

The Age of Religious Wars in Europe (1560-1715)

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Abstract: “The Age of Religious Wars in Europe” focuses on the condition of the church and the religion in Europe from 1560 to 1715, following the onset of the Protestant Reformation in Central, Western and Northern Europe.

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Our tutors never stop bawling into our ears, as though they were pouring water into a funnel; and our task is only to repeat what has been told us. I should like the tutor to correct this practice, and right from the start, according to the capacity of the mind he has in hand, to begin putting it through its paces, making it tastes things, choose them, and discern them by itself; sometimes clearing the way for him, sometimes letting him clear his own way. I don't want him to think and talk alone, I want him to listen to his pupil speaking in his turn. Socrates, and later Arcesilaus, first had their disciples speak, and then they spoke to them. The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn [Cicero].

Montaigne, *Of the education of children* (1579)

By the beginning of the 16th century, the medieval Church and all that it represented, entered a period of profound crisis. By this time, the Church was nearly fifteen centuries old. Throughout its history the Church always had to confront problems both within its organization and from without. But by 1500, these problems rose to the surface and the Church would shake at its very foundation.

Political philosophers like Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) had already rejected the medieval idea that popes were superior to kings. As a citizen of Renaissance Florence, Machiavelli was a Christian, yet he distrusted and disliked the clergy. He saw no need to reform the Church and Christianity because his secular theory of the state was based on the notion that religion and faith was nothing more than the cement which held society together. He would certainly have agreed with Karl Marx who, more than three centuries later, would argue that:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. [Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 1844]

A second problem of the period concerned the merchants, bankers and artisans of Europe's largest cities and towns who resented the fact that local bishops of the Church controlled all of their commercial and economic activities. Although capitalism as a form of economic organization had not yet infiltrated Europe, these producers and money-makers knew that more money and power was theirs if only their lives were less regulated by the Church. Again, I think what we are witnessing here is the development of a secular concept of work and acquisition. Yet another problem facing the Church was that in the 16th century there were numerous reformers who were openly criticizing the Church for its numerous offenses. Priests married and then took mistresses, holy offices were bought and sold for the highest price, incompetence among the clergy became the rule, the congregation of more and more people in towns and cities perhaps exposed the amorality and immorality of the clergy. In a word, the problem was corruption.

Meanwhile, peasants in England, Italy, France, Germany and elsewhere were also on the move. They began to revolt openly against both the clergy and the aristocracy. Their grievances were the most complicated of all -- their revolt was against political, economic, social and religious authority. And despite the Inquisition, the work of the Dominicans and Franciscans, and even a holy crusade, heretics and heresies continue to grow more numerous and more vocal.

Along comes Martin Luther (1483-1546), the son of a self-made copper miner from Saxony. As a Renaissance scholar, humanist, Augustinian monk and Doctor of Philosophy, Luther led an open attack on the issue of the sale of indulgences. While struggling with his own sense of self-doubt, Luther could not accept that salvation could be won by "good works" alone. Salvation for Luther could be won, however, by one's personal relationship with God, through faith ("the just shall live by faith alone"). This was an important development in the history of Christianity and the Church. The Christian had, up to 1517, always found his or her faith by obeying the Church. Good works were the only path to salvation -- in other words, there was nothing specifically individual about this faith. With Luther, on the other hand, faith was internalized -- it was a matter of heart and conscience. It was "inner-directed," to borrow an expression from the American sociologist David Reisman.

Luther's ideas appealed to those people who resented the worldliness, arrogance, incompetence, immorality, cynicism and corruption of the clergy. And, his message fell on ready ears -- in other words, the German people were ready to listen to a man like Luther since he seemed to speak their language. These people resented the wealth of the Church. The nobility resented the land held by the Church, all free of taxes. And the peasants saw Luther as a champion of social reform. Luther's confrontation with the Church, all prompted by the *Ninety-Five Theses*, led to a violent conflict between Catholic and Protestant. Such a conflict was not merely one of words but of men fighting men. Outside Germany and Scandinavia, the two places where Luther's ideas had their greatest impact, the Reformation was guided by the troubled conscience of John Calvin (1509-1564). Unlike Luther, Calvin stressed man's legal relationship with God. God's laws must be obeyed without question. For the Calvinist, moral righteousness must be pursued, lusts must be restrained and controlled, and social life and morality must be carefully regulated. Such an ethic of self-control was predicated on the notion that we should all work hard at our calling. By living such a life, one could be saved. However, for Calvin, 99 out of 100 men are damned. This is God's will and he must be obeyed.

