of the Reformation among the uncorrupted ‘adolescent nations’ of Scandinavia was part of Dickens’s wider argument about a clash of cultures, if not civilizations, which was at the heart of


\textsuperscript{35} Dickens, \textit{Martin Luther}, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{36} Dickens, \textit{Martin Luther}, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{37} Dickens, \textit{Martin Luther}, p. 117.
the confrontation between Rome and the nations of Europe. France and Spain were removed from this contest at an early stage, the one by the strength of the monarch, who enjoyed far-reaching rights over the Church, the other by a combination of preventive ecclesiastical reform and systematic repression of dissent, to which in both cases must be added the absence of a sufficiently strong and independent urban element. The existence of such an element was, as Dickens repeatedly stressed, of crucial importance for the successful central European Reformation.  

The contrast between the calculating cynicism, or at least pliable cultural elitism, of the exponents of the degenerate Mediterranean culture on the one side, and the ‘naive moralism’ which actuated the protagonists of the revolt of the ‘trans-alpine nations’ on the other, formed the backdrop against which the drama of the battle of the Roman Church with its Anglican, Lutheran, Zwinglian and Calvinist opponents gradually unfolded:

Speaking generally, the spirit of Renaissance Italy lay poles apart from that of Luther. The educated classes were intellectual and curious rather than fervent or indignant; their capacities for a personal religion could as easily be occupied by Platonist speculation as by a quest for Christian assurance. Italian grievances and aspirations did not coincide with those of Luther’s Germany. The hatreds provoked by the Papacy were only in rare cases founded upon religious zeal; even insofar as they were political, they lacked the deep resentments felt and expressed by German nationalism. While Italy provided the Reformation with a number of distinguished recruits like Pietro Martire Vermigli and Bernardino Ochino, its more characteristic response to the stresses of the age may be seen in that aristocratic and precious circle of choice spirits founded in Naples by Juan de Valdès. And when practical criticisms arose from eminent and virtuous men like Contarini, the offer of a cardinalate appeared to be no mere bribe but a brilliant opportunity to join in the work of Catholic reform.

Dickens’s description of the onslaught of the zealous barbarian nations on the morally debilitated Roman Church, whose jurisdictional powers kept the European nations captive in spite of being ‘a mere ghost of Imperial Rome’, reads like an ironic sequel to Gibbon. Germany was destined to lead the attack on this hollow structure: ‘it seems natural enough that the revolt – like that of the Hussites long before – should have arisen from a quasi-colonial frontier of Europe, where men felt themselves exploited in favour of the princes and communities of the anciently settled Mediterranean Basin and Rhine Valley.’ Anti-papalism allegedly became the battle-cry which rallied national sentiment to the standard of Protestantism, although the resulting movement failed to remedy the defect that Germany possessed no ‘political organization answering to this

38 Dickens, Martin Luther, pp. 76, 114, 120, 125; and see also Dickens, Reformation and Society, pp. 95, 97, 173.
39 Dickens, Reformation and Society, pp. 34–7.
40 Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 127.
This article will shortly turn to these contentions about the alleged substance and function of German nationalism.

Dickens briefly pondered another contender for leadership against Rome – the republic of Venice. The belated emergence of the nation-state in Italy and Germany in the nineteenth century seems to have inspired the author’s considerations on parallels between the two countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: like Germany, Italy failed to produce a ‘nationalized’ church within a national monarchy. Venice, as the ‘most consistently anticlerical force in Italy, the most secular-minded society, the only Italian power ostensibly in a position to repress the Papacy’, should have become the natural leader of an anti-papal league. However, it betrayed, so to speak, its historical mission by its ‘grasping’ territorial expansionism, which drove potential allies into the arms of Julius II and effectively brought the republic to the brink of destruction by the League of Cambrai in 1508–9.

