

# Brexit 1517 Brexit 2017

## What can history teach us?

*Steve Apted compares the remarkable similarities between the English break from Rome in 1517, and a similar break from the European Union in 2017. The issue of sovereignty, the pressure from big business, the drain of money to the Continent, the desire to spend the money released on social benefits, are examples of how deep-seated characteristics of English culture can cause a change of direction.*

In the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we have marked a number of significant historic anniversaries and events. These include the arrival of a new millennium, the centenaries of the sinking of the Titanic, the first flight by the Wright brothers, the commencement of World War I and most recently Queen Elizabeth II becoming the longest reigning monarch in British history. Many of these events carry significance when examined through the lens of a Christian worldview, but sadly it would take far too long to examine them all in this article.

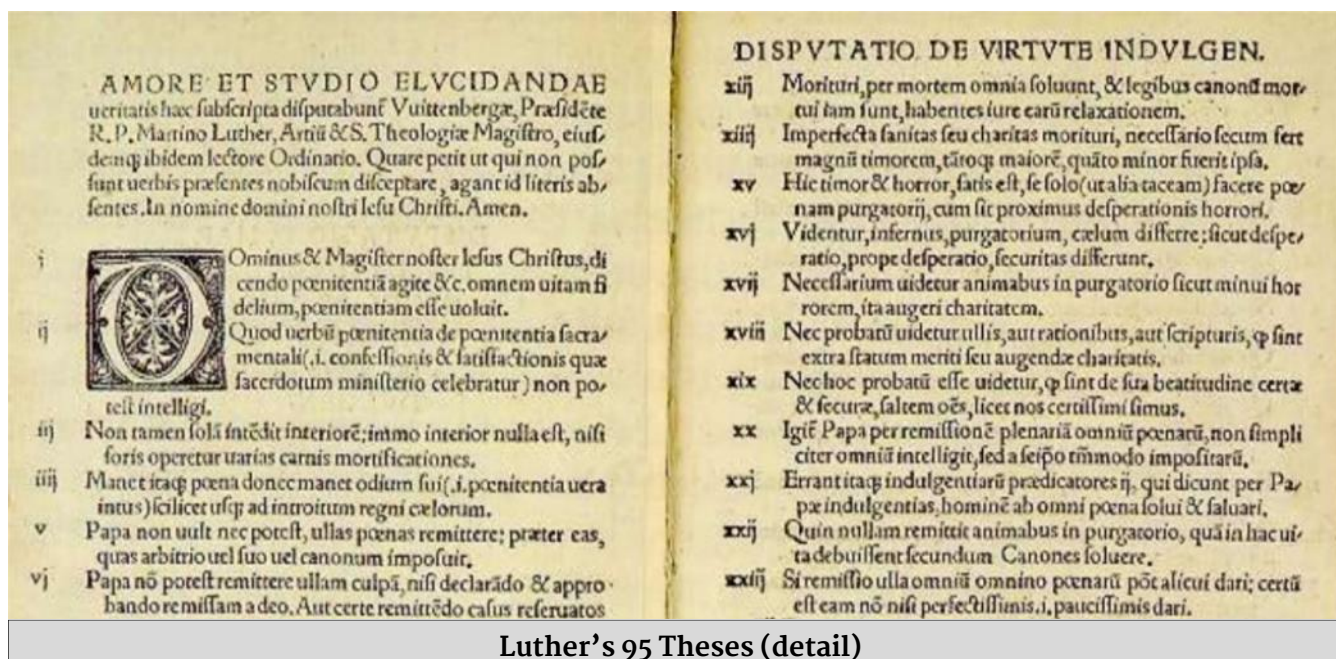
This year sees the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the trigger event of the Protestant

Reformation. On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 Martin Luther unknowingly fired the starting-pistol that led to a series of events that changed both the Christian world and the geopolitical face of Europe forever. On that day Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg castle church and its commemoration will be marked around the world.