Like Lutheranism, Calvinism had its greatest influence in northern Europe. Geneva became a Calvinist stronghold. In France, the French Calvinists or Huguenots were numerous but strong Catholic interests made sure that Catholicism would triumph. Surprisingly, there were numerous Protestant sects in Italy but as to be expected, Catholicism remained predominant. And in England, a country which seemed at times unsure of its faith, the Reformation came more as a result of political issues than religious or theological.

As we've seen, the medieval Church had to respond to the challenge of Luther and Calvin and this challenge was met by the Catholic Reformation. The Jesuits tried to combat Protestant heresy with education, preaching and emotional appeal. The Inquisition enlarged its activities and heretical books were confiscated, burned, and catalogued by the Index Forbidden Books, which was adopted at the Fifth Lateran Council of 1515 and confirmed by the Council of Trent in 1546. The Index was suppressed in 1966.

In the end, the Reformation smashed the medieval synthesis and destroyed the unity of the Christian matrix. Any hope for religious unity was now hopelessly impossible, as the events of the late 16th and 17th centuries will demonstrate. The Church was shattered, witchcraft flourished, and Protestantism itself fragmented into numerous sects. Meanwhile, the power of monarchs increased and, according to Max Weber, the Reformation justified the "spirit of capitalism. By 1560, a Protestant Reformation had clearly been made, a reformation that was perhaps inevitable. As an institution, the Church was controlled by men. As such, it was subject, like any other institution, to greed, arrogance, cynicism and power. It was, in the end, subject to human nature itself.

Between 1560 and 1715, Europe witnessed only thirty years of international peace. The greatest "international" conflict of the period was the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a war that had its origins in the complicated religious and political environment of the period. In 1555, the Peace of Augsburg brought an end to religious wars in Central Europe by dividing the numerous German states between Catholic and Lutheran authority. Although each prince had the right to determine the religion of his subjects, it happened that Lutheranism continued to spread into catholic-held lands. The spread of Calvinism, not recognized at Augsburg, also increased tensions. By 1609, the Holy Roman Empire had fragmented into two hostile alliances -- the Protestant Union and the Catholic League.

The Thirty Years' War began in Bohemia, an area in which Germans and Czechs, and Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholics lived in relative peace. The peace was shattered when Ferdinand II (1578-1637) became the king of Bohemia in 1617. Ferdinand was a zealous Catholic and the Bohemian Protestants feared he would recatholicize Bohemia. In May 1618, the imperial governors were thrown from the windows of Prague Castle. Ferdinand was deposed and the crown was offered to Frederick V (1596-1632, also known as the Winter King) of the Palatinate. This act extended the war from Bohemia to the Holy Roman Empire itself. The Protestant Union under Frederick now faced the Catholic League behind Ferdinand, who was now emperor. The Bohemian phase of the Thirty Years' War ended at the battle of the White Mountain in November 1620. With Bohemia in ruins, Ferdinand used the Jesuits to recatholicize the territory. The Czech nobility lost everything, the economy lay in ruins and half the population had been killed by war or plague.

The Battle of the White Mountain and the ultimate collapse of Bohemian Protestantism was a clear victory for Catholicism. With the Spanish Hapsburgs intervening in the Protestant states of north Germany and numerous Catholic League victories, Protestantism faced a grave challenge. The king of Denmark joined the Protestants in 1625 but he was more interested in territory and within a year his forces had been repelled by the military brilliance of Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583-1634), and his army of over 100,000 mercenaries. Although Wallenstein tried to build a military power capable of wiping out Protestantism, it soon became clear that his goals were of a more personal nature. Religion seemed to take a back seat as the Thirty Years' War became a war between warring states. In 1629, Denmark withdrew from the war leaving Wallenstein and his army in charge. Ferdinand issued the Edict of Restitution that restored to Catholics all land confiscated by the Protestants since 1552.

In 1630, the "Lion of the North," Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) entered the war in order to protect Sweden's interests in the Baltic which Wallenstein had threatened. His greater aim was a federation of German Protestant states under his authority. Although Wallenstein's armies sacked the city of Magdeburg (May 1631), Gustavus won a crucial victory several months later at Breitenfeld in Saxony and marched to the Rhine. Meanwhile, Wallenstein was recalled by Ferdinand at the request of the Catholic League. Gustavus defeated Wallenstein at Lützen but was killed in the battle. Without the leadership of Gustavus, Sweden could no longer maintain its presence in Germany.

