

The Background to the European Reformation

Modern scholarship has attempted to rehabilitate the church of the middle ages. Norman Tranter concludes his study of *The Church in the Later Middle Ages* with the following paragraph:

Why was the later medieval Church followed by the Reformation? The question remains intriguing yet difficult to answer. On the one hand, within the late medieval Church many of the seeds of both Reformation and Counter-Reformation may be discerned: these epoch-making movements in Church history represent both developments from within the late medieval Church and reactions against its perceived failures. Yet, had they known, late medieval Christians would have been surprised, I think, at the precise forms these developments were to take.¹

Tranter demonstrates that the Medieval church produced a rich spirituality, including that of the mystics such as Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1327), Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c.1416) and Catherine of Sienna (1347-80); scholarship of great depth and influence such as that of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), John Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308) and William of Ockham (c.1288-c.1348); and wide developments in the church itself. So why was this followed by the Reformation?

Alongside the undoubted positive developments which occurred during the middle ages, it can also be asserted that the church found itself in a moral, spiritual and theological crisis in the west by the end of the fifteenth century. In the words of Owen Chadwick, 'At the beginning of the sixteenth century, everyone that mattered in the Western Church was crying out for reformation'.² There were a number of reasons for this. We can separate these, for the sake of convenience, into social and theological reasons, though the separation should not be considered as absolute.

I Social Reasons

a. Social disasters

The unity of Christendom, based on the primacy of the bishop of Rome (the Pope) and predicated on the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, came under attack as a result of a succession of disastrous occurrences. These included the Hundred Years War between England and France (ended in 1453), the Hussite wars between 1419 and 1435, and the wars of the Roses in England between 1455 and 1485. The advance of Islam was a matter of grave concern, exacerbated by the fall of Constantinople, headquarters of the eastern empire, in

¹ Norman Tranter, *The Church in the Later Middle Ages* (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2008), p. 188.

² Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*, The Pelican History of the Church, vol. 2 (3rd ed. London: Penguin, 1972), p. 11.

1453. Alongside this there were also severe, prolonged and frequent outbursts of famine and plague. In 1347-48, approximately 40 per cent of the population of Europe succumbed to the Black Death. Such events gave the impression that Europe was under the judgment of God, which in turn gave the opportunity for the Church to exploit the situation by the selling of indulgences and the holding of chantries (sung masses which were paid for from the estate of the dead) and requiem masses for the dead, all with a view to ensuring that those carried away by war, famine or disease could still be redeemed, even post mortem.

b. The Great Schism

The papacy itself added to the church's problems. Although successive bishops of Rome had, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries spent more time away from than in the city, the establishment of the papal court at Avignon by Clement V in 1309 meant the permanent absence of the bishop of Rome from his see. Subsequent papal appointments, as well as the majority of the cardinals, were Frenchmen. In 1377, Gregory XI returned to Rome. He died in the following year, and Urban VI was elected in his place. However, in September 1378 a rival pope was elected – Clement VII – and he set up court in Avignon. The Great Schism ensued with Christendom divided in loyalty between the two popes. Central and northern Italy, Germany, Central Europe, Scandinavia and England were for Urban; France, Spain and Scotland were for Clement. Some territories, such as Ireland, Portugal and southern Italy changed allegiance over the following years. The cardinals called a council which met at Pisa in 1409, deposed the two popes and elected Alexander V in their place. The two papal courts refused to recognize the authority of the council which meant, in effect, that there were three popes. The Council of Constance met between 1414 and 1417 and ensured the abdication of the three churches and elected Martin V in their place. All this suggested that the basis of the unity of the Catholic church, namely the person of the pope, had been empirically challenged; it was one thing to claim that unity, it was another thing to demonstrate it in practice.

