Religious Crisis 1400-1700

Some Considerations

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It is a special characteristic of German historians that they some-
times go to excessive lengths to define their terms before they start
their discourse. I apologise for doing so at this point, and would
like to define the two key words of my paper. We are consider-
ing the question of 'crisis or transformation'. That means we are
not only talking about the 'how', as a phenomenology of change,
but also about the 'whether': whether the developments in certain
segments of history can be identified and then described by the
proper terminology. What then is a 'crisis'?

The concept of crisis

In the discussion about the notion of crisis a reference to the anal-
ogy of disease is occasionally made. 'The crisis always occurs in dis-
eases when the illness increases in intensity, or subsides, or trans-
forms into another sickness, or ends at all'.[1] One can find these
thoughts in Hippocrates. The crisis does not appear here as a dis-
tinct event, but is still the deciding moment of transition from one
state into another. For Jacob Burckhardt, to cite one of the most
quoted German-speaking authorities on the question of crisis, the
crisis is a part of 'the accelerations of the historical process'.[2] An
event that leads to something substantially new:

> The historical process is suddenly accelerated in terrifying fashion.
> Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to flit by like
> phantoms in months or weeks, and are fulfilled.[3]

The article has been translated by Olga Pollack.

1. Vierhaus 1978, p. 314.
2. Burckhardt 1943, p. 257.
3. Burckhardt 1943, p. 267.

Burckhardt's comment regarding the 'failed crises' is helpful in interpreting a crisis that can be – as he puts it – 'cut off' (*abgeschnitten*). For instance, he counts the German Reformation among this category:

> In the Reformation, a reform of the clergy and a moderate reduction of Church property carried out by the ruling classes, and by them alone, would have sufficed. Henry VIII and the Counter-Reformation after him show what could really have been done. There was in men's minds a profound discontent, but no general, clear ideal of a new Church.[4]

Burckhardt anticipates the antithesis alluded to in the word 'transformation' when he sets the 'accelerated process' against the permanent, gradual influences and interconnections of the great global powers.[5] Although slightly vague, this analysis reflects a way of thinking that we might call 'structural history'.

In the discussion about the notion of crisis, the temporal delimitation is stressed as an important criterion. The original etymology (Greek *krisis* = decision) precludes the description of a permanent condition as a crisis. A crisis is always the culmination-point of long-term developments, although the degree of their dynamic and effect can certainly be determined by contingent factors – how would the German Reformation have proceeded if Luther had died in 1521? The crisis itself is the procedure that describes the climax of a development. It can only be defined in the context of its prehistory and its results.

The crisis in a classical sense can develop momentum after reaching a 'point of no return'. It is not easy to reconstruct when this point is reached, and in fact in historical retrospection this point can only be hypothetically determined. The crisis then becomes removed to a certain extent from the conditions that gave rise to it, and in turn has a more or less intense effect on them. In this manner the crisis expresses a dramatic intensification of long-term developments, but simultaneously it has a quality of its own, in that it contradicts part of its causes.

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4. Burckhardt 1943, pp. 267-8.
5. Burckhardt 1943, p. 257.

One should remember that no crisis can completely overthrow or change a political or social system. Even in the case of historical crises permanence and change can be observed side by side (except in the case of crises in individual subsystems, for instance the death rate crisis). The best example of this can be found in Tocqueville's analysis of post-revolutionary France.