Dickens’s account of the European Reformation thus gave prominence to the theme of a clash between declining and rising cultures, from which the strong monarchies of the west, and the ‘adolescent’ and ‘frontier’ nations of Scandinavia and central Europe emerged victorious. Linked to this was the capacity of the Christian religion to purge and regenerate itself in the various creeds of Protestantism, and to adapt its organization to the framework of the nation-state. Dickens’s declining Mediterranean, it would seem, was essentially a shorthand for papal Rome and the circles of the late Renaissance Italian intelligentsia. For the sake of Christianity’s capacity for self-healing he was willing to concede that Counter Reformation spirituality, as imparted by the Italian and Spanish reform orders and the remnants of uncorrupted monasticism in other parts of Europe, allowed the Tridentine spirit to disseminate itself at national level and breathe new life into the Roman Church.

Germany occupied a special place in Reformation history as told by Dickens, because the prevalence of strong but politically frustrated national sentiment made it receptive to Luther’s anti-papal propaganda and turned the quest for religious reform into a national movement with an essentially political thrust. Given the centrality of this thesis to Dickens’s argument, it seems appropriate to have a closer look at the assumptions on which he based his case for the interaction of humanism, nationalism and the German Reformation.

As previously explained, Dickens did not undertake research of his own on the continental Reformation, although he was very well versed in the leading reformers’ writings, most notably those of his hero Martin Luther. He also took a keen interest in early Reformation historiography,
and was an ardent admirer of the humanist scholarship of Johannes Sleidan, whom he considered the most able and methodologically advanced of the contemporary Protestant writers. Among modern authorities who exerted the greatest influence on his views of the origins and course of the German Reformation, the German scholar Bernd Moeller must be mentioned. Between 1959 and 1965 Moeller published a series of pioneering articles on the urban Reformation which provided the starting point for what has since become a major subdiscipline of German Reformation studies.

In at least two of these articles, which were known to Dickens, Moeller offered an explanation of Luther’s relation to humanism and explored the links between the urban humanist sodalities and the Reformation. Briefly summarized, Moeller argued that, up to 1517, Luther’s contacts with humanists had been sporadic and consisted mostly of unsolicited correspondence with scholars like the Nuremberg writer Christoph Scheurl, the Reformer Georg Spalatin, who was Luther’s erstwhile fellow student and secretary to his patron Frederick the Wise, and the canon at the Church of St. Mary in Gotha, Konrad Muth (Mutianus Rufus), head of the humanist circle in Erfurt of which Eobanus Hessus and Crotus Rubanus were also distinguished members. While Luther deeply admired the humanists’ erudition and philological skills, he did not value these as ends in themselves, and the spirit and anthropological assumptions of humanism remained profoundly alien to him: ‘Luther’s discovery was more a rejection of that world. One could better call it a monastic discovery.’ The pattern of contacts changed with the onset of the Reformation controversy, when Luther corresponded with Erasmus and Reuchlin, while the younger and more daring generation of humanists became Luther’s most ardent followers and were the first to circulate his writings. Moeller thus concluded: ‘One can state this pointedly: No humanism, no Reformation.’

Dickens accepted most of this account, but took Moeller’s conclusion as the starting point for his own argument that humanism had a much more direct impact on Luther’s views. He thus stressed Luther’s insistence on the utility of humanist training in advancing his theological cause, and he quoted Luther’s letter of 29 March 1523 to Eobanus Hessus on the importance of a proper humanist education for Christian youth.

