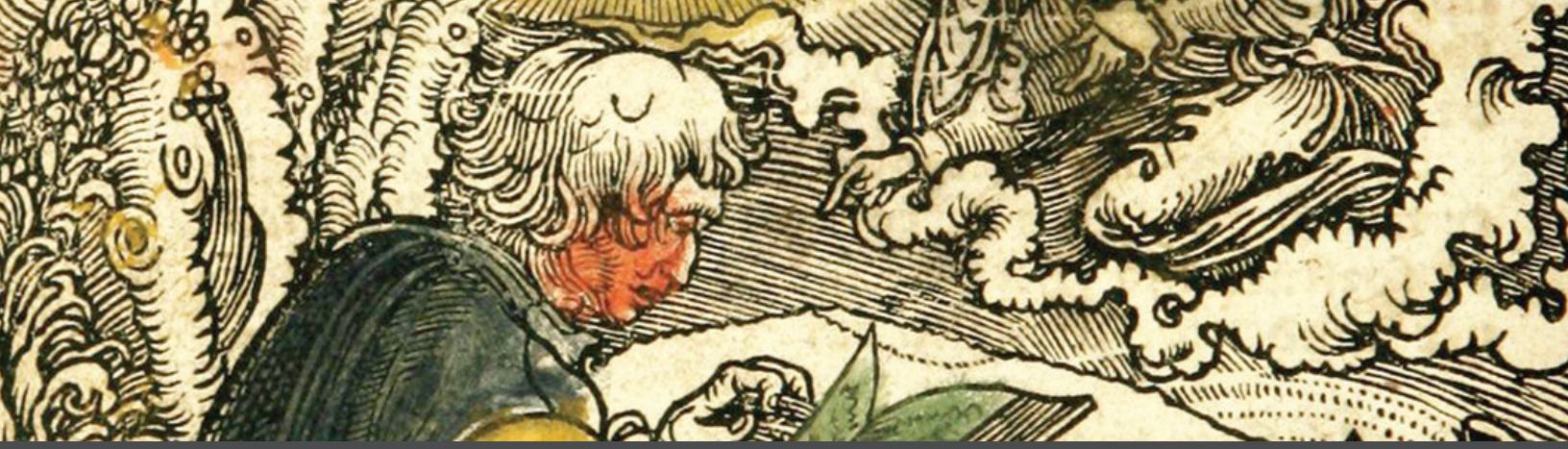

AN ESSAY

Early European Books Collection 11 and the Reformation

Simon Hudson, Senior Metadata Editor at ProQuest, explains how Early European Books deepen research and learning.

October 31st 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. It's a moment in Christian religious history that's dated so precisely because this was the day in 1517 when Martin Luther (1483-1546) is said to have posted his famed *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of All Saints' Church in the small German university town of Wittenberg.

The posting itself was an everyday event. The church door was used routinely as a kind of bulletin board for church and university business. And the message of his theses, primarily a protest against the then common church practice of selling indulgences, was controversial but not unprecedented.

Nevertheless, the circumstances and timing of Luther's act proved sufficient to set in train a splintering in Western Christianity that remains unmended to the present day, and which led to the establishment of a variety of different Protestant churches and sects – not least the Lutheran Church - that have since spread across Europe and the world.

Of course, dissension in the history of Christianity was scarcely anything new. The Great Schism of 1054, by obvious example, divided Christendom between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, while the later Western Schism of 1378-1417 briefly divided the Catholic Church against itself over rival claims to the papal throne. Even some of Luther's calls for reform were anticipated by those of previous outspoken dissident priests like the Englishman John Wycliffe (1320s-1384) and the Czech Jan Hus (1369-1415), the latter being burned at the stake as a heretic for his views.

But, while these earlier figures were in their own way influential, Luther's impact proved more widespread and decisive.

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The printing press and the spread of Reformist ideas

It's commonly agreed that one of the key factors which enabled Luther's reformist ideas to take hold so strongly was that he benefitted directly from Johannes Gutenberg's invention of moveable type in the mid-15th century.

