

The Modern Age in Europe (B) Reformation

The **Reformation** is the name given to a group of religious movements of the sixteenth century launched by the Christians against the various drawbacks of the Church and the objectionable practices of the clergymen. The main target of was the Pope.

Reformation movements created a split in the Christian Church between those who continued to remain loyal to the Pope at Rome were known as Roman **Catholics** and those who broke away from the Church at Rome were known as **Protestants**.

The Reformation broke out in a number of countries like England, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Scotland. However, all Protestants did not share the same religious beliefs and rituals. The Protestants of one country and those of another differed from each other in many ways, extreme form of Protestantism was Calvinism. Presbyterianism of Scotland and Puritanism of England were similar to Calvinism in simplicity, strictness and austerity.

CAUSES OF THE REFORMATION

The following causes were responsible for the Reformation:

1. DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PRACTICES OF CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church had become a vast hierarchical organisation headed by the Pope in Rome. Systematic efforts were made to extend the authority of the Church over everyone, high or low. People became dissatisfied. These Church practices were the following:

1. Economic Factors: In the middle ages, the Church had vast properties, which gave ample income to the Church. One-tenth of the income of a person was given to the Church. This was called the **Tithe**. In addition to this, the clergy collected another sum called the '**Peter's Pence**' from the people. Pope Leo X wanted to build St. Peter's Church. So he issued pardon certificates called **Indulgences** to those who gave money to build the Church.

Indulgences were letters which pardoned punishments of the sinners who bought them, both in this life and after their death, Normally, the priests imposed a penance or punishment on a person who had sinned and he was required to perform a special service or make a pilgrimage to a holy place. But now they could be freed from doing penance for their sins by buying a Letter of Indulgence.

Finally, the Church offices were given to the highest bidder. This practice came to be known as **Simony**. All these practices annoyed the rulers as well as the common people.

(ii) Corruption in the Church: In the beginning, the clergy led an exemplary life and commanded great respect in the society. But with the passage of time, moral decay came into some areas in the functioning of the Church. Some of the clergymen lacked proper education and some lived in luxury and neglected their religious duties. The priests promised *salvation in exchange for fees*. They could pronounce a marriage lawful or unlawful. In fact, there were fees for every transaction in life, from birth to death, fees for the peace of the soul and fees for the souls of the people dead long ago. These practices were severely criticised and opposed by the people. *Erasmus* exposed them in his book named **'In Prayer of Folly'** and prepared the ground for the Reformation Movement.



(iii) Rulers' Resentment: Pope's interference in the political affairs was naturally opposed by the kings. They strongly supported the Reformation Movement in order to weaken the Church. The rulers of Europe had quarrelled with the Popes over the *royal right to tax the Church property*. The rivalry ended in the defeat of the Papacy.

The French King, **Philip IV** had forced the Pope Clement V to *leave his headquarters at Rome* and stay in Avignon in France, when the latter interfered in the former's political affairs.

King Henry VIII of England hardly cared for the Pope. He got the Church lands and in 1536 passed an *Act for the dissolution* of monasteries, whereby small monasteries with an income of less than £200 a year were closed and their buildings, land and money taken by the Crown. By another Act of 1539, larger monasteries were closed. The monasteries were a reminder of the power and wealth of the Catholic Church. Henry's lavish lifestyle, along with his wars, had led to a lack of money. By destroying the monastic system, Henry could acquire all its wealth and property, while at the same time removing the influence of the Pope.

(iv) Movements against the Church: Anti-Church movements began in Europe in the middle ages. These movements directed their attacks on the wrong doings of the Church. **John Wycliffe**, an English priest and Oxford professor, criticised the worldliness of the Church and some of its practices. He laid emphasis on the *Bible as the sole guide for salvation*. The Church ordered his expulsion from the Oxford University where he was teaching. This created dissatisfaction among the scholars.

