

Reformation Background and Causes

I. Intellectual Movement – RENAISSANCE HUMANISM (14th - 16th Cent.)

- Cry of movement: “*ad fontes*” - back to the sources
- love of antiquity and eloquence
- Owed debt to influx of Greek scholars after fall of Constantinople in 1453
- Humanists’ return to classics in original languages brought a new critical spirit to scholarship.
- Martin Luther was indebted to the humanist movement chiefly in what it made available to him: The New Testament in Greek, his knowledge of Hebrew and the printed works of Augustine.

II. Technology – PRINTING PRESS (Johann Gutenberg, 1454)

- 100 editions of Bible printed (1457-1500)
- Books no longer confined to monasteries and universities
- Nobility and upper classes becoming better educated
- Over 200 printing presses in Europe by end of 15th cent.
- 1/2 of books were religious.
- Printers profited from disputes and could be expected to encourage them!
- Humanists created genre of “ecclesiastical grievance literature”
- In 1516 Erasmus published first printed edition of Greek New Testament—beginning a great debate over true meaning of many passages
- Information transformation similar to introduction of internet today—changing the existing power structure

III. Spirituality – THE CRY FOR REFORM

- Need for reform heard as early as the 14th century. Widely spoken of by 15th.
- Call chiefly for administrative, legal and moral reform. Doctrine not questioned until 16th century.
- Clergy were notoriously absent from their parishes. Only 1 in 14 German parishes had their pastor in residence. The Archbishop of Sens, Antoine du Prat made his 1st and only appearance in his cathedral at his own funeral
- Most high ecclesiastical positions were purchased
- The low moral estate of the clergy was scandalous
- Church bureaucracy was terribly inefficient and corrupt
- Reformers looked not to reinvent the Church, but to return to practices of the Early Church (as best they could)

LATE MEDIEVAL PIETY

- Increase in religiosity immediately prior to Reformation.
- Doctrine of purgatory encouraged good works, also pilgrimages and indulgences (paying for remission time)
- Preaching reached height of popularity
- Printing presses made private Bible study possible
- Rise in mysticism which encouraged practicing the presence of God and a life of piety

- “*devotia moderna*” - originated by Gerhard de Groote (1340-84). Spawned Thomas a Kempis’ Imitation of Christ. Erasmus a student there. Community shunned begging (*cf.* Franciscans) and encouraged industriousness and study of scriptures in small groups.
- Growth in piety largely restricted to laity.

IV. Church – ANTIPAPALISM

- Focused among ruling and educated classes—resented Pope’s meddling in local politics and church affairs
- 1302-Pope asserted Temporal powers over France and England
- Papal excommunications encouraged nationalism
- The requirement to purchase church appointments drained local revenues (*cf.* indulgences, dispensations and canonical waivers)

ANTICLERICALISM

- Focused in lower classes who resented privileges of the clergy along with their evident lack of piety

DOCTRINAL PLURALISM

- Existence of several theological “schools” of thought
- Papacy either unwilling or unable to clearly define teaching

V. Culture – CHANGES IN SOCIETY

- First article of the Magna Carta (1215): “The Church in England shall be free”
- Black Death killed 50 million people in Europe and Asia in 14th Century (*1/3 of all Europeans!*)
- Many cities and towns doubled in size during 15th century
- Rise in nationalism and nation-states
- Proliferation and expansion of European Universities. From 30 to 70 universities (1300 - 1500)
- Rise of the Middle Class

VI. Leadership – CRISIS IN AUTHORITY

- 14th-15th century: agreement that Pope was arbiter in faith
- 1378-1417 The Great schism (which Pope?)
- 1417 Council of Constance: Ended split but set precedent that councils have authority over Popes
- Hope of 15th century “conciliarist movement” to hold a “reforming council”
- “The failure of the conciliarist movement is generally regarded as a central cause of the Reformation, for two reasons. First, it led to hopes being raised that the church might be reformed from within - and when such hopes were dashed, many began to look for means of imposing reform upon the church.... Second, it posed a challenge to the doctrinal authority of the pope.” — *Alister McGrath*

THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

The English Reformation under **Henry VIII** was much more an act of state than a theological revolution. The divorce from Catherine was motivated by a combination of the King's dissatisfaction with her, his interest in Anne Boleyn and a genuine concern for a nonviolent succession (the 44-year civil "Wars of the Roses" were still in recent memory).