44 Dickens, Contemporary Historians, pp. 2–5.
47 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 55–6, 59, 63.
from Luther’s estimation of the study of the ancient languages and the *studia humanitatis* in general, Dickens saw the most direct relevance of humanism to Luther in the adoption of critical methods and a historical approach to scriptural studies. Moreover, the Erasmian call for the diffusion of biblical knowledge came as close as possible to Luther’s concern for its vernacular rendition.\(^{48}\) An anonymous reader had criticized a draft version of Dickens’s article on ‘Luther and humanism’ for giving a ‘partial’ account of humanism: ‘In Dickens’s telling of it, humanism equals Christian scholarship, especially of the Bible, plus high-minded moral reform by means of education.’ Dickens’s frank admission of this fact also highlights his understanding of the humanist movement itself: he underlined this critique and scribbled in the margins ‘Yes I am out to prove his [Luther’s] kinship with one important aspect of humanism – the most important’.\(^{49}\)

Dickens was thus at pains to demonstrate Luther’s close kinship with humanism, and this logically entailed the maximization of the distance between humanism and its predecessors. Indeed, he insisted that a complete break had occurred between humanism and scholasticism.\(^{50}\) In following this line of argument, Dickens deliberately repudiated the more complex account of the distinguished Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller. The latter had insisted that, at least in the case of the Italian Renaissance, there had been no direct confrontation between humanism and scholasticism, as humanism remained essentially unphilosophical. The outcome of the Renaissance humanists’ efforts had been a mere shift of emphasis among the academic disciplines in favour of grammar and rhetoric, in which fields the humanists had continued, and expanded upon, the work of their medieval predecessors.\(^{51}\) Kristeller’s provocative argument for a competitive relationship was, and remains, controversial, and Dickens agreed with Kristeller’s critics that his account levelled differences in form and content to an unacceptable degree.\(^{52}\)

Dickens’s attempt to integrate Luther as firmly as possible within the humanist tradition nevertheless poses problems of its own. Even if his objection is accepted that Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith


\(^{49}\) University of London Archives, MS. 923, box 1, letter of 1 June 1984 with Dickens’s comments.

\(^{50}\) Dickens, *Martin Luther*, p. 8.


\(^{52}\) Dickens underlined a critical comment by the author on Kristeller’s article in his copy of E. Meuthen, ‘Charakter und Tendenzen des deutschen Humanismus’, in *Säkulare Aspekte der Reformationzeit*, ed. H. Angermeier and R. Seyboth (Munich, 1983), at p. 222. The copy is among his papers in University of London Archives, MS. 923, box 1.
referred only to ‘the higher plane of human destiny: the plane of salvation’ and did not deprive man of the capacity for choice in his actions, there remains the problem of reconciling his views on predestination and corrupt human nature with the optimistic individualism of Renaissance humanism. In particular, it is difficult to see how the rift between Erasmus and Luther on the question of free will could have been smoothed over, and Dickens had admitted as much in his earlier account of the discrepancy between Erasmus’s views and ‘the tragic convictions of Luther, with the masked God whose ways are not ours’.

Another work which strongly influenced Dickens’s interpretation of German humanist nationalism insisted on the significance of the dispute about freedom of will in marking the boundaries between humanism and the Reformation. In 1929, an article obscurely entitled ‘Humanism and the development of the German mind’, was published by the then leading German intellectual historian Paul Joachimsen (1867–1930). Underlying his interpretation of the links between the Italian Renaissance, German humanism, nascent nationalism and the Reformation was the author’s concern to demonstrate the alleged ‘native propensities of the German mind’. These, according to Joachimsen, perpetually drew German thinkers towards the profound and spiritual, in stark contrast to the irredeemable worldliness of the frivolous Italian ‘national spirit’, from which not even Francis of Assisi was exempt. More rationally, he argued that a stock of patriotic, anti-papal arguments had been accumulated, and that they had been developed and systematically used by German humanists since the late fifteenth century. The exponents of this movement were the abbot of Sponheim, Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516), and the circle of Alsatian humanists led by Johannes Geiler von Kaisersberg (1445–1510), Sebastian Brant (1458–1521) and Jakob Wimpfeling (1450–1528). Their aim was to canvass support from the emperor and the political nation for constitutional and ecclesiastical reforms in the empire.

