

## “Historical Thought and the Reform Crisis of the Early Sixteenth Century”

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LUTHER'S VOICE was only one among many which in the early sixteenth century called for the reform of the Church. This reform, in fact, was the common preoccupation of the age, even before the fateful indulgence controversy of late 1517, and there is hardly a major figure on the European scene who does not in some way or other concern himself with it. Although the cry for the reform of the Church was by no means original with the early sixteenth century, it swelled at that time to a cacophonous crescendo heard in every country of Europe and at every level of society.

The causes of this phenomenon are complex. Historians rightly insist that social, economic, and political factors, for example, must be taken into consideration in order adequately to understand what would seem to be a predominantly religious problem. It is not my purpose in this article to rehearse the various causes which scholars adduce as contributing to the widespread conviction at the turn of the century that a reform of the Church was absolutely imperative. Far less is it my intention to try to weigh the respective importance of these causes. I should like, quite simply, to call attention to one of them which seems to me to deserve more attention than it commonly receives and to indicate some of its implications for the era under discussion. I shall follow what I feel to be the methodologically sound procedure of examining one case in some detail, while at the same time producing evidence



to suggest that elements which are operative in this instance may be operative in others as well.

What I should like to focus attention upon are certain ideas of history which were current in the early sixteenth century. The lively differences of opinion over the role late-medieval nominalism played in preparing the way for the Reformation are a good indication that scholars are aware of the fact that intellectual factors are important in explaining the religious upheavals of that period. We are today far removed from the idea that it was simply moral and disciplinary abuses in the Church which were responsible for reform and Reformation. What is not so often realized, however, is that a particular style of historical thinking can produce, or at least condition, a particular style of reform thought, which in turn can have serious repercussions in the realm of reform practice and activity.

Opinion on the nature, purpose, and method of history differed widely in the early sixteenth century. Humanist historiography, especially as practiced in Florence, bears little resemblance to the medieval traditions of historical writing which continued to exist alongside it.<sup>1</sup> Within both of these "schools," moreover, there was great diversity of viewpoint. It would be improper to insinuate that because similar ideas or themes can be found in different authors, similar or altogether identical outlook also obtained. Each case requires individual examination and investigation. My special competence is limited to Giles of Viterbo (Aegidius Viterbiensis, Egidio da Viterbo, 1469-1532) , and it will be principally by an examination of his thought that I will try to illustrate what I mean by the close dependence of ideas of reform upon the framework of history in which they are formulated. Giles of Viterbo has been receiving increasing attention in recent years as his importance for religious and intellectual history more clearly emerges.<sup>2</sup> Giles combined a central and effective position in ecclesiastical administration with active participation in the leading academic and literary movements of his times. In 1507, under the powerful patronage of Pope Julius II (1503-13), he was elected prior general of the Augustinian order, and he held that office until a few months after he was created a cardinal by Pope Leo X (1513-20) in 1517. As prior general, Giles undertook a vigorous reform of the order, and his friendship



with the popes under whom he served brought him into contact with the leading political and ecclesiastical figures of the day. At the request of Julius II, Giles delivered the inaugural oration for the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17), in which he declaimed his famous norm for reform, "Men must be changed by religion, not religion by men."<sup>3</sup> Giles met Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) in Florence, probably in the winter of 1494-95, and he became an enthusiastic exponent of Ficino's Platonic theology, actually writing a lengthy commentary "ad mentem Platonis" on the first seventeen distinctions of the first book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>4</sup> Besides his interest in the literary humanism of Giovanni Pontano (ca. 1422-1503), he promoted among his subjects study of the works of Giles of Rome, the Scholastic master of the Augustinian order. He was inspired by the works of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) and Johannes Reuccliiin (1455-1522) to undertake a serious study of the cabala, convinced that this medieval Jewish theosophy was essentially reconcilable with Christian doctrine. Giles eventually became one of the Renaissance's most accomplished "Christian cabalists."<sup>5</sup> During his years as prior general, Giles was Martin Luther's highest ecclesiastical superior in the Augustinian order, and he most probably met Luther during the latter's trip to Rome in the winter of 1510-11.<sup>6</sup> Girolamo Seripando (1492-1563), the great Augustinian theologian at the Council of Trent, was for a time Giles's protege, and there is reason to believe Giles's influence upon him was considerable.<sup>7</sup>

Giles of Viterbo's thought on reform takes as its point of departure a very somber assessment of the condition of the Church and his order in the first decades of the cinquecento. In a letter written to a fellow Augustinian in 1505, he describes the condition of the Church in the most depressing terms: the Church has lost the gift of divine charity and is so near extinction that he can actually hear the death rattle.<sup>8</sup> With bitter words he depicted the Rome of Pope Alexander VI, Roderigo Borgia (1492-1503), as a city in which gold, force, and lust reigned supreme.<sup>9</sup> The age in which he lived and the order over which he presided were in a state of collapse.<sup>10</sup> It is easy to imagine how in the light of such an appraisal reform came to be the most urgent concern of Giles's life. On more than one occasion he tells his correspondent that day and night he can neither do, nor think of anything else than



how to promote the reform of the Augustinian order.<sup>11</sup> He is willing solemnly to swear before God and the angels on the great Day of Judgment that the reform is, after his own salvation, his greatest concern here on earth.<sup>12</sup>

