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HIST 4230: Age of the Reformations

The Protestant Reformation and Its Imprint on the West

Although the Counter-Reformation by the Roman Catholic Church had both deep and far-reaching implications for Roman Catholics and the numerous nations they would encounter and influence, Protestantism ultimately exercised the most significant impact of the two on the early modern world. This impact is demonstrated paradigmatically in the Protestant Reformation's influence on the founding of the United States of America, a country which has in turn profoundly impacted the rest of the world. Part of what made the founding of America possible was the development of the idea of conscience and religious liberty—two ideas that are essential to American ideals and culture. From Luther to Calvin to Knox and onward to Locke and finally the War for Independence, the Protestant Reformation has had exceedingly far-reaching and intense effects on the early modern world.

Although important figures like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus both laid down some of the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation, the catalyst for the beginning of the Protestant Reformation is found Martin Luther his strong take on plenary indulgences.[1] Luther's disagreements on indulgences found in the 95 Theses eventually leads to Luther's tower experience with Romans 1:17 and what came to be known as the doctrine of justification by faith alone. At length, Luther's disputes with the Roman Catholic Church lead to his statement at the Diet of Worms that his "conscience [was] bound to the Word of God." Not only do Luther's experiences begin and progress the Protestant Reformation, but they also prepares the foundation for the establishment of the United States of America. Luther's profound statement about his

[1] Martin Luther, "The 95 Theses," (1517).

conscience has such an effect because it will later make way for the idea of religious liberty. First, though, one must consider its immediate influence on others around Martin Luther, such as Andreas Karlstadt and his conscience—his experience reflects Luther's statement at the Diet of Worms. Karlstadt's convictions (i.e., the shaping of his conscience) are then worked out in the matter of removing images from churches.[2] Karlstadt does not outright mention consciences in his work; nevertheless, it is clear by his continual citing of Scripture and (in his opinion) the necessity to remove images from churches that proves that his own conscience has been deeply affected.

Although Karlstadt's convictions create a split between himself and Luther, the event is nevertheless consistent with Luther's own admission—so long as one's conscience is bound to God's Word, he must follow it insofar as it is consistent with Scripture. After all, Luther does say that "a godly Christian lives. . . with a good conscience."[3] From what Karlstadt could demonstrate in his treatise, it seemed he was endeavoring to live with just such a "good conscience" that was influenced by his understanding of the Bible.[4] Karlstadt's experience, like Luther's, confirms the need for charity among Christians, but goes further in that it continues to plough the cultural soil in preparation for Locke and his move toward religious liberty.

Meanwhile, at Geneva, John Calvin—having been influenced by both Luther and Ulrich Zwingli—has been synthesizing his own system of doctrine and building a Protestant community

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[2] Andreas Karlstadt, "On the Removal of Images," (1522).

[3] Martin Luther, "The Table Talk of Martin Luther," p. 249. Translated and edited by William Hazlitt (1857).

[4] Karlstadt, "Removal."

that reflects his ideals.[5] Calvin does not explicitly add much in the way of developing the Protestant understanding of conscience in his "Draft Ordinances;" even so, Calvin does train missionaries and pastors at Geneva. This training is a vital step in history, because in this way Calvin effectively impacts the rest of the Western world.

Specifically relevant to Calvin's (and, in fact, the Protestant Reformation's) impact on the American West is John Knox, the Scottish minister who goes on to establish the Scottish Presbyterian Church. After Knox studies under Calvin, he returns to Scotland, reforms the Church there, and thus extended Calvin's influence over Scotland and, eventually, England through King James I.

Before John Knox reformed the Scottish Church, King Henry VIII formed the Church of England and began the English Reformation. Though the Reformation in England is almost purely political, it is still affected by the Protestant Reformation, because King Henry VIII switches to Protestantism to get divorced. Thus, it can be said that without the Protestant Reformation, Henry VIII would not have been able to "switch" to Protestantism to do what he wanted. Consequently, it is clear that, without Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and other reformers, the Church of England would not exist—in fact, neither would Puritans, and the West would certainly not exist as it now does.

King Henry VIII's Church of England provides a base from which Knox and the Puritans can work—figuratively speaking—for though many of the Puritans will later be removed from the Church of England, many of them still have their origins in the Anglican Church. However, the Church and people of England endure years of chaos as Henry VIII shifts between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and his children Edward and Mary follow suit—Edward being

[5] John Calvin, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances," (1541).

Protestant and Mary Roman Catholic. Queen Elizabeth I brings relief and the "middle way," wherein she attempts to slowly Protestantize England without causing too much conflict with her Roman Catholic subjects. Despite Elizabeth I's continuance of the persecution against Roman Catholics, her "middle way" exemplifies (albeit poorly) early attempts at religious liberty—for she urges her Protestant critics "not to make windows into men's souls."

It is interesting to note that the word "conscience" occurs approximately fourteen times in "Foxe's Book of Martyrs."[6] That is more than what is found in Luther's Table Talk—which is around eight occurrences of the word.[7] This detail is noteworthy because it illustrates the fact that, at the time of the book's publishing, conscience is just as important to Protestants as it was when Luther first made his statement. In fact, in many of the instances in which conscience is mentioned, it is done in a positive, authoritative light—indicating that, for Protestants, conscience is something to be recognized by all and to live by.[8] For instance, James Hale is said to have done his job as a judge with "justice, fidelity, constancy, and conscience," demonstrating that living with one's conscience at peace is a good thing.[9] Similarly—and related to the subject of religious liberty—William Hunter says to Father Atwell, "My Lord, if you will let me alone, and leave me to my conscience, I will go to my father and dwell with him, or else with my master again; and so, if nobody will disquiet or trouble my conscience, I will keep my conscience to myself."[10] Hunter's entire statement forces his audience to reckon with his

[6] John Foxe, "The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church" (1563).

[7] Luther, "Table Talk." Trans. and ed. by William Hazlitt (1857).

[8] Foxe, "Acts of the Church."

[9] Foxe, "Acts of the Church," p. 12.

[10] Foxe, "Acts of the Church," p. 29.

conscience, but also with the fact that Hunter is an individual living in a society that is hostile to his beliefs. The last part of what he says is especially pertinent to the development of religious liberty, "I will keep my conscience to myself"—at which point, Hunter is basically saying, "just leave me alone, and I'll keep my beliefs to myself."[11] Therefore, Hunter's statement highlights why various religious groups in England will eventually leave for the New World in search of religious liberty.

It is possible that John Winthrop and those with him are on such a journey when they leave England to sail to New England. As a Puritan, Winthrop likely has a similar view of conscience as do the Protestants in "Foxe's Book of Martyrs"—positive and reflective of his personal beliefs. There in New England, they will find religious liberty closely based upon Locke's ideas about religious liberty, and the right to life, liberty, and property (later to become the pursuit of happiness).[12] It should be noted that Winthrop and his people arrive at New England as heirs of the Reformation—its doctrines and practices—Winthrop's convictions concerning the new birth evince this fact.[13]

Thus, from Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses upon the door at Wittenburg, to some of the earliest Protestants in the colonies that would eventually come to found the United States of America in 1776, it is clear that Protestantism has had extensive effects upon the early modern world. The same ideals held by Luther, Karlstadt, Calvin, Knox, and many others are carried through the American War for Independence, and go on indirectly to shape the rest of American culture and, in turn, its impact on the rest of the world as we know it today.

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[11] Foxe, "Acts of the Church," p. 29.

[12] John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," (1689).

[13] John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," (c. 1630).