The emergence of a European print industry would have the profoundest impact on the dissemination of ideas. After all, Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* were not only posted on a church door. They were also later published and distributed in pamphlet form throughout much of Europe. Without the power of the printed word, it is difficult to imagine how Martin Luther might have by-passed the established channels of authority to communicate his message in the way that he did, or how he might have gained a large and receptive audience so swiftly.

But as much as Luther's mission was furthered by the Gutenberg revolution, it can also be claimed that Luther, his sympathizers and his many opponents, played a part in reviving and extending a troubled print industry that had already come to depend on a narrow market base mostly made up of scholars and clerics.

"[T]he extraordinary success of Luther's written work also helped define a wider reading public and breathe new life and ideas into the always uncertain business of printing and publishing."

– Simon Hudson

The *Ninety-Five Theses* were originally published in Latin, but it was not until they were translated into vernacular German (and subsequently into other vernacular European languages) that they drew much attention generally. What public attention they did gain was fully eclipsed, however, by the publication in 1518 of the pamphlet *Eynn Sermon von dem Ablasz und Gnade (Sermon on Indulgences and Grace)*, a much more accessible piece of writing originally composed in German and written by Luther as if directly addressing a parish congregation.

The sermon was a great success, reprinted fourteen times in its first year of publication, and made Luther a name familiar to a larger and more diverse readership than any scholarly Latin diatribe ever could. Although Luther continued to write – and write prolifically – in Latin, it was his works in German which won him the popular following out of which the Lutheran church eventually emerged. At the same time, the extraordinary success of Luther's written work also helped define a wider reading public and breathe new life and ideas into the always uncertain business of printing and publishing.

Early European Books Collection 11 and the Protestant Reformation

Texts from EEB Collection 11 have been specially chosen to demonstrate the wealth of material relating to religious matters made available during the early modern period. These works are drawn from the valued holdings of four partner libraries – the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze in Italy, the Kongelige Bibliotek in Copenhagen, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, and the Wellcome Library in London. The range of titles selected is intended to embrace editions of Biblical scripture, doctrinal pieces by clerics, works of comparative religion, the writings of the Church Fathers and of Christian mystics, as well as a sampling of items that reflect contemporary popular beliefs and superstition.

In this way, Collection 11 – comprised of more than 2,200 different items, evinces part of the fascinating diversity of the print industry as it continued to evolve through the early modern period and in different locations throughout Europe. It also reveals something of the tangled cultural contexts through which the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation unfolded.

Titles from Copenhagen, for example, point to Luther's presence through the inclusion of texts by him such as a 1577 Danish translation by Zealand priest Peder Tidemand of Luther's *Hauspostille* (1542). Nevertheless, these Danish holdings can also suggest how – sometimes just by a simple change of language – national traditions and local differences could begin to alter the terms of debate even where Luther's influence was strongly felt. Further, the range of titles chosen for Collection 11 often also reflect the profound discord brought about by changes to the established order, a discord which could lend urgency to Christian eschatological thinking and a new legitimacy to atavistic superstition.

Items from The Hague incorporate an extensive range of writings by another giant of the Reformation, the Geneva-based French theologian Jean Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin, like Luther, founded a church that flourishes to the present day. But the religious differences revealed by the Reformation also brought to the fore new generations of Christian mystics whose influence cannot be measured so tangibly. These include Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), a Lutheran and self-educated shoemaker from the Kingdom of Bohemia whose mystical writings drew attention from all ranks of society during his own lifetime despite being taken by many as heretical, and who became something of a talismanic figure for readers discovering him after his death.

Selections from The Hague feature many of Böhme's texts, not least an Amsterdam, 1682 edition of perhaps his most famous work, *De Signatura Rerum*, a Christian reconfiguring of the classical "doctrine of signatures" that proposes natural objects like herbs may be taken by their shape to suggest their medicinal or other properties. Also from The Hague is *L'Antechrist découvert* (1681) and a selection of other titles by the 17th-century Flemish mystic, Antoinette Bourignon de la Porte, who repudiated her Catholic upbringing in order to announce the end times and to establish an island colony of "true Christians" that they might be saved. Although Bourignon's community was a failure, her controversial ideas continued to attract interest into the next century.