Giles's pessimistic assessment of his age and his conviction that reform of it was the most pressing need of the day was shared by many of his contemporaries. Their times were the worst, the most calamitous, of all. The humanists did not escape this grim viewpoint, and it would be a serious mistake to believe that their thought was an expression of unmitigated optimism. The question Erasmus posed in the prefatory letter to the 1518, Basle, edition of his *Enchiridion militis christiani* betrays the spirit with which he viewed his age: "What person of sincere piety does not see that our century is by far the most corrupt of all?"<sup>13</sup> Like Giles of Viterbo, Gian Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470-1533) can describe contemporary morality only in terms of a general collapse.<sup>14</sup> Although he might refrain from a straightforward identification of his age as the worst of all, he does not hesitate to inform Pope Leo X that no other has surpassed it in the number and magnitude of its crimes.<sup>15</sup> For Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg (1445-1510), the most important popular preacher of his day in Germany, and even for the young Luther himself, the condition of the Church was so bad that they despaired of the possibility of any general reformation.<sup>16</sup> Symptomatic of the tracts of the times was an anonymous letter, "On the Wretched Condition of the Church," which originated in Canterbury about the year 1520. The author does not confuse his reader with subtle analyses and fine distinctions: sin is everywhere king and iniquity rules the land; man's wickedness has reached such a degree of intensity that it is hardly possible for it ever to become worse.<sup>17</sup> It is no wonder that in the atmosphere generated by such estimates of the condition of the Church and Christian society, demands for reform were frequent in number and exigent in their expectations of what the reform should accomplish.<sup>18</sup>

The norm for reform which Giles of Viterbo enunciated for the Fifth Lateran Council in 1512 discloses to us, when expanded to its full dimensions, something of what he expected this great Christian renewal to bring about. Giles's insistence that men must be changed by



religion and not religion by men was the operative ideal against which he tested his reform program. This is not the place to explore all the ramifications which Giles's norm had for his reform thought and activity, nor is it the place to show how intimately it relates to his cabalism and Neoplatonism. For our present purposes, it is enough simply to point out that what the norm immediately reveals about Giles's thinking on Church and reform is its conservative intent. For Giles, the sacred traditions of religion are a constant, and it is to them that man must try to conform his own instability and variability. These traditions, the heritage of belief and usage received from the past, will be the given for all reform in the future. Giles's cabalism taught him that these traditions were reflections of the divine realities. Hence, unless reform were to be an impious inversion of the order of the universe, they must be preserved from attack and from every attempt of man to tamper with them. The human exigencies of the moment are always to be measured against them and are never so peremptory as to justify a revision of them.<sup>19</sup> In matters of liturgical rubric and religious discipline, therefore, Giles took a strong stand against all innovation.<sup>20</sup> The reform of the Augustinian order must consist in a return to the observance of its original charters, and for this reason Giles instigated a search in houses of the order for all documents "quae vetustatem sapere videantur."<sup>21</sup> In spite of the novel categories his cabalism introduced into Christian theology, he was a sworn enemy of all innovation in dogma and doctrine.<sup>22</sup> In this instance, also, Giles voices ideas and assumptions which were commonplaces of his age. No matter what the content of a given reform program might be, it was almost without exception introduced under the respectable claim of a reaffirmation of the values of the past, values which presumably were obscured or totally lost in the present degenerate condition of Christian society. Gian Francesco Pico described the moral reform he deemed so urgent principally in terms of a reassertion of "sanctissima antiquorum Decreta patrum."<sup>23</sup> For Luther, as late as 1539, the purpose of ecclesiastical councils was to fix ever more firmly the ancient belief of the Church. One of the most serious charges which both he and Calvin leveled against the papal Church was that it felt it could confect new articles of



faith.24 Calvin was himself convinced "that whatever stems from human inventiveness corrupts religion."25

In the early sixteenth century there was, consequently, no call for the reform of the Church through *aggiornamento*. As a matter of fact, it is hard to imagine an intellectual atmosphere in which reform through a program of bringing things up to date would have received a more startled and uncomprehending hearing. This fact is made clear by a line from *Julius exclusus*, a devastatingly clever satire directed against Pope Julius II which was first published in 1513. In the course of the long and sometimes heated discussion between Saint Peter and Pope Julius as the latter is refused admission to heaven, the author has the unfortunate Pope draw a series of contrasts between the "barbarian" Germans and his own Italians, particularly those associated with the papal Curia. It is very significant that Julius is made to describe the barbarians as those "who stick to the antiquated laws of the past, whereas "we look at things differently."26 Needless to say, by picturing Julius as a pope who had little respect for the past, the anonymous author of the dialogue meant to present him in a most unflattering pose.

At least in the case of Giles of Viterbo, an investigation of the style of his historical thought is illuminating for understanding how his thinking on reform took its rise from a conviction of the evil condition of his age and looked for renovation by a revitalization of forms and institutions of the past. One of Giles's major works was his *Historia XX saeculorum*, a long history of the papacy composed for the purpose of indicating to Pope Leo X his responsibilities at the present crucial moment of history.27 Pivotal for understanding Giles's approach to history is the dominant role he attributes to divine providence. Sacred history is the "providentiae imago," the earthly fulfillment of a heavenly design.28 He thus easily confers upon religious traditions and institutions which appear in this history a value which derives not so much from the particular historical circumstances which produced them as from the fact that they were called into existence by the divine will. These traditions and institutions were, therefore, independent of the specific conditions of time and place in which they came into being and were impervious to other conditions of time and place



which might later modify them. In the fullest sense of the terms, traditions were sacred and truths were timeless. Such an approach to history is, of course, decidedly unhistorical. Giles's belief in the continuity, and even the eternity, of the Roman Empire, especially insofar as the Empire became identified with the Church, is illustrative of this aspect of his thought. This belief, by no means peculiar to Giles, was based on a number of sources, including the book of Daniel,(2:39-45; 7:1-28).<sup>29</sup> In accepting it Giles implicitly accepted the idea that the Roman Empire in some way or other marked man's final and definitive political form. Giles certainly was not blind to the political realities of his day. But he was predisposed to believe that time would not essentially modify the structures of the Empire and that history would not take its ultimate toll. In his historical thinking there was, in other words, a large measure of what Collingwood described as "substantialism," i.e., the assumption that the great agents of history are fundamentally unchanging and unchangeable, not subject to process.<sup>30</sup>

