3 The Age of Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was revolt against the medieval church

We saw in the first part of Western Civilization various revolts against the church throughout the Middle Ages

Of course, the various crowns and members of nobility struggled with the church over power (influence) and taxation within their domains from time to time

Commoners oftentimes protested the secularism of the church as opposed to the spiritual responsibilities people thought the church should be concerned with

Theologians like John Wycliffe (mid to late 14th century) in England argued that only church leaders who lived pious lives could claim legitimacy to spiritual leadership

Thus, faithful people had the right to criticize ecclesiastics and undertake reform of the church

This argument was also applied to secular rulers whose immoral lives proved that they held no mandate from God

John Huss (early 15th century), a theologian in Bohemia (the Czech Republic), also promoted reform of the church by rejecting the notion that ecclesiastics were spiritually superior to the laity (the people) and challenged certain church practices they labeled as superstitious such as transubstantiation

In the 15th century Netherlands were the Brothers of the Common Life that advocated for the “Modern Devotion”

They urged common people to adapt for their own uses the spiritual disciplines of monasticism that stressed piety and practical religion

Thomas à Kempis (d. 1471) summarized the philosophy of the movement in his tract the Imitation of Christ, a guide to the inner life intended for monks and nuns but also aimed at the laity who sought spiritual growth through the spiritual disciplines

The Brothers also served the public’s desire for better education and thus met the need of late medieval people for a more personal religion and better-informed faith

The Modern Devotion helped the people develop fuller religious lives without turning their backs on the modern world

A synthesis

The Dutch theologian Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) sought to unite the classical ideals of humanity and civic virtue with the Christian virtues of love and piety

Erasmus had begun his training with the Brothers of the Common Life

He felt that individuals and society could be reformed by disciplined studying of the bible and the classics

He taught what is known as the philosophia Christi or the philosophy of Christ which emphasized ethical piety modeled after Christ’s life

According to Erasmus true reform was only possible if people were guided by a pure source of God’s teachings

He thus improved the Bible in 1516 using the best manuscript sources at the time and produced a Greek version of the New Testament that improved on the Latin version used by the church

He produced a more accurate Latin translation in 1519

Of course, the church was opposed to these new translations and placed Erasmus’s works on the forbidden list

The Reformation began in about 65 of the free cities of Germany and Switzerland

The cities suffered from internal social and political divisions and these divisions contributed to certain factions favoring the Reformation and others resisting these developments

Residents of the cities had become increasing aware of the outside world and politics due to increased literacy, education, access to books, expanded travel as soldiers, pilgrims, traders, and explorers

The Reformation also was a response to the crises that afflicted the church in the late Middle Ages

The papacy’s exile in Avignon and the Great Schism

The conciliar movement

The flagrant worldliness of the popes and other church leaders

These things contributed to the clergy and laity to be highly critical of the traditional teachings and spiritual practices of the church

The previous religious movements that advocated reform desired religious simplicity in imitation of the life of Jesus

They wanted a more egalitarian church that gave a voice to its members and a church that was more spiritual based on the model of the New Testament

Ultimately, the papacy’s success in winning control over the appointment of candidates to church offices did not improve the administration of the church

The popes sold ecclesiastical posts to the highest bidders

Purchasers were entitled to the income of the offices, but they were not required to carry out the duties of their offices

Many medieval German towns complained about clerical malfeasance and dereliction of duty by these offices

City governments sometimes tried to improve religious life by endowing dedicated pastors providing services superior to those provided by the bureaucracy of the church

These preacherships often became platforms for reform and reformers

Preachers connected to the church also had special privileges

Churches and monasteries didn’t have to pay taxes, nor did ecclesiastics have to perform regular duties that common citizens had to perform

Such as military service and other obligations

Secular governments began to take steps to curtail clerical privileges that seemed underserved

There were also financial abuses of the church

The sale of indulgences or papal letters that guaranteed sinners released time from purgatory

If rulers and magistrates were given a share of the profits, they did not object to the practice

However, if local revenues were sent for projects away from home, local authorities would protest

The restraints that were imposed on the church in France and England in association with the emerging centralization and consolidation of power were only enacted and applied piecemeal in Germany as popular resentment of ecclesiastical abuses spread

By 1517, mass discontent was pervasive throughout Germany

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the son of a miner and educated by the Brothers of Common Life

He was educated at the University of Erfurt and received a master of arts degree in 1505

He entered the Order of Hermits of St Augustine later that year

He became ordained in 1507 and made a fateful trip to Rome on behalf of his order in 1510

In Rome, Luther saw firsthand the opulence of the church

In 1511 he moved to the monastery in Wittenberg, earned his doctorate in theology in 1512, and joined the faculty of the university at Wittenberg