It was at this time that France entered the war. Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) had been following the events of the Thirty Years' War for some time. Aiming to crush the Austrian and Spanish Hapsburgs, Richelieu accepted any allies regardless of their religion. In 1635, he declared war on Spain and formed an alliance with Sweden and Germany. The war was waged for another thirteen years but it was not until 1643 at the battle of Rocroi in the Netherlands that the Spanish Hapsburgs were finally defeated by France and its allies.

Peace negotiations were carried out between 1644 and 1648 at the Congress of Westphalia. The Treaty of Westphalia, signed October 24, 1648, allowed the fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire into more than three hundred sovereign states. Switzerland and the Dutch Netherlands became independent states and France acquired the rights to Alsace. Brandenburg and Bavaria increased their territory. In terms of religion, the Treaty confirmed the Peace of Augsburg and added Calvinism to Lutheranism and Catholicism as a recognized faith. The Thirty Years' War was a terrifying war whose destruction was only matched by the First and Second World Wars. The land was destroyed and cattle slaughtered -- all of which was made worse by a revisitation of the plague. The Holy Roman Empire lost one quarter of its inhabitants and its fragmentation into hundreds of small states delayed economic recovery as well as any hope for a unified Germany.

Between 1562 and 1598, there were numerous civil wars and outbreaks of violence that were clearly motivated by religious differences. For example, although Protestantism was illegal in France, the Calvinist minority grew in numbers and organization. By the 1530s, it had attracted the nobility, urban townspeople and women. By 1559, the French Calvinists or Huguenots organized a militant campaign against Henry II (1519-1559) and the Guise (a powerful Catholic family with ties to the Spanish crown). A Huguenot appeal for more liberal treatment was ignored and in 1562, a civil conflict broke out between Protestants and Catholics. An attempt at conciliation was made in 1572 -- the marriage of the nominal head of French Protestantism, Henry of Navarre (1553-1610), to Margaret of Valois (1553-1615), a Catholic member of the royal family. But this failed when Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589) urged the Catholics to murder the Protestant wedding guests. Over the next several days a popular protest against all Protestants left 3000 dead in the streets of Paris. The massacres continued from late August into October reaching the provinces of Rouen, Lyons, Bourges, Orleans, and Bordeaux. It has been estimated that 70,000 Protestants were killed that year. The SAINT

BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY MASSACRE forced the pope to respond with a Mass in which he celebrated a Catholic victory, thus insuring the continued hatred between Catholic and Protestant.

Henry of Navarre eventually became the king of France as Henry IV (1589-1610), but only after his conversion to Catholicism. In 1598, he issued the EDICT OF NANTES which granted a small degree of religious toleration to the French people (the first such document of its kind). His successors in the 17th century consistently weakened the Edict until the REVOCATION of the Edict was made official by Louis XIV on October 22, 1685.

In the 1560s, the Dutch revolted against Philip II (1527-1598, r. 1556-1598) of Spain, the greatest power in 16th century Europe. Philip understood the commercial greatness of the Dutch, but the influence of Lutherans, Anabaptists and Calvinists in the Netherlands led to a social revolt in which Philip was clearly the loser. The Protestants were driven into rebellion which forced the Spanish government to maintain an army by raising taxes in loyal provinces. By 1575, the Protestants were united under William of Orange (1533-1584) against the tyranny of Philip. Meanwhile, the Scottish rebelled against Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1587), a Catholic who was supported by Spain. And then in 1588, the Spanish attempted an armed naval assault upon the English. The Spanish Armada was a failure for the Spanish government and spelled the ultimate decline of Spain as a dominant power on the Continent. The Thirty Years' War (see above) was fought first in Bohemia over the issue of religious differences but soon involved every European nation. And during the English Civil War of 1640-1660, the English beheaded their king in 1649. All of these conflicts were inspired by religious differences owing to the Reformation, and all of these conflicts had political, economic and social ramifications.

In general, the period between 1560 and 1715 is an interesting one. The French became the dominant power on the Continent, taking over the position held by Spain since the end of the 16th century. With a monarch like Louis XIV, royal absolutism became perfected. Louis was both father and king to the French people. He ruled by divine right and as such, he made the laws and was above the laws.

