

The Reformation was the religious revolution that took place in the Western church in the 16th century; its greatest leaders were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Having far-reaching political, economic and social effects, the Reformation became the basis for the founding of Protestantism, one of the three major branches of Christianity.

The world of the late medieval Catholic Church from which the 16th-century reformers emerged was a complex one. Over the centuries, the church, particularly in the office of the papacy, had become deeply involved in the political life of Western Europe. The resulting intrigues and political manipulations, combined with the church's increasing power and wealth, contributed to the bankrupting of the church as a spiritual force. Abuses such as the sale of indulgences (or spiritual privileges) and relics and the corruption of the clergy exploited the pious and further undermined the church's spiritual authority.

The Reformation of the 16th century was not unprecedented. Reformers within the medieval church such as St. Francis, Peter Waldo, Jan Hus, and John Wycliffe addressed abuses in the life of the church in the centuries before 1517. In the 16th century, Erasmus of Rotterdam, a great Humanist scholar, was the chief proponent of liberal Catholic reform that attacked moral abuses and popular superstitions in the church and urged the imitation of Christ, the supreme teacher. These movements reveal an ongoing concern for reform within the church in the years before Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church, Wittenberg, on Oct. 31, 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day--the traditional date for the beginning of the Reformation. Martin Luther claimed that what distinguished him from previous reformers was that while they attacked corruption in the life of the church; he went to the theological root of the problem--the perversion of the church's doctrine of redemption and grace. Luther, a pastor and professor at the University of Wittenberg, deplored the entanglement of God's free gift of grace in a complex system of indulgences and good works. In his Ninety-five Theses, he attacked the indulgence system, insisting that the pope had no authority over purgatory and that the doctrine of the merits of the saints had no foundation in the gospel. Here lay the key to Luther's concerns for the ethical and theological reform of the church: Scripture alone is authoritative (*sola scriptura*) and justification is by faith (*sola fide*), not by works. While he did not intend to break with the Catholic Church, a confrontation with the papacy was not long in coming. In 1521, Luther was tried before the Imperial Diet of Worms and was eventually excommunicated; what began, as an internal reform movement had become a fracture in western Christendom.

The Reformation movement within Germany diversified almost immediately, and other reform movements arose independently of Luther. Huldrych Zwingli built a Christian theocracy in Zürich in which church and state joined for the service of God. Zwingli agreed with Luther in the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith, but he espoused a much more radical understanding of the Eucharist. Luther had rejected the Catholic Church's doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the bread and wine in the Eucharist became the actual body and blood of Christ. According to Luther's doctrine of consubstantiation, the body of Christ was physically present in the elements because Christ is present everywhere, but Luther was not willing to go as far as Zwingli, who claimed that the Eucharist was simply a memorial of the death of Christ and a declaration of faith by the recipients.

From the group surrounding Zwingli emerged those more radical than himself. These Radical Reformers, part of the so-called left wing of the Reformation, insisted that the principle of scriptural authority be applied without compromise. Unwilling to accept what they considered violation of biblical teachings, they broke with Zwingli over the issue of infant baptism, thereby receiving the nickname "Anabaptists" on the grounds that they re-baptized adults who had been baptized as children. The Swiss Anabaptists sought to follow the example of Jesus found in the gospels. They refused to swear oaths or bear arms, taught the strict separation of church and state, and insisted on the visible church of adult believers--distinguished from the world by its disciplined, regenerated life.

Another important form of Protestantism (as those protesting against Rome were designated by the Diet of Speyer in 1529) is Calvinism, named for John Calvin, a French lawyer who fled France after his conversion to the Protestant cause. In Basel, Calvin brought out the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536, the first extensive, systematic, theological treatise of the new reform movement. Calvin agreed with Luther's teaching on justification by faith. However, he found a more positive place for law within the Christian community than Luther did in his concern to distinguish sharply between law and gospel. In Geneva, Calvin was able to experiment with his ideal of a disciplined community of the elect. Under Calvin's forceful leadership, church and state were united for the "glory of God."