In the thought of Giles of Viterbo the most important such unchanging and unchangeable agent was the Church. For Giles, the early marriage of the Church with the Empire, for instance, was part of a providential design. He nowhere describes the contingent social and political conditions which made such a union possible, desirable, or even inevitable. He never suggests that this union might have modified the Church's functions and problems, nor can he imagine a situation in which it would cease to be meaningful. The same substantialistic view of history dominates Giles's understanding of the story of the Augustinian order. In 1256 Pope Alexander IV (1254-61) united into one body various congregations of hermits which had been following the Rule of Saint Augustine. Giles saw no intrinsic difference in ideals between these hermit congregations and the mendicant order which resulted from the union which the papacy effected.<sup>31</sup> Giles's concern for the problems created in his day by ecclesiastical wealth is another example of his lack of sophisticated historical consciousness. He gives no indication that he sees any relationship between this problem of ecclesiastical wealth and Europe's changing economy, that he sees



any difference between the economic situation in the time of the Emperor Constantine (306-37) and that in the time of the Medicis, his contemporaries.

Giles had at his disposal no really effective historical methodology which might have neutralized or controlled his providential concept of history. He was not in consistent possession of a methodology which would have permitted him to see how culturally conditioned every monument and institution of the past was in its genesis and how subject to process in the course of its existence. Thus he had few tools or perspectives to relativize the achievements of the past by showing them to be the product and patient of contingent historical circumstances. It was much easier for him to believe, for instance, that Scripture was the word of God than to show in any authentically historical way just how it was also the word of man. His sense of continuity with antiquity, and especially with Old and New Testament history, was all the stronger for his lack of a critical sense of perspective which would have indicated to him the almost unbridgeable cultural differences which separated him from the past.

If what we have just been saying is true, how to explain Giles's awareness that his age was more corrupt than those that preceded it? Does not this very awareness, somewhat like the concept of a renaissance itself, imply a historical consciousness which controls enough historical data to differentiate the present from the past and to weigh one's own age in unfavorable imbalance with it? The answer to these questions is relatively easy. To organize the past and render it at all intelligible, some historical framework had to be fitted over it. The framework, however, consisted of themes, principles, and assumptions which were in no way derived from the data under consideration and which were in no way later checked or ratified by the data. This framework consisted essentially in some metaphor of growth or decline. As such, it was not sensitive to any differentiation of the present from the past which could not be expressed in terms of more and less, better and worse, true and false.

Giles of Viterbo was heir to many of the commonplaces used to describe history's course, most of which had their ultimate origin in antiquity and were heavily weighted in favor of some form of historical pessimism. Giles tempered this pessimism with the belief that God's



providential plan called for a final period of history in which prerogatives lost in the course of time would be recovered and even amplified. But he viewed history's movement until that final period as one of rather constant decline. He tried to apply to the Christian era the Hesiodic scheme for a progressive debasing of history's metals.<sup>32</sup> His historical thought was also influenced by the ideas of cosmic senescence first formulated by Greek and Latin writers.<sup>33</sup> The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ suggested to him, as to many others in the late Middle Ages, that the history of the Church was set to the pattern of the Saviour. Like Him, the Church, too, had to endure suffering and trial before it could attain its final restoration.<sup>34</sup> More basic to Giles's stratification of the historical past into distinct periods was his numerology, especially as this related to the cabalistic Sefiroth or divine attributes. The second age of the Church, for instance, which stretched from Constantine to the time of Leo the Great (440-61), was less perfect than the first because it departed from the unity which was the perfection of the number one.<sup>35</sup> Giles was, furthermore, convinced that the farther any reality distances itself from its source, the weaker and more corrupt it becomes. This principle was metaphysical in its scope. By applying it to history, Giles saw that the Church was of necessity condemned to a course of constant decline as it chronologically receded from the age of Christ and the apostles.<sup>36</sup> His "substantialism" saved him from extending the application of this principle to the Church's essential structure and dogma, but it in no way inhibited him from applying it to the Church's moral and disciplinary fabric.<sup>37</sup> Myth, symbol, and metaphysics were the elements from which Giles constructed his framework of history. He then identified this framework with the course of providence and employed it prophetically to interpret God's ways to men.

To a historical framework of decline Giles of Viterbo subjoined a saturnine rhetoric of reproach which he directed against the Church, especially in its Roman character. This rhetoric was to a large extent based on biblical texts. Giles inherited it from the Middle Ages, where it was used to indict Rome for its many crimes, more heinous for being committed in so sacred a place.<sup>38</sup> By the early sixteenth century the sinfulness of Rome had become in many quarters an article of practical faith.<sup>39</sup> In the light of this faith, ecclesiastical problems



and policies were interpreted, and precious little effort was expended to understand how these were conditioned by the limited choices which were realistically possible at any given moment.<sup>40</sup> Giles of Viterbo, acutely aware of the holiness which Rome should embody as the capital city of Christianity, was struck by the contrast between the ideal of the New Jerusalem and the shocking phenomena he daily beheld. For him, too, Rome often seemed to be another Babylon, a harlot. He could hardly imagine it as the see chosen by the apostles.<sup>41</sup> Luther and Calvin were by no means the first or the only ones to see in the Church of Rome the unchaste Babylon and the veritable personification of the Antichrist. Concomitant with this symbolic and readymade vocabulary of reproach was the assumption that the cause of religion and reform was well served by parading ecclesiastical scandal before the eyes of the faithful. When Giles of Viterbo wrote to an Augustinian convent that the hour of justice and expose had arrived, he gave us a good insight into a principle which was operative in much that he preached and wrote.<sup>42</sup> Giles was considerably more temperate in his public criticism of ecclesiastical abuse than were many of his contemporaries. The problem had reached such proportions by 1516 that the Fifth Lateran Council had to intervene by formally forbidding preaching which intemperately subjected the episcopacy and other ecclesiastical superiors to public criticism.<sup>43</sup>

