

WHAT WERE THE MAIN FACTORS THAT LED TO THE CONTINENTAL REFORMATION? WOULD YOU SAY THAT THE REFORMATION WAS INEVITABLE GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES?

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1 Introduction

The Reformation – arguably the most important development in Western church history since the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon – was the consequence of a number of factors, linked not only to theology but also to developments in society, politics and economics. We seek to probe these factors and judge the necessity or otherwise of this decisive break from Rome by a large proportion of Christians. To answer the question concisely, we divide antecedents into those which we consider made it inevitable and those which do not point to such a conclusion. We also consider implications of God’s providential intervention in history.

2 Antecedents which tend to imply the Reformation was inevitable

2.1 Society

The growth of towns in the late Middle Ages entailed a shift among a significant part of the population towards individualism and autonomy, and thus to a hankering for break from the tradition, collectivism and hierarchy that was the basis of the authority of the medieval church. People in towns, being better educated, were more receptive to new ideas than those in the countryside and were thus open to Protestantism. More specifically, Luther’s stand on his individual conscience (at Worms) as against church councils found a powerful echo among town dwellers.

Even for peasants, the breakdown of feudalism tying them to the land and the rise of cash payment – linked inter alia to the shortage of labour after the Black Death – meant that even there, individuals no longer felt as tied to their locality and their position at birth on which the medieval church was based, and some were again willing to embrace Protestantism. The

Black Death and subsequent plagues, besides their economic impact, led to a popular preoccupation with sin and death. These demanded new and more satisfactory doctrines of salvation – such as those spread by Luther – rather than those that the church provided, or neglected to provide, as discussed below.

Furthermore, the invention of the printing press meant that new ideas such as those of Luther and Calvin could be rapidly spread and exchanged and were more difficult to suppress.

Literacy was growing also, owing to the growth of an educated merchant class. Bibles were translated into the local language, which encouraged an independent view of theology on the part of laypersons separate from the teaching of the clergy. Such individuals were again attracted to reformed teaching.

2.2 Religion

There was revulsion against the corruption of the clergy, especially at a local level. Simony and sale of “holy relics” for profit were examples of abuses generated by their pursuit of wealth and power. This was not new, but against a background of growing piety, linked to the plagues and other economic difficulties, as well as literacy, laypersons became increasingly offended by clerical immorality and ignorance, and attracted to a reformed alternative.

A particular problem was the worldliness of the Papacy, which eventually affected the whole church. The power and prestige of the Papacy was initially damaged by the “Babylonian captivity” of the Papacy by the King of France in Avignon, and the later political conflicts that led to several Popes being appointed by rival factions. Noll (1997) notes that thereafter “the persistent fascination with power, wealth, dynastic influence and temporal advantage eventually began to tell on the entire church. The specific difficulty was persistent inattention

to the questions that are most basic to the Christian life: What must I do to be saved? Where can I find secure religious authority?" Protestantism provided such answers.

In medieval times, and today also in the Catholic Church, purgatory is believed to be a place where sins of even those destined for heaven go to be expiated (drawn notably from the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 12:43-46). People were willing to undertake extra devotions and buy so-called indulgences. Indulgences were supposed to be means to purchase from the church some of Christ's merits that he left to the Church. Although their sacramental use was supposed to be to show gratitude for forgiveness, became popularly believed to reduce time in purgatory for cash. Much of the funds raised by the time of the Reformation were used for secular purposes by the Popes, including bribes and purchase of influence. A backlash against this, in a climate of heightened piety, was clearly very likely.

A climate of enhanced piety was apparent in late medieval movements counter to the Catholic Church such as the Waldensians and Lollards, both of whom taught "Protestant" ideas such as the authority of Scripture and also rejection of transubstantiation. Their advent gives evidence that a wider counter-Catholic movement such as the Reformation was likely to find fertile ground. Furthermore, interest in Augustine's writings was reborn with the work of scholars such as Wessel Gansfort. This was important, given his focus on salvation by grace alone, that found its ultimate flowering in the work of Luther. Study of Augustine also led to a rejection of unbiblical Papal rulings and a scepticism about the sacramental role of priests.

2.3 Intellectual movements

The Renaissance of learning, which began in the 15th Century, entailed a desire to refocus on the values dating from classical Greek and Roman times. Combined with the rise of literacy

generally, it contributed to an increase of critical interest in the Scriptures, including in their original languages (*ad fontes*). It also aroused interest in the teaching of the early church fathers, which were important background for Luther's rediscovery of the Pauline (and Augustinian) doctrine of salvation.

Particularly important were the humanists, scholars of the Renaissance who combined an interest in ancient texts with a desire to emulate the moral behaviour of classical times. They reacted strongly against scholasticism, the dominant theological method of the medieval period, which placed emphasis on rational justification of religious beliefs, and the systematic presentation of those beliefs (McGrath 1998). Although this aim is laudable, and brilliant scholarship from Aquinas and Ockham still resonates today, the school had fossilised into arid discussions based on preconceived categories and settled traditions.

Erasmus combined in one man many of the above points, and was of particular importance for pointing out errors in the generally accepted Latin Bible, the Vulgate, which cast into question key doctrines and, accordingly, weakened the authority of the Catholic Church and its interpretation of Scripture. For example, the Vulgate replaced the correct Greek word "repent" with "do penance" in Matthew 4:17 from Jesus' first sermon "'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". This was the basis of the notion of penance in the medieval church. Erasmus also criticised the immorality of the clergy, abuses of the church and the state of religious orders. Without him, it is hard to envisage the Reformation occurring.