After all, the 'great crisis' or the 'historical crisis' is complex. It can become manifest in a subsystem first (for example, in the field of public finances or the economy in general). As is generally known, increases in wheat prices, or 'subsistence crises' often lead to revolutions, which are part of crises themselves – of their beginning, their resolution, their climax.[6] From there, the crisis can affect other subsystems, leading to an accumulation of conflicts which mutually influence and intensify the dynamics of the crisis, taking it to a climax. There can be no doubt that the storming of the Bastille was such an event, as was the publication of Luther's 95 theses. But in both cases we are dealing with events, or 'explosions' as Braudel calls them in his famous essay on the 'longue durée' – their 'deceitful smoke fills the consciousness of the contemporaries but it does not last long, one can hardly see their flame'.[7]

The religious crisis of the late Middle Ages

However, our examination of the critical nature of religious change in the period between 1400 and 1700 should use a more complex model than Braudel's famous three-level-scheme can offer. One should consider that there were great regional differences in the development. In some German territories, Lutheranism and Calvinism were established, while elsewhere in Germany people remained true to their old belief, which however, experienced its own changes. In Italy, we find the classical case of the 'aborted crisis' when we inspect the institutional results of religious changes. Furthermore, one should consider that 'religious crisis' does not only mean a crisis of institutions (particularly the Papacy), but that the social aspect should also be taken into account. Who was affect-

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6. See Vierhaus 1978, p. 324.
7. See Braudel 1958, p. 728.

ed by these changes? Who perceived them as such? What groups
in society, for example, were caught up in the confessionalisation
process? Of course, when one has the rare fortune of a glimpse of
'non-elite' thinking, one finds a remarkable indifference concern-
ing dogmatic matters, ignorance and occasional idiosyncrasy.

The miller Menocchio or David Altenstetter, a goldsmith from
Augsburg, are probably the most interesting examples of the lat-
ter amongst the 'simple' folk and middle-class craftsmen in Early
Modern Central Europe.[8] And if a correspondent of Justus Lip-
sius writes at the end of the sixteenth century that darkness and
barbarism were spreading over the beautiful lands of Europe – to
what extent does such a statement reflect a broader consciousness
of crisis (as Peter Clark and others claim to have diagnosed for
the time around 1590 in general)?[9] By studying guild records and
other sources of this period, one encounters much evidence of a
normal, peaceful existence, and a calm everyday life that is by no
means overshadowed by those apocalyptic fears a few intellectuals
might have harboured.

Finally, the 'religious crisis' can be seen not only as a social or
institutional problem, but also as a problem of intellectual history.
Does the philosophy of the fourteenth century nominalists consti-
tute the beginnings of the reformers' new theology? Is then the
Reformation a consequence of the scholastic crisis (as Humanism,
in its own way, could be a response to it)? Or must one, as Febvre
says, descend to the 'gloomy regions'[10] of the reformer's psychol-
ogy (Erik Erikson tried this in his famous *Young Man Luther*)[11] in
order to find the final explanations for the religious upheavals at
the beginning of the modern age?

And so we arrive at the question of the relationship between
theory and practice, of the autonomy of processes in religious hi-
story, and, more general, of philosophical developments; at the
same time, we consider the importance of individual thought and
behaviour for the historical process. So, as accurate as it may be to
say that without the emergence of Luther or Calvin, the Reforma-

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8. On Menocchio: Ginzburg 1976; on Altenstetter: see Roeck 1989, pp. 117–21,
   and Roeck 2006.
9. See Roeck 1990; Clark, ed. 1985; and Kamen 1976.
10. Febvre 1941.
11. Erikson 1958.

tion would have gained a very different physiognomy, it is equally probable to assume that the success of the reformers can not be ascribed to the management of the *Weltgeist,* but only became possible in a very specific environment. There were structural tensions as defined by Neil Smelser that established the necessary requirements for escalation.[12] Without them there would have been no Reformation, and without the individuals involved there would have been a different Reformation – or a Reformation that would have alleviated or removed the tensions!

If religion is primarily a system of explaining the world, and its institutions offer methods of coming to terms with worldly problems, then the question regarding the state of the world has closer relevance. A religious crisis could ultimately be explained as the increasing failure of a religious system to explain the world and thus to play an integrating and legitimating role. The crisis appears – according to Habermas – as an expression of the inability of the system to perform in a way that guarantees its functioning.[13] As a result, people turn away from the traditional system, its institutions are threatened, and the world-explanation it offers is increasingly negated or at least modified. In the case of the late medieval religious system, this means that it's monopoly on cosmology, and even more its monopoly on magic, are increasingly questioned.

