

The Protestant Reformation

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By Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden, Theodore H. Von Laue
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The reformation of the church in the sixteenth century was rooted in demands for spiritual renewal and institutional change. These pressures began as early as the late fourteenth century and came from many sources...

John Wycliffe and John Huss

The papacy and orthodox Catholic theology were challenged by English theologian John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384) and Czech theologian John Huss (c. 1369-1415). Both attacked the bishops' involvement in temporal politics and urged a return to the simple practices of the early apostolic church; and both, claiming that the Bible alone – not the church hierarchy – was the highest authority for Christians, emphasised study of the Holy Scriptures by the laity and sermons in the common language of the people.

Wycliffe, though not Huss, also undermined the clergy's authority by denying the priest's power to change the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood during the mass. Despite severe persecution by church and state, followers of Wycliffe's and Huss's beliefs continued to exist and participated in the sixteenth-century Protestant movement.

The Conciliar Movement

Institutional reform from within was attempted through the Conciliar movement, which endeavoured to restrict the pope's power through regular meetings of general councils of bishops.

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) declared that a general council, not the papacy, was the supreme authority within the church and called for regular assemblies of bishops to consider the church's problems and initiate necessary reforms.

By the mid-fifteenth century, the Conciliar movement had collapsed, and the papacy, unreformed, freely exercised its supremacy. Fearful of losing its autonomy and power, the papacy resisted calling for a new council from 1437 until 1512, when the Fifth Lateran Council met in Rome under close papal supervision. The council issued decrees aimed at improving education of the clergy, eliminating many abuses in church administration, and summoning a church council every five years. But the council's decrees were not implemented after the last session ended in 1517, the same year Martin Luther first challenged the papacy, thus starting the Protestant reform movement.

The Reform Spirit

The principle source of the reform spirit was a widespread popular yearning for a more intense spirituality. It took many forms:

- The rise of new pious practices;
- Greater interest in mystical experiences and in the study of the Bible;
- The development of communal ways for lay people to live and work following the apostles' example;
- And a heightened search for ways within secular society to imitate more perfectly the life of Christ – called the New Devotion movement.

Secular Influences

Several secular factors contributed to this enhanced level of spiritual feeling. The many wars, famines, and plagues of the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries had traumatized Europe. The increasing educational level of the urban middle class and skilled laborers and the invention of the printing press allowed the rapid and relatively inexpensive spread of new ideas.

The Humanist Movement [1]

Finally, there was the influence of the humanist movement, particularly in northern Europe and Spain. Many humanists dedicated themselves to promoting higher levels of religious education. They stimulated public interest in biblical study by publishing new editions of the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the church fathers, along with new devotional literature.

Nearly all the religious reformers of the sixteenth century were deeply influenced by the ideas and methods of the Christian humanist movement.

Social and Economic Conditions

In Germany, a spirit of discontent with social and economic conditions coincided with the demand for reform of the church and religious life. For several decades before Luther's revolt against the papacy, the economic conditions of the knights, the peasants, and the lower-class urban workers had deteriorated.

The knights' grievances included loss of their political power to the centralizing governments of the German princes and increasing restrictions on their customary feudal privileges. Peasants protested that lords had steadily withdrawn certain of their customary rights and had added burdens, increasing the lords' income and control over their estates. The knights and peasants were squeezed into an ever-worsening social and economic niche.

In the cities, the lower-class artisans and laborers were similarly oppressed. Those in the urban upper classes, who controlled town governments, enhanced their own economic privileges at the expense of lower-class citizens.

The church, which was a major landowner and active in commercial enterprises in the towns, played an important role in these conflicts.

All these grievances formed the explosive background to Martin Luther's challenge to the authority of the church and the imperial government.

The Ruling Political Forces

The success of the reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, depended on support from the ruling political forces in the various kingdoms, principalities, and city-states of Europe. Usually, the rulers' religious preference determined whether the church remained Catholic or became Lutheran, Calvinist, or some combination of all three, as in England.

The rulers of large parts of Germany, especially the imperial city-states, and of the Scandinavian kingdoms adopted the Lutheran reform.

The Austrian and Spanish Hapsburg emperors and the French kings remained Catholic, although Calvinism had many adherents in France.

In eastern Europe, Protestantism was successful at first but, under the influence of the Catholic reform movement, Catholicism later recovered its dominance.

In Switzerland, allegiance was divided among Catholics and the followers of John Calvin, reformer of the church in Geneva, and of Huldreich Zwingli, reformer of the church in Zurich.

Calvinism took root in Scotland, and its influence also grew in England where it inspired the Puritan movement.

A Turning Point in European History

These divisions in the Christian church marked a turning point in European history and culture, ending forever the coherent world-view of medieval Christendom.

The Reformation split the peoples of Europe into two broad political, intellectual, and spiritual camps: Protestant and Catholics.

With the moral, political, and ideological power of the church significantly diminished, post-reformation society was open to increasing secularization on all fronts.

The stage was set for a new age in the development of Western civilisation.

Endnote:

[1] Bayith Note: Not to be confused with the *secular/atheistic* humanists of today.