Note however that there was no inevitability that the Renaissance would give rise to the Reformation, given that in Italy its flourishing was combined with a continuance of Catholic dominance.

2.4 Politics

The end of the medieval period was accompanied by a decline of the power of the Holy Roman Empire, and a desire for independence on the part of princes and rulers previously subject to his suzerainty. It was also marked by the rise of major kingdoms such as England, France and Spain outside the Empire. Such rulers were more willing than hitherto to determine the religion of their domains independently – and to wish to avoid political domination by the Papacy. Meanwhile, to limit the power of the landed nobility, kings would often align themselves with the wealthy and growing urban class, further increasing the influence over policy of the main adherents of Protestantism.

At the same time, there was a rise of nationalism on the part of peoples, itself spurred by the growth in use of the press and production of documents in local languages. Peoples, as well as their rulers, increasingly sought independence from foreign powers, including the Pope and the Catholic Church. We may note that the pre-Reformation Lollards preached that the church should be subject to the secular government.

Besides political causes, one may cite important economic causes of these trends. The 15th Century was a time of economic recovery, which generated new centres of financial wealth, and led to enhanced resentment by rulers and people of the way the church sought to siphon such wealth off to Rome.

3 Some counter arguments to inevitability

3.1 Dependence of the Reformation on Luther

All of the above suggest that the factors underlying the Reformation pointed strongly towards its inevitability. On the other hand, some arguments suggest that the Reformation might not have occurred in the form we know it. One is the dependence of the Reformation on the action of one key character, Martin Luther. It can be argued that in his absence, the Reformation might not have occurred. Although his opposition to indulgences was what brought him initial notoriety, we can highlight in particular his focus on the key revelation to Paul – and Augustine – that fallen mankind’s sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God through his free grace and Jesus’ atoning death on the cross. See Romans 3:23-24 “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”.

We need to consider whether another equally charismatic preacher would have devoted his life to defending this line, and the related challenge to Papal authority, that Scripture comes first. Would someone else have also appealed to nationalism, against papal abuses, and favouring a role of secular authority for which we have seen the preconditions were already set? One answer is to probe to what extent Luther’s contemporaries Zwingli and Bucer were themselves influenced by Luther or were independent reformers. Could they have led a Reformation in Luther’s absence? Zwingli, although emboldened by Luther’s acts and interested in his teachings, was also strongly influenced by humanism and related ideas – he himself always denied his Reformation was Lutheran. So he could have been a replacement leader. Bucer’s case is less clear, as he is recorded as being impressed by Luther at Heidelberg and being ejected from the church for preaching “Lutheran theology”. Of course Calvin might have taken up reform himself as a first mover had his predecessors not already set the framework.

3.2 The Counter Reformation without Reform

A further key issue is whether the Catholic Church might spontaneously have reformed itself, rendering reform otiose. There were currents of renewal before the Reformation, that went contrary to the negative picture painted above. One was “The Brethren of Human Life” who focused on godliness and charity. “The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas a Kempis, the best-known writing, emphasised spiritual self-discipline as a means of finding union with God in Christ – very much with the grain of the currents of individualism noted above. Erasmus, although his work buttressed the Reform, was by intention seeking to renew the Catholic Church via a more faithful text of the New Testament.

Certainly the Counter Reformation, when it came, prevented further advance of the Protestant movement and reclaimed a number of countries for Catholicism (such as Belgium and Poland). Particularly important were the renewed emphasis on persuasion and missionary activity led by the new Jesuit order, improved education of the clergy, ending of abuses such as those of indulgences, and clarification of doctrine including a corrected version of the Vulgate. In the event, the Counter Reformation was also enforced by persecution of Protestants and war on Protestant countries. Still, an argument can be made that the more positive reforms could have been enough to prevent a Reformation. More difficult is to believe that these reforms would have occurred in the absence of the Protestant challenge.

In this context, it is worth noting that the reformers themselves were highly reluctant to split the church. As noted by Noll (1997), the reformers “expected, or at least hoped, that their diligent attention to the great spiritual questions would lead to a general reformation of the one western church”. The various attempts to reconcile Protestant and Catholic doctrine, such as the Colloquy of Regensburg, bear out this desire. This again tells against the idea of inevitability.

4 God's providence and his love for the church

A serious objection can be made to a balanced and a-theistic historical analysis such as we make above, which is that scripture teaches of God's love for the church and his providential role in the unfolding of history. For example, Ephesians 5:25 states "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her", while 1:22-23 says that God's plan for the church includes the death and resurrection of Christ himself "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way". In Revelation the church is named the Bride of Christ. Matthew 16:18 has Jesus stating "I will build my church".

As regards God's redemptive interventions and control of history, this is evident throughout Scripture, from the Ark through Exodus and the entire history of Israel. Proverbs 21:1 emphasises "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases". Romans 8:28 says "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Could a schism as in the Reformation be the will of God? In John 17:23 Jesus says, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." The working of God's purpose is a mystery, as Job and other texts shows. But we can argue that he used the Reformation to bring back unity in a correct doctrine of salvation, even if it took till Vatican 2 for the Catholic Church to fully recognise it.

Conclusions

We have sought to outline the case for and against the inevitability of the Reformation. On balance, we believe that the developments in religion, society and politics in the late Middle Ages combined with the poor state of the Catholic church – and the providential action of God himself - indeed made Reformation inevitable. The dependence of the Reformation on Luther is one counter argument – but the role of Zwingli, as well as earlier movements such as the Lollards, show how reform could occur independently of him. And the Counter Reformation is hard to envisage without the reform to trigger it.

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