13 – Reformation & Religious Wars: 1500s-1648

Inspired by the writings of Christian humanists, troubled by the abuses that existed within the Roman Catholic Church, and increasingly concerned with church teachings concerning salvation, Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, igniting a movement that split the Catholic Church and resulted in a century and a half of religious warfare. This movement, the Protestant Reformation, changed the face of Christianity and led to a series of political, economic, and social reforms that affected every sphere of life in Europe. From the breakdown of political authority in the Holy Roman Empire to the extension of education to more men and women in some areas in Europe and, finally, to the development of divergent styles of art, the Reformation sparked changes that significantly altered the religious, political, economic, and social organization of Europe.

KEY TERMS

Act of Supremacy	Reformation	indulgences	*Ninety-Five Theses*	Puritans
Anabaptists	Diet of Worms	Huguenots	Peace of Augsburg	reformation
Anglican Church	Edict of Nantes	justification	*politiques*	Schmalkaldic League
Catholic Counter-	Elizabethan Settlement	Lutheranism	predestination	simony

KEY CONCEPTS

- The Reformation contributed to the outbreak of many civil wars that were sparked not only by religious differences but also by political and economic rivalries in regions such as the Holy Roman Empire.
- Although the Reformation was primarily a religious movement, it was a catalyst for social and economic changes that encouraged education so that men and women could read the Bible, and it secured limited rights for women within the family.
- Actions taken by Martin Luther splintered the Catholic Church and sparked the Reformation. Although Luther's message and actions inspired reformers, such as John Calvin, to split from the Catholic Church, most of these other religious revolutionaries did not entirely agree with Luther's theological ideas.
- The Catholic Reformation included the formation of reform orders, such as the Jesuits and the moral improvement of clerical practices, but it reaffirmed Catholic theological doctrine.

For a full discussion of the Reformation, see *Western Civilization*, 8th and 9th editions, Chapter 13.

Europe on the Eve of the Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation officially began on October 31, 1517, the date that Martin Luther posted the *Ninety-Five Theses* at the Castle Church in Wittenberg, but it had taken root long before, when political, economic, intellectual, and religious factors led to the questioning of papal authority and Church practices.

Christian Humanism

The growth of Christian humanism, which quickly spread from Italy to Northern Europe through both trade and the new writings made available by the printing press, laid the groundwork for the Reformation. Like the Italian humanists, northern humanists focused on the classical works of Greece and Rome and on cultural and educational reform, but they also studied early Christian writings and the Bible. These "Christian humanists," yearning for the simple piety of the early Church, criticized some of the medieval traditions of the Catholic Church and called for its internal reform.

AP Tip

It is important to remember that the Christian humanists were critical of the corruption and abuses of the Catholic Church, but they did *not* advocate a split from it. Instead, they urged reform within the Church and looked for ways to combine classical and Christian values. Wyclif and Hus sometimes show up on AP exams. They predated the reformers, but their ideas about justification by faith alone resemble Luther's.

Often called the father of Christian humanism, Erasmus translated the New Testament from the early Greek manuscripts and advocated an educated approach to Christianity. Erasmus stressed a return to the simplicity of early Christianity and criticized many of the external trappings of the Catholic Church, such as the veneration of saints. He especially disapproved of the abuses by many churchmen of his time and satirized them in a book, *In Praise of Folly.* Another prominent Christian humanist, Sir Thomas More, was a government official, English scholar, and author of the book *Utopia,* in which he outlined an ideal society much like a modern socialist model. More is remembered for both his devotion to the Roman Catholic religion and his execution for refusing to accept King Henry VIII's break with the Church.

Corruption Within the Church

Corruption within the Catholic Church also fueled the Protestant Reformation. The status and credibility of the Roman Catholic Church had been damaged by the Great Schism and by common clerical abuses, such as the fathering of illegitimate children, as well as by unethical business and financial dealings. Trying to increase its revenues, the Church sold leadership positions to wealthy nobles and businessmen. Known as simony, the practice sometimes led to pluralism, the holding of several Church positions by a wealthy Church leader, and often created absenteeism because it was impossible to work in more than one place at once. But the central issue that incited Martin Luther's criticism of the Roman Catholic Church was the selling of indulgences.

