
UNIT 9 REFORMATION

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the concept of Reformation and its historical origins;
- understand the social background of Reformation;
- understand the spread of Reformation; and
- understand the impact of Reformation in the social, political and economic spheres.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The Reformation can be regarded as a milestone in the history of Europe. It was not merely an event in the history of the Church that is the fragmentation of the western Catholic Church or the emergence of Protestant theology. Rather, it brought revolutionary changes in the social and political climate of the 16th and 17th century Europe.

Definition: The reformation in the conventional sense implies the schism or break with in the Roman Catholic Church that functioned under the Pope in

Europe for centuries and the only one part of Reformation. It led to the creation of several radical and moderate folds within Christianity such as Lutherans, Calvinists, Puritans, Anabaptists, Anglicans, etc.

Prelude : The Christian Church was effectively unified till the mid- eleventh century. However, western and central Europe came under the control of the Pope while the Byzantine church emerged under the influence of the Patriarch of Constantinople. There were bitter conflicts between the two heads on the question of supremacy and church incomes. In AD 1054 a split in the Christian Church occurred. Since then the Western Church came to be called Catholic (means universal) and the church in the Byzantine Empire came to be known as the Orthodox Church.

The Catholic Church was a strong bond which provided religious uniformity to the numerous feudal units. In the absence of political unity, the church helped in stabilization of social relations. The popes interfered in the internal, political and financial matters of the rulers. In a way the Catholic Church provided unity to European Feudalism. The weakening of the feudal structure from the late medieval period was bound to have repercussion on the church as well.

9.2 ORIGIN OF THE REFORMATION

The Catholic Church in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries faced institutional problems because of the failure of the papal authority to provide spiritual leadership. Contemporary writings unquestionably indicate a state of increasing ecclesiastical corruption and inefficiency. The church leaders showed their inability to satisfy the people's longing for personal piety.

The economic changes and feudal crisis had led to the financial burden of the Catholic Church. It was one of the important factors leading to the mounting criticism of papal authority. The papacy had developed its own extensive bureaucratic structure and fiscal system. The Pope received various types of subscription from officials of the far flung churches. These include *Tenths* (one tenth part of the income was to be sent to Pope), *First Fruits* (offering connected with the beginning of the harvest), etc. The most controversial of all the subscriptions was the *Sale of Indulgence* (cards of pardon from a grave sin on huge payment to the church).

The economic problems of the church led to an increasing separation between the upper and the lower clergies. The higher official who came from nobility like cardinals, bishops, etc. accumulated huge wealth, while the lower clergies remained poor and came from commoners.

9.3 THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND

The medieval world was close society dominated by feudalism and the Catholic Church and its priesthood. The church was a focal point of life and touched every aspect of people's life from birth till death. The late middle Ages witnessed significant developments which prepared the ground for the reformers. It is argued that a decline in population was a fall in the agrarian produce as well as manufacture. This hastened the transmutation of the feudal fabric society.

Landowners too were seriously affected by the fall in their revenues owing to the declining rentals. In western Germany, especially economic factors made the nobles more dependent on the territorial princes of Germany, whose authority was steadily increasing.

Artisans and peasants were particularly affected by the low wages and high prices. These acute economic distress, disorientation and resentment found expression in the rational appeals of Martin Luther and Calvin.

Marx and Engels described the period of Reformation as having witnessed a social transformation that is *the rise of the bourgeoisie*. Reformation reflects the rise of an educated elite of laymen who were ready and eager to take over the spiritual and administrative functions of discredited clergy.

The most important theological change was the reduction of the role of the sacraments in salvation which reduced the authority and prestige of the clergy and increased the independence and self confidence of the people. The reduction in the powers of the Holy Roman Emperor weakened the papal estates.

The Reformation, though due to religious factors, was made possible by the secular requirements of the times. Among the non-religious element leading to Reformation was the **Renaissance** which resulted in a critical approach to the authority. The impact of the humanists' movement upon the Protestant Reformation has been a subject of historical debate.