The Reformation spread to other European countries over the course of the 16th century. By mid-century, Lutheranism dominated northern Europe. Eastern Europe offered a seedbed for even more radical varieties of Protestantism, because kings were weak, nobles strong, and cities few, and because religious pluralism had long existed. Spain and Italy were to be the great centers of the Counter-Reformation and Protestantism never gained a strong foothold there.

In England the Reformation's roots were primarily political rather than religious. Henry VIII, incensed by Pope Clement VII's refusal to grant him a divorce, repudiated the papal authority and in 1534 established the Anglican Church with the king as the supreme head. In spite of its political implications, Henry's reorganization of the church permitted the beginning of religious reform in England, which included the preparation of a liturgy in English, *The Book of Common Prayer*. In Scotland, John Knox, who spent time in Geneva and was greatly influenced by John Calvin, led the establishment of Presbyterianism, which made possible the eventual union of Scotland with England.

The age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation

The specter of many national churches supplanting a unitary Catholic Church became a grim reality during the age of the Reformation. What neither heresy nor schism had been able to do before--to divide Western Christendom permanently and irreversibly--was done by a movement that confessed a loyalty to the orthodox creeds of Christendom and professed an abhorrence for schism. By the time the Reformation was over, Roman Catholicism had become something different from what it had been in the early centuries or even in the later Middle Ages.

Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation.

Whatever its nonreligious causes may have been, the Protestant Reformation arose within Roman Catholicism; there both its positive accomplishments and its negative effects had their roots. The standing of the church within the political order and the class structure of Western Europe had been irrevocably altered in the course of the later middle Ages. Thus the most extravagant claims put forward for the political authority of the church and the papacy, as formulated by Pope Boniface VIII (reigned 1294-1303), had come just at the time when such authority was in fact rapidly declining. By the time Protestantism arose to challenge the spiritual authority of the papacy, therefore, there was no longer any way to invoke that political authority against the challenge. The medieval class structure, too, had undergone fundamental and drastic changes with the rise of the bourgeoisie throughout Western Europe; it is not a coincidence that in northern Europe and Britain the middle class was to become the principal bulwark of the Protestant opposition to Roman Catholicism. The traditional Roman Catholic prohibition of any lending of money at interest as "usury," the monastic glorification of poverty as an ascetic ideal, and the Roman Catholic system of holidays as times when no work was to be done were all seen by the rising merchant class as obstacles to financial development.

Accompanying these sociopolitical forces in the crisis of late medieval Roman Catholicism were spiritual and theological factors that also helped to bring on the Protestant Reformation. By the end of the 15th century there was a widely-held impression that the resources for church reform within Roman Catholicism had been tried and found wanting: the papacy refused to reform itself, the councils had not succeeded in bringing about lasting change, and the professional theologians were more interested in scholastic debates than in the nurture of genuine Christian faith and life. Such sentiments were often oversimplified and exaggerated, but their very currency made them a potent influence even when they were mistaken (and they were not always mistaken). The financial corruption and pagan immorality within Roman Catholicism, even at the highest levels, reminded critics of "the abomination of desolation" spoken of by the prophet Daniel, and nothing short of a thoroughgoing "reformation in head and members [in capite et membris]" seemed to be called for.

These demands were in themselves nothing new, but the Protestant Reformation took place when they coincided with, and found dramatic expression in, the highly personal struggle of one medieval Roman Catholic. Martin Luther asked an essentially medieval question: "How do I obtain a God who is merciful to me?" He also tried a medieval answer to that question by becoming a monk and by subjecting himself to fasting and discipline--but all to no avail. The answer that he eventually did find, the conviction that God was merciful not because of anything that the sinner could do but because of a freely given grace that was received by faith alone (the doctrine of justification by faith), was not utterly without precedent in the Roman Catholic theological tradition; but in the form in which Luther stated it there appeared to be a fundamental threat to Catholic teaching and sacramental life. And in his treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, issued in 1520, Luther denounced the entire system of medieval Christendom as an unwarranted human invention foisted on the church.

