

Covenant Life College History of the Reformation

February 7, 2007

The Protestant Reformation Setting Review of the Late Middle Ages

I. The Church

- From the 11th Century (the time of Hildebrand) the papacy had been characterized by an increasing secularism. The popes were more and more involved in worldly matters, both economic and political. In general, the people become more skeptical of the RC Church. Pope Julius II actually led troops into battle.

A. Two Major Crises

1. The Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy

- **Pope Innocent III** (d. 1215) in the early 13th Century had more worldly power than any pope had ever had. He marked the height of papal power. He used the interdict on King John of England. The interdict was a powerful weapon in the hand of the pope for it effectively cut off (what people thought to be) the means of grace from those under it. John asked the pope to forgive him. The pope forced him to acknowledge him as superior, John as vassal. Following this incident, kings began to fight back.

- If Innocent III was the high water mark of the pope's earthly power, **Boniface VIII** (1294-1303) was the low.
- His struggle with Philip the Fair of France led to his issuing of *Unam Sanctum*, the papal bull which stated that the pope 1) has authority over all the rulers on earth (so God has decreed) and 2) submission to the pope is necessary for eternal salvation.
- But things had changed between the times of Innocent and Boniface. He was unable to back up his claims. Philip had him kidnapped and beaten. Though he was subsequently released, his health was broken and he died shortly afterward.
- Boniface was succeeded by **Clement V** who moved the papal chair from Rome to Avignon at Philip's insistence. The French kings were for most of the 14th Century influencing/dominating the papacy- a reversal of the former state of things.
- The English, who were at war with France, regarded the papacy as being in French hands.
- This state of affairs enabled **Wycliffe** in England to say things about the papacy that he would not have been able to say otherwise.
- 1309-1377 are the years of the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy.

2. The Great Schism (1378-1417)

- In January 1377, then Pope **Gregory XI** decided to return to Rome. After Gregory died, the Roman

mob demands an Italian pope. **Urban VI** was elected but did not get along with the French Cardinals who secretly met in a town in northern Italy and declared Urban apostate. In his place they elected **Clement VII** pope (who also happened to be the nephew of the king of France).

- This newly elected pope moved his chair back to Avignon.
- This created great confusion and division in the RC Church. Christendom became divided politically, as well.
- The world watched as *two* one and only vicars of Christ on earth anathematized each other.
- The credibility and authority of the papacy was severely damaged.
- In 1409 a council at Pisa attempted to rectify this situation. The council deposed both popes and elected a third, but neither of the first two resigned. So, there were then three!
- The Council of Constance (1414-1418) finally ended the schism by the election of **Martin V** in 1417.
- The big winner in this was the Conciliar Movement (the idea that the supreme authority of the Church lies not with the pope but with a General Council).

B. Attempts at Reforming Corruption

- **Economic corruption** had continued with the “Right of Spoil” that said when a noble died, all his property went to the pope. Recall “Simony” and “The Right of Reservation.”
- **Moral corruption** – vows of celibacy were routinely broken; concubine fees paid; Pope Innocent III fathered 16 illegitimate children.

- **The Black Plague** also occurs during this time. Two-fifths of the population by conservative estimate die. All this was viewed as the punishment of God. There were other attempts to reform the RC Church, mainly on moral grounds.
- **Cardinal Cisneros** the Primate of Spain, recognized all the problems mentioned and set out to bring reform:
 - Ordered that the priest must reside within his parish- no absenteeism
 - Priest must refrain from immorality
 - Priest must preach the gospel
 - Priest must make an effort to teach the young
 - He established Bible Studies
 - He established the University of Alcala, where it was required that three languages be learned- Latin, Greek and Hebrew

Cardinal Contarini- very influential in the early 1500's. Experienced a dramatic conversion and used his office to promote moral reform and biblical studies. There were actually many like him. Some read and approved Luther (on justification by faith alone). They were evangelical in soteriology, but differed with Luther on ecclesiology.

II. The Intellectual Context

A. Scholasticism

- Scholasticism was an educational methodology, with a heavy emphasis on logic.
- A definition suggested by Alister McGrath:

“... the medieval movement, flourishing in the period 1200-1500, which placed emphasis upon the rational justification of religious belief, and the systematic presentation of those beliefs. ‘Scholasticism’ thus does not refer to a *specific system of beliefs*, but to a *particular way of organizing theology*—a highly developed method of presenting material, making fine distinctions and attempting to achieve a comprehensive view of theology.”¹
- On the eve of the Reformation Aquinas and Ockham were the major schools. The theological orientation of Ockham was tilted toward Pelagianism while Aquinas was more Augustinian in his orientation.
- There was a smaller stream, the Schola Augustiana. A minority viewpoint, it was more intensively Augustinian than Anselm. Gregory of Rimini (d. 1350) is the significant voice here. He was at the University of Paris. Gregory
 - Believed in a rigorous view of original sin
 - Believed in the final authority of Scripture
 - Believed man was saved by grace alone
 - Believed in a double predestination
 - Heiko Oberman thinks that Luther read Gregory. They were both Augustinian hermits.

