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# 1. Prelude to Reform

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# 1. Prelude to Reform

## Abstract

The more immediate background for the Age of Reformation includes factors which precede Luther by a Century and more. While the reformers themselves felt that these factors had roots in first century Christian history and literature, more directly relevant to the movement were political, social, and economic changes which produced severe tensions in the late medieval world. Some of these contributed significantly to the Protestant upheaval. Still more important, however, were diverse streams of religious ferment, such as late medieval scholasticism, mysticism, humanism, heretical propaganda, and anti-clericalism, which flowed toward a junction in the Reformation. While it must be insisted that it took dynamic personalities to trigger this movement, we must remember that these great figures were influenced by the ideas of their environment. These earlier streams of ferment may properly be called the prelude to reform. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Age of Reformation, Christianity, Aquinas

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | History of Christianity | History of 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.

## Authors

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## VII. THE PROTESTANT MOVEMENT

### 1. Prelude to Reform

The more immediate background for the Age of Reformation includes factors which precede Luther by a century and more. While the reformers themselves felt that these factors had their roots in first century Christian history and literature, more directly relevant to the movement were political, social, and economic changes which produced severe tensions in the late medieval world. Some of these contributed significantly to the Protestant upheaval. Still more important, however, were diverse streams of religious ferment, such as late medieval scholasticism, mysticism, humanism, heretical propaganda, and anti-clericalism, which flowed toward a junction in the Reformation. While it must be insisted that it took dynamic personalities to trigger this movement, we must remember that these great figures were influenced by the ideas of their environment. These earlier streams of ferment may properly be called the prelude to reform.

In 1500 the Church was still the most cosmopolitan and cohesive force in Europe. Above the babel of competing princes and merchants there was unity of religious form and organization. Affecting the life of the proudest king and simplest peasant was the Church with its nerve center in Rome, still claiming both spiritual and temporal supremacy. Despite the Church's claim, however, there were severe tensions within her structure and these were largely responsible for the eventual rupture.

Later scholasticism had become increasingly suspicious of the theology and temporal claims of the Church. The harmonious wedding of faith and reason envisioned by Thomas Aquinas, together with the claim for the primacy of the Church propounded by Innocent III, were far from universally acknowledged among the schoolmen of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A violent protest against giving reason status next to faith was lodged by Franciscan scholars who were more than willing to use the scholastic method to depreciate their Dominican rival, Thomas. This protest was especially evidenced in the work of two Britons, Duns Scotus (c. 1265 - c. 1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1300 - c. 1349). Scotus has been called the "subtle doctor" among the scholastics because of the complexity of his reasoning, but this did not prevent his gaining a sizable

*mystic offered a way to God outside the church.*



following -- the Scotists. It was especially at the points where Scotus insisted that the will of God was sovereign and autonomous as opposed to being rational, and where he affirmed that "the individual is the real," that he undercut the central tenets of most earlier scholasticism. Ockham went further than Scotus at two important points. First, he elevated faith to the point of autonomy, completely severing it from reason. Second, as a convinced nominalist, he denounced the Church's claim of universality. Since reason for Ockham consisted only in the elaboration of facts given by perception and by introspection, no dogma such as knowledge of the Supreme Being could be rationally demonstrated. Thus, the divorce between faith and reason was established -- a divorce destined strongly to influence the reformers. While Ockham and his contemporary Marsiglio openly and deliberately attacked the supremacy of the papacy by insisting that in the created world the authority of the state is supreme, there is no evidence that they ever envisioned a divided Christendom. Yet their work was prophetic, for their principles were taken up by others like John Wyclif and were headed for the crucial junction of the Reformation.

Persistent protests were also heard from the mystics. At the height of the medieval period, Francis of Assisi had illustrated the approach to God and man in the purity of a loving heart and Bonaventura had stressed the contemplative journey of the mind to God. But the mystics of the fifteenth century were more critical of the Church, especially of its pomp and wealth. They stressed, instead, the union which they felt should exist between Christ and the believer, and the love that should flow from that relation toward one's fellowman. In the Rhine valley there developed an outstanding example of this mystic piety in the Brethren of the Common Life. This was a lay brotherhood dedicated to preaching in the vernacular, service to poor and orphans, and teaching the young. Erasmus was trained in their schools and Luther was impressed by their writings. From the Brethren, possibly from the pen of Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471), came The Imitation of Christ, a devotional classic which exerted profound influence on many in the Age of Reformation and since. It is to be noted that the "imitation" here implied not only contemplative union but also keen moral desire to emulate the virtues of Jesus. Nevertheless, these mystics did not accomplish any major reform. Their strongly asserted individualism and its resultant lack of organization limited their impact. Some more developed religious community was necessary to effect real changes.