The rediscovered ‘Germania’ by Tacitus became the primary historical source from which German humanists like Conrad Celtis (1459–1508) and the urban humanist sodalities derived their impetus in developing a concept of the German natio which had ethnic connotations and was built around the antithesis of German simplicity and Italian corruption. This incipient ‘national romanticism’ was encouraged by the patronage of Maximilian I, but was gradually superseded by a more soberly philological and primarily religious brand of Christian humanism, of which Johannes

53 Dickens, ‘Luther and the humanists’, p. 199.
54 Dickens, Martin Luther, pp. 83–4. For a concise statement of the theological issues and bibliographical references, see R. Schwarz, Luther (2nd rev. edn., Göttingen, 1998), pp. 177–82. On relations between Erasmus and Luther, see Humanismus und Reformation: Martin Luther und Erasmus von Rotterdam in den Konflikten ihrer Zeit, ed. O. H. Pesch (Munich, 1985).
Reuchlin (1455–1522) and Erasmus of Rotterdam became the eminent exponents. Both strands of German humanism eventually fused in the character and writings of the Christian knight-poet Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523).

Following on from that, Joachimsen argued that the Reformation as an historical movement was carried a good part of its way by humanism. Without romantic patriotism and the resulting national irritability, the Reformation would hardly have become a great movement, or at least not so rapidly. Without its connection with Erasmian tendencies it would not have taken hold so firmly on the European mind.

The end to this coalition, however, came ‘inevitably’, and was induced by the famous exchange between Erasmus and Luther on the issue of free will. For Joachimsen, this argument was in itself ‘sufficient proof of how foolish it is to think that the Reformation might be considered an offshoot of humanist tendencies’. Humanism was nevertheless relevant to the Reformation in providing it with a new ‘form’, the points of contact between the two being a common concern for a return ‘ad fontes’, that is, to the pristine sources of Christianity both scriptural and spiritual, and for a proper understanding of the bible.

Dickens’s outline of German humanism and nationalism followed Joachimsen’s account very closely, down to the subdivision into two distinct consecutive phases. Dickens slightly extended the chronological scope in both directions, starting his account with the fourteenth-century defenders of imperial authority and critics of the pope. However, the familiar figures of Marsilius of Padua and William of Occam were ousted from this story as they were foreigners and ‘rootless radicals at the imperial court’ of Louis IV. Of greater consequence, in Dickens’s view, were the writings of conservative churchmen who became critics of papal authority, such as, for example, Lupold von Bebenburg (d. 1362), who insisted that the Constantine Donation was a forgery before Lorenzo Valla, and the less radical Conrad of Megenberg (d. 1374), who accepted the supremacy of the pope over the emperor but asserted the general council’s right to depose popes. As shown above, Dickens stressed the affinity of the Reformation with contemporary humanist concerns and hence defined the scope of Christian humanism to include Melanchthon, Luther and the early Protestant historian Johannes Sleidan.

57 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 1–48.
58 Dickens, Martin Luther, pp. 2–4.
59 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 37, 202–5; see Dickens, ‘Luther and the humanists’, p. 206 for Melanchthon, p. 210, and passim for Luther himself; and see also the restatement of his argument in Dickens, ‘Intellectual and social forces’, p. 495.
interpretation, lay in its providing a favourable climate and a medium for the diffusion of Luther’s specifically religious anti-papalism and related reform agenda. Luther became, in the words of both Dickens and the German Counter Reformation historian Ernst Walter Zeeden, the ‘German prophet par excellence’ by adopting a national perspective. The downside of this was that it prevented him from giving much thought to non-German problems.\(^60\)

There are several problems with this account of the links between humanism, nationalism and the Lutheran Reformation. The difficulties arising from Dickens’s attempt to integrate Luther fully into the humanist tradition have already been pointed out. Further difficulties arise from the assumption that humanism and nationalism, or patriotism, were inseparably entwined, if not identical. Dickens subsequently recognized that he might have overstated his case. One might say that he was misled in this by Joachimsen, and in a later restatement he inserted a caveat against any interpretation that gave too much weight to the humanist components in German nationalism and anti-papalism. Furthermore, he drew attention to the fact that, as yet, little was known about the downward diffusion of humanist ideas beyond the charmed circles of princely courts and patrician associations.\(^61\)

