A Father Without a Family

The Religious Reformations of the Sixteenth Century

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From the High Middle Ages through to the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century, Europeans faced a conflation of cultural, social, and geopolitical changes that directly affected the way in which they lived their lives[1]. The Black Death plagues of the fourteenth century, the development of financial institutions, the printing press, changes in farming practices, and colonial expansion of the fifteenth century. The advances in shipbuilding, the Religious Reformation, the struggle of national debt, and bankruptcy in the sixteenth century, and finally, to the beginning of the cultural and social apotheosis of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century[1]. For Europeans, the early modern period provided a series of life-changing events that coalesced into an end of feudal governance, a challenge to ecclesiastical dogma, and eventually some forms of egalitarianism[1]. This paper will focus on the impact the religious reformations of the sixteenth century had on this leviathan of change throughout the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. The deconstruction of political unity, the spread of vernacular literacy, and changes to the artistic, intellectual, and economic models of European life are intrinsically linked to the religious reformation.

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From the High Middle Ages through to the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century, Europeans faced a conflation of cultural, social, and geopolitical changes that directly affected the way in which they lived their lives[1]. The Black Death plagues of the fourteenth century, the development of financial institutions, the printing press, changes in farming practices, and colonial expansion of the fifteenth century. The advances in shipbuilding, the Religious Reformation, the struggle of national debt, and bankruptcy in the sixteenth century, and finally, to the beginning of the cultural and social apotheosis of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century[2]. For Europeans, the early modern period provided a series of life-changing events that coalesced into an end of feudal governance, a challenge to ecclesiastical dogma, and eventually some forms of egalitarianism[3]. This paper will focus on the impact the religious reformations of the sixteenth century had on this leviathan of change throughout the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. The deconstruction of political unity, the spread of vernacular literacy, and changes to the artistic, intellectual, and economic models of European life are intrinsically linked to the religious reformation.

Political and social unity, is something that Europe had under the Latin Church, enjoyed for many centuries[4]. Even though warfare was a regular feature of life in early modern Europe, the cultural and political power that the church wielded was in effect, a punitive equaliser in how social class, law, and education were disseminated. Examining the events post the religious reformation there are a number of changes in political doctrine, these include the advent of English Protestantism with King Henry VIII and the Church of England, the Thirty Years War of the German states, and the Italian Wars fought between Spain and France over territory. All of these conflicts would serve as a mechanism to re-draw geopolitical boundaries based on the desire for political and religious autonomy[5]. Adjacent to these conflicts, there is also the gradual dilution of hierarchical derived feudal-nobility to an age of absolutism where monarchs

[1] Edward Muir, "The Idea of Community in Renaissance Italy," Renaissance Quarterly 55, no. 1 (2002): 5-7.
[2] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789. 8th Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152-155.
[3] Richard C. Trexler, "Forentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," Studies in the Renaissance 19 (1972): 7-11.
[4] Ross Douthat, "Religion & Ethics: Is There a Future for Christianity? The Shape of Things to Come." ABC. July 30, 2012. http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/07/30/3556405.htm (accessed August 1, 2012).
[5] Wiesner-Hanks, 26.

would manage the entire state unshackled from the other derivations of nobility and ecclesiastical hegemony. Moreover, as political discourse continued to adapt, so to do the polity, with multiple revolts by the peasantry across Europe pleading their case for a more secular ideology replacing the Divine Right of Kings. This culminated in the English revolution of 1688 after the nation saw a return of Catholic leadership under King James II. This along with the previous revolutions in England earlier in the seventeenth century would place England on a path of political reformation culminating in the establishment of a parliament who in the context of the day would represent the broader community. The canon of Latin theology was established for over eleven hundred years, these challenges to the social and political order support the assertion that life was anything but static for Europeans post the religious reformations of the sixteenth century[6]. Religious divide centred around geopolitical liberation and autonomy, are inflammatory drivers to aid an end to an age of despotic dystopia.

