



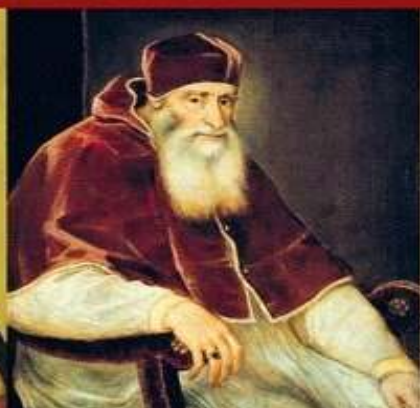
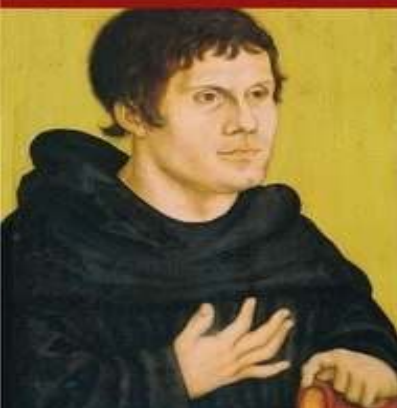
# CHRISTENDOM ✦ DESTROYED ✦

EUROPE 1517-1648

MARK GREENGRASS

"An absorbing portrait of the social and cultural life of early modern Europe."

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mark Greengrass is the Emeritus Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Sheffield. He is an award-winning historian, noted for his work on France and the Reformation. This book was written mostly in Freiburg im Breisgau, where he is a fellow of the university's Institute for Advanced Study. He now lives and works in Paris, with affiliations to the University of Paris-IV (Centre Roland Mousnier).

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MARK GREENGRASS

Christendom Destroyed

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*For Emily*

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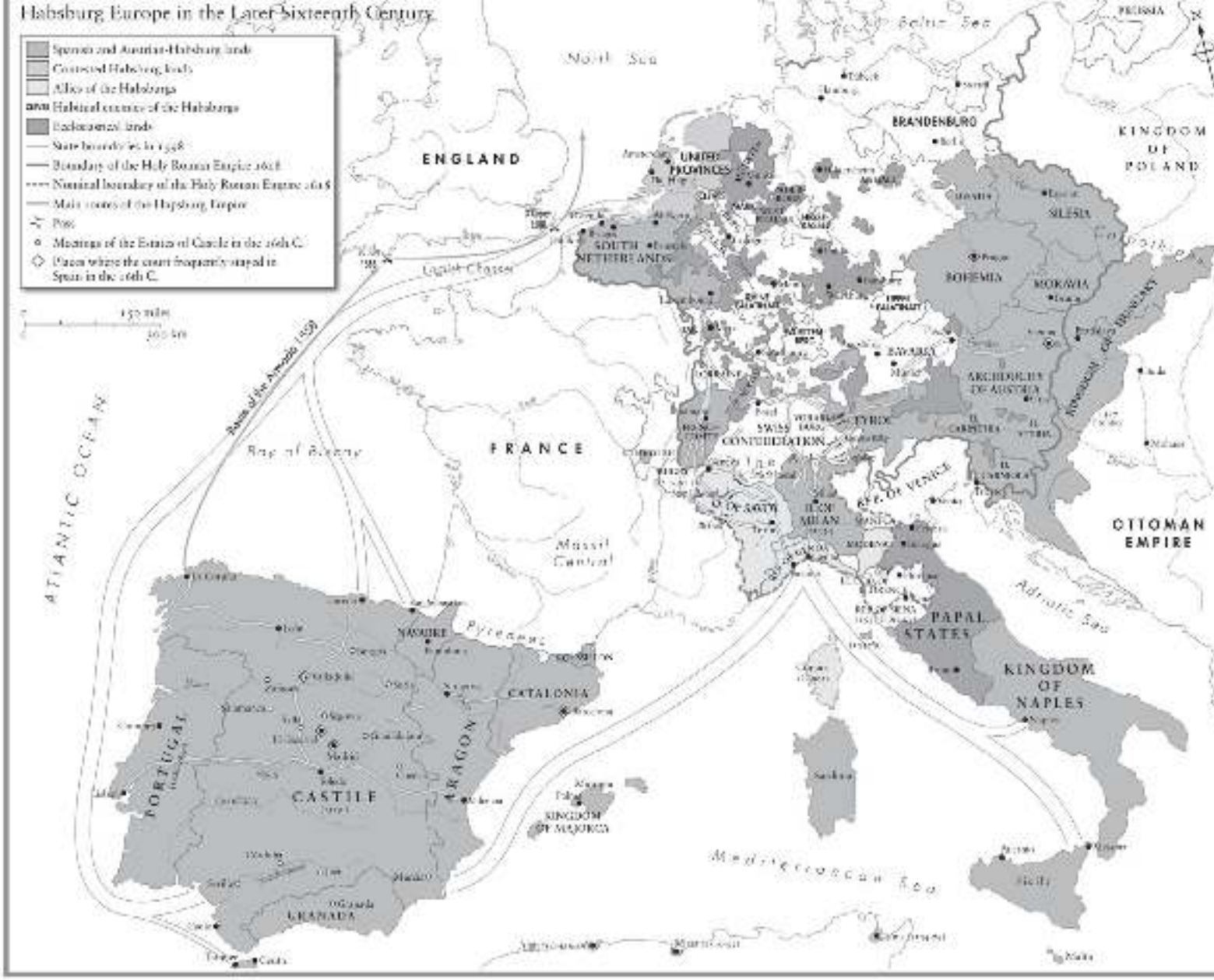


