

# The Age of Religious Discord

## The Counter-Reformation

In retrospect, the Reformation of the 16th century must be regarded as one of the most profound reasons for the transformation of mediaeval Europe. The unquestioned power of the Church began to crumble, and this new development paved the way for the emergence of a modern, enlightened society.

However, it took the Catholic Church a long time to realize that Protestantism posed a serious threat. At first the pope did not take Martin Luther's criticism seriously and dismissed it as "a monk's quarrel." He did not think Luther's theses could rock the ecclesiastical establishment to its foundations. After all, there had been quite a number of people within the Catholic Church – e. g. Erasmus\* – who had called for reforms even before Luther appeared. Nonetheless, as the German monk's ideas spread and the breakup of the Church continued, the pope eventually was forced to realize that there was a drastic need for change.

Thus, in the 1530s, the Catholic Church initiated a counter movement to undermine the Protestant movement: it was a major reform effort known as the *Counter-Reformation*, or the Catholic Reformation. Originally intending to promote a more spiritual attitude in the Catholic Church, the Counter-Reformation also propagated the doctrines\* of the Church and pursued an aggressive campaign against any Protestant endeavours to establish a new faith.

The first pope to take action was Paul III who reigned from 1534 to 1549. He wanted the Catholic Church to become more spiritual and pure again. Paul III turned away from the common practice of simony, i. e. buying holy offices or positions in the hierarchy of the Church. Instead, he appointed pious and well-educated men as bishops and cardinals and made the bishops live and work in their home dioceses\*.

An important instrument of the Counter-Reformation was the Inquisition. In Spain, the Inquisition\* had been established since 1478 in order to try and punish heretics. Now Pope Paul III brought the Inquisition from Spain to Rome. Many of the Inquisition's brutal punishments – such as burning people at the stake – had long before been used by governments against the worst criminals and traitors. The Inquisition of the Counter-Reformation was not primarily intended as a weapon against Protestants. The key purpose was to prevent Catholics from leaving the Church.

In 1555, Paul IV became pope. He used a new method to fight heresy\*. In 1557, he established an index of prohibited books which forbade Catholics to read certain works that were regarded to threaten, challenge, or undermine the Catholic Church's authority. This index showed that the improvements in printing had played a vital role in spreading the Reformation. Before the printing press, the Church could easily find and burn manuscript copies of heretical work. After printing had been improved, books became much cheaper and affordable to a larger number of people. Now it was easier to prohibit what people could read than to try burning all the books. The Catholic Church did not abandon the index of prohibited books until 1966.

Pope Paul III was well aware of the fact that it was vital to define Catholic doctrines clearly if a counterattack against upcoming Protestantism was to be successful. Actually, Catholic authorities had often disagreed about certain doctrines, such as the role of priests. In 1545, the pope therefore summoned a council of important Church leaders to the Italian city of Trent. The *Council of Trent*, which was in session between 1545 and 1563, laid down an official Church doctrine with the same precision that the Protestant reformer Jean Calvin had used when defining his faith.

The Council of Trent prohibited the sale of indulgences\* which had set off Martin Luther's protest in 1517. Furthermore, the council demanded strict discipline from the clergy. However, in most cases, the council reaffirmed those features which the Protestants fiercely rejected, such as the need for ceremonies and splendour. It was emphasized that people were dependent on priests since God granted forgiveness only through the Church

and not on personal merit. The Council of Trent conceded that every individual enjoyed a free will, yet a person's fate after death was not only determined by their faith, as Martin Luther had asserted, but by Church ceremonies as well.

In conclusion, the Council of Trent can be regarded as an important element of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Protestantism with its simplicity and austerity still attracted many people. A large proportion of the faithful, however, preferred traditional ceremonies and took comfort in beautifully decorated churches. They regarded the authority of priests as important, and the idea that one could gain salvation through performing good works as essential. The Counter-Reformation was not able to roll Protestantism back, but by the 1600s, the Reformation had slowed down.

## ***The Society of Jesus***

10 In order to be successful in fighting the upcoming Protestant faith, the Catholic Counter-Reformation needed to take action in many ways. After all, it was not enough to reform the Church in theory only; the pope needed an 'army' to fight for his cause. As a result, a new religious order, the *Society of Jesus*, also known as the Jesuits, was formed.

15 Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) founded the Jesuit order in 1534. Loyola had served as a soldier in the army of the Catholic Emperor Charles V. He had been severely injured in the war against France. Since he had to go through a long period of recovery, he started to read books on the lives of Jesus and the saints. Having committed various sins in his life as a soldier, Loyola wondered if he could ever attain salvation. The answer is said to have come to him in a vision that he described in his book *Spiritual Exercises* in 1548. According to Loyola, self-discipline and determined effort could lead to salvation. In 1540, Pope Paul III acknowledged Loyola's Society of Jesus as an official order of the Catholic Church.