It would not be too much to say that Giles's approach to the method and meaning of history was, in its broad lines, typical of his age. Even in figures like Erasmus and Luther, in whom presumably there was a more highly developed critical sense than in many of their contemporaries, a providential view of history often predominated.<sup>44</sup> Belief in some form of historical decline or degeneration from a holier or more perfect era was also widespread and derived much more directly from myths and theories inherited from antiquity and the Middle Ages than from a scientific analysis of historical data.<sup>45</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, belief in ecclesiastical decline gained ever greater currency due to the exploitation of the pessimistic elements in the thought of Joachim of Flora (ca. 1130-1202) by the Spiritual Franciscans and those influenced by their views.<sup>46</sup> Luther himself believed that the world was growing old and that men showed the effects of progressive weakness in



the fact that their longevity was far less than that of the patriarchs.<sup>47</sup> He saw further proof of the ravages of time in the sharply rising incidence in Germany of the French disease, which was practically unknown there when he was a boy.<sup>48</sup> In Calvin we occasionally catch a suggestion that his historical thinking, especially as it relates to the Church, is conditioned by a belief that created reality is of necessity prone to degeneration and that corruption is an inevitable consequence of chronological distance from an original state or time of greater purity and truth.<sup>49</sup> Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples (ca.1455-1536), the greatest of the French humanists, is explicit in his conviction that religious truth, like all reality, necessarily is dissipated as it radiates out from its source. For this reason the Gospels have the highest authority of all religious documents. Then come the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, closely followed by the works of those who were familiars of the apostles such as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.<sup>50</sup>

In very many cases this myth-and-metaphysics of historical decline was carried to its logical conclusion that time was running out and that the Last Day was near to hand. For perhaps no other period of history is there more evidence in art, literature, and popular preaching that expectation of imminent doom or consolation was so prevalent. <sup>51</sup>

Luther lived out his days in the belief that the end was nigh, and Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples saw signs of the same.<sup>52</sup> Calvin, like Giles of Viterbo, felt he was witnessing the close of one great era of history and the opening of another, the last.<sup>53</sup> Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98), the great politico-religious reformer of Florence, viewed his mission in millenarist terms, and the anonymous author of Canterbury preached that the Day of Judgment was proximate.<sup>54</sup> For each of these figures, eschatological speculation related directly to the question of ecclesiastical reform, a reform which would be achieved only in the drastic context of the end of time.

It was not without reason that the Fifth Lateran Council felt itself compelled explicitly to condemn preaching which predicted for the near future a veritable inundation of catastrophe and horrid calamity, among which was the advent of the Antichrist and the cataclysm of the eschatological event.<sup>55</sup> In the opening years of the sixteenth century, evidence of corruption,



decay, and the approaching end of a degenerate world was produced on all sides. Today we find much of this evidence unconvincing, to say the least. It is perhaps not so difficult for us to see how the fact that more indulgences were being granted than in former times could be construed as a sign that the Antichrist soon would appear. It is more difficult to understand how the fact that new universities were being established and that more learned books were in circulation than ever before could also be adduced as proof for the imminence of that same dire event.<sup>56</sup> Surely Gian Francesco Pico's words to Pope Leo X have application here: "Veteris loco proverbii, rater beatissime, solitum est id a plerisque usurpari. Talem unicuique rem videri, qualis est ipse qui videt."<sup>57</sup>

The style of preaching forbidden by the Fifth Lateran Council was symptomatic of an era accustomed to measure itself against the uncompromising standards of some previous golden age of health, literature, or religion. It helped convince contemporaries of the corruption of their times and it is at least partially responsible for the erroneous belief which persists even today that the Renaissance was an age of unrestrained licentiousness and defiant revival of pagan ideals.<sup>58</sup> The sense of religious tension which the era experienced was by no means due solely to an unidirectional causality flowing from the breakdown of medieval institutions. The institutions themselves had to bear the weight of a corrosively negative rhetoric and an artificially pessimistic framework of historical thought.

The relationship which I set out to illuminate was that which obtained between the historical and the reform thought of the early sixteenth century, especially as this is verified in the writings of Giles of Viterbo. There can be no doubt that Giles's view of history was a determining factor in his thought on reform, even though it was by no means the only one and was itself affected by the whole intellectual milieu in which he lived. There is reason to believe that the same can be said of other reform thought of the period.

Giles's view of history helped wed him to a style of thought which must be categorized as conservative, i.e., which was intent upon conserving usages, beliefs, and traditions received from the past and in which *aggiornamento* was not only practically undesirable but intellectually impossible. This view of history derived from sources other than the pertinent



historical data and, as a result, was incapable of seeing the intrinsic differentiation in institutions and patterns of life and thought which have characterized different periods of the past.

More important still, it was incapable of seeing the bearing such differentiation had on the Church, actually altering its structure, functions, problems, and needs. Giles viewed the past as a reality homogeneously identifiable with the present. Its reconstruction in historical imagination, consequently, presented no particular methodological difficulties. The present's relationship to the past could be understood only as a degeneration from it, or as a providential continuation, amplification, or recovery of it. The forms of the past, insofar as they were assumed into a framework of providence, could not easily be relativized. If a reality of the past is not culturally relative, it is culturally absolute. There is no possibility of a critical review of it which will release the present from its authoritative grasp. Giles had no choice but to reaffirm the forms of the past. His view of history would not let him do otherwise.