These are important modifications indeed. As for its social scope, one may wonder whether German humanism, with its exclusive urban sodalities, was substantially less elitist than its Italian counterpart, with its leading scholars taking pride in their Latin eloquence and knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. Hutten, who otherwise embodied as closely as possible the ideal of the nationalist humanist, took up writing in German only after 1519, as Dickens himself pointed out.\(^62\) Anti-papalist propaganda was, of course, a different matter, and its graphic broadsheet representations could reach a much wider and illiterate audience.\(^63\)

The substance of German nationalism as the allegedly prevalent popular mood likewise remains unclear: there were no obvious German institutions around which such a sentiment could have crystallized, as the German humanists themselves were all too aware. The imperial and electoral diets, which might be considered virtual national assemblies, were, as yet, events rather than institutions, and the sixteenth-century German nation was, in fact, a loosely integrated confederation of legal entities. Moreover, even humanist concepts of the nation for the most part retained a strong regional flavour and essentially glorified the virtues of a particular gens, like the ‘Alemannic’ nationalism of the Alsatian

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\(^{60}\) Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 48; German Nation, p. 70; ‘Intellectual and social forces’, p. 498.

\(^{61}\) Dickens, ‘Intellectual and social forces’, p. 492.

\(^{62}\) Dickens, German Nation, p. 46.

\(^{63}\) See the classic study by R. W. Scribner, For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation (1st edn., Cambridge, 1981; Oxford, 1994).

The obvious, and indeed only, plausible rallying point for a popular national movement would have been the emperor himself. Hopes for an imperial constitutional reform by a messianic emperor were entertained by the group of lawyers and royal officials attached to Maximilian I’s court, but their illusions were soon shattered when the dynastic, and hence mostly foreign, priorities which guided Maximilian’s policies became clear. An even less probable figurehead for German patriotism was his successor, the Spanish king Charles V, who remained aloof from the national movement and implacably hostile to Protestantism. His vicegerent and successor, Ferdinand I, who might have been considered an alternative, did not think in imperial or even more abstract national terms. Like any other German prince, he thought along the lines of dynastic and territorial policies, which was exactly what the German Protestant princes resumed doing once the unacceptable enforced truce of the 1548 Augsburg Interim had been toppled in favour of the more palatable compromise of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. The patriotic propaganda during the War of the Schmalkaldic League in 1546–7, which conjured the spectre of impending ‘Latin’ hegemony, did not elicit a national response;\footnote{T. A. Brady, jr., Protestant Politics: Jacob Sturm (1489–1553) and the German Reformation (Atlantic Highlands, N. J., 1995), pp. 306–7.} in fact, even Nuremberg prudently refrained from joining the confederation with an eye to maintaining good relations with the emperor. No mass popular uprisings in defence of the nation occurred, nor were they hoped for, as the memories of the German Peasants’ War of 1524–5 were imprinted indelibly on the minds of the Protestant princes.

