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7. A Postscript to the Age of Reformation

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7. A Postscript to the Age of Reformation

Abstract

Estimates regarding the results of the Reformation differ as widely as do the names used to characterize it. As it has been called a revolt, a reaffirmation, a reaction, or a reformation, so its results have been assessed as a shattering of Christendom, a resurgence of the gospel, a return to religious scholasticism, or a real quickening in the faith of Western man. Therefore, any conclusions as to its influence which we might draw will of necessity be somewhat affected by the views of the writers. With this in mind, we shall examine several important ramifications of the Reformation. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Church, Catholicism, Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic Church, Catholic Revival

Disciplines

Catholic Studies | Christian Denominations and Sects | Christianity | Cultural History | History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | New Religious Movements | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section VII: The Protestant Movement](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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The shattering of Christendom was the most obvious result. Prior to the sixteenth century there had been only small heretical groups, and in a sense it cannot be said that they were outside the Church. After the sixteenth century there was not only the major division between Catholic and Protestant, but

also a proliferation within Protestantism. The medieval ideal of a united Christendom gave way before the narrower loyalties to national churches and national states.

The end of the concept of Christendom invited a new competitive situation in which each church had to define clearly its position in order to make its appeal as attractive as possible. Such competition may well have had much to do with a quickening of faith, however short-lived it turned out to be. Never since has there been such widespread interest in and discussion of the Christian life by prince as well as priest, by burgher as well as monk. Catholics did correct previously prevalent abuses. Protestants devised new and varying means of promoting piety. Anabaptists practiced what has been termed an "inner-worldly asceticism" apart from society. Lutherans laid stress on the personal piety of the individual within the world. Calvinists put into effect a rigorous individual and social puritanism in everyday life. But all Protestants repudiated a double standard, one for the religious and another for the laity. And all Protestants laid stress on a new individualism, on the immediate relation of every Christian soul to God.

The question of whether the proliferation which appeared with the Reformation was good or bad has set off a great debate which continues in heated fashion to the present. The Catholic claims that private interpretation of Scripture by each individual produces the anarchy of a thousand sects. He argues that emphasis on faith alone is destructive of charitable works. He insists that Protestantism let loose on Europe a chaos of individualism in philosophy and morals; and that, in order to recover from this chaos, Protestants turned to the states whose princes used religion to further their own military, political, and economic aims. In summary, the Catholic charges that Protestant pluralism has set up a disintegrative process in Christianity which can be traced through the eighteenth century Enlightenment to the materialistic worship of science, technology, and the totalitarian state.

The Protestant answers to these charges are grounded on the belief that God alone is the supreme authority. The Protestants rejected the idea that such authority was granted by God to any historical institution. They believed that this authority is communicated to men through the Scripture -- the Living Word -- which makes possible the personal encounter with God. Because they insisted that man is fallen and fallible, the Protestants held that the reception of God's communication is always warped and will vary with each individual.

In a brief span we shall consider the impact of the Protestant movement upon the state, the economic order, the family, the arts, and the schools. In the political arena, the new pluralism produced an agonizing century of religious wars. Catholic and Protestant intolerance fanned disputes into persecutions, and persecutions into open hostilities and bloodshed. People acted on the premise that it was necessary to fight and

kill for the state that championed their faith. The struggle began immediately after Luther's death in Germany with the Smalkald War (1547-1552), spread to France in the intermittent wars of religion (1562-1598), continued in the Low Countries in association with their struggle for independence (1568-1609), and reached its devastating climax in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Related to this struggle was the English Puritan Revolution (1642-1660). These religious wars proved that it was no longer possible -- or worth the price -- to reunite Western Christendom by force. With them ended all but a legendary fiction about a Holy Roman Church and a Holy Roman Empire uniting all Europe. What began to a considerable degree as a struggle over antagonistic religious convictions ended either in exhaustion or with the primacy of political considerations. In the process of these wars many became convinced that the state was in a better position to settle religious discord than was the church.

Thus the way was opened, in Catholic and Protestant areas alike, for political absolutism to replace the religious absolutism sought by Catholics and most Protestants of the era. It has been argued that Luther and Calvin indirectly furthered the cause of political authoritarianism. By emphasizing man's basic sinfulness as the factor which renders him powerless to govern himself, they prepared the way for the absolutistic state. On the other hand, some of the countries where Protestantism predominated, such as the Netherlands, England, and America, became the chief soil for the development of political democracy. Protestant theories of government could result in the theory of divine right of James I of England, the regicide of Oliver Cromwell, or the constitutionalism of John Locke. The evidence seems inadequate, therefore, to assert that the Reformation gave rise to any single political theory or promoted any one particular form of political development.