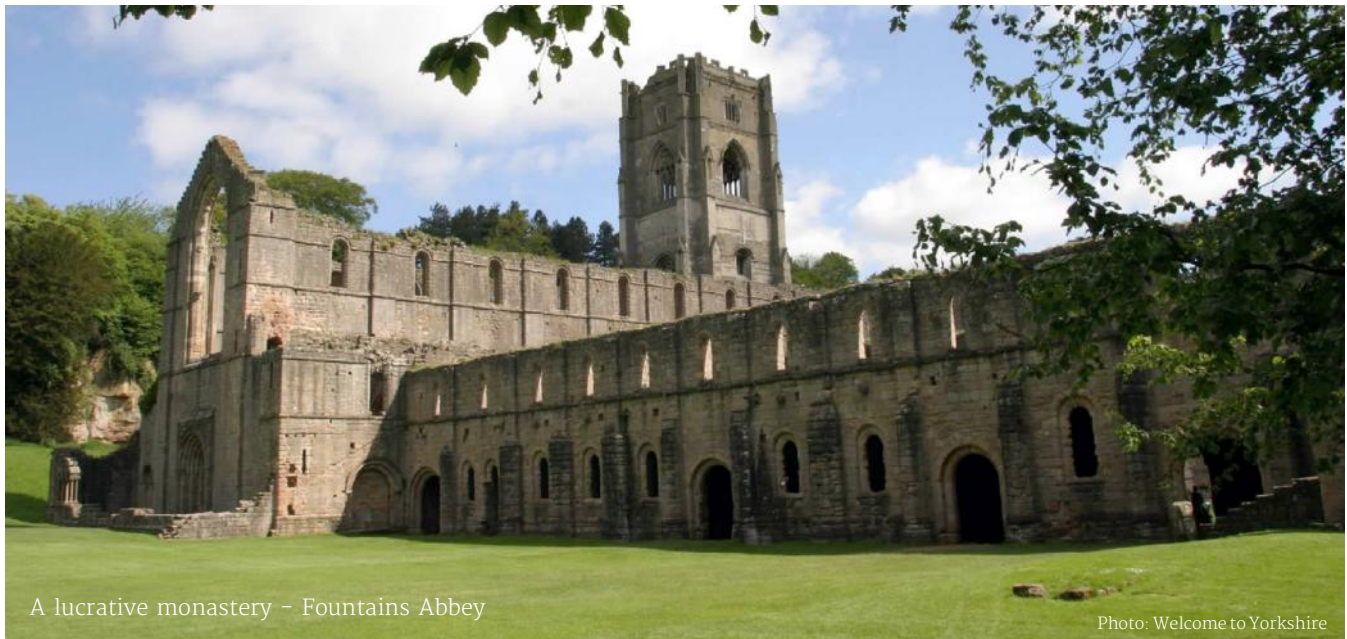
The 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation is a multi-faceted phenomenon that has major Christian, political, social and technological strands. The issues, debates, challenges and changes that occurred at the time of the Reformation bear a striking

resemblance to issues that confront us today in the aftermath of the EU referendum.

In England the Reformation had a double significance. Not only was it the biggest shake-up of the theology and governance of the church since Augustine arrived on these shores from Rome with the message of the Gospel. It also triggered the biggest changes in power politics since the arrival of William the Conqueror in 1066. As we emerge into a new post-Brexit world, working through the longest, messiest and most expensive divorce of all time (trying to part company with our partners in the EU after 40 years) there are a number of



Luther's 95 Theses (detail)



surprising parallels between the English political Reformation of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and our own situation. Of course the biggest point of difference - which must not be forgotten - is that the current situation arises as a result of the democratic will of the people, which was not the case in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century under King Henry VIII.