The Reformation was seen as the logical and inevitable consequence of the rise of humanism. By accepting the Renaissance, the papacy brought about its own end as it led to increase in the intellectual activity with severe criticism. The ideas of Renaissance accelerated the Reformation. Italian Humanism implicitly rejected the monastic virtues of renunciation and fostered secular attitudes.

Thus, the Reformation arose, as **Alister McGrath** points out, from a complex heterogeneous matrix of social and ideological factors. The rise of nationalism, the growing political power of the south German states and the Swiss cities, the emergence of individual personalities, intellectual movements and theological awareness at the time of growing crises in the church gave way to the Reformation movement, though it varied from one region to another.

9.4 REFORMATION IN GERMANY

The politics and socio economic conditions of Germany were conducive to the emergence and spread of Protestant Reformation. Max Stienmetz suggests that Germany's economic position was characterized by an upturn in commercial production yet feudalism in the countryside remained strong. The clergy often played the role of landlord fuelling a spirit of revolt among the peasants, and the Catholic Church still owned a substantial portion of land in Germany. A strong feeling began to develop against church exploitation by the late-fifteenth century. Hence, anti-papalism and anti-clericalism became the two main characteristics of German region.

Martin Luther listed Papal and clerical abuses in his famous reforming treatise of 1520 – *An Appeal to the German Nobility*. The rise of humanism emphasized the idea of individual consciousness and human individuality, which raised new

interest in the doctrine of justification—*how human beings could enter into a relationship with God*. He achieved practical success because of his moderate approach and the popular resentment against the prevalent practice of “*Sale of Indulgence*”. Indulgence began as a gift of money or donation as an expression of thanks for forgiveness. Initially Indulgence meant relaxation of the punishment imposed by the church for a moral sin. Later it became a remission of punishment in purgatory by God and not the church alone. Thus God’s grace was commercially sold through Pope’s agents via Albrecht of Brandenburg and the banking house of Fuggers.

9.5 MARTIN LUTHER AND PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Martin Luther (1438-1546) was from peasant background. He showed strong religious inclination and in 1505 he decided to become a monk. He was a professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg. Lutheran Reformation had to begin with simple question — ‘*What must be done to seek the forgiveness of God.*’

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his **Ninety Five Thesis** on the church door in Wittenburg and directly challenged the sale of indulgence. His actions immediately attracted the attention of all Europe. Engels described Luther’s revolt against the Roman Catholic Church as ‘*Luther’s lightning struck home*’.

In the thesis he presented three points: 1) The concerned was the financial abuses, 2) Focus on the attention on doctrinal abuses and 3) Attacked religious issues.

In summer of the year 1520, Luther published his “**Three Treaties**”. In this, 1) The address to the Christian nobility of the German nation in which German provinces were called upon to reform the church. Here, he explained the Reformation Doctrine “*Priesthood of All Believers*”, the assertion that all Christians have an equal calling in the church. 2) Luther questioned the sacramental system of the church and declared that instead of seven, there has only three sacraments i.e *Baptism, Marriage and Ucharism..* 3) The most drastic change was that Luther denied the involvement of church and priest in granting liberation to Christian Man. He developed religious and ethical implication of doctrine of ‘*justification by Faith*’

When the Pope issued a bull (a Roman Catholic Church proclamation) of excommunication, Luther publicly burned it. In 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor asked Luther to appear before the Diet (parliament) at Worms to face trial. Luther refused to recant his position and thus was outlawed by the highest authority in Germany. He remained under a sentence of death throughout his life but was shielded and supported by the Elector of Saxony- Frederick, who personally did not like Papal interference in an academic centre. While in hiding Luther translated the **New Testament** from Greek text of Erasmus to German language. The supporters of his views came to be called the *Lutherans or Protestant*.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you understand by the term ‘Reformation’?