Dickens briefly referred to the ‘anti-French aspects’ of early sixteenth-century German nationalism, but did not follow this up, although with hindsight Francophobia turned out to be the constitutive element of German patriotism in the seventeenth century.\footnote{Dickens, German Nation, p. 40. For Francophile patriotism in the 17th century, see G. Schmidt, Geschichte des Alten Reiches: Staat und Nation in der frühen Neuzeit, 1495–1806 (Munich, 1999), pp. 216–27; and H. von Zwiedineck-Südenhorst, Die öffentliche Meinung in Deutschland im Zeitalter Ludwigs XIV: 1650–1700 (Stuttgart, 1888).} As Dickens pointed out, German Protestants in 1535 could compare the spectacle of the Catholic emperor fighting the infidel in Tunisia with that of Francis I, ‘in cynical league with the Grand Turk’.\footnote{Dickens, Martin Luther, p. 97.} The imperial-French contrast, underwritten
by this unholy alliance with the arch-enemy of Christendom, and aggravated, from a Protestant perspective, by the persecution of the French Huguenots, arguably had no less an impact on the popular imagination than anti-papalism, and, unlike the latter, it was not limited to the Reformation movement. As for cynicism, the secret negotiations between the politique prince Maurice of Saxony and Henri II, and the subsequent Treaty of Chambord of 1552, by which the rebellious German princes hoped to gain French support against the emperor at the price of handing over Metz, Toul and Verdun, demarcated the boundaries of their avowed patriotism. The nation had, as yet, no clearly defined place in the world of a sixteenth-century German nobleman, which was structured by a complex web of political (that is, dynastic), and patron-client, as well as social and confessional, allegiances.

Finally, it should be remembered that Luther’s spiritual concerns placed constraints on his largely rhetorical nationalism. Those humanists who concerned themselves with the fate of the German nation were also mindful of the Hussite Wars and composed vitriolic attacks on the Bohemians as successful rivals. Before the turning-point of 1519, as Dickens pointed out, Luther had condemned the Hussite schism but had developed no conclusive opinion on Huss’s theology. Under pressure from his opponents at the Leipzig disputation, who pounced on his affinities with the Bohemian heresy, Luther in the following year embarked on a systematic study of the Czech reformer’s thought, from which he proceeded to back Huss’s repudiation of Roman primacy and to applaud his ‘De ecclesia’. Luther followed this up with further expressions of sympathy in his post-1520 writings and an exhortation to the Czechs and Germans to overcome their mutual national antipathy. Any characterization of Luther as a ‘German prophet’ must hence be balanced against this evidence, which testifies to his overriding spiritual concerns and wider intellectual horizon.

The one aspect of the German Reformation which Dickens deemed central to its success, that is, its appeal to and impact on the German towns, remains to be considered. It has already been mentioned that, in a general European context, Dickens considered the existence of a strong urban element, made up of an urban oligarchy pressed by aspiring middle classes, and a high degree of municipal autonomy as the key factor in the success of the popular Reformations of central Europe. German merchant communities and settlers in eastern Europe and the Baltic became local foci for the diffusion of the Lutheran faith, explaining the rapidity of its spread and the geographical pattern of its diffusion in the early stages of the Reformation. Dickens was primarily interested in the intellectual

68 Dickens, Age of Humanism, p. 133.
69 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 94–5.
70 Dickens, Reformation and Society, p. 95; Martin Luther, pp. 76, 114, 120.
forces and social dynamics underpinning the success of the new faith in the German towns during the first half of the sixteenth century, and more particularly in the initial phase up to c.1530, which ‘saw Lutheranism become an ineradicable feature of German society’.

For his factual account of the progress of the new faith in an urban setting Dickens largely relied on the research of Gerald Strauss and Miriam U. Chrisman for Nuremberg and Strasbourg, Bob Scribner’s work on Erfurt, and the Marxist Johannes Schildhauer’s studies for the Hanseatic cities, while the previously mentioned seminal essays by Bernd Moeller supplied the wider conceptual and chronological framework for his argument. In line with Moeller, Dickens named as preconditions for the urban Reformation an effort to maintain municipal autonomy against the interference of secular or spiritual lords, and the existence of social tensions between in- and out-groups of government, with the magistrates’ oligarchy in general slowing down or obstructing entirely the process of Protestantization. The struggle between different groups of the urban middle classes and an exclusive patriciate for the adoption of the new faith was in turn overshadowed by the social threats emanating from economic decline, and the concomitant growth of an unemployed or underemployed urban population. The overriding concern for order and stability worked towards a realignment of the urban elites against the threat of socially subversive religious sectarianism and open revolt, as exemplified by the peasant revolt of 1524–5 and the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster.