The political aspects of the English Reformation centred around where power, control and influence lay. Was it with the Pope in Rome or was it with Henry VIII as Sovereign, who saw himself as God's appointed head of the nation? In the case of Henry it was his desire for a marital divorce from Catherine of Aragón that bought things to a head, complicated by the power politics of the time. Philip, the Holy Roman Emperor, was the nephew of Catherine of Aragon and vehemently opposed to Henry divorcing his aunt. Philip was also threatening the Pope with an invasion of Rome at this time, thus strongly influencing the responses given to the English envoys pleading Henry's cause in Rome. Henry broke with Rome in order to regain control and not to be answerable to a foreign power. He argued for the right of Kings to rule their nation's affairs without being subject to Papal authority. *Dieu et mon droit* - French for *God and my right* - is the

motto of the monarchs of the United Kingdom outside Scotland, going back to Henry V and his claim on the French crown. The king is *Rex Angliae Dei gratia: King of England by the grace of God*, implying that the monarch of a nation has a God-given right to rule. Henry VIII despite all this remained a faithful Catholic to his dying day. It was in large part his successors Edward VI and Elizabeth I who shaped the final Protestant settlement that gave the Anglican church its shape and theology.

For our generation the defining issue of the EU referendum has been the control of our borders and the free movement of people. Where should power and sovereignty reside? In London or Brussels? Henry spent much time in diplomatic efforts to maintain relations with the Pope and secure a divorce. The break with Rome was entered into as an act of desperation and Henry was to learn that the Brexit of his day was a lot longer, messier and more protracted than he ever could have imagined.

There are many good books<sup>1</sup> covering every aspect of the Reformation including the faith-based issues, the power politics and the role of the reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Bucer.

One of the best generalist books I have read on the subject is *A Brief*

*History of the Reformation* by Derek Wilson. Wilson is a popular historian who demonstrates great insight and sensitivity into the nature of salvation through faith alone that lies at the heart of the Reformation, but also examines the faith issues in the wider political and social context. A number of the quotes in his book published in 2012, long before the EU referendum, are directly applicable to the in/out EU debate, and I have sought to draw on a number of these parallels.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of the Reformation which had a profound economic, financial and social impact on local communities was the closure of the monasteries. The monasteries were centres of local production and social justice. They were economic hubs in local communities. Monasteries acted as the budget hotels of the time, providing safe and secure predictable accommodation for travellers. The monasteries also brewed beer, grew agricultural produce, provided health care for the sick and elderly, doles for the poor and unemployed and were employers of servants, agricultural workers and retainers.

Henry first started to move against the monasteries in 1534. This had profound economic consequences for the local economies, as the



Leave campaign Battle Bus

Photo: Getty Images

monasteries were forced to close. Aristocratic landowners were the big business and financial leaders of their day. They were also responsible for keeping the peace and raising a militia when required. Just as today it is critical for governments to retain the support of key industries and major employers, so Henry used the dissolution of the monasteries and the wealth that this released to sweeten the changes he was making. (Note the government's assurances to Nissan, a major employer in the North-east of England, over their concerns about tariffs whilst the rest of the country was simply being told 'Brexit means Brexit'). Key landowners 'in the know' were ready and waiting to snap up monastic bargains in the form of land, artefacts and buildings. Regional power brokers saw this as an opportunity to extend their estates or consolidate their landed holdings. The prospect of a once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity created a frenzied scramble to take advantage of the bonanza. Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's right-hand man at the time, following the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, was president of the Court of Augmentations charged with the disposal of the assets, the money

from the sale of monastic properties going direct to the king's coffers. Monks were paid off and many of the older ones became destitute as they were unable to work or build new lives for themselves. C J Sansom recounts the story of one such closure and the devastating consequences in his novel *Dissolution*.

Wilson concludes that the means by which these ancient institutions were brought down were shoddy in the extreme, and the motives of most of the people concerned were, at best, questionable. For those dubious about the monastic closures there was a moral carrot: the money currently expended on maintaining the monastic system could be better spent on social enterprises such as improved education for many. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury even suggested in one sermon that the king would have no more need to tax his people.