Magiemonopol ('monopoly on magic') is a term that identifies the claim by the institutional church to possess, exclusively, the treasure of the means of salvation, which opens the way to paradise and at the same time, enables one to cope with worldly problems.[14] It is that notion which – before and after the Reformation in a more or less close alliance with the worldly power – defines what is religion and also what is superstition, what is doctrine and what is heresy; decides what is high religion – the religion of the elite – and what is the religion of the common people. I tend towards a pragmatic definition of these terms, which sets different forms of religiousness or belief in relation to the more or less clear and closed systems of institutions.

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12. Smelser 1970.
13. Habermas 1973.
14. On the term *Magiemonopol* see Roeck 1999, pp. 334-6. For the problem of the struggle between the upper class culture and the popular culture see Burke 1978; Muchembled 1978; and Behringer 1984.

As is generally known, the institution which claimed this mo-
nopoly, and which in fact occupied it until the period of the Re-
formation, the Catholic Church had suffered dramatic and dif-
ficult events and developments during the high and late Middle
Ages. The Holy See reached its absolute height of authority and
power during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This resulted
from victories over secular authority during the bishops' investi-
ture controversy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and over the
Hohenstaufen emperors. But it is well known that these successes
over the Empire were Pyrrhic victories. At the end, there was the
Great Schism, and there were the various attempts to resolve the
problems of the Catholic Church by means of a great council – a
powerful movement that weakened the Papacy's position. The in-
ternal church reforms before the 'great' reformation were insuf-
ficient. It is obvious that tensions and contradictions inside an in-
stitution, which mediates salvation and owns monopolistic claims,
would have made at least the educated elite insecure.

Already here the formation of such a powerful movement with
anti-ritualistic origins like the Order of the Franciscans was a
symptom of the inadequacies of the 'official' church. Likewise the
Observants in the fifteenth century stood for the dialectics of a
change of the reform movement. This proved to be the beginning
of an anti-ritualistic negation of tradition, which repeated older
patterns and anticipated the Reformation.[15] The emergence of
new heresies and sects such as the Cathars, the Brothers of the
Free Spirit, the Hussites and the assortment of people, which Can-
timori depicted for us in his wonderful book,[16] characterise devel-
opments in the late Middle Ages. Here it is important to see that
the old system no longer met the demands of the people. But also
movements, which remained inside or at the edge of the 'official
church', provided grounds for the assumption that teachings and
rituals were being questioned, that people searched for new ways
to God. In this category belong the mystic movements of the late
Middle Ages, and, in a totally different way, the crisis of the scho-
lastic system taught by the nominalist Ockham. The increasingly
noticeable differentiation of various methods to achieve salvation,
which were either sanctioned by the Church – or condemned and

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15. See Douglas 1972.
16. Cantimori 1949.

therefore fought by it, is the main point, which an observer of late medieval relationships would notice.

A look at Italy (as well as a few northern regions, namely Flanders and Burgundy) points out the most dramatic pre-reformation changes: Humanism and Renaissance. Particularly the German historian tends towards the tradition of Hegel[17] and, of course, towards Ranke's history of the Reformation, in describing these movements with the metaphor of the dawn, until the actual sunrise arrived with Luther and his followers. Most probably the model is more complicated. Today we tend to look more at the abundance of worldviews and the possibility of sublimation, which stand for Humanism, Renaissance and Reformation in connection with other differentiation processes of the passing Middle Ages, thereby finding different but often simultaneous explanations for the same challenges and problems.[18]