Although Luther in his opposition to the practice of selling indulgences was unsparing in his attacks upon the moral, financial, and administrative abuses within Roman Catholicism, using his mastery of the German language to denounce them, he insisted throughout his life

that the primary object of his critique was not the life but the doctrine of the church, not the corruption of the ecclesiastical structure but the distortion of the gospel. The late medieval mass was "a dragon's tail," not because it was liturgically unsound but because the medieval definition of the mass as a sacrifice offered by the church to God--not only, as Luther believed, as a means of grace granted by God to the church--jeopardized the uniqueness of the unrepeatably sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. The cult of the Virgin Mary and of the saints diminished the office of Christ as the sole mediator between God and the human race. Thus the pope was the Antichrist because he represented and enforced a substitute religion in which the true church, the bride of Christ, had been replaced by--and identified with--an external juridical institution that laid claim to the obedience due to God himself. When, after repeated warnings, Luther refused such obedience, he was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in 1521. Until his excommunication Luther had gone on regarding himself as a loyal Roman Catholic and had appealed "from a poorly informed Pope to a Pope who ought to be better informed." He had, moreover, retained an orthodox Roman Catholic perspective on most of the corpus of Christian doctrine, not only the Trinity and the two natures in the person of Christ but baptismal regeneration and the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Many of the other Protestant Reformers who arose during the 16th century were considerably less conservative in their doctrinal stance, distancing themselves from Luther's position no less than from the Roman Catholic one. Thus Luther's Swiss opponent, Ulrich Zwingli, lumped Luther's sacramental teaching with the medieval one, and Luther in turn exclaimed: "Better to hold with the papists than with you!" John Calvin was considerably more moderate than Zwingli, but both sacramentally and liturgically he broke with the Roman Catholic tradition. The Anglican Reformation strove to retain the historical episcopate and, particularly under Queen Elizabeth I, steered a middle course, liturgically and even doctrinally, between Roman Catholicism and continental Protestantism.

The polemical Roman Catholic accusation--which the mainline Reformers vigorously denied--that these various species of conservative Protestantism, with their orthodox dogmas and quasi-Catholic forms, were a pretext for the eventual rejection of most of traditional Christianity, seemed to be confirmed with the emergence of the radical Reformation. The Anabaptists, as their name indicated, were known for their practice of "rebaptizing" those who had received the sacrament of baptism as infants; this was, at its foundation, a redefinition of the nature of the church, which they saw not as the institution allied with the state and embracing good and wicked members but as the community of true believers who had accepted the cost of Christian discipleship by a free personal decision. Although the Anabaptists, in their doctrines of God and Christ, retained the historical orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed while rejecting the orthodox doctrines of church and sacraments, those Protestants who went on to repudiate orthodox Trinitarianism as part of their Reformation claimed to be carrying out, more consistently than either Luther and Calvin or the Anabaptists had done, the full implications of the rejection of Roman Catholicism, which they all had in common.

The challenge of the Protestant Reformation became also the occasion for a resurgent Roman Catholicism to clarify and to reaffirm Roman Catholic principles; that endeavor had, in one sense, never been absent from the life and teaching of the church, but it came out now with new force. As the varieties of Protestantism proliferated, the apologists for Roman Catholicism pointed to the Protestant principle of the right of the private interpretation of Scripture as the source of this confusion. Against the Protestant elevation of the Scripture to the position of sole authority, they emphasized that Scripture and church tradition were inseparable and always had been. Pressing that point further, they denounced justification by faith alone and other cherished Protestant teachings as novelties without grounding in authentic church tradition. And they warned that the doctrine of "faith alone, without works" as taught by Luther would sever the moral nerve and remove all incentive for holy living.

Yet these negative reactions to Protestantism were not by any means the only, perhaps not even the primary, form of participation by Roman Catholicism in the history of the Reformation. The emergence of the Protestant phenomenon did not exhaust the reformatory impulse within Roman Catholicism, nor can it be seen as the sole inspiration for Catholic reform. Rather, to a degree that has usually been overlooked by Protestant historians and that has often been ignored even by Roman Catholic historians, there was a distinct historical movement in the 16th century that can only be identified as the Roman Catholic Reformation.

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