The German theologian Valentin Weigel (1533-1588) was a Catholic convert to Lutheranism whose mystical writings are now mainly associated with the development of Christian theosophy. His *Der güldene Griff* can be found in Collection 11 with a 1613 copy from London's Wellcome Library. Also from the Wellcome, Dutch engraver Jan Luyken's (1649-1712) *Theatre des martyrs* provides memorably gruesome full-page scenes of religious persecution and martyrdom from the time of Christ to his present day. The horrors Luyken depicts so attentively figure as a reminder that, for all its advances, the early modern remained a bloodthirsty period in European history and, more pointedly, that violence reached new extremes as the result of religious schism.

The short-lived but population-devastating German Peasants' War of 1524-5 was in part a religious rebellion, support for which from one of Luther's more radical rivals, the preacher Thomas Müntzer, led to his capture, torture and execution. Similarly, the brutal suppression of the Münster Anabaptists in 1535 – a sect discussed in detail in the Calvinist reformer Conrad Heresbach's letters to Erasmus which also feature in Collection 11 – culminated in the deliberate slaughter of most of the city's male population.

All this violence was tragically surpassed, however, by the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a conflict which began as a struggle between Protestant and Catholic states and which ravaged northern and central Europe, spreading famine and disease in its wake. Yet open warfare was not the only kind of violence visited on communities and individuals during this time.

The Reformation and rising interest in witchcraft and devil worship

Scholars have frequently argued for a connection between the religious uncertainty triggered by the Reformation and the rise of the witch hunt craze which reached its peak between around 1580 and 1630. Certainly, titles from Collection 11 hint at a new level of interest in witchcraft and devil worship.

Another title from the Wellcome, the *Disquistionum Magicarum* (1600) by the Jesuit Martin Delrio (1551-1608) is widely held to be largely a reworking of a landmark pre-Reformation book on sorcery, Heinrich Speyer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) or *Hammer of the Witches*. Nevertheless, Delrio's exposition proved hugely popular, being reprinted on numerous occasions and in various centres of early modern publishing well into the 1700s.

Originally published in 1597, a 1604 copy from The Hague of the *Demonologia* by James I of England demonstrates how a concern with necromancy and magic was scarcely confined to the lower orders or the poorly educated. Items from Florence, meanwhile, tend to favour the kind of titles one might expect from a national repository of a country that remained for the most part staunchly Catholic. For example, a Florence, 1638 edition of a work first published in Rome in 1602, Bernardo Davanzati's *Scisma d'Inghilterra*, presents an unsurprisingly critical history of the English Reformation under Henry VIII.

And yet, this Catholic continuity does not exclude from Florence's holdings texts which expose similar dark preoccupations with the idea of witchcraft. One of the most seminal works on witchcraft and demons from the early modern period is *Strix* (1523), a text originally in Latin by Giovanni Pico di Mirandola (1470-1533), the philosopher and nephew to the more famous humanist scholar of the same name (1463-1494). Collection 11 includes one of two early vernacular Italian versions of the text, published as *La Strega* in Pescia in 1555. A work like Mirandola's helped give the persecution of supposed witches intellectual credibility, and trials and executions became highly organized and well-documented affairs not just in northern parts of Europe where the impact of the Reformation was felt most profoundly, but across southern Europe as well, in Italy, Portugal and in Spain.

In a deliberate reference to the printing world, Martin Luther once remarked that he would fight the devil with ink. Whether it was literally the devil Luther contended with in his battle to reform Western Christendom, it's certainly true that print enabled him on his mission. It's also no overstatement to say that in the process Luther's success as a reform campaigner helped change the fortunes of the print industry. Through it all, print became not just a conveyor of ideas and information but both a beneficiary and a driver of change.

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About Simon Hudson

Simon Hudson has been working at the Cambridge UK office of ProQuest for the past 10 years and on Early European Books as senior editor for the last five. Back in the '90s he completed a D.Phil. in English at Oxford University on the subject of James Joyce. While his first love continues to be literature, Simon has always taken a keen interest in history and since working on Early European Books, this interest has focused increasingly on the early modern period and on the history of the book.

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