A discourse revolution

Panofsky, in his famous comparison of scholasticism with Gothic style, formulated the thesis that the goals of the high Gothic cathedrals, as well as the scholastic *Summa,* dealt with the idea of completeness. From this idea the thesis has obtained, through both synthesis and elimination, a perfect, complete solution. One can speak with much more legitimacy about the high Gothic system than about the style of any other period.[19] A conclusion of Panofsky's (admittedly not indisputable) depiction could be to relate the end of Gothic cathedral construction with the end of the scholastic worldview. This would account for the change in those *mental habits,* which had determined the classic Gothic as well as the scholastic system. Panofsky himself names decentralisation and subjectivism, which is defined with clarity by Petrus Aureolus and Ockham as an indication of this process of disintegration. The only substantial things for 'Modernity' are those that are accessible from the *notitia intuitiva,* individual things, and psychological states; faith and rationalism were separated, forming a philosophi-

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17. See Hegel 1988, pp. 877-82.
18. See my summary in Roeck 2001.
19. Panofsky 1951.

cal preview of the Enlightenment. Metaphysical and theological questions, like those concerning the existence or the nature of God, the immortality of the soul, and even the validity of the causality principle were only answerable by categories of greater or lesser probability. At the same time the gates were opened for a rational approach to the world based on empirical concepts. The basic approach to the 'disenchantment of the world' – Weber's notion seems to me to be still accurate and therefore irreplaceable – becomes subsumable, because belief and emotion are assigned to their own areas which are separate from the area of logic and reason.[20]

One of the first results of the contradictions of the scholastic system and other circumstances lies in an event, which one could call *Diskursrevolution* ('revolution of discourse'). It began with Petrarca and Boccaccio and was then followed by the early Florentine humanists – Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni and Giannozzo Manetti. The new thinking cannot be simply defined as a result of secularization – the majority of the books in the libraries of this epoch still had religious or theological contents – but it cannot be overlooked that there was a gradual increase in the *number of topics* which were inspired by an increase in access to the ideas of antiquity. It is an obvious fact that the fundamentals of exploration of agriculture, astrology and medicine increasingly expanded, and that politics and history, war strategy, the beauty of cities and landscapes, theory and practice of architecture and painting played a more and more important role.[21]

Impressive, even spectacular evidence for this development is found in the arts, as is well-known. With the sunset of the *maniera greca* in the West, the ideal of the approach to the archetype in favour of a freer dealing with tradition disappears: Giotto, Pietro Cavallini and Duccio di Buoninsegna allowed the subjective view in painting to emerge. Brunelleschi developed central perspective to a scientifically calculable process. From the Flemish, especially Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden (Bartolomeo Fazio calls them *Johannes and Rogerius Gallicus*), came 'realistic' observation and illustration, even though these representations still had evident problems with the representation of three-dimensional illu-

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20. See Weber 1985, p. 308.
21. See Peter Burke's overview in Burke 1998.

sions, as shown by some paintings by Flemish or German masters, for example the so-called 'Master of Flemalle' or Konrad Witz.

Certainly, the new amalgamation of Flemish realism and the rational construction of the perspective space from Tuscany still remained in the service of religious purposes: Masaccio decorated the walls of a votive chapel with the legend of the 'penny with interest', Antonello da Messina received accolades for his depiction of the Madonna. But gradually a different handling of images became recognisable; the magical aura, which surrounded the depiction of the holy, was not thrown away in one sweep but glimmered more and more faintly.[22] Step by step, worldly themes broke through – Peter Burke gave the example that the percentage of paintings with profane subjects rose from 5 per cent in 1480 to 22 per cent in 1539 (although one must consider that sacral artworks, for various reasons, have a greater chance of being preserved).[23] Portraits and self-portraits were practically new genres in the fifteenth century.[24] They appear more frequently and more realistically than they have since antiquity. Until now, landscapes had been only included as scenery – some for religious and others for mythical depictions – but now, especially since the discovery of the *sfumato*, they announced their autonomy as an art subject. As in other cases, the literary formulation of the new aesthetic ideals preceded their visual realisation.[25]