# The Spread of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, c. 1570



# Habsburg Europe in the Later Sixteenth Century

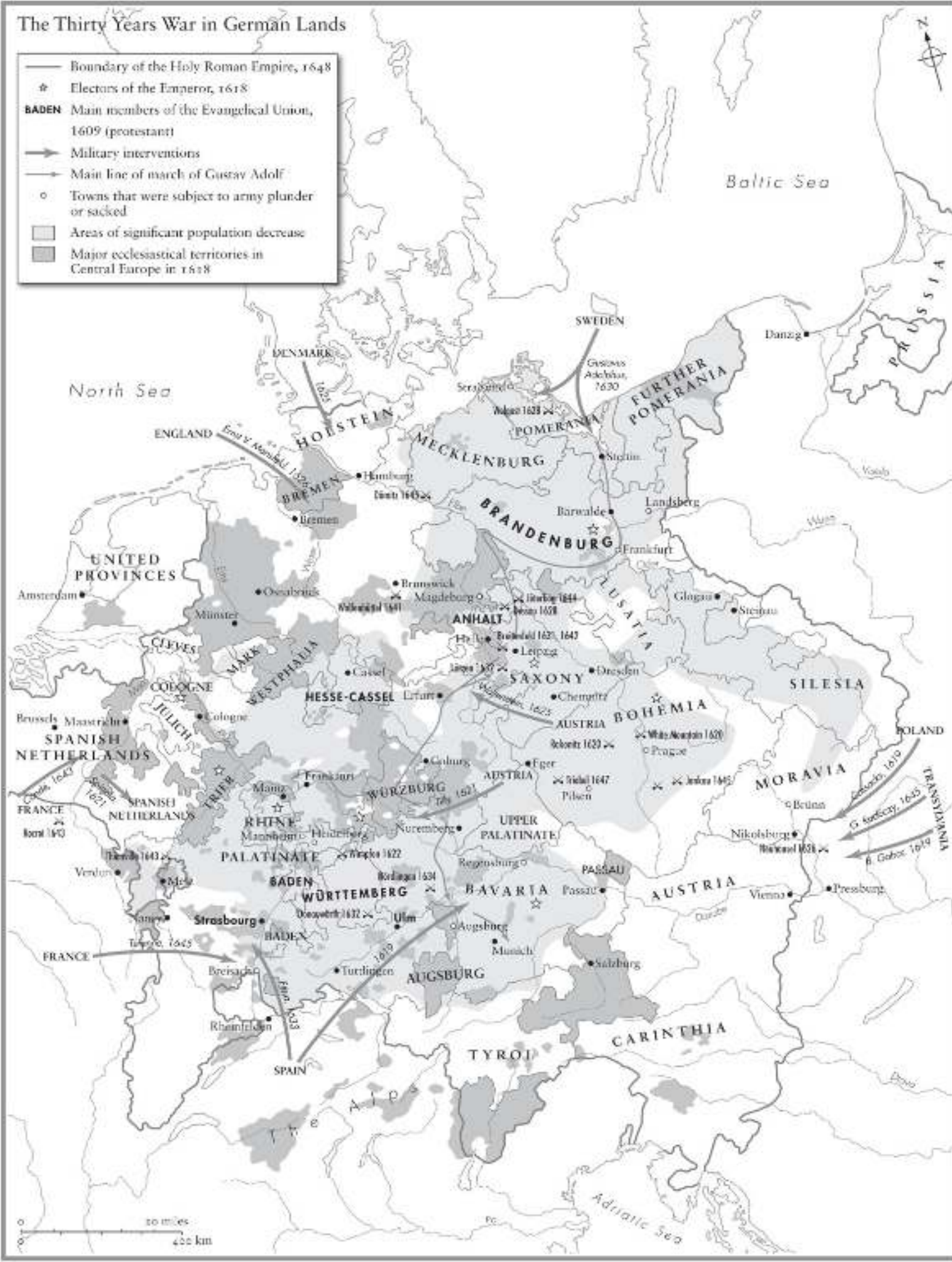
- Spain and Austria-Habsburg lands
- Controlled Habsburg lands
- Allies of the Habsburgs
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- Paris
- Meeting of the Estates of Castile in the 16th C.
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# The Thirty Years War in German Lands