The aprioristic application to history of myth and metaphysics represented an intellectual tradition innocent of historical procedures of invention and verification as we know them today. It fostered a style of expression which relied upon symbol and loose metaphor to articulate truths felt to be obvious and beyond the need of sober analysis. Furthermore, it produced important hermeneutical repercussions, partially insulating Giles from the very data he was trying to understand. Even events to which he was contemporary were filtered through these pre-established interpretative screens. Giles's view of history certainly did not of itself preclude all valid insight into the problems of his age, but it undoubtedly tended to fit such insight into an already concluded argument and an already fabricated scheme of history. His understanding of the method and meaning of history freed him to construct his picture of the Church and its needs in accordance with his preconceptions and untested intuitions. Giles's decrying the collapsed state of the Church in which he lived cannot be taken at its literal value. He had neither the method nor the perspective to answer the delicate question of how the present condition of the Church compared with any previous



condition. The Church was indescribably corrupt and the need for reform was feverishly urgent because the structure Giles imposed upon history told him it had to be so.

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## Notes

1. [\[back\]](#) For a discussion of the historical thought of Renaissance humanists, see Myron P. Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963) esp. pp. 1-37.
2. [\[back\]](#) For an excellent survey of studies on Giles of Viterbo, see Francis X. Martin, O.S.A., "The Problem of Giles of Viterbo: A Historiographical Survey," *Augustiniana* 9 (1959), 357-79; 10 (1960) 43-60. Bibliographical references contained in two articles I have recently published bring Fr. Martin's survey up to date: "Giles of Viterbo: A Sixteenth Century Text on Doctrinal Development," *Traditio* 22 (1966) 445-50, and "Giles of Viterbo: A Reformer's Thought on Renaissance Rome," *Renaissance Quarterly* 20 (1967), 1-11. Martin is preparing for publication his doctoral dissertation, *Egidio da Viterbo, 1469-1518: A Study in Renaissance and Reform History* (Cambridge Univ., 1958). For the story of Giles's life and reform activities up to 1518, Martin's biography will replace the helpful but eulogistic work of Giuseppe Signorelli, *Il Cardinale Egidio da Viterbo* (Florence, 1929). I hope soon to publish a book dealing with Giles's thought on Church and reform.
3. [\[back\]](#) Mansi 32, 669-76, esp. 669: "...homines per sacra immutari fas est, non sacra per homines..."
4. [\[back\]](#) The copy to which I shall refer in this article is in the Biblioteca Vaticana, Ms. Vat. Lat. 6325.
5. [\[back\]](#) On this aspect of Giles's career, see Francois Secret, *Les kabbalistes chretiens de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1964) pp. 106-26. Secret has edited the two surviving works of Giles's which treat ex professo of the cabala, *Scechina e Libellus de litteris hebraicis* (2 vols., Rome, 1959).
6. [\[back\]](#) Luther is mentioned by name only once by Giles, in his official register from 1513: "Fratrem Martinum Wittenberg. Lectorem facillus," as quoted in D. G. Kawerau, "Aus den Actis generalatus Aegidii Viterbiensis," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 32 (1911) 604. Luther



speaks of Giles twice in the Tischreden, 1531 and 1536. He describes Giles as very learned, and in both instances he depicts him as preaching against the abuses of the papacy (*WATR* 2, 34-48, and 3, 345). See also Hubert Jedin, "Die romischen Augustiner quellen zu Luthers Friihzeit," *Archiv fur Reformationsgeschichte* 25 (1928) 256-70; Reinhold Weijenborg, O.F.M., "Neuentdeckte Dokumente ill Zusammenhang mit Luthers Romreise," *Antonianum* 32 (1957) 147-202, esp. 185-97; Francois Secret, "Notes sur Egidio da Viterbo," *Augustiniana* 15 (1965) 414-18.

7. [\[back\]](#) On Giles's relationship to Seripando, see Hubert Jedin, *Girolamo Seripando* 1 (Wurtzburg, 1937) 24-33, 80-95. See also Jules Paquier, "Un essai de theologie platonicienne a la Renaissance: Le commentaire de Gilles de Viterbe sur le premier livre des Sentences," *Recherches de science religieuse* 13 (1923) 293-312, 419-36, and Francois Secret, "Notes sur Egidio da Viterbo," *Augustinia* 15 (1965) 68-72. Secret has emphasized Seripando's dependence upon Giles for his interest in the cabala: "Girolamo Seripando et la Kabbale," *Rinascimenlo* (2nd series) 3 (1963) 251-68.

8. [\[back\]](#) Biblioteca Nazionale, Naples, Ms. V.F.20, 94v95r: "Mater ecclesia jam prope extinta est...Refrixit multis jam annis haec regina; obriguit nostra luna, quonjam refrixit charitas multorum...Ecce jam media propinquat nox. Audio mortis strepitus." See also *ibid.* 264r. This manuscript will henceforth be cited as Naples V.F.20.

9. [\[back\]](#) Biblioteca Angelica, Rome, Ms. Lat. 502, 26Ov: "...nihil jus, nihil fasj aurum, vis .,et Venus imperabat." This manuscript will henceforth be cited as Ang. Lat. 502. For some further descriptions of the desperate state of the Church of his day, see *ibid.* 26r, and Vat. Lat. 6325, 86rv, 195rv.

10. [\[back\]](#) Biblioteca Comunale, Siena, Ms. G.X.26, 123, henceforth cited as Siena G.X.26; *Scechina* 1, 104; Mansi 32, 675; and in the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome, Ms. Lat. 1170,, 23v, henceforth cited as Ang. Lat. 1170. See also Naples V.F.20, 281r

11. [\[back\]](#) See Siena G.X.26, 123: "Sumus die noctuque in labore reformandi, nihilque aliud agimus, inspicimus, cogitamus nisi ut, jubente et pontifice et protectore, collapsa nostra respublica faciem recuperet antiquae majestatis." See also *ibid.* 4, 79.