It could appear that the age of art began simultaneously with the period of the crisis in the scholastic system. The book of hours (*Les très riches heures*) of the Duke of Berry (before 1402) is a prayer book, but was also a beautiful work of art – even a cult object. Art became an object of divertissement; beauty achieved its own quality, which no longer served exclusively the work of salvation. The humanist Niccolò Niccoli, one of the earliest historically recognised organised collectors, consciously shaped an aesthetic surrounding to which paintings, valuable dishes, expensive *maiolica* and cameos belonged.[26] We find the classical formulation of understanding art patronage in *Zibaldone* by the Florentine banker Giovanni Rucellai

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22. See Roeck 2002, with some hints for further reading.
23. Burke 1974; in German in Burke 1984, pp. 284-6.
24. See Castelnuovo 1973; and Pope-Hennessy 1979.
25. See Sutton 1987; and, for further reading: Ketelsen 2001.
26. See his *vita* by Vespasiano da Bisticci: Greco, ed. 1976, vol. II, pp. 225-42.

where he remarked that spending money was more enjoyable than earning it.[27]

The history of art illustrates an aspect of the *Diskursrevolution.* Still, art was far from providing a primary function as religious replacement in a secularised world, but a beginning was made. It primarily served religion, morality and politics, but it is unmistakable – and this is already obvious in the sixteenth century – that art had won a certain amount of autonomy.[28]

Works of art and literature are not always only expressions of their time but often much more a view of alternative projections. They formulate ideal pictures, opening escape paths from an often unpleasant reality.[29] They offer, in other words, more or less practical tools to deal with problems. Religion with its ritual system was the most important tool in the pre-modern period. For our exploration it is decisive that the Church's absolute authority over the *Weltanschauung* began to crumble after the fourteenth century as an ever-increasing variety of cures were found for dealing with affliction in the world. These included new forms of devotion, which renounced the firm authority of the mediators, empirical, rational methods of world understanding, which could be maintained on this side of religiousness. Looking at the causes of fear and anxiety helped to balance the psychological economy.[30] The new forms and contents of art, literature, and discourses offered to alleviate the fears and plagues of existence, and even escape became an option, like that famous flight from pestilence, which composed the framework of Boccaccio's *Decamerone.* Beauty was reborn out of the spirit of neo-Platonism, which demystified artwork and proved to be the prerequisite for the use of art as a kind of psychotropic drug, as a tranquilizer.

Admittedly, a large majority of the population did not participate in these intellectual and artistic developments (yet it is also very questionable whether the church crisis of the fourteenth century would have allowed a majority to experience this as such!). It took time for the new ideas and lifestyles to diffuse into the mainstream.

27. See Perosa 1961.
28. This could be illustrated by the famous controversy between Veronese and the Inquisition: see Fehl 1961; Pignatti 1977.
29. See Białostocki 1985, p. 20.
30. See Roeck 1996.

Humanism and the Renaissance were more or less a matter for the *happy few*, as Nietzsche already observed. The physiognomy of the transformation process between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period is characterised by this fundamental bipolarity: on the one side, there were broad population stratums glowing with devotion, searching for salvation.[31] On the other side, there were people who were still part of the Christian elite, but were nonetheless searching for new ways, thereby struggling with the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Aby Warburg used the word *Polaritätspsychologie* ('polarity psychology'), to describe the mentality of the early Renaissance: a term which should bring together the 'medieval' and the 'modern' aspects of Renaissance thinking.[32] On the other hand Warburg didn't see the social dimension, the fact that 'Humanism' and 'Renaissance' can be seen as phenomena of the intellectual and creative elite, whereas the 'people' still remained 'medieval'...

