

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REFORMATION IN WESTERN EUROPE

- I. Was the Reformation a radical “movement”?
 - A. Politically and Socially Conservative Intent
 1. *Magisterial Reformers*: it was a common trait of the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Calvinist reformers to work within the framework of reigning political power
 - a. they never contemplated reform outside or against the societies of which they were members
 - b. they wanted their reform to take shape within the laws and institutions of the 16th century
 2. as such, many scholars point to the fact that the political and social status quo changed very little during the 16th century
 - a. the same aristocratic families governed as before
 - b. in general, the rich got richer and the poor poorer
 - B. Nevertheless, the Protestant movement, as we have seen, had some effect on society and politics of the time. Thus, while it might be true that the only radical change occurred in religion, the seeds of social and political change were planted. In time, the ideas fostered by the Reformation would have profound political and social effects on Europe.
- II. The Revolution in Religious Practices and Institutions

***While the early Protestant reformers may not have intended great political or social change, they certainly intended “radical” religious change. This did occur, but, as stated before, within the laws and institutions of the time.**

- A. Religion in 15th-Century Life
 1. the clergy make up 6 to 8% of the total population
 - a. they exercised considerable spiritual power and were considered more “religious” than the laity
 - b. they also exercised political power
 - 1) they legislated and taxed
 - 2) they tried cases in special church courts
 - 3) they enforced laws with threats of excommunication
 2. the church calendar regulated daily life
 - a. one-third of the year was given over to some kind of religious observation or celebration
 - b. religious fasting was commonplace
 3. monasteries and nunneries were prominent and influential institutions
 - a. the children of society’s most powerful citizens resided and were educated there
 - b. cloisters exercised political and social privileges
 4. in churches, mass and liturgy were read almost entirely in Latin
 5. images of saints were regularly displayed and, on certain holidays, their relics were paraded about and venerated

6. letters of indulgence were sold regularly
7. the clergy walked the streets with concubines and their children
- B. Religion in 16th-Century Life (in Protestant regions and cities)
 1. overall numbers of the clergy fell by two-thirds
 2. religious holidays shrunk by one-third
 3. cloisters were nearly gone
 - a. those that remained were transformed into hospices for the sick and poor or converted into educational institutions
 - b. the clergy paid taxes and were subject to civil laws
 4. worship in churches (which had also been reduced in number by at least one-third) were conducted in the vernacular
 - a. the churches were much less ornate (to make sure the congregation meditated only on God's word)
 - b. copies of Luther's translation of the New Testament could be found in private homes
 5. there were no saints displayed in churches and their relics were not venerated
 6. letters of indulgence had disappeared
 7. the clergy could marry (and many of them did)
- III. How did the Reformation affect society?
 - A. The Reformation and Education: The Reformation implemented many of the educational reforms of humanism in the new Protestant schools and universities (even when their views on Church doctrine and humankind separated them from the humanist movement)... Why?
 1. the humanist program of studies, which provided the language skills to deal authoritatively with original sources, proved to be an appropriate tool for the elaboration of Protestant doctrine
 2. "Salvation by faith alone" and personal interpretation of the scriptures required that lay people be educated
 3. education gave people the tools to question ancient doctrine and implement reform
 - B. The Reformation also fostered new expectations about social roles
 1. Women: Protestant reformers challenged the medieval tendency to degrade women as temptresses and to exalt them as virgins
 - a. praised woman in her own right, but especially in her biblical vocation as mother and housewife
 - b. promoted the idea of husband and wife as co-workers in the special God-ordained community of the family, sharing authority equally within the household

***Although from a modern perspective, women remained subject to men, new marriage laws gave them greater security and protection. In some Protestant cities, women had an equal right with men to divorce and remarry in good consciences.**

2. Laity
 - a. the laity were encouraged to study the Bible on their own

- b. there was less of a distinction between the laity and the clergy
- 3. Clergy
 - a. the clergy was no longer the only emissary of god
 - b. the clergy was now subject to taxes and the civil law
- 4. Secular Rulers
 - a. secular rulers were no longer subject to the church
 - b. the church became secondary to the state
 - c. in England, Henry VIII became the head of the church as well as the state
- 5. Peasants
 - a. demanded social and political rights and equality based on Protestant teachings
 - b. although very little changed for the Peasants, the desire for change did not die