While agreeing with the importance of these points in Moeller’s model, Dickens put special emphasis on the function of anticlericalism in the German towns as a catalyst, compared to its lesser significance in the Swiss municipal Reformation. Further characteristic features were, in his view, the activity of individual reformers as charismatic leaders and, so to speak, local motors of Protestantization, the creation of a favourable intellectual climate, and the subsequent circulation of the new doctrines by urban preachers and local printing presses. Dickens was later to quote the Hussite Reformation as a caveat against overestimating the clout of printed propaganda, an error of which he considered modern studies of the subject to be guilty. By contrast, he stressed the persuasive power of the sermon as a medium of mass education and mobilization.

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71 Dickens, German Nation, ch. v.
72 Dickens, German Nation, chs. vii–viii, pp. 135–99; and the detailed account in Moeller, Imperial Cities, pp. 42–114.
74 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 102–34.
As previously mentioned, Dickens’s concern was for a social explanation of the successful entrenchment of Lutheranism in the early stages of the Reformation, which he considered intellectually decisive. Subsequent studies of the second wave of urban Reformations in the later sixteenth century have revealed the very different patterns which emerged under the conditions of urban decline, the constraints of the Augsburg Peace and the advances of the Counter Reformation in south-west Germany. Although no one explanation fits developments in all of the north and north-western German towns, some general features emerge which make the late urban Reformation almost look like an inverse of its predecessor. Thus, almost universally, a ‘magistrate’s Reformation’ was imposed on a passive or even recalcitrant population ‘by a numerically small but powerful upper-strata minority’, resulting in a significant strengthening of this group’s collective power. It frequently relied for its success on the availability of external support, for example in the case of Aalen, where the Reformation was pushed through by a patrician minority with the support of the duke of Württemberg. Finally, while Dickens’s claim for the importance of the merchants’ contribution in the early stages holds good for the late urban Reformation as well, there is a conspicuous absence of reformers of notable intellectual stature. The Lutheran heritage of anticlericalism was taken on by the Calvinist movement, which in the west of the empire was fuelled to a considerable degree by anti-clerical sentiment. One presumes that the influence of Dutch emigrants goes some way towards accounting for this phenomenon.

The conservative nature of the second round of reformations is in line with Dickens’s assessment, based on Moeller, of the decline of urban Protestantism around the mid sixteenth century. The infusion of humanist and Protestant communal spirit had temporarily arrested the long decline of the civic sense which had previously defused tensions within the late medieval urban communities. However, from the middle of the sixteenth century, the power and claims of the magistrates had grown inexorably; ‘caught in a web of nepotism and self-seeking, the burgher failed to become more of a citizen and less of a subject’. Dickens’s assessment of the role of Lutheranism in this process stood in marked contrast to his appreciation of its pacific qualities at the level of state politics. The republican heritage of Renaissance civic humanism, with its celebration of the value of *publica utilitas*, was absorbed and transmitted not by the German prophet Martin Luther, but by Bucer, Zwingli and their successors among the ‘ecclesiastical statesmen’ of the Reformation. Hence the roots of western liberalism must be traced

76 The above characteristics of the later urban reformations are given in K. von Greyerz, *The Late City Reformation in Germany: the Case of Colmar, 1522–1628* (Wiesbaden, 1980), at pp. 197, 199, 200–1.