AP Tip

Indulgences were partial remissions of temporal punishment for sin. One could purchase an indulgence for oneself or for one's relatives, alive or dead. It is important to remember that although indulgences exist within the Catholic Church today, their sale is no longer allowed.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

Martin Luther, a Catholic monk, agonized over the question of salvation. He concluded that one could be saved not by good works or by indulgences, but only by faith in God, a belief that became central to his theology.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses,* an attack on the sale of indulgences. Copies were quickly printed up and distributed throughout the German states. Although initially the pope ignored them, Luther's ideas soon gained a popular audience. In 1519, the Church challenged Luther to a series of debates with Johann Eck, a Catholic churchman, in an effort to discredit him. Instead, the debates gave Luther a forum for his ideas.

Luther's theology diverged from the Roman Catholic Church's in several areas. Luther counted not seven sacraments, but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper, because they were the only ones described in the Bible. He rejected the idea of transubstantiation, the transformation of bread and wine into the physical body and blood of Christ during communion. Instead, he believed in consubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are not transformed but are filled with the spirit of Christ. Luther also rejected the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church. He saw Christians as belonging to a "priesthood of all believers" who could interpret the Bible for themselves. And because scripture was the only source of religious truth, he said that Catholic traditions should not be the basis of religious belief. Luther also disagreed with the Church's demand for clerical celibacy and its insistence on Latin rather than the vernacular for services.

Luther then began to question the authority of the pope, which provoked the Church to condemn him. Moving toward a more permanent split with the Church, Luther wrote several more pamphlets laying out his beliefs, including "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," "The Babylonian Captivity," and "The Freedom of the Christian Man."

AP Tip

Martin Luther was not the first to criticize the pope and Church practices, and he did not initially intend to start a new church. Since he was the first to actually split from the Roman Catholic Church and start a new church, he is often referred to as the Father of the Reformation.

Luther was excommunicated and called before the Diet of Worms, a council convened by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1521. When Luther refused to recant, he was declared an outlaw and exiled. Frederick of Saxony intervened and kept Luther in hiding at Wartburg Castle, where he stayed for a year and wrote hymns and a translation of the New Testament. Pamphlets, woodcuts, and sermons by his followers also spread his ideas. Although many humanists had supported Luther's right to publish his ideas, many, such as Erasmus, believed that he had gone too far by breaking away from the Church, and criticized him for being too radical.

Luther had the support of many members of the nobility, who saw a chance to gain political independence from the Holy Roman Emperor. In addition, by supporting the German Reformed Church, or Lutheran Church, these princes freed themselves from papal dues owed to the Catholic Church. Eventually, they reaped more economic benefit when they forcibly acquired Church lands, convents, and monasteries. Needing the support and protection of the nobility, Luther supported the Knights' War, but he did not support the social discontent that emerged during the peasants' revolts, which he stingingly condemned in a pamphlet, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants."

Charles V was unhappy with the rebellion by Luther and the princes, but he was busy with military campaigns against the encroaching Ottoman Empire and the French until 1545. By then, the Lutheran princes posed a threat to the emperor's power. Both Charles and the Protestant Schmalkaldic League attracted international help, but after nearly a decade of war, they were stalemated. The ensuing Peace of Augsburg of 1555 established the principle *cuius regio, eius religio,* meaning "whose region, his religion." The princes could choose the religion – Catholicism or Lutheranism, but not Calvinism of their respective states. A year later, Charles abdicated and became a monk, splitting his empire between his son Philip II, who gained the

Spanish Empire, and his brother Ferdinand I, who gained the Holy Roman Empire.

AP Tip

The Peace of Augsburg legalized Lutheranism but left the question of Calvinism unsettled. Keep in mind that although the princes could choose the religions of their individual states, this did not constitute freedom of religion for the general population, because residents were expected to follow the religion chosen by the prince.

The Protestant Reformation Outside Germany

By the mid-1500s, the Scandinavian countries, following the leads of their monarchs, had become strong Lutheran nations.

Switzerland's 13 cantons were split. Ulrich Zwingli, a humanist and Protestant reformer, preached a more radical Protestantism. Under Zwingli's leadership, the Zurich city council decreed Protestant reforms and created a state-run church. Artwork and music were banned from churches, and recognition of papal authority and the veneration of saints were rejected. An alliance with the Lutherans floundered on the issue of consubstantiation; Zwingli believed that the bread and wine were only symbols and did not contain the real spirit of Christ. By late 1531, civil war broke out between the Protestant and Catholic Swiss cantons, a war in which Zwingli died.