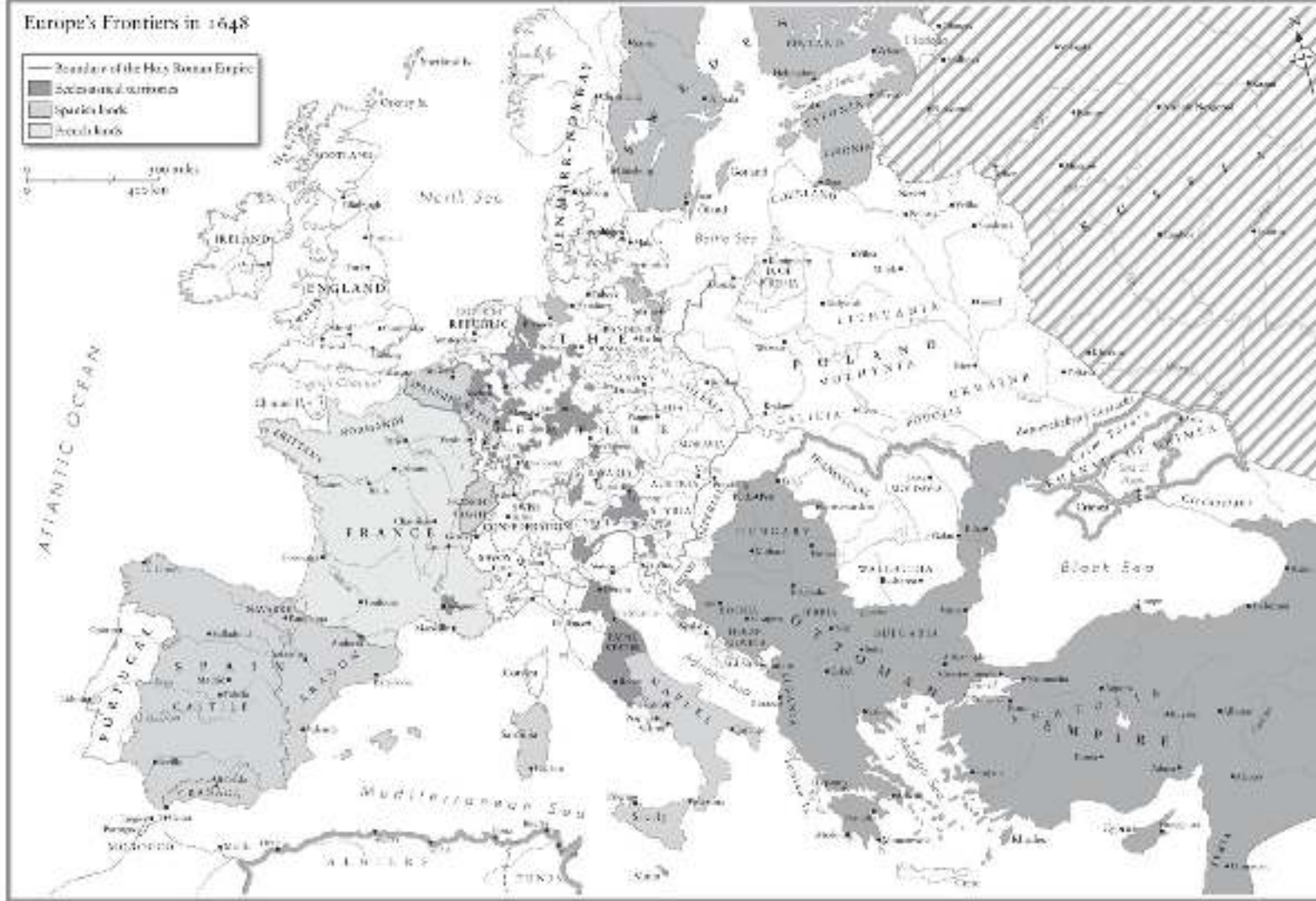
- Boundary of the Holy Roman Empire, 1648
- ☆ Electors of the Emperor, 1618
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- ➔ Military interventions
- ➔ Main line of march of Gustav Adolf
- Towns that were subject to army plunder or sacked
- Areas of significant population decrease
- Major ecclesiastical territories in Central Europe in 1618