(v) Immediate Cause: Long before the open breach with Rome, there had been some cases of protest against the power of the Pope. These minor revolts were crushed with a heavy hand. So the early reformers met with failure. The challenge was accepted by a German priest, *Martin Luther*. He raised a strong voice and launched a movement against the abuses in the Church and the authority of the Pope. This proved to *be the immediate cause of the Reformation*.

2. NEW LEARNING

The spread of new learning and spirit of enquiry was developed by Renaissance scholars. *The invention of printing press and the printing of the Bible* in vernacular languages brought a new outlook among laymen.

The Renaissance encouraged spirit of enquiry, developed critical attitude and broadened the mental outlook of man. People then began to question everything including the authority of the Pope. They criticised the Church practices, rituals and the lifestyles of some of the clergymen. New learning led to a secular outlook among people.

Nobles and merchants were jealous of the wealth of the Church. The common man in Europe looked upon the Church taxes with contempt. The changing attitude of people towards the Church led to the growth of secular ideas.

MARTIN LUTHER'S CONTRIBUTION

In the 16th century, Martin Luther, a German clergyman and *Professor of Theology* at the University of Wittenburg, openly criticised papacy. He accused the Church for the sale of indulgences. In 1517, Luther wrote **Ninety-five Theses** or statements dealing with the difference between the beliefs and practices of the Church and nailed them on



the church door at Wittenburg. Earlier in 1512, he undertook a pilgrimage to Rome and found that some of the clergymen were living a luxurious life. This made him a strong opponent of the Church.

The Holy Roman Emperor **Charles V**, upon request by the Pope, asked Luther to defend his case before a Grand Diet held at Worms known as **the Diet of Worms** consisting of Council of Princes and High Dignitaries in 1521. The Diet ordered that Luther's writings be burnt and Luther be outlawed. But Luther had the support of German rulers; and so no harm was done to him.

This movement soon came to be described as the **German Protestant Movement**. Luther devoted his time translating the Bible into German and set up an independent church. Luther travelled extensively to different parts of Europe, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The Protestant Movement found wide acceptance.

Lutheranism was recognised as a legal form of Christianity by a treaty known as 'The Peace of Augsburg' in 1555, nine years after the death of Luther. This treaty was signed between the **Schmalkaldic League** (formed by Luther and some German Princes) and **the Roman Catholic Church** after a long civil war. In Germany, the southern states continued to remain loyal to the Catholic Church whereas the northern states accepted Lutheranism.

COUNTER REFORMATION

The Reformation Movement was against the Roman Catholic Church and brought about the birth of the Protestant Church. In order to restore the credibility of the Catholic Church, a large number of dedicated Christians including some Popes introduced certain reforms within the Church. This movement is known as the **Counter Reformation**. A Church Council was convened at Trent in northern Italy in 1545 by **Pope Paul III**.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563): The Council made a number of changes in the Catholic Church. It expanded its doctrines in the light of the changed attitudes of the times. It condemned leading an irresponsible religious life by the clergy. Books, which were considered to have had ideas against the Catholic teaching, were banned. The Pope was regarded as the head of the Catholic Church and the final interpreter of the Christian doctrine. The Council of Trent was responsible for establishing centres known as **seminaries** to educate and train priests. It forbade the Church to charge fees for conducting religious services, and advocated the use of the local language for preaching in the Church.

Society of Jesus: to counter reformation, One of religious orders was the Society of Jesus founded by **Ignatius Loyola**, with the permission of the Pope. He studied theology in Sorbonne University. It speedily gained recognition and was successful in winning back more adherents in Europe, India, China, Africa and the Americas.



Saint Francis Xavier: St. Francis Xavier was *a follower of Ignatius Loyola*. He travelled to China and Japan for the propagation of Christianity. He came to India and worked till his death. His mortal remains are **found at the Church of Bom Jesus** in old Goa. The selfless 1900 and dedicated service rendered by the Jesuits helped in restoring the credibility of the Roman Catholic Church.