The even more radical Anabaptists, who often faced persecution by both Protestants and Catholics, usually lived apart, in their own communities. All members of the community were considered equals. Believing that membership in the Christian community should be an adult choice, they baptized only adults, and they read the Bible literally. Anabaptists adhered to a strict separation of church and state, and refused to hold public office, pay taxes that could be used for military purposes, or serve in the army. Most Anabaptist communities were pacifist. A shocking exception was the Anabaptist takeover of Munster in the 1534, followed by its fall in a siege by an army of Catholics and Lutherans.

Menno Simons, an important leader of the Dutch Anabaptists, reinvented and spread the religion. His followers, called Mennonites, carried it throughout Europe and eventually to North America.

Calvinism

While Lutheranism dominated the first half of the sixteenth century, Calvinism dominated the latter half. Born and educated in France, John Calvin, a humanist scholar and lawyer, read smuggled works of Martin Luther and became convinced that the Catholic Church needed reformation. By the 1530s, French Protestants, known as Huguenots, faced persecution by the Crown, and Calvin fled to Geneva, a city that became the center of his brand of Protestantism. It was there that Calvin wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* a summary of his beliefs, in 1536.

Calvin's theology resembled Luther's but differed in several respects. First, Calvin believed in predestination – that God determines before birth who will be saved and who will be damned. According to Calvin, a person could never know whether he or she was among the elect or the damned. Many of his followers in Geneva believed that they were among the chosen and so should legislate morality. They removed artwork from churches, banned dancing and singing, prohibited drinking and gambling, and punished what they considered heretical religious beliefs. Calvin's followers also promoted hard work and dignified labor – this is the origin of the "Puritan work ethic." Second, although Luther relied on the German princes to establish state-run churches and promote his beliefs, he believed in a degree of separation between church and state. Calvin, however, believed in theocracy; to that end, the Geneva city council established religious laws to govern the city.

Calvinism became the theological basis of the Puritan movements in Scotland, England, the Netherlands, and France and had an enormous impact worldwide, partially motivating the settlement of some of the North American colonies. Under the leadership of John Knox in Scotland, Calvinism emerged as the theological basis of the Presbyterian Church, which became the national church of Scotland, despite the fact that the monarchy under James V and Mary Queen of Scots was Roman Catholic.

The English Reformation

Unlike Martin Luther, who split from the Roman Catholic Church because of theological differences, King Henry VIII initiated the English Reformation because he wanted to divorce his wife. Henry and Catherine of Aragon had one child, Mary. In 1527, wanting a male heir and in the midst of an affair with Catherine's lady in waiting, Henry sent Cardinal Wolsey to request an annulment from the pope. Denied his request, Henry demanded an annulment from the English ecclesiastical court. Parliament took legal action to cut off papal authority, and in 1533, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, granted the king his annulment. He married a pregnant Anne Boleyn, who then gave birth to Elizabeth. In 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, which made Henry the head of the English Church. Coupled with the Treason Act, which made it a capital crime to deny that the king was the head of the Church, this act completed the break with the Catholic Church. Henry had a total of six wives and fathered only one more heir, Edward, the son of Jane Seymour.

AP Tip

Under Henry VIII, the theology of the Church of England changed very little, other than rejecting papal authority and closing monasteries. The Book of Common Prayer and the other theological changes that shaped the Church of England were introduced largely during the reign of his son, King Edward VI. This is an important point to remember when comparing and contrasting Reformation beliefs.

