

CAUSES OF THE REFORMATION—POLITICAL, MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL*

THE great religious upheaval of the sixteenth century cannot be attributed to any one man, or set of men, or even to one particular nation of Europe. The causes of so great and wide-spread a movement must be sought in a study of the general history of all Christendom during a period of many years preceding its actual occurrence. It is true that in different countries one will find secondary or immediate causes, certain conditions which tend to make the reform movement assume an aspect peculiar to each country. One will find certain individuals, who, by their personal influence, hastened the actual revolt, and perhaps carried on the movement to greater excesses than it might otherwise have gone. But the real causes, what we might call the primary or remote causes, were the great events of the fifteenth century, which affected the entire populace of Europe; those mighty influences which wrought such changes in the general thought and spirit of the times, gradually prepared the minds of the people for such an outburst, and made the Reformation a possibility.

We might place as first among these causes the lowering of the dignity and prestige of the Papacy and the growth of absolute power in the civil or secular government.

The first step in the decline of the Papal influence was the series of quarrels and disputes between the Popes and the secular princes of Europe during the fourteenth century, notably the unhappy contention between Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair. Then followed the Babylonian Exile of the Popes at Avignon. This was in itself most pernicious, but its immediate re-

sult was a far greater catastrophe—the Great Schism of the West. Never has the Church faced a more serious crisis, never has she been placed in a more critical position than at this time. The Schism was beyond doubt the most severe wound the Church ever received, and its terrible effects endured for many generations.

What could be more conducive to engender doubts and mistrust in the minds of the faithful, than the sight of two and sometimes three aspirants to the Chair of Peter? A shocked and startled Christendom beheld this great scandal in the head of the Church, and from this time dates the gradual lessening of the high esteem in which the Papacy had been held, and a spirit of general discontent with the temporal government of the Popes.

Many things tended to foster this spirit. The false Conciliar Theory had spread to a rather alarming degree. Good and devout Catholics doubted whether or not the Pope was subject to a General Council. The question was widely discussed and disputed, with the inevitable result of diminishing the influence of the Vicar of Christ, and the sacred regard and deep respect which had formerly been shown him. Then, too, the worldliness of the Court of Rome and the undue prominence assumed by secular or temporal government of the Church, produced most baneful effects.

The Court of the Pope had indeed undergone great changes during the fifteenth century. According to contemporary writers, it took on the appearance of the imperial courts of pagan Rome, and even seemed to rival the courts of the Caesars in its wealth and luxury, its display of pomp and splendor. Worldly-minded cardinals and other dignitaries, unworthy rep-

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representatives of the Church, encouraged the revival of pagan customs, and even some of the Popes of this time were imbued with a spirit of worldliness ill befitting the Vicar of Christ. Not unfrequently the very palace of the Popes displayed a scene of worldly grandeur far surpassing any of the other courts of Europe. Added to this, was another evil, namely the partiality and favoritism shown in the selection of the members of the Apostolic College and the occupants of other important offices in the government of the Church. Nepotism made itself felt in Rome. Besides, intrigue and scheming were not wanting among the seekers of ecclesiastical dignities. Influence and wealth secured positions of authority and power for men altogether unfit for such offices.

What then was the effect of such conditions on the general thought of the age? The idea of a supreme spiritual tribunal seemed to be obscured, and in the estimation of many, the Papacy was reduced almost to a level with the other secular governments of Europe.

Simultaneous with this decline of the prestige of the Papal court, was the growth of absolute power in the civil government, and the development of the national spirit in the countries of Europe. With the revival of pagan ideas, came the desire to worship civil authority. It is a phenomenon perhaps difficult to explain, but nevertheless it is true, that at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Europe seemed to be seized with a sort of mania for the Absolute in civil government. The people began to look to their civil rulers for decisions in matters spiritual as well as temporal. Or at least they carried their disputes and controversies to the local bishops, many of whom held their office by the grace of the secular prince. Thus there gradually grew up a sort of estrangement from the gov-

ernment of Rome, and a tendency towards national churchliness.

The kings and princes also objected to the exercise of jurisdiction over their subjects by a foreign power which while it was professedly spiritual, was at the same time largely concerned with temporal and political matters. In this way the relations between Church and State became strained. An ever increasing antagonism made itself manifest, so that at the opening of the sixteenth century the political-ecclesiastical condition was such as threatened the dissolution of the unity of Christendom, and presented a golden opportunity for those rebellious spirits who strove to promote heresy and schism, and to throw off the restraint which the Church imposed on their unlawful ambitions and the evil inclinations of their lower nature. These so-called reformers were not slow to take advantage of this state of disaffection and conflict existing between the Head of the Church and the civil authorities, and by securing the support of the latter, they gained a certain degree of success for a movement which would otherwise have very likely proved a miserable failure.

Another of the chief causes of the Reformation, and the principal pretext seized upon by the leaders of the movement, was the laxity of morals in the members of the hierarchy of the Church.

This is a subject which has been much disputed. It has led many a historian to wander far from the truth, and to present to his readers the products of his imagination rather than an account of historical facts. Undoubtedly the evils and abuses in the Church at that time have been grossly exaggerated, especially since much that has been said on this question has been based on the testimony of biased and unreliable witnesses, such as Erasmus,

and other over-enthusiastic reformers of that age. But still it cannot be denied that the condition of morals at that time was most deplorable, and that there was indeed a need of real reform.