B. Humanism

¹ Alister McGrath, Christian Theology, Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1994, p. 34.

- Like Scholasticism, Humanism is an educational methodology, which gave birth to a movement. It placed emphasis on eloquence and looked to classical antiquity for inspiration.
- *Ad fontes* was the motto, *to the founts* (of learning), back to Cicero, Seneca, the great rhetoricians.
- Generally, Scholasticism was concerned to move men's minds; Humanism, to move hearts.
- The Humanism of this period must not be confused with 'secular humanism' of our day. These people were consciously Christian, wanting to move people by preaching.
- Looked back to the early fathers, as well. Augustine, Jerome and the New Testament, especially the original languages.
- Many of these humanists became great philologists in Greek and Hebrew.
- These men were often moral reformers. They were reform minded in a moral, not doctrinal way.

Erasmus- 1466-1536

- In a sense, Erasmus prepared the church for Luther. He was the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest. He was also the first ever best-selling author. "In Praise of Folly" went through 600 editions.
- He was concerned about moral reform. Wanted to opt for a more simplified Christianity- *imitatio Christi* – let's imitate Christ.
- He didn't reject the sacramental system, but he didn't put the emphasis there, either.

- His *Enchiridion* published in 1501 was a handbook on the Christian life. He wanted to encourage the study of the Scriptures, he believed in the concept of the vernacular- “I long for the day when a plowboy can read the Psalms in his own language.
- In 1513, as a satirist, he wrote *Julius Exclusius* (Julius excluded) about Pope Julius II (the pope who led troops into battle). He wrote it anonymously. In it the pope is denied heaven.
- **1516- Critical edition of the Greek New Testament- A watershed event.**
- Luther used this to make his famous German translation. Erasmus’ textual work had doctrinal implications. This work undermined the Vulgate at points. E.g. Matthew 4.17 “Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Vulgate)
- All the reformers, with one exception, are humanists trained in the classics. That exception is, of course, Luther, who was trained in the scholastic tradition.

III. The Political Context

Politics is woven throughout the story of the Reformation. It was not purely a religious thing.

A. The Holy Roman Empire

- **The Holy Roman Empire** is the name given to the attempt to create a new political empire in Western

Europe to supposedly continue the Roman Empire of Antiquity. It emerged following the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD. The desired concept was that of political and spiritual unity, a dominant thought of the Middle Ages. In practice it never quite achieved its aim.

- The H.R.E. was composed of some 300 semi-autonomous principalities. It was a political counterweight to the secular aspirations of the papacy.
- One may think of the kings of Europe as a sort of corporate board with the H.R. Emperor as the chairman of the board.

- Two major political events conspired to help Luther:
 1. In 1519, Charles V of Spain (and of Netherlands and Burgundy) became the new emperor. Francis I of France had coveted this title. In order to stop Charles aspirations, Francis tried to bribe the seven electors who voted in the new emperor. But Charles offered better bribes. As a result of his defeat, Francis initiated a series of (four) wars with Charles during the years 1520-1550. These are known as the Hapsburg-Valois Wars.

 2. Secondly, there was the threat of the Ottoman Turks under Sulieman the Magnificent. In 1520, they pressed upon the eastern border of the empire, conquering Belgrade in 1521 and defeating the Hungarians in 1526 at the Battle of Mohacs. In 1529, they surrounded Vienna with 200,000 soldiers. Vienna was defended by a force

of only 20,000 imperial troops. But the Turkish supply lines gave out and they had to retreat.

3. The early years of the Luther in Saxony coincided with these significant political events. Charles could have crushed Luther, but for Francis on his west and the Turks on his east. So Charles was pre-occupied when Luther was most vulnerable. He was off in his native Spain trying to raise an army.

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- If you think of all the kings of Europe as a sort of corporate board, the H.R. Emperor was the chairman of the board. Politically, there was the church, over which the pope ruled.
- Then there were the states, over which the HRE ruled. Not everyone bought into this.
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[Sidelight- one of these wars figured into Calvin's life. When he was on his way to Strasbourg, he had to detour to Geneva because of a battle between the forces of Francis and Charles.

B. The Turkish Threat

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