After Henry's death, in 1547, his son, Edward VI, became king. Under the guidance of Archbishop Cranmer and other Protestant leaders, Parliament enacted new laws that established a more Protestant theology and provided for clerical marriage and the elimination of artwork from Anglican churches. Following sickly Edward's death in 1553, his oldest sister, Mary Tudor, ascended to the throne and tried to re-Catholicize England. Nicknamed "Bloody Mary," she married Philip II of Spain, convinced Parliament to enact Catholic legislation, and instituted an English Inquisition, burning Protestant heretics at the stake. In 1558, after Mary's death, Elizabeth became queen, taking over a nation in religious chaos. During her rule, England experienced the Elizabethan Renaissance, became involved in overseas exploration, and grew into a world power. Elizabeth I worked with Parliament to repeal the pro-Catholic legislation and to pass a new Act of Supremacy making her the head of both the government and the Church of England. This act, combined with the Act of Uniformity and the Thirty-nine Articles, comprised the Elizabethan Settlement, which revised the theology of the Church of England so that it was not as radical as the theology under Edward VI. For example, artwork was reinstated in the churches and some prayers that were more acceptable to former Catholics were reintroduced. Elizabeth was a *politique,* a political ruler who subordinated religious differences in favor of political unity. The settlement worked well except for a minority of radical Catholics and Puritans, who felt that the compromise betrayed true religion. Elizabeth cracked down on the radicals and, for the most part, religion was not a divisive issue during her reign.

Largely based on the power of the English navy, Elizabeth's foreign policy promoted the wealth and power of England. Elizabeth supported sea-dogs, such as Sir Francis Drake, and provided aid to Protestants who faced persecution in France and the Spanish Netherlands. As tensions between England and Spain mounted and personal animosity between Philip II and Elizabeth intensified, Elizabeth agreed to the execution of Mary Stuart, known as Mary Queen of Scots, in 1587. This action became the final catalyst for the launching of the Spanish Armada; its defeat in 1588 started the decline of Spanish power and secured the power of Protestant England.

AP Tip

Be sure that you do not confuse Mary Tudor with Mary Stuart. Mary Tudor was Queen Mary I of England. Mary Stuart was Mary Queen of Scots, a cousin of Elizabeth and Mary Tudor. Mary I was married to Philip II of Spain and ruled England from 1553 to 1558. Mary Stuart was finally executed after evidence revealed that she was involved in a plot with the Spanish to assassinate Queen Elizabeth and take over the English throne. Both Mary I and Mary Queen of Scots were Catholic.

Reformation Politics

Despite persecution, 40 to 50 percent of the nobility – as well as a number of subjects from other social classes – became Huguenots in an attempt to assert their power in France. A series of young, weak Valois kings and queen mother Catherine de' Medici saw France torn apart by rivalries among the three main families: the ultra-Catholic Guises, who were backed by Spain, and the Bourbons and Chatillons, both of whom were Huguenots. After the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, the War of the Three Henrys erupted, ending with the death of King Henry III of Navarre and the institution of the Bourbon monarchy. Henry of Navarre, who became King Henry IV of France, another *politique,* converted to Catholicism but issued the Edict of Nantes in 1598, giving Huguenots limited freedoms. In Spain, the radical Catholic leadership of King Philip II led to an international crusade to promote Catholicism and eliminate Protestantism. Within his empire, he also sought to consolidate his own power and that of the Catholic Church by use of the inquisition. In the Netherlands, which was a mix of Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists, Philip raised taxes to aid the ailing Spanish economy; the Dutch revolted. To punish them, Philip established the Council of Blood under the leadership of the Duke of Alba. The Catholic and Protestant Dutch united temporarily to oppose Philip, but after the sacking of Antwerp, the seven Dutch provinces in the north split from the Catholic provinces in the south. This created the modern division between the Netherlands and Belgium.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation

In response to the spread of Protestantism and growing demands for a purification of Church practices, the Catholic Church took action to defend itself. The Counter-Reformation consisted of several important actions that together led to the reinvigoration of the Catholic Church. First, in 1535, the new pope, Paul III, called for an investigation of the problems of the Church; in response to the report, in 1545 he called the Council of Trent. Although Pope Paul III died before the Council concluded its work, he had put the Catholic Church on the road to

recovery. Second, Pope Paul III officially recognized the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. This new religious order, founded by Ignatius of Loyola, promoted obedience to the Catholic Church and the Pope, advocated humanistic education in the vernacular, and supported missionary work, thus becoming an important tool in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Finally, the Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563, reaffirmed all of the theological beliefs of the Catholic Church and refused to make any compromises with the Protestants. The Council did, however, institute some practical reforms, such as prohibiting the sale of indulgences and improving the moral character of the clergy.