77 Dickens, *German Nation*, p. 199.
through the various strands of the Reformed faith of non-Lutheran
descent, whereas the direct followers of the German prophet failed in
their call to civic leadership. Having achieved their own limited goals of
religious and political emancipation, they turned into small-time tyrants
‘whose virtues, when the main crisis came in 1620, proved the supine
virtues of legalism rather than those of religious and political liberty’.
Dickens based his crushing verdict on the contrast between the political
activism of Zwingli and Calvinist political thought on the one hand, and
Luther’s preoccupation with social as opposed to political concerns on
the other. He quoted Luther’s illusory imperial loyalism and effectively
denied the existence of Lutheran political doctrine other than ‘that reverse
side of an ecclesiastical tapestry which has passed muster as his “political
thought”’. 78

While it would be hard to dispute the main point about Luther’s
spiritual priorities, the most obvious objections to Dickens’s wider
argument concern his disregard for Luther’s teachings on the essence
and limits of Christian obedience, and the changes that his thinking
underwent in response to political events. Moreover, it took no account
of the further development of Lutheran resistance doctrine by, for
example, the Schmalkaldic League and the Gnesio-Lutheran opposition
in Magdeburg to the Augsburg Interim of 1548. Dickens was acquainted
with these facts, and we must revert to the question of his underlying
agenda to understand the importance that he attached to the failure of
Lutheranism as a civic ideology in the German Reformation.

Some books should be read starting from the end, and Dickens’s
account of the urban Reformation is a striking case in point. Following
his conclusions on the suppression of urban democracy and the
concomitant economic decline of the upper German towns, which
were cut off from the new networks of Atlantic and Baltic trade, Dickens
went on to expatiate on the continuing relevance of the German cities
as ‘settings for civilized and humane living. Even in our day the
decentralization of German public life has done much not only to foster
genius but to prevent the triumph of barbarism’. Reflecting on his stay
in Germany at the end of the Second World War and its immediate
aftermath, Dickens reminisced about the resurgence of German culture
from its urban roots: ‘From beneath the physical and spiritual rubble, the
Germany of Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment quickened
and sprouted in a thousand places: it soon began to grow again into
warmth and fragrance, and it grew first of all in the musical and religious
life of the city churches.’ 79

This passage echoed the reflections of his post-war diary on the rich
historical traditions and prevalent sense of bourgeois self-confidence of

78 Dickens, German Nation, pp. 193, 221, 70.
79 Dickens, German Nation, p. 199.
pre-war Germany, which he found epitomized above all in the merchant culture of the Hanseatic towns of Lübeck and Hamburg. He bitterly regretted that they had not produced a Swiss-style confederation and infused Germany with their spirit, ‘to the exclusion of that evil Baltic kingdom of Prussia’. However, they might still become starting-points for post-war European reconstruction: ‘Amidst the brutal levelling down of this poor continent, with the threatened approach of Spengler’s cultureless society, should we not strive to retain something of the old middle-class refinement which so distinguished Hamburg and her Hanseatic sister-cities?’ Thus, while they had tragically failed to turn into city-state nuclei of a democratic confederation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the German towns nevertheless had an important historical mission in supplying an alternative vision to Spengler’s cultural desert.

In composing his picture of the European Reformation, which he perceived as a multifaceted but unitary event, Dickens combined his expert knowledge of the theological sources with a sophisticated eclecticism in selecting from the vast and rapidly expanding stock of specialist studies. His primary interest was in the social and intellectual dimensions of his subjects, but, while never losing sight of the larger issues he wished to demonstrate, he nevertheless insisted on the significance of local evidence, discussed in case studies, and stressed the need to quit the level of high politics for a ‘grass roots’ approach to history. Dickens pointedly criticized the occasional pedestrianism and blinkered perspective of the work of some of his German contemporaries, who continued to treat the Reformation and its humanist precursors within an isolated German context. Conversely, he appreciated the wider perspective adopted by the Church historian Hubert Jedin and the historian of the Counter Reformation Ernst Walter Zeeden in their explorations of Tridentine reform and the European confessional age.

Dickens’s religious background and agenda have been illustrated, but any danger of confessional partisanship was forestalled by the engaging concern for tolerance which informs his writings throughout, as does that much underrated capacity of the historian, sober common sense. Arguably Dickens’s most valuable and lasting contribution to German Reformation studies was to insist on the need to investigate the long-term causes of the Reformation and to place German events within a comparative European perspective.