The Reformation was, in part, a response to the failure of traditional medieval religion to provide laypeople and clergy with personal spiritual and intellectual satisfaction

It also seems to be a rebellion against the traditional caste-based structure of medieval society

Luther concluded from his reading of the Scriptures that the righteousness demanded by God was not the product of religious works and ceremonies

He understood it as a gift from God to those who believe and trust in the

teachings of Jesus

Following the teachings of Jesus was sufficient for salvation

This doctrine of justification by faith was incompatible with the church’s practice of issuing indulgences which required the obligation of a work for the absolution of a sin

Indulgences were based on the supernatural claim that the saints had an infinite reservoir of excess good works that could be appropriated to others (1343 Pope Clement Vi)

The papal letters of indulgence were drafts on this reservoir to cover the works of satisfaction owed by sinners

In 1476 Pope Sixtus IV expanded the market by proclaiming the church’s power to grant indulgences to souls already in purgatory

By Luther’s day the indulgences were being discounted and mass marketed

Pope Julius II declared a special Jubilee indulgence to be sold in 1517 to raise funds for the rebuilding of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome

When official of the church were sent to Luther’s district to sell indulgences Luther responded by posting 95 theses opposing the sale of indulgences on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517

The posting of the theses made Luther famous, and he was summoned to appear before his order in Heidelberg in April 1518

In October he was called to Augsburg to be examined by a papal commission

The death of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in January 1519 diverted attention away from Luther and redirected it towards the contest of who would be the new emperor

Charles I of Spain succeeded his grandfather and became Charles V

The noble electors of the Holy Roman Empire seeking to enhance their power and limit the power of the emperor forced Charles to agree to consult with a diet of the empire on all major foreign and domestic issues

Charles had to agree to this arrangement

The arrangement ruled out unilateral imperial action in Germany

This benefitted Luther greatly

In 1519, Luther was involved in a debate where he questioned the infallibility of the pope, and he made an appeal to the Scripture as the sole authority governing faith

In 1520, he urged the German princes to reform the Roman church and restrict its political and economic power

He also argued that the Scriptures, decrees of church councils, and the decisions of the secular princes were superior to the pope

Likewise, he promoted his theological insight that salvation is achieved by faith alone

In June the pope condemned Luther for heresy and gave him 60 days to retract

The pope excommunicated Luther on January 3, 1521, and was ordered to appear before a diet in Worms to recant his heresy

Of course, Luther refused under the reasoning that it violated the Scriptures, reason, and conscience

Luther was placed under an imperial ban which now made heresy a crime against the Holy Roman state

Luther went into hiding, helped by sympathetic friends and princes

During this time in seclusion (April 1521-March 1522), Luther produced a German translation of Erasmus’s Greek text of the New Testament

Charles V was too preoccupied with foreign affairs to be bothered with Luther

France was threatening Charles’s empire in Italy

The Ottoman Turks were advancing on eastern Europe

The Turks overran Hungary in 1526

The French continued their wars against the Habsburgs in Europe (1521-1559)

As a result, Charles V punted on the Luther issue and granted each German prince the right to deal as he saw fit with the situation created by Luther (Diet of Speyer 1526)

This development cleared the way for the Reformation, and it inaugurated a tradition of princely control over religion that was eventually solidified in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555.

By the 1530s the leadership of the Reformation had passed from theologians to magistrates and princes

In the towns, city governments mandated religious reforms and cities began to pass reforms into law binding on all residents

Some princes implemented reforms on a statewide level

These princes recognized the advantages of overthrowing the church in terms of power and economics and urged their neighbors to join them

These developments helped create powerful alliances of princes with which they could challenge the power of the emperor and prepare for war

Independent reform movements began to emerge in Switzerland and France

Ulrich Zwingli was the leader of reform in Switzerland, and he credited Erasmus for sparking his interest in reform

He also opposed the sale of indulgences

When he applied for a post of people’s priest in Zurich, he was denied because of his acknowledged fornication with a woman

However, many people sympathized with Zwingli’s plight, and he was able to win the post

From that pulpit in Zurich, Zwingli led the fight against clerical celibacy and other reforms questioning traditional practices such as fasting, transubstantiation, the worship of saints, pilgrimages, purgatory, and some sacraments

Zurich endorsed Zwingli’s ideas in 1523 and took the lead in the Swiss Reformation and pioneered the kind of Protestantism called puritanical

When Landgrave Philip of Hesse tried to create an alliance in 1529 between Luther and Zwingli to unite Protestants against the Catholics, the two reform leaders refused to come to an agreement over theological reasons