12. [\[back\]](#) See Marlin, "Ebridio da Vilerbo," p. 387.
13. [\[back\]](#) *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmus Roterodami*, eds. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, 3 (Oxford, 1913) 366: "Quis vere pius non videt ac suspirat hoc seculum longe corruptissimum?"
14. [\[back\]](#) *Ad Leonis X P. M. et Concilium Lateranense de reformtandis moribus oratio, in Fasciculus rerum expetendarum et fugiendarum*, eds. Orthuinus Gratius and Edwardus Brown, 1 (London, 1690) 417: ". ..de moribus hominum qui tam diu collapsi jacent. ..." *Ibid.* 421: ". ..ut collapsos mores ad normam priscae virtutis instauremus..."
15. [\[back\]](#) See *Joannis Francisci Pici Mirandulae Domini Comordiatque Comitum Liber de veris calamitatum causis nostrorum temporum*, ed. Ferdinandus Calorius Caesius (Modena, 1860) p. 67.
16. [\[back\]](#) On Geiler von Kaysersberg, see H. Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist im späteren Mittelalter, bei Luther und in der konfessionellen Polemik* (Leipzig, 1906) p. 6. For Luther, see WA 5, 345. See also *ibid.* 42, 260-61.
17. [\[back\]](#) *Epistola Cantabrigiensis cujusdam anonymi de misero ecclesiae statu: circa anno 1520*, in *Fasciculus rerum* 2, 637-38: "...ubique peccatum regnat, perpetratur iniquitas...Ad hoc nempe jam hominum devenit malignitas ut major esse vix possit."
18. [\[back\]](#) Gratius and Brown collected a number of documents calling for the reform of the Church, principally from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the two volumes of their *Fasciculus rerum*.
19. [\[back\]](#) See, e.g., Vat. Lat. 6325, 116v, 169r; Ang. Lat. 502, 194r; Siena G.X.26, 120.
20. [\[back\]](#) Siena G.X.26, 26: "[all that the friars do] ad amussim nostris legibus institutisque patrum conformentur." *Ibid.* 261: "Non enim nova facimus, sed leges patrum in ista patria extinctas, Deo ita jubente, suscitamus." See also *ibid.* 24, 198. Ang. Lat. 1170, 23v: "Vobis [unidentified] igitur mandamus in obedientiae meritum ut...antiquas leges ametis..." Giles, of course, recognized the Church's right to modify or even abrogate purely ecclesiastical laws. Jacopo Sadoletto (1477-1547) reported a conversation between Lorenzo Campeggio (1474-1539), Cajetan (Thomas de Vio, 1469-1534), and Giles on whether or not the laws of



fasting bound under pain of serious sin. Giles opposed the more liberal views of the other two, but all three were of the opinion that the pope ought to change the law so as to remove this scruple from the consciences of the faithful. See Sadoletto, *Opera omnia* 4 (Verona, 1738) 323-24.

21. [back] Siena G.X.26, 31.

22. [back] See, e.g., Ang. Lat. 502, 40v, 124v, 164v, 166r.

23. [back] Gian Francesco Pico, *Oratio de reformandis ntoribus* 417.

24. [back] *WA* 50, 551; *Institutes* 4, 8, 10; *CR* 30, 853.

25. [back] *Institutes* 1, 5, 12; *CR* 30, 50: "...sed nihil unquam excogitavit ullus mortalium, quo non turpiter corrupta fuerit religio."

26. [back] *Julius: Dialogue entre Saint Pierre et le Pape Jules II* [Latin text with French translation] trans. Edmond Thion (Paris, 1875) p. 116: "Item Simonia, jam olim a rerum ; natura sublatum vocabulum, velut umbram adhuc formidant illi [barbari], et antiquatas, jam veterum leges mordicus tenent, nos alio spectamus. Atque hujusmodi permulta sunt alia, in quibus nobis non convenit cum Barbaris."

27. [back] Ang. Lat. 502. The autograph copy of this work is in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Naples, Ms. IX.B.14.

28. [back] *Scechina* 1, 130: "...nihil esse aliud historiam sacram quam sephiroth figurae, providentiae imago, exemplarium processio, rerum imitamenta divinarum." Also *ibid.*: "...idque quod in coelo erat mundoque divino historiae veritas imitatur in terris, factum sicut in coelo et in terra." See also *ibid.* 2, 113. As with the manuscript sources, in quoting from the *Scechina* I have taken the liberty of clarifying the punctuation.

29. [back] See Ang. Lat. 502, 5v, 6v, 10r, 15v-17v, 20v-21r, 183v; *Scechina* 1, 49, 189-90, 201; 2, 167-68; Naples V.F.20, 277r; and in the Biblioteca Publica of Evora, Portugal, Ms. CXVI/1-30, 54v54(a)r, henceforth cited as Evora CXVI/1-30. See also Kenneth J. Pratt, "Rome as Eternal," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965) 25-44, and T. Mommsen, "Saint Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," *ibid.* 12 (1951) esp. 348-49.

30. [back] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1966) pp. 42-45.