0 20 miles  
0 400 km

# Europe's Frontiers in 1648

- Border of the Holy Roman Empire
- Substantial territory
- Spanish lands
- French lands



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## *Introduction*

David de Vries was proud of having seen the world. The travel account which he published in his native Dutch in 1655 recounted the six voyages which had taken him to the Mediterranean, the Far East, Newfoundland, the Caribbean, and South and North America. Born in La Rochelle to Dutch parents in 1593, he became a trained artillery master, fluent in several European languages, a skilled navigator, a shrewd man of business, an autodidact with an observant eye. It was not his fault that his colonial enterprises – on the ‘South’ (Delaware) river (1633), Oyapock river in Guyana (1634) and Staten Island (1638–43) – all failed. Sponsors let him down, the local populations were difficult to manage, and competing ventures were hostile. De Vries knew where his loyalties lay. His homeland was in the Low Countries, the town of Hoorn his *patria*. If he had succeeded in establishing a colonial ‘patroonship’, he would have modelled it on the estates of the landed gentry of Holland as a part of the ‘New Netherland’ to which he often referred. He was a Calvinist Protestant who had a hand in building the first Christian church on Staten Island. De Vries understood Europe in a wider world. Landing at St John’s, Newfoundland in 1620, after marvelling at the monumental icebergs he saw en route, he recounted the Dutch, Basque, Portuguese and English vessels that he had met, fishing and trading in those waters. With an eye already acclimatized by his reading of other travelogues, he accommodated himself to local Indian customs. Visiting the governor of the new English colonies along the James river in 1640, he was welcomed with a glass of Venetian wine and sat down with another English colonist who had also been in the East Indies in the late 1620s. ‘I looked at him well, and he at me,’ says de Vries. And he heard the colonist say ‘that mountains could not meet one another, but men who go and see the world can’.