20 The organization of the Jesuits differed very much from the traditional religious orders of the Middle Ages. Loyola formed the group with military discipline and strictest obedience. This made the Jesuits an enormously effective weapon of the Counter-Reformation. By 1550 the Jesuits already had 1,500 members. They were intensely involved in missionary work all over the world, even in China and Japan. However, their efforts in Europe were remarkable as well.

25 The Society of Jesus put emphasis on education. They founded numerous schools and colleges in Europe, combining theology with humanist values. Thus, the Jesuits attracted and generated intellectuals that were loyal supporters of the Catholic Church. The Jesuits rejected the killing of heretics, believing that – if given a chance to discuss religious issues with Protestants – they could convert them and thus gain lost souls. Jesuit missionaries proved extraordinarily successful in restoring Catholicism to large parts of Germany and Eastern Europe. Poland was largely won back through Jesuit efforts.

30 Jesuit activities in Latin America were very controversial in Europe. The colonial powers Spain and Portugal even accused the Jesuits of interfering with enterprises of the royal governments. The Jesuits fiercely opposed slavery and tried to protect the Natives from being exploited. They even formed Christian Native American city-states in Paraguay and parts of present-day Brazil. These were societies based on an idealized theocratic model.

## ***The Wars of Religion in France***

By the second half of the 16th century, Protestantism and Catholicism had become more and more radical opponents in the struggle for the minds and hearts of European Christians. This conflict resulted in numerous religious wars all over Europe known as the “European wars of religion.” They took place in the 16th and 17th centuries in countries like Switzerland, France, Germany, Austria, Bohemia, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, 5 Ireland, and Denmark. Although these military conflicts are called “wars of religion,” economic, social, and political reasons played an important role in these struggles as well. The most shattering religious wars of the 16th century were the French civil wars which are known as the “French wars of religion.”

In the course of the 16th century, Calvinism grew rapidly in France. The Huguenots – as the French Calvinists were called – came from all levels of society: artisans and shopkeepers annoyed by rising prices and a strict 10 guild system; lawyers and merchants in towns all over France who were dissatisfied with their few local privileges; and members of the French nobility. Within a few decades only, nearly half of the French nobility became Huguenots, even the house of Bourbon, which ruled in southern France and was next in the royal line of succession to the House of Valois. The fact that such a high percentage of the nobility converted to Calvinism gradually turned out to be a potentially dangerous threat to the power of the French monarchy. Although the Huguenots 15 represented only 7 percent of the entire French population, they were a powerful and very well-organized minority.

The Valois monarchs were steadfast Catholics and tried to stop the spread of Protestantism by persecuting Calvinists. In 1559, King Henry II (1547–1559) was killed in an accident during a tournament. He was succeeded by a series of sons who were extremely weak. In addition to that, two of those sons were dominated by 20 their mother, Catherine de Medici (1519–1589). Catherine was a rather moderate Catholic and strove for religious compromise in order to settle political tensions. Unfortunately, she soon had to realize that both sides – Catholics and Huguenots – had their share of religious fanatics who were not willing to make any concessions. The radical Catholic party was in favour of strict opposition to the Huguenots and was led by the powerful Guise family. Due to the fact that they were in control of Paris and large parts of northern and north-western France, the 25 Guise family was able to recruit and pay for large armies and received support abroad from the pope and the Jesuits who praised the Guises’ hard-line position with regard to the Huguenots.

Nonetheless, religion was not the only cause of the French civil wars. Many provincial towns and regions distant from Paris, which had long been annoyed by the growing monarchical power through gradual centralization, were only too willing to join a revolt against the king. The same was true for the nobility, and because so 30 many of them had converted to Calvinism, they formed a threatening opposition to the crown. For some people, the political unity of France was of less importance than religious truth. However, there was also a group of public figures in France who placed politics above religion and believed that no religious truth was worth a civil war devastating the country.

The wars of religion erupted in 1562, when the mighty duke of Guise slaughtered a peaceful congregation of 35 Huguenots. In the following decade of the 1560s, the cruelties on both sides escalated and got out of control. Although the Huguenots were too small a group to conquer France, their armies were well organized and could not be defeated.

In 1572, the conflicting parties of Catholics and Calvinists were supposed to be reconciled by the marriage of the sister of the reigning Valois king, Charles IX (1560–1574), and Henry of Navarre, the Bourbon ruler of the 40 southern French kingdom of Navarre. Henry was the generally accepted political leader of the Huguenots, and – consequently – many Huguenots travelled to Paris for the wedding.

The Huguenots were not aware that the Guise family had managed to persuade the king and his mother, Catherine de Medici, that such a gathering of Huguenots posed a dangerous threat to the royal family. Charles IX decided to take the opportunity to eliminate the Huguenot leaders with one swift blow.

Early in the day on 24 August 1572 the king's guards took some prominent Huguenot leaders by surprise and killed them. These infamous murders soon set off a wave of violence that spread throughout the city of Paris. Catholic mobs roamed the streets of Paris for three days, killing 3,000 Huguenots in an often cruel and bloodthirsty manner. Thousands more were killed in provincial towns. Henry of Navarre saved his life by promising to convert to Catholicism. This *Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre* did not turn out to help the Catholics win the war since it discredited the Valois dynasty without ending the conflict.