The Social Impact of the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation created social changes, too. The family was highly valued by Protestants – who rejected clerical celibacy – and women were expected to bear children and instill in them Christian values. With the closing of nunneries, women had few alternatives to family life. Although limited basic education for women was encouraged so that they could read the Bible, higher education was not, and Protestant churches did not welcome women into church leadership. Protestant reformers did encourage education for a wider audience and, in some parts of the Holy Roman Empire, established publicly funded schools focusing on humanist ideas and Christian teachings.

AP Tip

Protestant reformers such as Luther believed that education was necessary to allow followers – including women – to read the Bible. But these reformers continued to advocate the traditional role of wife and mother for women – reading the Bible was meant to make women better mothers. Be sure that you do not confuse religious reform with changes in traditional gender roles. Most reformers were actually quite traditional when it came to social issues.

Crises of the Early Seventeenth Century

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the economies of Spain and the Mediterranean states faced recessions; imports of precious metals from the Americas had declined, and the center of trade had shifted away from the Italian states. In addition, that was a period of war, famine, and disease. As economic and social tensions festered, people found extreme explanations for these problems, including witches.

Witchcraft Hysteria

Although not new to Europe, witchcraft trials and executions skyrocketed, causing Europeans to live in fear. Among the reasons for this outbreak of witchcraft hysteria were religious concerns, often exacerbated in areas still torn by the Reformation; a changing economic system in which communal values were disintegrating; and growing numbers of poor. As community charity became less available, many people, especially older women, began to sell herbs to survive and were subsequently accused of witchcraft. Because women were viewed as the weaker sex and more prone to temptation, the vast majority of witchcraft victims were women. Only when the Thirty Years' War was ending and a spirit of religious toleration was renewed did the witchcraft craze diminish.

War and Rebellion

The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) is often considered the last of the European religious wars. It erupted from both religious and political rivalries between the Protestant and Catholic Leagues over issues that had festered since 1555, when the Peace of Augsburg failed to recognize the legality of Calvinism. The war, mainly fought in the Holy Roman Empire, consisted of four major phases. It began with the Defenestration of Prague, when Bohemian princes rejected Archduke Ferdinand as their king and threw several of his representatives out of a castle window into a moat of manure. The nobles chose Frederick IV as their king, and Ferdinand (now the Holy Roman Emperor) declared war, using the imperial forces and those of Habsburg Spain to bring down the Protestant rebels, who got support from the Dutch. In phase two, the Danish phase, Lutheran King Christian IV of Denmark made an anti-Habsburg alliance with England and the Dutch and marched in to help the Protestants in Germany, but lost to the Empire. Phase three, the Swedish phase, began when Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus marched into northern Germany to help the German Protestants and extend Swedish power. His death, however, crippled the Swedish effort. In 1635, wanting to halt the spread of Habsburg power, Catholic France arrived to help the Protestant Swedes and Germans, starting the Swedish-French phase. Largely a battle for supremacy between France and Spain, the war continued on German soil, devastating German lands. In 1659, the fighting between the two powers finally stopped, with France emerging as the dominant power in Europe.

Intended to end the war in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia reestablished the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio,* which gave to whoever controlled the land the right to choose the religion of that realm. This time, Calvinism could be chosen. France gained small amounts of Habsburg lands, and its growing power and prestige opened the door for the rise of Bourbon dominance under Louis XIV. Finally, the secularization of politics was confirmed when the pope was not even invited to the negotiation process. This devastating war weakened and splintered the German states but led to the rise of Prussia by the end of the century.

Between 1590 and 1640, much of continental Europe

was also rocked by revolts. Peasants and artisans revolted mostly for economic reasons: Their taxes were high, there was a series of bad harvests in the late 1500s and early 1600s, and prices rose while wages fell. These revolts started in the Atlantic states, and spread to central Europe, the Italian states, and even parts of Russia. Noblemen in France, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and England also revolted, as they saw their traditional rights being diminished by the growing power of monarchs.

AP Tip

The Treaty of Westphalia granted a large degree of independence to the Protestant princes and served notice that the Habsburgs could no longer tightly control their realm. German princes even substantially controlled their own foreign policy, further weakening the Habsburgs. The treaty was significant because it decentralized the German states, a situation that partially explains why German unification did not occur until 1871.