By their clothes, their food and their demeanour, these were Europeans, aware that they were on another continent, having (as de Vries said) ‘steered the earth’s four corners’. De Vries’s career reflected the wider geographical horizons of his generation, the possibilities and challenges which they opened up, an extraordinary pluralism of contact and communication that challenged old loyalties and senses of belonging. This new sense of Europe as a geographical entity, fashioned in a reflection of the wider world, would not have existed a century before. This eclipse of the older notion of ‘Christendom’ by ‘Europe’ in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the extraordinary changes that went with it, is the subject of this book.

Christendom conjures up – like Camelot – an imagined past. In the Middle Ages, the Latin terms for Christendom (*Christianitas* or *Corpus Christianorum*) delineated something else: an imagined present and future for a world united by its beliefs and aspirations. That belief-community emerged along with the fall of the Roman empire in the west. The Christianity that took root amid what remained of that empire was initially only the western fringe of a much wider Christian world whose heartland lay further east, towards the Middle East and in the still-active eastern (Byzantine) Roman empire. Gradually, however, and by a process of mutual estrangement, eastern and western

Christianity drew apart until, in 1054, the pope in Rome and the patriarch in Constantinople mutually excommunicated one another. Following that big divide, Latin Christians were henceforth separated from Orthodox Christians in the Greek archipelago, the Balkans and Russia to form western Christendom.

In the first millennium of western Christianity, Christendom developed without any elaborate notion of where its centre lay, and therefore where its peripheries were to be found. It existed (to borrow the phrases of a distinguished medievalist) as a series of 'micro-Christendoms' held together like a 'geodesic dome', composed of self-contained segments. The traffic of 'symbolic goods' (holy relics, but also holy people, such as missionaries and saints) carried the charisma of holy power from one place to another and, with it, the values and aspirations of the belief-community from one segment to another. Then, in the Central Middle Ages, and following the rupture with the East, western Christendom developed a more elaborate sense of centre and periphery with the full emergence of two geographical and ideological units: the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. Their claims to authority were forged competitively by theologians, lawyers, political theorists and intellectuals in an atmosphere of confident universalism. That ideal was supported by the economic transformations of the period, the impressive growth of markets and inter-regional and international trade, and by the marriages and diplomatic alliances of the aristocracy. 'Christendom' was how learned contemporaries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries understood the world of Latin Christians in western Europe.

The Roman Catholic Church was the central pillar of the belief-community in Latin Christianity. The intellectual élites of the latter were formed around an international language (Latin, as opposed to Greek) as well as a common curriculum (centred in matters of philosophy and logic on the works of Aristotle) and ways of study (scholasticism). Papal envoys shared with princely advisers common theocratic and bureaucratic conceptions of how power was derived, exercised and legitimated. The Crusades became western Christendom's most ambitious project. Above all, Latin Christianity was expressed in inherited and practised beliefs, mapped onto that pre-existent multi-dimensional sacred landscape of shrines, pilgrimage sites, saint cults and festivals. Baptism was a universal rite of initiation. Those who were not baptized Christians (Jews, Muslims) were a significant presence in western Christendom's margins in the Central Middle Ages, tolerated precisely because they were not part of the belief-community. But, as Christian kingdoms pushed the frontiers of Latin Christianity southwards in Spain and southern Italy, their significance as exemplifying alien forces from those who did not belong to Christendom seemed to increase.