The context of religious change

The context encompassing this process of change and economic and social transformation in the late Middle Ages is not easily constructed from simple cause and effect connections. A structural model, which is capable of comprehending complex interdependencies, seems more appropriate. The church crisis, economic changes, indicated by agricultural crisis and plague, plus resulting social changes, and finally a fundamental process – the rise of the early modern state and its consolidation – all of these factors have a fairly clear connection with the changes which occurred in the late Middle Ages. Humanism, the Renaissance, and the Reformation received their specific form through these basic processes; and these occurrences present a 'Janus face' in a structural historical perspective. Their function was in many ways dialectic, not only in the way that they showed modern aspects as they defended traditional elements – which applies, by the way, to almost every spiritual movement – but also because they resulted from modernisation which they simultaneously promoted. Their expression was at the same time an antidote to their negatively understood manifesta-

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31. See e.g. Blickle 1987.
32. See Warburg 1907.

tions, like their effect. There was therefore a double dialectic. On the other hand, they had a hindering effect on church developments, pushing back the evolution, which they had brought about. And so they could become factors, which, as Burckhardt describes, checked or aborted the crisis. Every revolution is finally directed to resolve its causes.

The historian is not accustomed to speaking of events, which did not occur – his subject is reality, not fiction. However, is it completely mistaken to argue that Italian Humanism together with its highly specific culture of discourse or – more generally – the higher level of modernisation in Italy, contributed to the fact that the Reformation ideas never really gained ground there? The German Reformation shows this double dialectic: the Reformation seemed at first to threaten the social order and without a doubt demanded subjective attitudes and political decentralisation. This counted as a factor in setting off the Peasants' War, but then in many ways the Reformation had a socially stabilising effect. This was not only because its most important spokesmen entered into an alliance with the authorities, which improved the early modern state building process, but also because it offered the people new and plausible salvation devices. These were so successful at this time because they were at their root anti-ritualistic[33] like late medieval mysticism. Already because of this, these alternatives offered logical explanations as to why the old ritual system could not remove suffering from the world.

The sometimes so-called 'crisis' of the late Middle Ages does not offer an adequate explanation for the complex religious and cultural developments that occurred between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. This is especially true for crises, which were accompanied by long-term structural changes – changes that would set the decisive context for religious transformation as well as its course and its result. The economic situation (the crisis of the 1590's[34] with its witch-hunts, inflation, falling incomes and pauperisation), the demographic development, the 're-urbanisation' which began after the middle of the fourteenth century[35] – all

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33. For the notion of the Reformation as an 'anti-ritualistic' movement see Douglas 1972.
34. See Clark, ed. 1985.
35. See de Vries 1984.

these belong to the same structural changes. After all, in their beginnings, even the Renaissance and the Reformation were urban events. One should also consider the increasing importance of the monetarised economy and, in a close correlation with these developments, the genesis of the new time perception in the cities and in the state, which gradually replaced the old ecclesiastical perceptions.[36] This evolution can be taken as an important sign of the growing importance of the burgher's secular world.

What is essential is the *state formation,* which occurred in Early Modern Europe. The German historian Peter Moraw coined the term *Verdichtung* ('condensation') expressing very well the sometimes gradual, sometimes very fast and intense process, which led to the formation of the modern state, the agglomeration of rights and power, the growing of bureaucracies and military forces. It was the early modern states and city-states, which formed the framework for cultural change. The representatives of these organisations, acting as clients, visibly placed the new art into the public field of view. This contributed to making the discursive revolution in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries possible and also facilitated the corresponding connection of communication networks. But these officials were also very demanding, requiring ever-increasing taxes and other services from their subjects. And as they strove to control the body,[37] they also noticeably attempted to make provisions for the salvation of people's souls. Both actions awoke opposition, leading to social and political unrest after the fourteenth century. The religious process of transformation began to accelerate, the transition of the 'tectonic structures' took on its own dynamic, and it came to a crisis (tremors) and then to major crises (eruptions). The changes were such that the religious element – the question of how far the monopoly on magic of a state should reach – proved to be a more or less important factor.