Associated with the protests of the mystics were those of the northern humanists. They directed caustic criticism against clerical abuses and cultural boorishness alike. With their criticism of abuses went an emphasis upon the moral aspect of religion. Veneration of images, pilgrimages, and even the sacraments were of minor importance alongside the purity of the moral life which they termed "the philosophy of Christ." In general, the Christian humanists charged that abuses and false doctrines had crept into the Church precisely because she had

*mystic emphasise on person & God.*



lost touch with the original texts of Scripture. Study of these and the early Church fathers made by the thoughtful and educated would reveal the moral philosophy of Jesus, and this in turn would so influence the religious and secular leaders that abuses would disappear. Thus the Christian humanists were in the Renaissance tradition that believed in man's basic rationality and perfectibility. But few of these humanists were men of action or gave thought to methods of accomplishing the reforms they suggested. Their highly intellectual appeals and their willingness to make concessions rather than to stir conflict failed to capture the support of any large segment of Christendom or to gain the sincere backing of secular leaders. Actually these humanists in general sought no break with the Church. They were content with denouncing, not renouncing.

*Go back to the scriptures*

There were other voices demanding a reform that was even more thoroughgoing than the ones already considered. Perhaps the word "reform" is not sweeping enough to represent the goals of the late medieval heretics. They sought basic changes in the ceremony, polity, and theology of the Church. The views of the Waldensians, Albigensians, and Lollards have previously been indicated. Bitter persecutions did not eradicate them. Furthermore, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, heresy was becoming increasingly associated with political movements, as in England and Bohemia, and was posing a growing threat to the unity of Christendom. John Wyclif had exemplified this trend in England. The Bohemian teacher, John Hus (1369-1415), took up many of Wyclif's ideas and gave them determined and patriotic presentation. Hus had become dean of the faculty of arts in the University of Prague in 1401, and as rector of a prominent chapel in that city was recognized as Prague's outstanding preacher. He was excommunicated in 1410 for publicly expressing views such as the following:

Those priests who affirm that they are the creators of God, that they create the body of Christ whenever they wish, and that they forgive sins whenever and whosoever they wish, and send to hell whomsoever they desire, are guilty of...blasphemy.... They also blaspheme who say that the pope cannot err and that men should obey him in all things, for he can send whomever he wishes to heaven or hell. For such power belongs to God alone. It is likewise a blasphemy when they affirm that the pope is an earthly god who can do on earth as he pleases, ruling over all mankind as he wishes; likewise, those who say that he may establish a law contrary to God's law, or that he may rightfully order something against the holy apostles. \*

It is to be noted that Hus fixed attention on religious rather than on moral issues; it was blasphemy (profaning God's Word,)

\* Quoted in Matthew Spinka, ed., Advocates of Reform... (Vol. XIV, The Library of Christian Classics) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 199. Used with permission.



will, and name) rather than scandal that disturbed him most. There was certainly also a positive side to Professor Hus' message. In one of his chief works (Concerning the Church, c. 1412), he developed the ideas that all believers were priests before God, and that Christ is the sole head of the Church. Hus' century was not yet ready for so forceful an attack and generally applauded his death at the stake by order of the Council of Constance (1415). But his voice was not stilled; his followers were to keep Bohemia in a state of continued upheaval for a century.

Such were some of the Church's significant critics. Later scholastics found fault with her pretensions to universal supremacy and with her congeniality to the claims of reason. Mystics criticized her formalism. Humanists lampooned the immorality of her clergy and the mechanical nature of her sacramental system. Heretics attacked her as Satanic and demanded a complete reorganization of doctrine and practice.

The Church could not remain oblivious of the force of many of these criticisms. Much too obvious were the scandals of simony, clerical immorality, pluralism, and absenteeism, all of them capped by the Great Schism (1378-1417), which produced two and finally three rival popes. The schism had begun after Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) tried to end the Babylonian Captivity by returning to Rome. Upon his death rival popes were elected, with one remaining at Rome and the other returning to Avignon. About half the nations of Europe, including England, most of Germany, and the Netherlands, supported the Roman pope, while France and Spain stood by the Avignon pope. An abortive effort to conclude the schism at the Council of Pisa (1409) resulted in the choice of a third claimant for the chair of Peter.

Before considering how this scandal of schisms was brought to an end, we must observe how much out of joint the Church was with the remainder of fifteenth century European life. There were princes and kings who were ready to question or dispute every claim of the papacy within their own territorial boundaries. They viewed this international institution sometimes with envy, but very often with distrust. There was also the middle class. The papacy, which was chronically short of funds, needed this class to collect its revenues and to advance its loans. For their part, the bourgeoisie resented that the Church had not changed its basic attitude toward economic activity, particularly since its own wealth and income were so enormous. In addition, there was unrest among the masses, peasants and artisans alike. Discontent and bitter class hatred animated the crowds of beggars, peasants, and dispossessed lesser nobles who thronged the roads of Europe in the fifteenth century. These discontented people often blamed the established order, especially the Church, for their plight.