Christendom was a reflexive construction that felt easily threatened. In reality, its most dangerous enemy was not non-Christians. Its power-brokers were most vulnerable from a different and disparate constituency – from those with particular, local loyalties to whom the overarching aspirations of Christendom meant little or nothing. Across the landmass of western Europe, over and against the mechanisms of the universal order of the Holy Roman Empire (the dominion located in central Europe whose title indicated its claims to continuity with the Roman empire and a temporal form of universal dominion) and Church lay thousands of villages and parishes, their inhabitants often carrying burdens of obligation to their manorial lords which made them serfs. These communities were joined by towns, benefiting from the economic transformations of the Central Middle Ages. Suspicions were fostered towards the cosmopolitan ambitions and bureaucracy of the international order. The more the sense of centre and periphery within Christendom was enhanced, the more people locally begrudged the time spent in getting permissions from above. Many resented the levies to sustain the universal Church and mistrusted the overblown supranational project of the Crusades. These sentiments spilled



over into contentiousness, or heresy – the latter being a serious epidemic problem – and still more threatening in the minds of those to whom the ideals projected by Christendom mattered most – from the twelfth century onwards.

The confidence in these ideals waned as the European economy contracted in the wake of the Black Death. Serfdom and manorial obligations became matters of contention as local people asserted what they claimed were their customary rights. Although the beliefs and practices which Christendom had represented continued, and its sacred landscape flourished as never before, its local credibility diminished as it became the object of competing claims to represent a traditional social order. The Great Schism (1378–1417), too, undermined the claims to universal obedience. The existence of two lines of popes divided Christians between those loyal to Rome, and those supporting the Avignonese papacy, stigmatized by its enemies as a puppet in the hands of a disruptive French monarchy. The dispute ended in a compromise, but its legacy was lasting damage to the moral authority of the papacy. It also pointed up the dangers of an alliance between discontented localism and the new force of secular, but non-imperial, authority. For the compromise was achieved through the authority of an ecumenical council. A council sustained the assertion (troubling for theocrats and bureaucrats), already debated two centuries previously but now presented with greater force, that a council was superior to the pope. That proposition was a radical way of putting it, and most ‘Conciliarists’ were moderates. They saw a council as a neat way out of a mess, not an engine to destroy universal papal monarchy, and still less a way of deriving doctrinal authority via unorthodox ways. Yet that was what the implicit successor to the Conciliar Movement, the Protestant Reformation, achieved.

So the central issue in the history of Europe in the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries was: what was to happen to Christendom – the institutions which defined its centres of gravity and, still more, the belief-community which underlay it? If Christendom was destroyed, what, if anything, was to take its place? The process was one of a progressive eclipse of Christendom by Europe (defined as a geographical notion in a relationship of distance with other parts of the world). The two entities differed fundamentally. Christendom claimed the loyalties of those who were baptized into the belief-community and who related to the outside world accordingly. Europe, on the other hand, claimed no unity beyond the geographical landmass that it represented and an emerging sense of the moral and civilizing superiority of the different states and peoples which occupied it. Western Christendom was a great project about European unity, over a millennium in the making. Its destruction, by contrast, was rapid and total. In little over a century, there was nothing left but the dream of it. Huge forces accomplished its destruction and transformed Europe. Their interaction with one another is the focus of the first chapter.

---

# 1. The Fall of Western Christendom

When Thomas Cockson published his engraving entitled *The Revells of Christendome* in the wake of the controversial truce between Catholic Spain and the newly emergent Dutch Republic in 1609, he drew on well-known satirical modes to make fun of Christendom. At the head of the table stands Pope Paul V with, to his left, other crowned heads of Europe (Henry IV of France, James I of England and King Christian IV of Denmark) facing us. Opposite, three Catholic monks play backgammon, dice and cards with them for the future of Europe. A dog urinates on the foot of one of them. The implication of the print was clear. The fate of Christendom was out of anyone's hands. It had become a joke. Many of the elements which contributed to the fall of western Christendom were already at work in Europe before 1500. But it was only when they were all in place, interacting with one another, that Christendom's eclipse became total.