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2) Discuss the unfolding of Reformation in Germany.

9.6 LUTHER AND PEASANT WAR

Luther confrontation with the Papal Church inspired the German peasants to open rebellion in 1525. The Peasant war was not a coordinated rebellion and had several leaders; *Thomas Munzer* successfully led the movement for a brief period. He organized the struggle against the feudal lords and church exploitation. Their “Twelve Articles” a programme for action, was quite moderate and did not seek to destroy the feudal system completely.

Marxist writings suggest that the peasant war was an expression of socio-economic conflict and formed an early phase of bourgeois revolution, while the Reformation was its ideological expression. Steinmetz argues that it was a national movement precipitated by Martin Luther, bringing all the classes (except the ecclesiastical) under the leadership of the middling bourgeoisie against the Papal church. Peter Blickle on the other hand, suggests that the Peasant War was an attempt to overcome the crisis of feudalism through a revolutionary reshaping of social and seigniorial relation.

Though, the peasants war was inspired by Luther’s brave confrontation with Papal power, Luther did not want to lose the support of the nobility who were threatened by the peasants and so he vehemently attacked the rebellious peasants. Luther’s theory of political authority developed against the background of peasants’ war. Luther condemned all forms of rebellion as means of settling grievances. He argued that a true Christian should suffer the wrong and endure evil rather than flight the authority of the king. Hence Luther’s views were supported by a large section of the ruling class.

9.6.1 Luther’s Religion

Luther’s reformation began on the question of what an individual must do in order to be saved. From this developed his doctrine of justification by faith. Luther believed that the church had misunderstood the gospel and the true essence of Christianity by adopting practices such as the sale of indulgence.

Luther’s religion was given an organizational structure and a definite shape by his fellow Professor Melanchthon. He helped Luther prepare three Tracts and establish a new sect of Christians. This new group of Christians called Lutherans

believed in the supremacy of faith which destroyed the exclusive position of priests along with their mystical functions. Luther declared that each Christian was to be his own priest. For Luther the external order of the church was of secondary importance. Liberty was an inward faith and not an outward social and political freedom. He abolished the hierarchy of church officials from popes down to priests.

The Lutheran movement brought about a sharp division within the Christian church and destroyed papal supremacy. The general popularity of Lutheranism was displayed by the way in which the people accepted it as a kind of doctrine with ethical issues and which also suggested economic reforms which affected the papacy and changed economic system of the country.

Thus, we can say that Reformation in Germany was not a really a single great development but rather consisted of a number of separate localized Reformation. Each of which was organized by the city council or Prince who looked after different religious doctrine and tried to promote it.

9.7 HULDREYCH OR ULRICH ZWINGLI

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was a contemporary of Luther who carried out religious reforms in the Swiss confederation of the Zurich. Zwingli's reformation was based on humanist's views. He presented new views in course of his preaching. His actual reformation started in 1520 and was completed within five years.

The Swiss Reformation under Zwingli stressed upon the corporate nature of the church. It believed that clergy and laymen formed a 'holy community'. The Reformation in Zurich had a great social impact. The monasteries were abolished and monastic charity became a communal concern. The church and moral discipline was to be jointly supervised by the church and the state. Together they were to form the '*holy Community*'.

There were some similarities between the Lutheran and Zwingli's Reformation. Both rejected the medieval sacraments and emphasized the God. Both of them retained traditional practices of infant Baptism but for different reasons.

9.8 THE ANABAPTISTS

The Anabaptists rejected the doctrine of infant baptism and believed that the true Christian is one who was re-baptized as an adult. They believed in the doctrine of justification by faith and contended that only those who firmly believed in God could become members of the true church and excluded all others.

As infant baptism was considered a sacrament both by the Protestants and the Catholics, the arguments of the Anabaptists posed a threat to their doctrine. Moreover, the Anabaptists refused to recognize or participate in civil government, take oaths of allegiance or serve in the army and refused to pay taxes in the government. They argued that true Christians should never use sword or go to law courts or perform magisterial functions. These groups reflected the aspirations of the poor people and wanted social reforms of all the institutions in preparation for Christ second coming.