The disagreement splintered the movement

When Protestants and Catholics divided up the Swiss cantons, civil war broke out beginning in 1529

Zwingli was killed in the fighting

The treaty that ended the war by 1531 allowed each canton to determine its own religion

More radical Protestant movements broke out among those who wanted more rapid and thorough restoration of “primitive” Christianity based on the church as it is described in the New Testament

This led to the appearance of the Anabaptists (re-baptizers) in 1525 in Zurich who took their name from their rejection of infant baptism and insisted on the re-baptizing of adults

Besides the rejection of infant baptism, they opposed the swearing of oaths, committed themselves to pacificism, and refused to condone secular governments

They withdrew from society to live as they believed the first Christians lived

Secular authorities saw their conduct as an attack on society

Anabaptists were not only persecuted by secular authorities, but also by other Protestants and Catholics

Rebaptism was declared a capital offence in the Holy Roman Empire and up to 5,000 people were executed for rebaptism between 1525 to 1618

Anabaptists were successful in taking over the western German city of Munster from 1534 to 1535 and Munster briefly became an Old Testament theocracy

Protestant and Catholic armies crushed the Anabaptists and afterwards the Anabaptists were committed to pacificism, and the movement spread among rural populations

Menno Simons, the founder of the Mennonites (1535), an Anabaptist religion from Frisia (Dutch and German speaking area of northwestern Europe)

Jakob Hutter and the Hutterites from Tyrol

The English Reformation

The king of England was the only monarch to break from the pope

The English Reformation owed more to developing English nationalism then to sympathy with Luther or any other Protestant theology

There was a history of the English maintaining the rights of the crown against that of the pope

In the 13th century Edward, I imposed taxes on the clergy in opposition of the pope’s demand that the clergy couldn’t be taxed by secular kings

Later in the mid-1300s the Parliament curtailed the right of the pope to appoint candidates to church offices, limited the amount of money that was sent to Rome, and limited the number of courts that could be appealed to Rome

In the late Middle Ages, Wycliffe argued that the church authorities were not superior to secular authorities

In 1525, William Tyndale translated the New Testament into English, and access to the Bible in the English language became the centerpiece of the English Reformation

When Luther’s ideas began to circulate, King Henry VIII’s ministers, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Sir Thomas More urged him to defend the pope, and he declared his Catholic convictions

However, the king was unhappy in his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella and aunt to Charles V

Catherine had been betrothed to Henry after his elder brother Arthur had died

Her miscarriages and stillbirths convinced Henry that his union was a sinful one

They had one surviving daughter, Mary

However, Henry was enamored by Anne Boleyn a young lady in waiting in aging Catherine’s court

Henry felt that she would be a more fruitful mate

To marry Anne, Henry needed an annulment of his marriage by the pope, who had originally approved of the marriage in the first place

This posed a problem, and this was complicated because Rome had been sacked by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the pope was his prisoner

When Thomas Wolsey failed to secure an annulment, Henry dismissed him and his new advisors, Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell who were Lutheran sympathizers, advised Henry to simply declare the king supreme in spiritual as well as temporal affairs

Then he wouldn’t need foreign permission

Beginning in 1529, the Parliament met for seven years to establish legislation that established the king’s authority over the clergy

In 1531 Henry was recognized as the head of the church in England

In 1533 Henry married Anne and in 1534 Parliament passed the Act of Succession that made Anne’s children the legitimate heirs to the throne

When advisors Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher refused to accept the Act of Succession, Henry had them executed

Beginning in 1536 the crown confiscated the property of the church

Catherine of Aragon

Mary

Catherine and Mary go into exile in France

Anne Boleyn

Elizabeth

Anne was executed and Elizabeth was taken to Holland into exile

Jane Seymour

Edward VI

Jane died shortly after giving birth

Anne of Cleves

The marriage was promoted by Thomas Cromwell as part of a plan to forge an alliance with Protestant princes

The marriage and the plan were failures and Cromwell was executed

Catherine Howard

Beheaded for adultery

Catherine Parr

A patron of humanists and reformers

Henry was her third husband and she survived him to marry a fourth time

Henry opposed changes in church doctrine and practice and only made mild concessions to Protestant tenets

Catholic tradition preserved

When Henry dies, Edward VI was 10

He was given a Protestant education and his government led by regents established Protestant principles such as clerical marriage and other Roman Catholic practices

In 1549, Thomas Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer was imposed on all English Churches and images and alters were removed from churches

When Edward died 1553, Mary succeeded to the throne and made it her mission to restore Catholicism to England