The influence of Protestantism on the economic structure presents an even more complex problem than its political impact. There is wide divergence of opinion as to the degree to which capitalism is to be associated with the Reformation. There are those who claim that the entire movement, and particularly Calvinism, was chiefly the invention of the middle classes to justify their new vocations and claims to power. There are those who declare that the Reformation was strictly a religious movement with no implications for the economic sphere. A medial interpretation holds that the Reformation was substantially religious in its origins, but that the ways in which it dealt with the problems of evil and salvation, encouraging the ethic of unremitting toil and disparaging pleasure, were influential in shaping consequent approaches to economic questions. Thus the theory of Max Weber holds that Calvinism was primarily the result of its own internally generated religious ideas, but nevertheless became the important factor in the development of the spirit of capitalism. Another medial interpretation argues that there were many different possibilities in the complex socio-religious Reformation movement, and that from this complexity

different groups with differing economic needs shaped beliefs and practices that were meaningful to them. Thus, the thesis of R. H. Tawney holds that both intense individualism and rigorous socialism could be deduced from Calvinism, and that which of these predominated in any particular area depended on differences of political environment and social class.

It is clear that Lutheranism and Anglicanism did not have the following among the rising middle class which Calvinism did. These faiths retained much more of medieval economic standards and became the established churches of an aristocratic gentry. Only gradually did they adapt themselves to commercial interests and only reluctantly did they incorporate doctrines that appealed to the lower classes, particularly those in the cities.

Protestantism changed the picture of marriage and family life for subsequent times. It eliminated the view that there was an elite piety in which celibacy was the rule. It introduced, particularly through the Anabaptists and Calvinists, the view that in marriage the mutual dedication of the couple in service of God, rearing of children, and maintenance of the true religion is foremost. The idea that marriage was primarily for propagation and the channeling of passion gave way in varying degrees to the ideal of comradeship. Further, the parsonage as an example and guide for proper family life left an important legacy in all lands where Protestantism was strong. But it would not be correct to attribute to the Reformation the later insistence that romantic attachment is a prerequisite for marriage.

The effect of Protestantism upon the arts has been variously interpreted. To be sure, there was much iconoclasm in the Reformation era. In many cases, painting, sculpture, and music were forced out of the churches or were made to take an unimportant place. The Puritan meeting house with its clear-glass windows, and devoid of organ or bell, is testimony of this feature. Yet some great artists and writers were directly inspired by Reformation faith. In the seventeenth century Lutheranism could bring forth a Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and Puritanism a John Milton (1608-1674). Lutheranism and Anglicanism were more friendly to artistic representations of the Christian faith than were the Calvinists and Anabaptists, though they did not develop the many themes of Catholicism. In its many types, Protestantism emphasized the subservience of art to Scripture, sometimes to the point of eliminating it. By way of contrast, it can be said that Catholicism emphasized the subservience of art to the church.

In education, Protestantism brought to the fore a concern for the instruction of the masses. They had to become literate to study the Bible. Furthermore, good schools were necessary for boys and girls, if only to maintain civil order and properly regulated households. Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin each had detailed plans for state education. This included an elementary curriculum in which reading, writing, counting, religion,

and sometimes sacred music, were included. It embraced a secondary curriculum with considerable emphasis upon the classical languages, which appealed to the humanists, but with the religious goals always in central focus. Higher education was a concern for both Luther and Calvin. Both sought high standards in the universities, but always with an evangelical core and with an evangelistic purpose predominating. The Genevan Academy was a good example. In most Protestant countries, as in those which remained Catholic, the churches took responsibility for education with a new seriousness, and they continued to be primarily responsible for this work until superseded by the state in the nineteenth century.

In the matter of religious toleration, the humanists rather than the reformers were responsible for the theoretical formulations of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, there was in the Protestant spirit an appeal to the liberty of the men whom Christ had set free. It is probable that whatever tolerance was observed before the eighteenth century was chiefly the result of a negative principle: the exhaustion from religious struggle and exasperation at its destructive effects. The real elaboration of the principle of toleration came in the Enlightenment era.

It would be a serious error to assume that the Reformation gave rise in Europe to the denominational pattern of contemporary America. Instead, there was almost without exception within a state one established church, whose expenses were paid from public funds. If the prince were willing, there might be some consideration for dissenters, such as permission to support their own churches or sects, but this would be in addition to the support they were required to give the established church.

We have already noted that what began in the creative stage of the Reformation as a sincere search for personal salvation soon was diverted into assertions of power, whether theological or political. The pioneers were followed by the polemicists; adventuring faith gave way to the struggle for advantage. This oscillation has reasserted itself periodically in the Christianity of subsequent centuries: in Pietism followed by the Enlightenment on the Continent, in Wesleyanism followed by latitudinarianism in England, and in the Great Awakening followed by rationalism in America. In this respect, the Protestant movement was a reformation that has continued.