

## **An Overview of the Reformation**

Here we devote a section to certain elementary statements about the movement in men's religious ideas during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They are a necessary introduction to the political history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that follows.

We have to distinguish clearly between two entirely different systems of opposition to the Catholic Church. They intermingled very confusingly. The church was losing its hold upon the consciences of princes and rich and able people; it was also losing the faith and confidence of common people. The effect of its decline of spiritual power upon the former class was to make them resent its interference, its moral restrictions, its claims to overlordship, its claim to tax and to dissolve allegiances. They ceased to respect its power and its property. This insubordination of princes and rulers was going on throughout the Middle Ages, but it was only when in the sixteenth century the church began to side openly with its old antagonist the Emperor, when it offered him its support and accepted his help in its campaign against heresy, that princes began to think seriously of breaking away from the Roman communion and setting up fragments of a church. And they would never have done so if they had not perceived that the hold of the church upon the masses of mankind had relaxed.

The revolt of the princes was essentially an irreligious revolt against the world-rule of the church. The Emperor Frederick II, with his epistles to his fellow-princes, was its forerunner. The revolt of the people against the church, on the other hand, was as essentially religious. They objected not to the church's power but to its weaknesses. They wanted a deeply righteous and fearless church to help them and organize them against the wickedness of powerful men. Their movements against the church, within it and without, were movements not for release from a religious control but for a fuller and more abundant religious control. They did not want less religious control but more—but they wanted to be assured that it was religious. They objected to the Pope not because he was the religious head of the world but because he was not; because he was a wealthy earthly prince when he ought to have been their spiritual leader.

The contest in Europe from the fourteenth century onward, therefore, was a three-cornered contest. The princes wanted to use the popular forces against the Pope, but not to let those forces grow too powerful for their own power and glory. For a long time the church went from prince to prince for an ally without realizing that the lost ally it needed to recover was popular veneration.

Because of this triple aspect of the mental and moral conflicts that were going on in the fourteenth and fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the series of ensuing changes, those changes that are known collectively in history as the Reformation, took on a three-fold aspect. There was the Reformation according to the princes, who wanted to stop the flow of money to Rome, and to seize the moral authority, the educational power, and the material possessions of the church within their

dominions. There was the Reformation according to the people, who sought to make Christianity a power against unrighteousness, and particularly against the unrighteousness of the rich and powerful. And finally there was the Reformation within the church, of which St. Francis of Assisi was the precursor, which sought to restore the goodness of the church and, through its goodness, to restore its power.

The Reformation according to the princes took the form of a replacement of the Pope by the prince as the head of the religion and the controller of the consciences of his people. The princes had no idea and no intention of letting free the judgments of their subjects, more particularly with the object-lessons of the Hussites and the Anabaptists before their eyes; they sought to establish national churches dependent upon the throne. As England, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, North Germany, and Bohemia broke away from the Roman communion, the princes and other ministers showed the utmost solicitude to keep the movement well under control. Just as much reformation as would sever the link with Rome they permitted; anything beyond that, any dangerous break towards the primitive teachings of Jesus or the crude direct interpretation of the Bible, they resisted. The Established Church of England is one of the most typical and successful of the resulting compromises. It is still sacramental and sacerdotal; but its organization centres in the Court and the Lord Chancellor; and though subversive views may, and do, break out in the lower and less prosperous ranks of its priesthood, it is rare for them to struggle up to any position of influence and authority.

The Reformation according to the common man was very different in spirit from the princely Reformation. We have already told something of the popular attempts at Reformation in Bohemia and Germany. The wide spiritual upheavals of the time were at once more honest, more confused, more enduring, and less immediately successful than the reforms of the princes. Very few religious-spirited men had the daring to break away or the effrontery to confess that they had broken away from all authoritative teaching, and that they were now relying entirely upon their own minds and consciences. That required a very high intellectual courage. The general drift of the common man in this period in Europe was to set up his new acquisition, the Bible, as a counter-authority to the church. This was particularly the case with the great leader of German Protestantism, Martin Luther (1483-1546). All over Germany, and, indeed, all over Western Europe, there were now men spelling over the black-letter pages of the newly-translated and printed Bible, over the Book of Leviticus and the Song of Solomon and the Revelation of St. John the Divine—strange and perplexing books—quite as much as over the simple and inspiring record of Jesus in the Gospels. Naturally, they produced strange views and grotesque interpretations. It is surprising that they were not stranger and grotesquer. But the human reason is an obstinate thing, and will criticize and select in spite of its own resolutions. The bulk of these new Bible students took what their consciences approved from the Bible and ignored its riddles and contradictions.

All over Europe, wherever the new Protestant churches of the princes were set up, a living and very active residuum of Protestants remained who declined to have their religion made over for them in this fashion. These were the Nonconformists, a medley of sects, having nothing in common but their resistance to authoritative religion, whether of the Pope or the State. In Germany Nonconformity was for the most part stamped out by the princes; in Great Britain it remained powerful and various. Much of the differences in the behaviour of the German and British peoples seems to be traceable to the relative suppression of the free judgment in Germany.

Most, but not all, of these Nonconformists held to the Bible as a divinely inspired and authoritative guide. This was a strategic rather than an abiding position, and the modern drift of Nonconformity has been onward away from this original Bibliolatry towards a mitigated and sentimentalized recognition of the bare teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Beyond the range of Nonconformity, beyond the range of professed Christianity at all, there is also now a great and growing mass of equalitarian belief and altruistic impulse in the modern civilizations, which certainly owes, as we have already asserted, its spirit to Christianity.

(H.G. Wells, from *The Outline of History*)