Apart from the disrepute in which the institution of the papacy came, and the damage done to the unity of Christendom, the 'Great Schism' resulted in a general sense that a church council could exercise greater authority over the church than the pope. Marsilius of Padua (c.1275-1342) had argued in *Defender of the Peace* that 'power' is derived from the general body of citizens (as far as the state is concerned, and not from the rulers) and from the general body of believers (as far as the church is concerned, and not from the pope). Although these early arguments for conciliarity were rejected by subsequent popes and was largely redundant by 1450, it gave a certain degree of precedence to subsequent arguments which emerged during the following century.

c. Papal decadence

R. Tudur Jones notes that:

The popes were becoming increasingly embroiled in local Italian politics. Italians had an absolute majority among the cardinals from the time of Pius II (1458-64) onwards and these men were far more concerned about the fortunes of their families than with the welfare of the universal church. Half the popes between 1447 and 1517 had fathered illegitimate children and the papal court itself became a hotbed of conspiracies, plots and intrigues. And the moral degradation reached its lowest point in the person of Rodrigo Borgia – Alexander VI.³

Financial difficulties led to the development of pluralism, where the same individuals could hold multiple benefices. This was true at all levels of church life and resulted in absenteeism (both among bishops and among local clergy). Such difficulties resulted in the secularization of the office of priest and bishop and the breakdown of ministry in the church. While this was not true everywhere, it was widespread in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century.

II Theological reasons

There are basically three movements which arose in the medieval church which are generally considered to be forerunners of the sixteenth century Reformation. These are the Waldensians, the Lollards, associated with John Wyclif (1329-84) and the Hussites associated with the Czech reformer Jan Hus (1373-1415).

a. Waldensians

Peter Waldo (or Valdés), was a twelfth century merchant from Lyon in France. He began to preach around 1177 and advocated the simple and moral life. Indeed he advocated poverty as reflecting the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament and thus rejected the Roman Church for its luxury, its institutionalism and its compromise with the world. There are several particular teachings associated with Waldo and his movement: oaths were forbidden except oaths made to God; the validity of capital punishment was denied; sacraments were validated by the worthiness of those consecrating them; thus lay people, who lived demonstrably holy lives, could consecrate the sacraments. Although his teaching was declared heretical in 1215, Waldo's fate is unknown, though he evaded capture and is thought to have died in Germany around 1218. A movement grew around his teaching and this continues to exist as the Waldensian Evangelical Church, which is particularly strong in Europe and in South and North America.

b. The Lollards

³ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 12.

Wyclif was hailed as the 'morning star of the Reformation'. Initially an Oxford don, he forfeited his position in the University in 1381 as a result of his criticism of the Catholic church. He held that the sole infallible authority was the Bible, not the institution of the church or its traditions. This is made accessible through preaching rather than through the sacramental theology established by the church. Thus he denied the efficacy of ritual (the sacraments, exorcism, pilgrimages and so on) as well as the right of the state to practice capital punishment. He also advocated the idea that the true church was composed of those elected (predestined) to salvation by God, not by those who were confessed members of the earthly institution. Those predestined were obvious by their display of genuine holiness. Furthermore, he denied the infallibility of the papal office, and claimed that God was the supreme head of the church and, as God had appointed the king, he advocated a sense of the supremacy of the state over the church. Those who followed Wyclif's teaching were termed 'Lollards', though there was never a central organization to the movement. 'Lollard', like so many other religious terms, finds its provenance in derision; it is most likely to derive from a word meaning 'mumbler' or heretic.

c. The Hussites

Hus was ordained in 1401 and became rector of the University of Prague. He came under the influence of Wyclif's writings, denying the infallibility of the pope and the need, and theological justification, for indulgences. He claimed that authority lay not in the institution of the church and its hierarchy but in the body of believers who lived under the authority and insights of the scriptures. He also stressed morality against the clear immorality of the institutional church and its officers. He was a popular preacher and commanded significant support in his native land. In 1410 he was excommunicated and his views condemned. He was offered safe passage to the council of Constance, but this was not honoured and on 6 July 1415 he was declared a heretic and handed over to the secular powers for punishment (strictly speaking the church never punished heresy, rather it handed heretics over to the secular powers for punishment). He was burned at the stake that afternoon, demonstrating considerable bravery, an act which ignited years of warfare in his native Bohemia. Luther would later claim him as a 'like-minded' reformer.

III Conclusions

The medieval period provided a number of developments in the church which were positive and a number of developments which were worrying. All were significant for the subsequent movement which is known as 'the Reformation'. There were social and ecclesiastical developments which were the cause of much concern, while theological arguments were emerging which suggested alternative ways of structuring the Christian life and which could be justified by reference to the New Testament. In this way, the social, ecclesiastical and theological foundations had already been laid which would give rise to the Protestant Reformation.