As in our own day, arguments and passions ran high with both sides of the Reformation divide making wild and unsubstantiated claims.

Consider these quotations taken from Wilson's book referring to the

Reformation which have direct applicability to the current Brexit debate:

1. 'The advocates of change in the King's employ of course wished to encourage this questioning culture – as long as it led the people to the 'right' conclusion. But what if it did not? What if, having weighed up all the evidence an intelligent man decided the King could not replace the Pope as head of the English Church'.

(Replace King's employ with Parliament, Pope with EU and English church with legislative body and you have a statement directly relevant to the current EU referendum debate.)

2. 'This realm of England is an empire with the right to determine its own laws and customs' (A direct quotation from Henry VIII in 1537).

3. 'The desire to change society was not new in the 1530s. It was however given an impetus of unprecedented vigour. And England was changed – profoundly. It looked different thanks to the disappearance of the monasteries, and the creating of large estates by the new men. It sounded different, as anyone


attending divine service in English rather than Latin knew only too well, it felt different: being separated from Latin Catholicism made England distinct (perhaps in a manner not dissimilar from modern British aloofness from the Eurozone)'

4. 'Bigod's alienation sprang not from rejection of the Cromwellian reform programme but with his disillusionment of its practical outworking. He had hoped that the money raised from the dissolution of the monasteries would be ploughed back into the economy and particularly new educational projects. Discovery that the government was playing the people false and that the Northern shire could expect no succour from the Henrician regime enraged him'

(Substitute 'dissolution of the monasteries' with 'EU exit' and you have a quote in direct parallel to the deeply contested £350m per week promised to the NHS as a result of Brexit)

5. 'There was a deep sense of alienation in the remoter parts of the realm from what was happening in the centre'

6. 'Communities now felt under threat from a government that was as distant emotionally as it was geographically'

In the same way that the protagonists on both sides in the current Brexit battle are fighting for influence and control, so also in the political sphere of the Protestant Reformation both sides were fighting for the ear of the king. Henry VIII had the steering wheel, the reformers had the accelerator, the traditionalists had the brake and nobody had a road map. Anything sound familiar? 

- 1 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, Penguin, 2005  
Diarmaid MacCulloch, *All Things Made New: Writings on the Reformation*, Allen Lane, 2016)  
Michael Reeves & Tim Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, IVP, 2016)  
Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, HarperOne, 2008  
Roland H. Bainton, *HERE I STAND: A Life of Martin Luther*, Plume, 1995.  
Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, Yale University Press, 2015  
Historical fiction: C J Sansom: *Dissolution, Dark Fire, Sovereign, Revelation, Heartstone and Lamentation* (Matthew Shardlake series, Pan, 2015)
- 2 Derek Wilson, *A Brief History of the English Reformation*, Constable and Robinson, 2012



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#### A PRAYER FOR THE 'BREXIT' ELECTION

God of every time and season,  
Whose reign and rule extends beyond any earthly realm;  
In the midst of the uncertainty,  
The debate and expectancy of a forthcoming General Election,  
Help us to centre ourselves afresh on you;  
Not to escape the issues and argument,  
But that we might be engaged  
With wisdom and faithfulness  
That reflects our identity as your people.

Protect us from indifference  
That we might promote attitudes of grace  
And seek to uphold the narratives of truth and goodness.  
And may we not become so consumed  
With the agendas of our own concern  
That we forget the lives and needs  
Of a world that extends beyond our immediate horizons.

We pray for those who seek office  
And those to whom this responsibility will be given  
May we never take for granted  
The service that they offer  
Or the freedom we have  
To determine those who govern us.

Help us to act wisely;  
To listen prayerfully;  
To debate honestly;  
To disagree graciously;  
And to seek the ways of your Kingdom  
In the decisions we make together.

Through Christ our Lord and King. AMEN

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