The Pope was in a bind: his predecessor had granted a special dispensation so that Henry could marry his brother's widow in the first place (declaring that invalid would be a stain on papal authority); secondly, Emperor Charles V (who happened to be Catherine's nephew) had recently sacked Rome. Due to the above canonical and political factors the Pope requested that the case be heard in Rome. Henry was unwilling to submit to a foreign authority and had himself declared "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England."

Little noticeable change occurred in the pews. The average English churchman was conservative and no doctrinal changes were taught. However, the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536-1540 created quite a stir. While the crown gained over £100,000 per year, the local communities lost employment as well as the benefit of the charitable work done by the religious orders. This suppression was a factor in a revolt in the north of England which Henry suppressed in 1536-7.

It was only after Henry's death in 1547 that Protestantism took a stronger hold. Henry's young son **Edward** was tutored by Protestants and the country was run by a Privy Council dominated by Protestants during Edward's short reign. It was at this time that the Prayer Book in English was first published and priests were allowed to marry (1549).

Upon Edward's death, **Mary**, the only surviving child of Henry's first wife, succeeded to the throne. A staunch catholic, Mary and her advisors did everything they could to undo the work of her father and brother. Popular opposition to Mary's moves was not based in theology as much as opposition to foreign rule—particularly that of Spain (Mary married a Spanish prince).

One historian noted that "on Mary's arrival in the capital the population of the prisons rapidly changed." Initially tolerant, Mary's position hardened due to a rebellion which she quelled as well as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's continued defense of the Protestant positions promulgated under Edward. During Edward's reign, only 2 burnings were held. Mary, from 1555-1558 burned at least 287 Protestants—including Cranmer and Bishop's Ridley & Latimer. Another 40 or more died in prison.

Upon **Elizabeth's** accession, the queen sought a middle ground based on political expediency. She disliked Catholicism because it denied her legitimacy, but neither was she fond of Calvinism because of its rejection of bishops which she thought essential for a monarch to maintain rule. The middle way or "Elizabeth settlement" adopted the Lutheran political theory which protected the rights of monarch's while keeping much of the catholic order including bishops and such ceremonial items as crucifixes, statues, etc... A new Prayer Book of 1559 was issued with changes friendly to Roman Catholic

sympathizers and the doctrine of the real presence, while not officially promulgated, was not actually denied.

Key Figures in English Reformation

Henry VIII	King 1509-1547	Declared head of the church in England in 1534. Dissolved many of the monasteries in 1536 & 1539. Ordered English Bibles placed in churches in 1538.
Thomas Wolsey	Lord Chancellor 1515-1530	Served also as a Cardinal and Archbishop of York at the same time. Most powerful man in England apart from the King. His failure to secure Henry's divorce caused him to lose favor and he died shortly after.
Thomas Cranmer	Archbishop 1532-1556	Annulled Henry's 1 st marriage in 1533 Author of 1 st two Books of Common Prayer in English: 1549 & 1552
Edward VI	King 1547-1553	Son of Jane Seymour, Henry's 3 rd and favorite wife. Tutored by Protestants. Privy Counsel ran country during his rule. Died at age 16.
Mary I	Queen 1553-1558	Only surviving child of Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Assumed throne after Edward's death. Married Philip II of Spain. Sought to suppress Protestantism in England. Burned Archbishop Cranmer and others at the stake.
Elizabeth I	Queen 1558-1603	Daughter of Anne Boleyn, Henry's 2 nd wife. Author of "Elizabeth Settlement." Defeated Spanish Armada in 1588.