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HIST 4230: Age of the Reformations

## An Examination of the Protestant Continental and English Reformations

Just as the Protestant Continental and English Reformations were instituted from different perspectives and for varying reasons, so too the results were fundamentally distinct in the effects they produced. As a result, the transformation of worldview is drastically more substantial as they compare to one another, and to Roman Catholicism. Luther's "Table Talk," Melancthon's "Augsburg Confession," Calvin's "Ordinances," and Foxe's "Acts of the Church" all demonstrate a way of thinking about the world—not just religion—that is essentially distinguishable from King Henry VIII and his reformation.<sup>1</sup> This contrast is revealed in the manners in which these Reformers discuss the various issues they address in their works—namely, spiritual warfare, justification, governance, and martyrdom, among others.

The Protestant Continental and English Reformations both began in drastically different ways. On the one hand, Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation unintentionally and quietly at first, posting his 95 Theses in an effort to debate and spark reformation *within* the Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast, Henry VIII broke from the Roman Catholic Church abruptly and set up his own Church, over which he was the head (as opposed to setting up another Pope). Additionally, Luther began his disputation with the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "The Table Talk of Martin Luther." Translated and edited by William Hazlitt (1857); Denis R. Janz, ed. "A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions: *The Augsburg Confession*." By Philip Melancthon (1530); John Calvin, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances" (1541); John Foxe, "The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church" (1563).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "The 95 Theses" (1517).

doctrinal conviction, whereas Henry split from the Roman Catholic Church on due to his personal desires and at variance with his beliefs. Furthermore, although Luther remained constant in his convictions and would not recant, Henry VIII vacillated between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, which would serve to cause turmoil in England through the reigns of the following two monarchs. It is also intriguing to note that, while Luther started out as a monk and eventually received support from Frederick III and underwent many hardships, Henry as king was easily able to sever England from the Roman Catholic Church and establish his own—by his own authority and with his own resources. The differences between the two Reformations would produce Protestant Christians that, although they shared similarities, also sustained substantial distinctions.

Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon (Martin Luther's friend and helper) were magisterial Reformers supported by Frederick the Wise and later his brother John the Constant. Yet despite their positions as magisterial Reformers, they nevertheless had their difficulties. Luther was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, branded a heretic, and pursued by Church and State authorities. Although Melanchthon did not suffer through Luther's hardships, even so, he had to remain in hiding as long as he associated himself with Luther. Moreover, eventually he would come to clearly and publicly identify with Luther by drawing up the Augsburg Confession in 1530.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, King Henry VIII had issues of another nature—and much less likely to end in his demise—such as the problem of establishing a Church and defining its doctrine.

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<sup>3</sup> Janz, ed. "*Augsburg Confession*," by Philip Melanchthon (1530).

One major focus of Luther's, as evidenced by his "Table Talk," was upon the devil and Luther's interactions with him.<sup>4</sup> Even though Luther's focus on the devil was certainly not a new concept, there was a newness of "urgency" and substance to the way Luther spoke of the devil.<sup>5</sup> Luther describes Satan as a devil who hates Christians and wages his war against them constantly and without reprieve, for, according to Luther, Satan would afflict them even in sleep.<sup>6</sup> Luther also told of interesting ways to defy and resist Satan—such as spitting or tearing off a horn—while he himself "[resisted] him with the arms of faith" and was "against him with God's Word."<sup>7</sup> Luther's methods appear to have differed from the Roman Catholic Church's methods of dealing with devils, which included holy water and exorcisms. This difference is important to note, since Roman Catholic teaching would likely still have some bearing on Henry VIII and Church of England's thinking. Contemporary Protestantism, particularly within the Reformed tradition, thinks much differently than Luther and his contemporaries. Within the Reformed tradition, vices are not "[diabolized]," but are more often attributed to the human heart.<sup>8</sup> Spiritual warfare as a whole is not addressed as often, though when it is, it bears some resemblance to Luther's thinking, in that what is taught is that we resist Satan and the other devils with "the arms of faith," part of which would be "God's Word."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Pettegree, *Europe in the Sixteenth Century* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002). p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

<sup>7</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

<sup>8</sup> Pettegree, *Sixteenth Century*

<sup>9</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

Along similar lines of thought is Luther's view that the Roman Catholics were serving Satan, as depicted in various wood cuts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century wherein the Pope was portrayed as the antichrist. In addition to this, he indicates plainly that he believes their religion to be akin to paganism, "before the shining of the gospel[] in Popedom. . . the people understood as little of Christ and his Word, as the Turks and the heathens."<sup>10</sup> In opposition to Luther, the Roman Catholic Church produced artwork depicting Martin Luther as Satan's fool, which is further developed in "Foxe's Book of Martyrs" when Father Atwell says to William Hunter, "ye will go to the devil all of you, and confess his name," which demonstrates Atwell's conviction that Protestants serve Satan.<sup>11</sup> Henry VIII's position would have been unique under such circumstances, because although he originally declared Protestantism to be heresy, he eventually used it for his own ends—despite the fact that Roman Catholics would have seen this as joining the devil's side.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Henry VIII's behavior reveals that his convictions must have been shallow, since they did not effectively inform how he conducted himself with regard to his religion.