## THE IMPACT OF THE RENAISSANCE

The revival of classical texts and ideas had begun well before 1517 in the urban cultures of northern Italy, Flanders and the Rhineland. It challenged scholasticism as the accepted way of defining the philosophical concerns of Europe's élites, and with it the dominance of Aristotelian philosophy. Humanist scholars saw it as their task to recover the texts of classical Antiquity in their purity, and to enter into a dialogue with the thought of those who wrote them, subjecting it to cross-examination and scrutiny. Humanist teachers emphasized 'persuasion', learning how to marshal and deploy arguments that would win other people over to one's point of view. Their pupils, brought up on a diet of Latin (especially Ciceronian) texts, absorbed a new language and set of preoccupations about the proper conduct of citizens. That led to different conceptions of the relationship between ruler and ruled, the political and the social, and a different universalism (the 'public') from that afforded by 'Christendom'.

The 'public' was the largest conceivable *universitas*, a fictive person in the eyes of Roman law, distinct from those who created it, an entity which could mimic a living person, take on rights and responsibilities, and delegate others to carry them out in its name. The *universitas* of a republic embodied the will of its members. There could be a pluralism of republics, some more virtual than others. The 'republic of letters', for example, took advantage of changing modes of communication and was energetically promoted by humanist scholars of the age. It also, however, reflected the history of Europe's 'intellectual capital', which was increasingly out of the hands of a small clerical and bureaucratic élite and vested in a more complex and cosmopolitan market of producers and

consumers, in which patrons, printers, engravers, librarians and readers of varying sorts all had a stake. How that market functioned depended upon the local environment, which explains why the Renaissance had a variable intellectual and social geometry, its impact differing across Europe, the distinctive contours sharpened by religious divisions. One of its important components would be the princely courts, and the Renaissance readily migrated and transmuted into a court culture, adapting itself to their needs and aspirations. Like the great scientific discoveries of the twentieth century, the Renaissance had the power to transform, and to destroy. It could cement ecclesiastical and political authority but also undermine it. It could challenge fundamental ideas about God's providence in the world, and also reinforce them. Its new pedagogies introduced fresh ways of understanding how one learned about oneself, the world and its creator.

Humanist scholars discovered, among other things, that ancient philosophy had a history to it. To understand Aristotle you had to place him in the context of those whose thought he was engaging with. He ceased to be a unique authority upon which to construct truth and legitimacy. The process had begun with the editing, translating and popularization of the Greek text of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*. This provided a genealogy for the competing 'sects' of Greek philosophers, giving lustre to views which had been marginal in the Middle Ages. Contemporaries presented Aristotle to their students within this more complex lineage, and took the arguments and debates of the Greek world seriously. Some philosophers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were disciples of the Epicureans, Stoics, Platonists and Pyrrhonists. The result was that ancient philosophy ceased to be the handmaiden of Christian truth and the instrument by which a universal order could be constructed. That did not stop philosophers of the period seeking to discern an underlying set of truth. Some thought that, as in any genealogy, you could trace the line back to an ancestral primacy, of which all the descendants would contain perennial, genetic traces. Francesco Patrizi, for example, in his *New Philosophy of Universals* traced what Aristotle wrote, back through what Plato had told him, through Solon and Orpheus, to the Mosaic account of the creation of the world and the mysticism of the Egyptians, as hinted at in the works of Hermes Trismegistus (these latter, he said, contained more wisdom than 'Aristotle's philosophy entire'), written originally over 1,100 years before Plato. Others preferred to highlight the points of agreement between Plato and Aristotle as the signs of an underlying 'symphony' in ancient thought, despite the apparent disagreements.