The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were simultaneously wars of state formation.[38] With the Thirty

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36. See Le Goff 1977 and 1981.
37. Prodi, ed. 1994 and the important studies by Heinz Schilling. See Schilling 1999.
38. See Burkhardt 1991. Burkhardt defines the Thirty Years' War as a *Staatsbildungskrieg,* a war forcing state formation. But this term characterises many medieval and early modern wars, because every war causes taxes and therefore a certain degree of bureaucracy and organisation.

Years' War as a climax, the wars denote the extreme escalation of the transformation process into one of crisis. One of the most important developments of this period that proved to be of equal relevance in terms of social history was the increasing effort to keep out nonconformity in every aspect. This tendency was, in fact, triggered by the struggle between rival confessional parties and the involved states. The clash of the state/church complex with nonconformity brought about the notion of a struggle between an elite culture and popular culture where neither could remain clearly definable. I think that the crucial point lies in the fact that, until the seventeenth (and partially still in the eighteenth century), the problem of state formation remained closely connected to the question of what was allowed and not allowed in religious practise.[39] The consolidating institutions viewed it as essential to their power to be able to find out which belief context, forms, and rituals were or were not acceptable. I would prefer to speak of the struggle over the monopoly on magic as described above. Therefore, the confessional struggle between the states, as well as the internal struggle, was essential.

One should not be fooled by the devotion of the princes and the division of power between Church and state! Already their conscience suggested them – yes, even demanded of them – to form their states into theocracies. It revolved around the salvation of their subjects, and when this central task became insufficient, it revolved around their own life. They had 'received their swords from God' and this power not only produced a 'good policy', but also tried to save souls. Religious wars and especially the preceding campaigns against heresy, witches, and demons received their dynamic form from these developments.

In the eighteenth century the sovereign state was for the first time openly sovereign enough to be tolerant and the claim to the monopoly on magic fell away. More and more destiny – Machiavelli's *fortuna* – substitutes God as the master of history. The world runs like clockwork, God doesn't any more intervene directly in the matters of man. The *théodicée* is the most important intellectual result of the age of religious wars, of the early modern religious crisis.

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39. See Roeck 1999; and Sallmann 1994.

Conclusion

The Italian Renaissance seems to be more similar to the eighteenth than to the sixteenth century – especially, when we focus our attention on the centres of the early Renaissance in Florence, Urbino, Mantua, Milan, Naples or Rome. The sublime atmosphere around the circles of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola is close to that which might have flourished in tolerant discussion circles of the Enlightenment. The syncretistic tendencies of the Florentine neo-Platonists seem to anticipate in a certain respect the tolerance of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise.*

An important reason for the dramatic break in the development from which the notions of Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Catholic reform and confessionalisation were constructed lies in the fact that humanistic culture, an achievement of the Renaissance, was only the matter of an extremely small minority. The *Weltanschauung* offered by these cultural and spiritual movements did not provide the essentials for the governments, the princes, kings and city councils to face the dramatic changes which occurred between the Middle Ages and the Modern period. The ideal state of the Early Modern period remained in many ways a theocracy until the second half of the seventeenth century. The state should not only guarantee law and peace, business and change, but should also be the primary protector of the eternal souls, even more than of the mortal bodies.[40]

The dynamic of crises which followed from this reality lead on to the acceleration of state consolidation in a world which was still spellbound – still under the monopoly on magic. The increasing organisational possibilities were available for the attempts to create the 'godly state' on earth. This tendency reached in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an absolute climax. Finally, the discursive revolution also led to technical innovations, without which it hardly would have been possible to condition diverse classes of population in the confessional manner: The Reformation without Gutenberg – would it have been possible?

After the Reformation began the difficult process of testing whether God was a Catholic, a Lutheran, or a Calvinist, and only the failure to find evidence gave rise to the resumption of a tolerant tradition, which had its roots in the age of Italian and European Humanism.

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40. See Roeck 1988.

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