The thirteenth century witnessed the Church at the zenith of her power and glory, but during the two succeeding centuries Divine Providence permitted her to be subjected to most severe attacks of vice and corruption, and to descend to the lowest moral level she ever reached throughout her entire history. Not that the Church herself was changed or tainted in the slightest degree. The Spouse of Christ remained as pure and unspotted as ever. The Holy Ghost resided in the Church according to the promise of Christ, during all these trials, preserving her in soundness of doctrine. Her sanctity was in no way impaired. This period was as productive of great and holy saints as any other. Indeed, this stands as one of the greatest arguments for the divine institution and guidance of the Church, namely that she emerged glorious and triumphant, strong and unchanged, from an ordeal which it would be impossible for any human institution to survive. Despite the sad degradation of the human element in her, the Church of God ever retained her original Apostolic purity and sanctity.

We do not deny that abuses existed in the Church at this time, but we do maintain that these abuses came not from the Church herself, but from extraneous causes. The increase of scandals and disorders among the clergy and laity, may be traced to various sources, but the chief and radical causes were the invasion of the secular rulers into the domain of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and the anti-Christian doctrines of the Humanists, aided as they were by the newly discovered art of printing.

As to the first, many writers have felt themselves justified in declaring that it was the greatest of all the evils that befell the Church. The kings and princes had been aiming for a long time to gain control over the Church, and to make the bishops their vassals. They had usurped the power of nominating bishops and clergy, and even claimed the right of conferring on them the insignia of their spiritual office. A bitter conflict, protracted through many long years, arose between the Popes and the princes, on this question of Investitures. Ecclesiastical appointments were to a large extent in the hands of unscrupulous and wicked rulers, who conferred benefices upon such men as would serve their own evil purposes and be as mere tools in their hands.

Numerous other abuses arose concerning this matter. Very often more than one benefice was conferred on the same individual. Many bishops refused to reside in their own dioceses, thus leaving their flocks unprotected from the attacks of ravenous wolves. The custom had arisen of bestowing even some of the highest ecclesiastical appointments on young boys, the sons of noble families. One contemporary writer expresses in a few words the condition of affairs at that time: "We appoint to rule over our Church ignorant, pleasure-seeking, illiterate men merely because of their aristocratic birth and high connections."

It is not difficult to perceive the terrible results to which such abuses inevitably led. Many of the bishops and clergy were worldly, avaricious men, men without any vocation to the sacred offices which they held, men who cared nothing for the spiritual welfare of their subjects and neglected their most important duties, who desired to hold their positions merely for the honor and distinction and mercenary advantages they derived therefrom. Their whole aim was to amass wealth for

themselves, to lead a life of ease and pleasure, and to gain worldly renown and the esteem of their masters, the secular princes.

But one of the saddest features of this period was that while these luxurious, pleasure-seeking and immoral bishops and clergy were growing in number, the really good and holy priests were being reduced to very small numbers by the great plagues and pestilences which swept over Europe. While these unworthy prelates were squandering the proceeds of pious endowments by their extravagant and sumptuous living, the Black Death was claiming as its victims, the pious and saintly men of God who went about tending the sick. To the prevalence of disease and plague must also be attributed the relaxation of monastic discipline during this time.

Is it any matter of surprise then, that with such scandals and abuses in the pastors, the faithful should have been shaken in their faith; that they should have lost confidence in their spiritual superiors; that with such examples of vice and corruption before them, their own moral state should have deteriorated?

The second great cause of the moral degradation of clergy and people, was the teaching of the intellectual innovators known as the Humanists. Humanism was the name given to an intellectual movement which began in Italy in the fourteenth century. Its object was the revival of ancient Greek and Roman literature and the introduction of Platonic philosophy in opposition to the Aristotelian teachings of the Scholastics.

In the beginning, this movement may not have been evil. Certainly the study of the classics was not reprehensible in itself. But in its later development it proved most disastrous and undoubtedly contributed much towards the success of the religious rev-

olution of the following century. It revived the spirit of Pagan Antiquity. Men seemed carried away by a mad enthusiasm for the restoration of the old customs and ideas that held sway before the advent of Christianity. The result was a violent outburst of immorality. Men of every class embraced the new teaching because it appealed to their lower passions. They worshipped the pagan ideals, and as a consequence the most infamous vices pervaded all human society. The great Christian virtues were cast aside, and in their place reigned lust and greed and pride.

Equally as terrible as these moral effects, were the intellectual effects which Humanism produced. A system of philosophy was established to uphold and defend their new manner of life. Faith and Revelation were openly attacked, the authority of the Church was denied, the supremacy of reason and the doctrine of intellectual liberty was upheld, Christian teachings of self-restraint and mortification were ridiculed, in fine all that was subversive of Christianity was taught by these new philosophers.

Thus the dawn of the sixteenth century found European society in a condition which can scarcely be imagined. The situation politically, morally and intellectually was such as portends a tremendous cataclysm in the history of mankind, so that when Martin Luther entered into his quarrel with the Dominican Tezel, it was but the spark needed to set ablaze that mighty revolution which has torn such countless numbers from the bosom of Holy Mother Church, and sent them wandering in darkness and error, without a head, without a guide, ever disagreeing among themselves, ever dividing into new sects, until we behold them to-day in Babel-like confusion, far from the Truth and the teachings of Christ.

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