Wherever the Anabaptists settled, the local rulers persecuted them; Protestants drowned them in water and ordered them to be stoned to death while the Catholics burned them alive. Their principal leaders like Balthasar Hubmaier and Jacob Hutter had converted some nobles to their faith, but in the end they face torture and death. But their tradition of democratic thought and economic equality remained.

9.9 THE REFORMATION IN FRANCE

The situation in France with respect to Reformation was similar to Germany. Although decentralization of government was not so great and strong. The ground was better prepared for the reform of the church in France than in Germany because of the efforts of liberal Catholics. Luther's ideas were soon imported and widely read. The strongest opposition came from the Parliament of Paris. Francis I subordinated his religious policy at home to the needs of his foreign policy. In 1560s, Francis I of France concluded the *Concordat of Bolognes* with Pope Leo X by which the crown was given virtual control of the French clerical appointments.

In France, Reformation movement was a very much inspired by Calvin and his philosophy.

9.10 JOHN CALVIN

John Calvin (1509-64) of France was from the second generation of reformers. He is regarded as the most influential reformer because of his powerful impact on different parts of Europe. Calvin was highly learned and possessed a logical brain. Many of his views derived from the Bible but he was also influenced by St. Augustine. Calvin was forced to leave France because of the religious prosecution carried out by the rulers.

Calvin was influenced by Erasmus and other humanists of his time. He shared with Luther the belief in salvation by faith alone and supported the doctrine of direct communication of man with God. His emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God gave a unique character to his teachings.

Like Luther, he also retained only two sacraments— Baptism and the Eucharist. Calvin's first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) became the most influential work of Protestant theology and reflected his sharp intellect and legal mind. The doctrine of predestination constituted the most important element of Calvin's social thought. His social thought also believed to have indirectly promoted commercial activity.

9.10.1 The Spread of Calvinism

The type of Protestantism which was the basis for the modern congressional and reformed churches was Calvinism. Calvinism was established after the death of Zwingli. The leadership of the new Swiss Protestantism was provided by a Frenchman John Calvin (1509-34). The ethics of Calvinists were dynamic and social. Luther's ideology was more successful in Northern Germany and Scandinavia because it suited the rulers of these areas. But the Calvinism took roots in the states where it opposed vigorously the existing political and religious

establishments. Calvinism was the official religion of Northern Netherlands and the German states. It directly influenced the society and the development of finance, industry and commerce. The economic significance of Calvinism has been the cause of prolonged controversy. Calvinist political thought reinforced the middle class attempt to throw off the control of the French monarchy and break the power of the Catholic and aristocratic ministries in Scotland.

Hence Calvinism won adherents from the nobility and it was the support it received from noble families. The Huguenots as French Calvinist were called were particularly strong in courts and parliaments.

9.11 REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

When Reformation movement had already taken its root in Germany and France, England also witnessed its reformation. The beginning was political rather than religious. It is an irony that the English Reformation was initiated by the same ruler – Henry VIII (1509-47), who was a strong critic of Martin Luther's reforms. Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife Catherine who was a Spanish princess but the Pope could not grant it because divorce was not allowed in Catholic Church and also due to the fact that the troops of the Spanish Emperor were in control of the city of Rome and the Pope could not go against him. Henry became desperate after waiting for three years, and decided to take matters into his own hand. Through a subservient Parliament (also called the Reformation Parliament 1529-34), he severed all relation with the Pope. He repudiated Papal authority and in 1534 set up the Anglican Church with the King as Supreme Head. Changes under Henry were the suppression of monasteries and the introduction of the Bible in vernacular.