The advent of the printing press in 1450 developed into a global enabler of cultural and social liberation throughout the early modern period and beyond. Education would become more accessible through the spread of literary works; geo-vernacular text would propagate the ideology of localised text for all, and encourage a whole section of the community towards a raft of new occupations that previously, had been beyond all but the clergy and nobility, or in some cases seen as heresy[7]. The culmination of this gradual social and cultural evolution is marked by the religious reformation of 1517. With literary works at the centre of the Luther engagement, the ninety-five theses would forever change how people would interpret once unquestionable doctrine of the Latin Church, even though this was not his intention. Luther, a member of the clergy himself, set in motion a wave of social and cultural scepticism around the established relevance of ritual based Latin theology[8]. This would change the geopolitical landscape in Europe, with violence amongst emerging states, but also amongst class, as a better-educated polity became more

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[6] Charles Zika, "Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages: Controlling the Sacred in the Fifteenth-Century Germany." Past & Present 118 (1988): 25-30.
[7] Wiesner-Hanks, 120-122.
[8] Wiesner Hanks, 30.

concerned with the governance of their lands and their own social welfare. Writing, would no longer be solely for the nobility and clergy, but for an emerging middle class that would grow in financial and hence social status out of the labour shortages caused by the Black Death. Replicating the Bible in a multitude of vernaculars also gave the broader public a chance to question, to criticise, and deploy a pragmatic approach some of the myths around purgatory, the institution of indulgence and the financial model the Latin Church had attached to it. Post the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the rise of the Nation State would find an unconscious partner in the spread of vernacular literacy. This stanza in the early modern period is a cornerstone to how literary freedoms would eventually result in a pluralist consent of all men being equal under the law.

To examine the classical works of art pre and post the religious reformations of the sixteenth century, there is no doubt of the cultural and creative changes that this movement gave rise to. Pre the reformation, art was focused on clergy, saints and Christ, an almost unrealistic model of the human form. How Christ, the Virgin Mary, and other people of the church were embodied in art was merely in support of the rules, norms, and values that the church was espousing. Artistic and creative freedom was constricted to ecclesiastical models of visual stimuli. By comparison, in the decades and centuries following the reformation, there is a clear divergence from this form of art. The most profound change was in the realism attached the human form. No longer were people represented in almost cartoon like resolutions, but in more life-like scales that bought the common person closer to the works itself. The personal attachment to art provided people with an avenue of relevance to their own lives, which previously had been denied them. This in turn advanced and supported the rise of individualism amongst the arts and its subordinate areas of creativity. Expression of family, of love, and hatred all took on a distinct change post the reformation. The creative freedom afforded by this gradual cultural shift directly affected the lives of people throughout Europe in this period. Taking a step back from the arts, and creative plurality, there is also the paradigm

shift in economic life that drove class liberation[9]. The middle class as it would be known, utilised the weaknesses caused by famine, disease and war to drive up the lost of labour, and by-so increase their worth as a sellable asset. The introduction of additional taxation regimes provided momentum to the peasantry and their challenge to canonical rule. Increased secularism, diversity in theological doctrine, and financial liberation conflated into a new voice in political governance and a beginning of capitalism. These changes would for several nations, result in revolutions or civil uprisings bringing to an end the age of monarchical forbearance. For the church, this increase in secular plurality resulted in a steady decline in theological pre-eminence amongst the newly forming nation states.

Through the deconstruction of political unity, the spread of vernacular literacy, and evolution of economic, artistic, and intellectual paradigms, early modern Europeans did face profound changes in their lives and how they lived. The religious reformations of the early sixteenth century represented the embryonic beginnings of a social, cultural, and paradigmatic liberation that up to the French Revolution in eighteenth century Europe nurtured a secular plurality, and theological diversification never seen before. Europeans divested themselves from the primacy of the Latin Church, and through the actions of Luther, were over time able to create a geopolitical landscape that has in many ways endured to the current day. Creative freedoms, economic pressure, and a steady growth in the availability of education provided a further means of allowing social and cultural change to develop. Traditional paradigms of monarchy, aristocracy, and religious authority–were unquestionably overtaken by new Enlightenment principles of equality, citizenship and egalitarianism.

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[9] Ronald F. E. Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence. College Park, Maryland: Academic Press, (1982): 2-8

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