The period can also be defined by mercantilism, an economic system based on the notion that the earth contained a fixed quantity of gold and silver. Between 1521 and 1660, the Spanish imported 18,000 tons of silver from Mexico and Peru. This figure represented three times the supply of silver in Europe before 1520. At the same time, the gold reserves increased by twenty per cent. More than half of what Spain imported flooded Europe in the forty years between 1580 and 1620 alone. Needless to say, European merchants, bankers, manufacturers, artisans and monarchs went money-mad. And all this bullion -- that is, gold and silver -- made it easy for the expansion of a capitalist economy in the early modern period. A new class of men appeared -- the bourgeoisie, the "men of the towns." These are men who made money by saving and investing in the future. These men, especially the Dutch and the English, would, in the 18th century, provide the commercial spirit, technology and entrepreneurial initiative to set in motion an Industrial Revolution which would change the landscape of Europe and the world during the 19th century.

The 16th and 17th centuries are also remarkable for the exploration of the New World. The goal was to find the Northwest Passage to Cathay (China). In 1534, the French sent Jacques Cartier (c.1491-1557) to the New World -- he traveled up the Saint Lawrence River as far as Montreal. In 1682, René-Robert-Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle (1643-1687) had journeyed down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. The English were busy as well. In 1585, the English established a settlement on Roanoke Island. There followed settlements at Jamestown (1607), and Plimoth Colony (1620). In March 1630, John Winthrop (1588-1649) and 900 Puritans founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Other colonies followed in rapid succession: Maryland (1634), Connecticut (1638), New Hampshire (1677) and Pennsylvania (1681). Harvard College was founded in 1636.

No account of this period of 150 years would be complete without mention of the Scientific Revolution. In the world of science, mathematics and astronomy, the age produced Nicolaus Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Robert Hooke, Robert Boyle, Edmund Halley, and Isaac Newton, in whose mind the wisdom of centuries of scientific thinking and endeavor seemed to find its ultimate expression. In philosophy, we have René Descartes, John Locke, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza. The Scientific Revolution forever changed the way men thought about the world and the cosmos. Nature was ultimately demystified (a process begun more than 2000 years earlier) and was now the object of scientific study.

By 1660, there was also a lengthy tradition of witchcraft in European history. The practice of witchcraft always lay under heavy suspicion but it was also an integral part of everyday life in Europe. There were basically two kinds of witchcraft. The white variety involved healing and fortune-telling, while the black variety concerned the conjuring of evil powers by a curse or by manipulating objects. The Church interpreted witchcraft in its own way. Witches entered a bond with Satan in order to work against God. Witches held secret meetings and had sexual relations with Satan. By the 13th century, bishops and popes prosecuted witches for heresy, which is not really that surprising since the 12th and 13th centuries constituted the great age of heresy. I imagine the point is this -- witchcraft became an issue because the Church made it so. The number and availability of printed books helped feed the Church's hysteria that witchcraft was part of a diabolical plot to overthrow God.

In 1486, there appeared the *The Malleus Maleficarum (The Witch Hammer)* of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. Both men were Dominican friars who claimed to show that what witches did at the request of Satan. Kramer and Sprenger tried fifty people for witchcraft (all but two were women). By the 16th century, the link between women and witchcraft was both unmistakable and complete. Men could be accused of witchcraft, but in general, and no matter what country we look at, accusations against women outnumber those of men three to one. As many as 100,000 men and women were tried for witchcraft -- perhaps 10,000 were hanged or burned at the stake. In southwest Germany for the period 1561-1670, there were 3300 executions. In Switzerland (1470-1700), there were 9000 cases tried with 5400 executions. Why were women more prone to be singled out as witches? It was commonly believed that women were perceived to be the "weaker vessel," that is, they were weaker individuals and more quick to give in to temptation, especially of a lustful kind.

By 1700, the witchcraft craze died down in England, the Netherlands and in Spain. There are two reasons why this happened. The Reformation triggered an intellectual backlash that led some people to argue that there was too much religious fanaticism or enthusiasm. The intellectual developments of the 16th and 17th centuries produced an atmosphere which implied that Human Reason was capable of understanding the world and man's place in it. By the time of the 18th century Enlightenment, the goal was not so much to do away with religion or faith, but to bring it into accordance with reason. In other words, whatever could not stand the test of reason ought to be abandoned. But there is perhaps a more important reason why witchcraft became less popular. By 1700, the elite groups of European society began to regard astrology, witchcraft and any other form of magic, as the sole property of the common people. In other words, the 17th century witnessed a division in culture and tradition. Whereas in an earlier period, wealthy and poor shared similar beliefs, by 1700 two distinct cultures had made their appearance -- one called high or elite, the other low or popular.

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