The Reformation helped in strengthening the English monarchy and in creating a national church. Thus we can say that the English Reformation was quite different from other countries as here the rulers for personal reasons took the initiative to introduce it. It was implemented through political means. The Anglican Church Settlement (1559) was an attempt to avoid the extremes and adopt a midway path between Protestantism and Catholicism.

9.12 IMPACT

The European Reformation of the 16th century was a complex and heterogeneous movement with direct or indirect ramification on the political and socio economic life of Europe. Since Christianity was associated with the lives of the rulers it was bound to have some impact on them.

9.12.1 Political Impact

The Protestant reformation produced different perceptions of the relationship between state and church. One of the first consequences of Reformation was the breakdown of the Catholic Church into many divisions that was highly organized and laid down strict norms of political, moral and social behaviour.

Protestantism indirectly contributed to the idea of political unity. It is also argued by some of the historians that Protestantism marked a natural development of European Nation States.

Protestantism had been interpreted as both a product of the rising nation states concept as well as catalyst to emerge national identity

9.12.2 Social Impact

The Protestants placed family at the centre of human life and stressed on mutual love between husband and wife. From the medieval times religion played an enormous role in the everyday lives of most Europeans. Both the Protestant and Catholics Reformation played an important role in transforming popular culture including popular rituals and festivals.

The Reformation also stimulated new composition in art and music. Luther praises an art and placed music next to the word of God. However, Zwingli and Calvin in Switzerland were against it. They considered music to be a source of distraction and stressed on a purified form of worship.

The Catholic Reformation became an important source of patronage to the new style of art called 'Baroque' that developed in post Renaissance period.

9.12.3 Economic Impact

The Reformation is sometimes seen as a revolutionary event because it represented the challenge of a new class to feudalism. According to some historians, this religious individualism was a counter part to the intellectual individualism of Humanism and it encourage the growth of Capitalism.

M.J. Kitch said that "historically there appears to be a strong link between Protestantism and Capitalism". This link has been the subject of much debate. **Max Weber**, the German Sociologist and economist was one of the first to suggest the relationship in detail. He makes a clear connection between **Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism**. In his words, he has clearly said that it was difficult to derive the economic progress of countries before Reformation.

Weber explains the casual relation between Protestantism and Capitalism by demonstrating how the protestant model ideas created a mental and intellectual environment in which capitalism came on its own.

His work *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* did away with the abstract phrase 'Spirit of Capitalism'. Secondly he emphasized the economic aspects of capitalism, pulling it out of the social spiritual framework.

Christopher Hill also supported Tawney's theory of two way affinity between Protestantism and Capitalism. According to Hill, Protestantism provided a set of flexible doctrines that helped in breaking the strong hold of the "Iron ideological framework of the early times."

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the spread of Luther's and Calvin's ideas.

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- 2) Discuss the social, political and economic impact of Reformation.

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9.13 LET US SUM UP

Thus, it can be said that Reformation embraced a number of areas – reform of both the morals and the structures of church and society; reinterpretation of Christian spirituality and the reform of its doctrine. The popularity of Reform movements cannot be properly understood purely in religious light. Rather these have to be placed in their historical, political, social, and economic context. The Reformation was far more than a movement directed against the abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. It was the culmination of a complex situation with roots deeply buried in the medieval past.

9.14 KEYWORDS

Peasant Wars: The German peasant wars were a widespread popular revolt in Central Europe between 1524-25. The revolts failed due to an intense opposition and oppression from the aristocracy.

Infant baptism: The practise of baptising/naming young children practised by both protestants and catholics. Infant baptism is also known as christening in some faith traditions.

9.15 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sections 9.1 and 9.2
- 2) See Section 9.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sections 9.5, 9.6, 9.10 and Sub-section 9.10.1
- 2) See Sub-section 9.12.1, 9.12.2, 9.12.3

9.16 SUGGESTED READINGS

Arvind Sinha (2010), Europe in Transition: From Feudalism to Industrialization, Manohar, Delhi

Meenakshi Phulkar (2000), Rise of Modern West, Macmillan Delhi,