31. [back] Ang. Lat. 502, 150r, 171 v. Giles erroneously attributes this union to Pope Innocent IV (1243-54).
32. [back] See Ang. Lat. 502, 39r, 150r, 171v-172r. Giles gives Innocent IV (1243-54) credit for beginning the unification of the order, and he sees Alexander IV as completing the task.
33. [back] Naples V.F.20, 94v-95r, and Ang. Lat. 502, 51 v52r, 56r. On the question of "human and cosmic senescence" in antiquity, see Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935) pp. 98-102.
34. [back] *Scechina* 2, 150. See Ernst Benz, *Ecclesia spiritualis* (Stuttgart, 1964 [photoreprint of original 1934 edition]) pp. 26-27, 303.
35. [back] Ang. Lat. 502, 35v, and 60r: "Addo Aramaeorum arcanum, cum in universa lege turn vero in Daniele scriptum: saecula Deum imitari. In Deo pythagoreum denarium ponunt, quem numerum rerum et mundi initium faciunt." On medieval numerology, see V. F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (New York, 1938). See also Roderich Schmidt, "Aetates mundi: Die Weltalter als Gliederungsprinzip der Geschichte," *Zeitschrift fUr Kirchengeschichte* 67 (1955-56) 288-317.
36. [back] Evora CXVI/1-30, 23r: "Omnia namque bonis e fontibus emanavere, sed facile tande Il adulterantur omnia, nihil que adeo initio praestans est quod exiguo" deinde tem pore non labefactetur. Ita in pejus prona est natura rerum." Giles applies this principle specifically to realities of Christian history in Ang. Lat. 502, 52r, 59v, and Vat. Lat. 6325, 194v. For a metaphysical application of it see Vat. Lat. 6325, 44r and 46r.
37. [back] Even today any attempt to assess the condition of religious life and practice on the eve of the Reformation is complicated and delicate. Joseph Lortz has attempted it for Germany in his *Die Reformation in Deutschland* 1 (Freiburg, 1941) 69-138, esp. 97-99. As regards the general moral and disciplinary condition of the Augustinian order during Giles's generalship, F. Martin judges that there is no reason to infer that any substantial rot and decay had set in; see "Egidio da Viterbo," pp. 185-87. The nature of the abuses Giles consistently reproves inclines me very much to agree with Martin. From Giles's constant



harping on the necessity of leading the common life, we can assume that there was a rather widespread practice among the friars of obtaining food, clothing, and certain privileges which were not accorded to all on an equal basis. Giles wants to eliminate the use of linen instead of wool as material for the friars' habits. He insists upon silence in the dormitories, choir, and refectory, and lays down minute prescriptions for the celebration of the liturgical offices. There were some cases of notorious scandal, such as that of the prior who publicly took a wife and then set her in charge of the monastery, but these were few and do not seem particularly indicative of the general condition of the order. For this incident, which occurred in 1506, see in the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome, Ms. Lat. 688, 20v.

38. [back] See, e.g., Benz, *Ecclesia Spiritualis*, pp. 307-315, and Arturo Graf, *Roma nella memoria e nelle immaginazioni del Medio Evo* {Turin, 1915) pp. 30-33.

39. [back] For example, the observations of Petrus Galatinus, O.F.M. (ca. 1460-1540), in his commentary on the Apocalypse in the Biblioteca Vaticana, Ms. Lat. 5567, 304v-305r (Arabic numeration): "Praecipue tamen ac principaliter dicimus per magnam hanc fomicariam Romanam significari ecclesiam...Vocat [the author of the Apocalypse] autem earn meretricem magnam, quia et verus Dei cultus et verus Christi sponsi sui amor est in ea hodie maxime adulteratus." See also Hubert Jedin, "Rom und Romidee im Zeitalter der Reformation und Gegenreformation," in his *Kirche des Glaubens: Kirche der Geschichte 1* (Vienna, 1966) 143-52.

40. [back] E. Garin's analysis of the attacks on ecclesiastical corruption by Florentine humanists of the fifteenth century would seem to have a wide application; see *La cultura filosofica dei Rinascimento italiano* (Florence, 1961) p.167: "[Their attacks continue] una vecchia tradizione polernica condotta su un piano puramente retorico..." *Ibid.*, p.171: "Ma quell a che non si tenta mai e una diagnosi precisa del male e un piano concreto di rimedi; insomma una discesa dal regno dell'utopia a quello della storia."

41. [back] See Ang. Lat. 502, 90v, 173(a)r; Naples V.F.20, 87r; Siena G.X.26, 19091.

42. [back] Siena G.X.26, 62: "Venit enim justitiae tempus, quando oportet curanda vulnera videantur, non dissimulanda."



43. [back] Conciliorum ouumenicorum decreta, eds. Joseph Alberigo et al. (Basle, 1962) p. 613.

44. [back] See Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists*, pp. 105-14, and John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven, 1963) pp. 1-2,42,58, 106-8, 133-34, 167-68, 187, 195. See also Wilhelm Maurer, "Luthers Lehre von der Kirche: Kirche und Geschichte nach Luthers Dictata super Psalterium," in *Lutherforschung heute*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Berlin, 1958) esp. pp. 92-93, 98. Through the courtesy of W. Jared Wicks, S.J., I have been able to read a mimeographed copy of the paper Maurer delivered at the Dritter internationaler Kongress fur Lutherforschung, August 11-16, 1966 Jarvenpaa, Finland, "Luthers Anschauungen tiber die Kontinuitat der Kirche." The views Maurer expresses in this paper can be used to confirm a strongly substantialistic idea of history in Luther.

45. [back] Besides the biblical basis, especially in Genesis, for belief in an original period of greater strength and purer religion, other ideas of "hard and soft" primitivism were wide spread in antiquity; see Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism*. The idea that the "ancients" were nearer the gods and had, therefore, a purer truth can be found in Plato, whose works were known in the Renaissance through Ficino's translation; see Josef Pieper, "The Concept of Tradition," *Review of Politics* 20 (1958) esp. 476-80. The idea that purity in religious doctrine was in proportion to the doctrine's antiquity was especially prevalent in the second and third centuries, when the Hermetic literature, so widely diffused in the Renaissance through Ficino's translations, was composed; see A.J. Festugiere, *La revelation d' Hermes Trismegiste* 1 (Paris, 1944) 14. For instances of historical pessimism in Philo, Augustine, Prudentius, see George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948) pp. 56, 52-53, 184-85.