Despite a bloody persecution of Protestants, Mary was unable to achieve her goal

She was married to Philip of Spain who became king in 1556

And she died childless in 1558

Elizabeth inherited the throne and proceeded to restore Protestantism

John Calvin and the Genevan Reformation

Calvinism replaced Lutheranism as the dominant Protestant influence in Europe during the second half of the 16th century

Calvinists believed strongly in divine predestination and the Christians ought to reorder or reform society according to God’s plan

They zealously used the machinery of governments to compel people to live according to the codes of conduct they believed were set in the Scriptures

John Calvin was the son of the secretary to the bishop of Noyon in France

He thus received an education and eventually studied at the University of Paris and went to law school in Orleans

His association with Catholic humanists helped him become interested in religious reform

In 1534 he converted to Protestantism

The Swiss city-state of Geneva, along with several other Swiss city-states established their political independence from their feudal overlords in the House of Savoy in 1527

They drove out the local prince-bishop associated with the Savoy and the city councils took over the legal and political powers of the bishop

In 1535 Genevans discontinued the traditional mass and other Catholic practices and in 1536 Geneva officially joined the Protestant Reformation

Calvin arrived in Geneva that year as he had been forced to flee France because of his Protestantism

In Geneva, Calvin was asked to draw up articles for governance of the new church and religious teachings for the people

Calvin met opposition because of the strong measures he proposed regarding moral conduct

He was accused of attempting to impose a new orthodoxy and was driven from the city in 1538 and he went into exile in Strasbourg

In 1540, sympathetic Genevan leaders decided that Calvin would be a valuable ally and invited him to return to the city

Within months of his return the city adopted his ecclesiastical ordinances and won pledges from city leaders to maintain discipline there

Calvin designed a new church administered by four kinds of officials

5 Presiding pastors

Teachers of religious instruction

12 elders (presbyter) to oversee or regulate the lives of everybody

Deacons who managed the church’s charitable disbursements

Calvin believed that strong church government was needed to maintain high moral standards for the community

A committee of elders and pastors had the responsibility to mete out punishments for moral and religious transgressions

For example, the criticism of Calvin was among the sins that led to punishment

After 1555 the city was solidly behind Calvin and began to attract disciples from all over Europe

At one point over 1/3 of the city’s population consisted of religious refugees loyal to Calvin

When they returned home, they were strong champions of Calvinistic religious reforms

The Catholic Counter-Reformation

Even before Luther spoke out, the church had already proposed reforms during the Fifth Lateran Council (1513-1517)

However, the pope wary of the struggle between the papacy and the Councils of Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1431-1449) which usurped the authority of the pope

Thus, the initiatives of reform were squelched by the pope

The Modern Devotion inspired many Catholics who pushed for reform

It prompted the formation of a new order in Rome called the Oratory of Divine Love

This order encouraged inner piety, Christian living, and reform of the church

Many other reform minded orders appeared during the 16th century

The most influential of the new orders was the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) organized by Ignatius of Loyola in Spain

Ignatius was a soldier fighting against the French in northeastern Spain when he was severely injured and experienced a dramatic conversion to religion that inspired him to do whatever necessary to become a soldier for Christ

He argued that a person could create a new self through study and discipline, and he wrote a manual on how to achieve spiritual self-mastery

Unlike the Protestants who opposed the authority of the traditional church, Ignatius urged Catholics to submit to the church without question

Discipline and self-control as well as willingness to submit all personal goals to the church were cultivated by the Jesuits

These characteristics equipped the Jesuits to counter the Reformation and Jesuit recruits were sent to Protestant areas of Europe to recover those districts for Catholicism

They recovered areas in Austria, Bavaria, and the Rhineland, and they staffed missions in India, Japan, and North and South America

The Council of Trent (1545-1563)

Pope Paul II, in response to Charles V, called a council in 1545 to address the crisis created by the Reformation

The commission to prepare for the council was chaired by a member of the Oratory of Divine Love, Caspar Contarini who was such an advocate of reform that he was called semi-Lutheran

The council in northern Italy at Trent focused on the restoration of internal church discipline

It curtailed the selling of church offices and religious goods

It ordered absentee bishops to return to their homes and make frequent tours of inspection of their bishoprics

Encouraged parish priests to be better educated, better dressed, celibate, and active among their communities

Called for the construction of a seminary in every diocese

Trent made no doctrinal concessions to Protestantism, and it affirmed most of the things Protestants rejected

Traditional scholastic education

The role of good works in salvation

The authority of tradition

The seven sacraments

Transubstantiation

Withholding the cup

Clerical celibacy

Purgatory

Indulgences

The veneration of saints, relics, and images

Trent was meant to strengthen the church in opposition to Protestantism

However, this contributed to the increasing polarization of Europe and the potential for war