Just as this syncretic agenda might have been consolidated, however, there emerged the radically sceptical voices of those who read the works of the Greek philosopher Sextus Empiricus. He had used the disagreements among his fellow philosophers in Greece to disparage Aristotle's and others' efforts to attain the truth at all. If you took his works seriously (and some heavyweight thinkers of the period, notably the French magistrate Michel de Montaigne, did), then classical philosophy was full of error. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, the Martin Luther of sixteenth-century philosophy, wrote in his *Examination of the vain doctrines of the Gentiles* (1520): 'the entire learning of the Gentiles [i.e. pagan Antiquity] totters with superstition, uncertainty and falsehood'. It would take the genius of the French philosopher René Descartes to build a universal philosophy, capable of supporting a new experientially based physics, on the foundations of such Pyrrhonism. But, by then, no one could seriously imagine Christendom being patched together on the basis of radical doubt.

Humanist geographers, physicians and natural philosophers shared an emerging sense of the importance of direct practical experience and the value of experiment. That changed the picture of the natural world. Europe's geographical discoveries in the wider world contributed to the gathering perception that the natural world was a cornucopia of rich and rare phenomena, a treasure-store of secrets, waiting to be interpreted by those who held the key to decoding nature. Astrologers,

alchemists, cosmographers, natural magicians and unorthodox practitioners of medicine rivalled one another to offer explanations as to how that immense variety in nature might be reducible to ordered, physical principles, or at least to demonstrate that it was conducive to empirical enquiry. Some of them sought these principles in forces higher than nature itself – magical power immanent in nature like a spirit hidden in earthly processes, or conveyed by celestial warmth and movement. They, too, like many philosophers, were vocal in their criticism of Aristotle, mainly on the grounds that his ideas about matter were too abstract. They enveloped their learning and insight in an aura of arcane mystery to protect them from their numerous critics and enhance their reputation for exceptional wisdom and power. But there was a contrary recognition that human knowledge had its limits, which implied that penetrating the secrets of nature could never be the work of a single individual. It had to be achieved through a collaborative effort of many enquirers, attentive to the practical aspects of knowledge and the varying possibilities for its interpretation.

The impact of such changes upon the notion of Christendom was nowhere more profound than in cosmology. The Copernican heliocentric universe owed a great deal to the revival of alternative cosmologies from classical Antiquity which challenged the Aristotelian consensus. But, if the earth was simply another planet, revolving around the sun, then the universe became dramatically large in comparison to the earth – ‘immense’, as Copernicus conceded. That was because it was necessary to envisage an enormous distance between the orbit of Saturn and the sphere of the stars. Once the earth became one of the planets, all the processes of generation and corruption which had been explained by Aristotle as based on what happened in the natural world and on earth, could more plausibly be explained in terms of the influence of the sun, or the earth’s motion and position with respect to the sun and the other planets. Christendom was most comfortable when it was cocooned within the concentric circles of a geocentric and anthropomorphic universe. Placed in a heliocentric universe, it ceased to be at the heart of the created order of things.

The brilliantly self-publicizing chemical physician Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim), the magician and astrologer John Dee, the theologian and cosmographer Giordano Bruno, the natural philosophers Francesco Patrizi and Galileo Galilei were among those who found themselves, in varying degrees, held in suspicion for heliocentric views by the remaining ‘gate-keepers’ of Christendom, the Inquisition and the papacy. In February 1600, Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome. A year later, the Dominican friar Tommaso Campanella was brutally tortured for forty hours in the Castel Nuovo in Naples for his involvement in a popular rebellion. He spent the next quarter of a century a prisoner there, raging against the ‘infected roots’ of pagan Aristotelian philosophy. He dreamed of a radical transformation of a world in which he now no longer truly belonged. The problem for radical thinkers in this period was that the circumstances of the moment, well as the accident of where they happened to live, determined in what ways and how their ideas came to be seen as challenging – which is why there was no ‘end’ to the Renaissance, but rather a continuing renegotiation of its potential for demolishing old certainties in new contexts.

## THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

At the heart of the movement for religious change was the Protestant Reformation, a rift in Roman Christianity as spectacular and as permanent as that which had occurred between the eastern and western Churches in the eleventh century. What made it the more painfully complicated was that western Christianity splintered violently. Martin Luther became convinced that Christendom was

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