Another significant matter to consider would be the development of Luther and Melancthon's view on marriage in light of Henry VIII's divorce. Obviously, while Henry VIII viewed divorce as the preferential option to polygamy—which is intriguing in light of his work "In Defense of the Seven Sacraments," one of which is marriage—Luther and Melancthon (in theory) did not. Rather, when asked by Philip of Hesse for counsel, they answered that (in theory) it would be better to have multiple wives than to divorce Christina, who was his wife at

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<sup>10</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

<sup>11</sup> Foxe, "Acts of the Church"

<sup>12</sup> Foxe, "Acts of the Church"

the time. Both of these views contrast with Roman Catholicism's view on marriage, which was plainly displayed when Sir Thomas More opposed Henry VIII's divorce and suffered martyrdom for it.<sup>13</sup> It is fascinating that Reformed Christianity today would more likely side with the Roman Catholic view than Luther and Melancthon's—insofar that Reformed Christians view polygamy as detestable and divorce as only acceptable under strict circumstances.

The doctrine of justification was one of the defining doctrines that distinguished Reformers from Roman Catholics.<sup>14</sup> Philip Melancthon's points on justification in the Augsburg Confession describe how one is justified by faith alone in God.<sup>15</sup> The Roman Catholic Church would later define their doctrine of justification in the Council of Trent, but early on in the Protestant Reformation it is evident they believe more than faith to be involved in the *process* of justification. That is another characterizing distinction between Protestant and Roman Catholic doctrine—whereas Protestants view justification as a one-time event in a believer's life, Roman Catholics believe justification to be a process in which one is made more and more just in God's sight before they enter Heaven. Taking this into consideration, Henry VIII's declaration of Protestantism as heresy, his subsequent separation from the Roman Catholic Church and association with Protestantism, and his continual shifting between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is revealed to be all the more scandalous. Such shifting would be viewed as scandalous (indeed, disastrous) because of the weight given to such a core doctrine of the Church. Even today, albeit in smaller circles, the doctrine of justification is recognized to be a defining teaching, and one that continues to separate Protestants and Roman Catholics.

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<sup>13</sup> St. Thomas More, "The Tower Works: Devotional Writings." Edited by Garry E. Haupt (1980).

<sup>14</sup> Janz, ed. "Augsburg Confession," by Philip Melancthon (1530).

<sup>15</sup> Janz, ed. "Augsburg Confession," by Philip Melancthon (1530).

Just as England's Reformation differed vastly from the Protestant Continental Reformation in the Holy Roman Empire, it also deviated from the Protestant Reformation in France and Switzerland respectively. In both countries, Protestants were the minority group. The Protestant Reformation flourished more readily in Switzerland than France, due to Francis' fierce persecution of Protestants after the Affair of the Placards.

John Calvin, a French magisterial Reformer who fled from France to Switzerland, shared many of Luther and Zwingli's convictions regarding important doctrines like justification. Calvin also shared Luther's belief that there is a real distinction between the secular magistrate and the Church. In Calvin's "Ordinances," he instructed the Protestant Church in Geneva to balance authority and power between the magistrate and the Church, such that the Church does not have authority over the magistrate with regard to secular matters, but has a say in matters of the Church.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Calvin does not discuss what power the magistrate has over the Church.

Calvin's ecclesiology differs from the Roman Catholic Church's convictions, which beliefs allow for the Roman Catholic Church to have its own distinct authority and power completely separate from secular magistrates, and at times even over the secular state. As an example, the Roman Catholic Church illustrated the authority and power it possessed when it refused to give Henry VIII the divorce he desired. Moreover, Calvin's "Ordinances" distinguish the Protestant Geneva from the Church of England, for whereas Calvin establishes a balance of power between the magistrate and the Church, Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy made him the head of the Church of England, which would grant the state authority in determining the Church

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<sup>16</sup> Calvin, "Ordinances."

of England's doctrine, ecclesiology, liturgy, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, it would be easy for Henry himself and later generations to dissolve, change, or sustain the Church according to their own whims.

In light of these analyses, it is clear that the Protestant Continental Reformers' convictions were established and carried out upon the basis of the Bible, and that their actions were consistent with their beliefs. For instance, some of Luther's rebukes against Satan were based upon his belief regarding the doctrine of justification by faith alone.<sup>18</sup> Both Luther and Calvin left room for the secular magistrate to function with its own authority and power, which accords with Luther's "Two Kingdom" theology.<sup>19</sup> The Reformers, though seriously flawed men, plainly saw Christianity, indeed the Bible itself, as a means of knowing God and renewing the world in a substantial way.<sup>20</sup> The Bible and their view of God shaped their perception of the world in such a way that their actions reflected their convictions, albeit imperfectly. However, Henry VIII had many inconsistencies with his professed convictions. He vacillated between moderate Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, which caused confusion for the English and their clergymen. Henry VIII's actions demonstrate that he did not view Christianity and the Bible as important, but as instruments to be used for his own desires and purposes.

Nevertheless, despite the inconsistencies between Henry VIII's convictions and his actions in establishing the Church of England, this one act would give the Protestant Church tangible hope. Protestants around Europe until this time had difficulty in gaining and maintaining

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, "Ordinances."

<sup>18</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, "Ordinances."

<sup>20</sup> Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857); Calvin, "Ordinances."

footholds—granted with exceptions such as Calvin in Geneva and Zwingli in Zurich. However, there is a major difference between turning a city from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism with the help of the magistrate, and one man turning an entire nation into a Protestant nation.

Although Henry VIII's motivation for doing so was shallow, the reality that a whole country could change in such a short time must have been refreshing for Protestants across Europe.

England's transformation represented the possibility that their own countries might change, given time and the right circumstances.

In spite of the significant flaws of the Reformers, their interpretation of Scripture and the consistencies between their beliefs and actions established an example for later generations of Protestants, and continue to influence many Christians today. Luther's rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in God, together with his "Two Kingdoms" theology, and even Calvin's "Ordinances" are still impacting the Church—its beliefs, values, and practices. As such, it can be said that the Protestant Church's worldview is still profoundly affected by the Protestant Reformation—both English and Continental—and that perhaps in spite of Henry VIII's inconsistencies.