In previous moral and religious crises in the life of the Church, several agencies had been used to effect reforms: the monastic orders, the friars, or the papacy itself. Since none

*By other sources have to look to the secular  
States faced rising cost without rising income.  
Church trying to control kings (national state, international church)  
3rd failure of the church to reform itself.*



of these now seemed able to purge Christendom "in head and members," as the expression went, some university scholars and political leaders called for a general council, which would bring together men from many parts of Europe. The most important of a series of these councils held in the first half of the fifteenth century met at Constance (1414-1418) at the urging of the Holy Roman emperor. It succeeded in ending the schism and initiating a few reforms. Earlier, the conciliarists had argued that the council should be made a permanent feature of the Church's polity. Accordingly, a decree was issued at Constance declaring that henceforth councils should convene regularly every ten years. But the Conciliar Movement, which never had a wise base of support, soon ended in defeat, since it became evident that councils could be just as schismatic as the papacy had ever been. Once the unity of the papacy was restored, it was relatively easy for the pope to triumph over a movement which threatened to end his own supremacy in the Church. A papal bull of 1460 declared that those imbued with the spirit of rebellion who appeal to a council from the Roman pontiff are to be considered as "erroneous and detestable."

The collapse of the Conciliar Movement left the matter of reform to either the papacy or the national monarchs. But as we have already seen, the papacy was primarily interested in building beautiful churches, collecting ancient objects of art, and promoting Renaissance culture in other ways. Like a Machiavellian prince, the pope was consolidating states of the Church and increasing their political power. The national monarchs, for their part, sought increased control in their own territories. Reforms of the Church would have to come as a byproduct to their main concerns, if they were to come at all. Through concordats with the papacy, the monarchs of England, France, and Spain were able, in effect, to divide the spoils with Rome. In return for the papacy's acknowledging their increased power over the Church in their states, they permitted sizable revenues to flow to Rome.

So, neither the Church's critics nor her consequent effort to correct herself had sparked any general, effective reform movement up to the beginning of the sixteenth century. While the situation may well be compared to a supersaturated solution, it needed courageous leaders to precipitate the Reformation. To transform a general yearning into a great movement required men capable not only of criticism, but also of reorganizing and reconstructing some or even all aspects of religious life.

Before considering such men, we may properly ask what this sixteenth century movement should be called. Some describe it as a revolt. This interpretation stresses the rupture in Christendom and the creation of something decisively new: a society no longer dominated by the Church and eventually an intellectual atmosphere no longer controlled by theology. However, there are serious disadvantages to the use of this term. It gives the impression that the movement was an innovation deviating widely

*The Great Schism, Babylonian Captivity  
Conciliar Movement = council parliament of the church. (council had worked for the state, Popes weren't going to lead a reform) wanted to limit the pope's power.*



from the traditional norm of Christianity. This the reformers themselves strenuously denied. Further, the word "revolt" conveys the view that the movement was by nature revolutionary and radical. Thus many present day Roman Catholic authors describe it as the paganization and vulgarization of the West, while some secular thinkers interpret it as the freeing of the human mind from the authority of revelation. Actually, the reformers repeatedly show that they regarded themselves as conservatives engaged in restoring the purity of the primitive Church.

Some scholars prefer to follow this interpretation of the reformers and appraise the movement as primarily a reaffirmation. Its leaders insisted upon the need for return to the pure gospel, frequently to practices more like those of the time of the apostles, and to justification by faith as propounded by Paul and Augustine. The reformers believed it far safer to be led by these guides than by what they regarded as innovations of canon law and medieval scholasticism. The weakness in the term reaffirmation, however, is that it represents ideals which the reformers hoped to achieve rather than what they actually accomplished. A return to first century Christianity was impossible in the sixteenth century. The reformers could not isolate themselves from the church-dominated culture of their own day as did the early Christians from the ocean of paganism which surrounded them. They could not hope to recapture the setting in which the first century gospel had been proclaimed. Reaffirmation, therefore, overemphasizes what was conserved just as revolt overstates the changes effected.

Some modern secularists stress the reactionary nature of the main stream of the Protestant movement. They suggest that it brought with it an unfortunate reemphasis on the supernatural bordering on the superstitious. This interpretation finds the real advances of the age in the intellectual and urbane canons of the humanists, and an actual retreat in the God-centered emphases of the reformers. This approach makes its assumptions on the basis of the value judgment that the man-centered secularization of the West was actually an improvement on the God-centered world of the Middle Ages.

Probably reformation is still the most adequate term for this movement. While its primary emphasis was not on the moral reforms suggested by the humanists and others, it reformulated and reasserted basic relationships between God and man. Its fundamental concern was with such religious questions as: Will God save me? How? How can I be saved? What is the gospel? This return to and concern with the experience of salvation, peculiarly lacking in the centuries just preceding the sixteenth, gives the term "re-form" a particular aptness.

The fact that these varied designations are used reveals how complex the Reformation movement was. This will become abundantly clear as we look at the process of reform which began with Martin Luther.