46. [back] See Benz, *Ecclesia spiritualis*, pp. 26-29, 285-86, 303, 358-59, 389-90.

47. [back] WA 42, 15455; 43, 39. For comment on these passages, see Headley, *Luther's View*, pp. 11824. Headley sees degeneration as constituting a principle of Church history for Luther (p. 179), but warns that this must be cautiously interpreted (pp. 1067, 187). On the idea of *senectus ecclesiae* in Luther, see Maurer, "Luthers Lehre," p. 93.



48. [\[back\]](#) WA 42, 154-55.

49. [\[back\]](#) In speaking of his particular veneration for the first five ecumenical councils in contrast with later ones, Calvin observes, *Institutes* 4, 9, 8; CR 30, 862: "Sic priscas illas synodos, ut nicaenam, constantinopolitanam, ephesinam primam, chalcedonensem ac similes, quae confutandis erroribus habitae sunt, libenter amplectimur, reveremurque ut sacrosanctas, quantum attinet ad fidei dogmata....In posterioribus quoque nonnullis videmus elucere verum pietatis studium, notas ad haec ingenii, doctrinae, prudentiae non obscuras. Sed quemadmodum solent res in deterius fere prolabi, ex recentioribus conciliis videre est quantum subinde ecclesia a puritate illius aurei saeculi degeneravit." For what seems to be another application to history of the same principle of decline, see *Institutes* 4, 7, 18; CR 30, 836. The most detailed recent study of Calvin's views on history is Heinrich Berger, *Calvins Geschichtsauffassung* (Zurich, 1955). Berger does not cite or comment upon the text I adduced above, but he does see in Calvin a view of history influenced by the idea of decline and of a progressive spoiling of the purity of the early Church, e.g., pp. 75-76, 84, 169, 239. See, e.g., *Institutes* 4, 17, 14; CR 30, 1012; 4, 17, 43; CR 30, 1045; *Commentary on Thessalonians* 2, 3; CR 80, 197; 2, 7; CR 80, 200-201.

50. [\[back\]](#) The text occurs in the opening lines of his introduction to his edition of Dionysius, as quoted in *Dionysiaca: Recueil donnant l'ensemble des traductions latines des ouvrages attribues a Denys de l'Areopage* 1 (Bruges, 1937) cx: "Lumen quanto soli vicinius est, tanto splendet illustrius, vimque mortalium superat oculorum. Et unumquodque quanto suae propinquat origini, tanto quoque puriorem suam retinet naturam atque servat. Neque id aliter in divinis aliter vero in humanis evenire putandum est. Hinc omnium sane scripturarum supremum dignitatis apicem, summumque decus, augustam reverentiam et auctoritatem, obtinere dignoscuntur sacrosancta Evangelia, utque a Deo maxime manaverint in dispositos animos transfusa. Mox ea sequuntur...." I was led to this text by a comment and reference in the article by Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "The Humanist Idea of Christian Antiquity: Lefevre d'Etaples and His Circle," *Studies in the Renaissance* 9 (1962) 126-60, esp. 134-36.

51. [\[back\]](#) See, e.g., Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist*; Giuseppe Ermini, ed., *L'Attesa*



*dell'eta nuova nella spiritualita della fine del medioevo* (Todi, 1962); Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1962) esp. pp. 169-306; M. Bataillon, "Evangelisme et millenarisme au Nouveau Monde," in *Couratus religieux et humanisme a la fin du XV et au debut du XVI siecle* (Paris, 1959) pp. 25-36; Garin, *La cultura filosofica*, pp. 224-28; Delio Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento* (Florence, 1939) pp. 10-23; C. Vasoli, "La profezia di Francesco da Meleto," in *Umanesimo e ermeneutica: Archivio di filosofia* (1963) pp. 27-80; and the two studies by Andre Chastel, "L'Apocalypse en 1500," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 14 (1952) 124-40, and *Art et l'humanisme a Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique* (Paris, 1961) pp. 341-51.

52. [back] For Luther, see Headley, *Luther's View*, pp. 224-65. For Lefevre d'Etaples, see J. Dagens, "Humanisme et evangelisme chez Lefevre d' Etaples," in *Courants religieux*, esp. p.132.

53. [back] On Calvin, see Berger, *Calvinus Gescltichtsauffassung*, pp. 73-91, 178. Giles of Viterbo divided the history of the Church into ten ages, the last of which began with the pontificate of Leo X; see, e.g., Ang. Lat. 502, 316v. This tenfold division relates directly to the ten cabalistic Sefiroth. A tenfold division of history was known in antiquity; see Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen* (Halle, 1898) pp. 150-51.

54. [back] On Savonarola, see Donald Weinstein, "Savonarola, Florence and the Millenarian Tradition," *Church History* 27 (1958) 291-305. See the *Epistola Cantabrigiensis* 637-38.

55. [back] See *Conciliorum decreta*, pp. 611-13.

56. [back] See Preuss, *Die Vorstellungen vom Antichrist*, pp. 232-4. For Luther's idea that peace and security was the final and greatest temptation the Church had to undergo, see Maurer, "Luthers Lehre," p. 95.

57. [back] *Liber de veris calamitatum causis*, p. 8.

58. [back] The best of contemporary scholarship is unequivocal in its rejection of the view that the Renaissance was an age which can meaningfully be labeled pagan and immoral; see, e.g., Paul Oscar Kristeller, "The Moral Thought of Renaissance Humanism," in his *Renaissance Thought 2* (New York, 1965) esp. 31; Garin, *La cultura filosofica*, p. 178;



Chastel, *Art et humanisme*, pp. 195-206. For a recent apology for the values in the humanists' theology, see Anthony Levi, S.J., "Renaissance and Reformation," *Dublin Review* (Autumn, 1965) pp. 255-67.