The wars continued. The Huguenots regrouped and found new strength. In 1576, the ultra-Catholics formed a "holy league," more determined than ever to exterminate Protestant heresy and make the true Catholic pretender – Henry, Duke of Guise – the new King of France, replacing the weak ruling king, Henry III (1574–1589), who had succeeded his brother Charles IX. The conflict was to be decided in the so-called "war of the three Henries" in 1588 – 1589. Henry, Duke of Guise, who was financially supported by Philip II of Spain, took control of Paris and forced King Henry III to make him chief minister. Henry III, in return, assassinated the Duke of Guise in order to get rid of the influence of the Guise and then allied with Henry of Navarre (who had converted back to Calvinism again) who was next in line to the throne. Their aim was to crush the Catholic Holy League and recapture the city of Paris. Henry III thereby succeeded in defeating the Holy League, but was in turn assassinated by a monk who was driven by his aversion to a Catholic king cooperating with a Protestant. Finally, in 1589, the Huguenot Henry of Navarre claimed the throne of France. Knowing that the vast majority of France was Catholic and would never accept a Calvinist ruler, Henry converted once again to Catholicism. With Henry of Navarre's coronation in 1594, the French wars of religion finally ended.

The religious conflict was eventually settled through the *Edict of Nantes* in 1598. The edict laid down that Catholicism was the official religion of France, but, at the same time, guaranteed the Huguenots the right to worship in selected places in every district. Huguenots were even allowed to enjoy political privileges, including the holding of public offices. Nonetheless, the Edict of Nantes did not recognize and tolerate the rights of the Protestant minority out of conviction; it did so out of mere political necessity.

## ***The Thirty Years' War***

The wars of religion in the 16th century had thrown Europe into chaos, and most people were longing for peace and order. Nevertheless, the first half of the 17th century did not bring an end to the countless wars and upheavals. On the contrary, central Europe was plagued by a devastating war that affected nearly all areas of Germany and brought about an atmosphere of disorder, violence, and desperation: *The Thirty Years' War*.

The Thirty Years' War is often regarded as the last of the religious wars. However, even though religion – the conflict between Catholicism and Calvinism in particular – can be considered the main cause of the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War, it became increasingly clear in the course of the conflict that secular – dynastic and national – considerations were far more important.

Although most of the fighting during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) took place in the German-speaking parts of the Holy Roman Empire, the war became a Europe-wide military conflict. Actually, many modern historians regard it as part of a larger conflict between the Habsburg dynasties of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire and the Bourbon dynasty of France for the leading role on the European continent.

In 1555, religious warfare between German Catholics and Lutherans had ended in the *Peace of Augsburg*. Nonetheless, from that point on, religion divided Germany into Lutheran and Catholic principalities rivalling each other. Furthermore, the Peace of Augsburg had settled the conflict between Lutherans and Catholics only, but did not recognize the rights of Calvinists. In the course of the second half of the 17th century, however, a number of German principalities had adopted Calvinism as their state religion. Consequently, the Calvinists of Germany strove for emancipation and found their leader in Frederick IV, the Calvinist ruler of the Palatinate and prince-electors\* of the Holy Roman Empire. At the beginning of the 17th century, Frederick formed an alliance of

German Protestant states called the *Protestant Union*. In return, the Catholic Duke Maximilian of Bavaria organized the *Catholic League* of German states. As a result, Germany was dividing into two armed camps preparing for a religious military conflict.

In addition to the religious division of Germany, the Habsburg emperors also had to face a constitutional conflict with the princes. During the 16th century, the Habsburg dynasty had made every effort to consolidate their authority in the Holy Roman Empire. The princes of the empire, on the other hand, offered resistance to the emperor and fought for their constitutional rights as individual rulers. The Habsburg emperors were supported by Spain, which was ruled by another branch of the Habsburg dynasty, while the princes asked the enemies of Spain – especially France – for help against the emperor. The divisions within the Holy Roman Empire thereby represented a larger European conflict which almost inevitably had to lead to a major European war. Germany was to be the battlefield.

The Thirty Years' War is usually divided into four major phases.

**The Bohemian Phase (1618–1625).** The first phase began in Bohemia, which was the Habsburg emperor's own territory. Many of the Bohemian nobles were Calvinists, yet the Habsburg Archduke Ferdinand was their king. Ferdinand gradually caused discontent among the Bohemian Calvinists by pursuing a policy of re-Catholicizing Bohemia and strengthening royal power. In May 1618, the Protestants showed their unrest by throwing two of the Habsburg governors and a secretary out of a window of the royal castle in Prague where the Bohemian government was situated. Legend has it that the three Habsburg officials survived the 70-foot fall from the castle because they fell into a manure pile. The Catholic side, however, called their escape from death a miracle that was due to the intervention of the Virgin Mary. This incident marks the beginning of the Thirty Years' War since the Bohemian Calvinists now took control of Bohemia and replaced Ferdinand by young Frederick V, the Calvinist ruler of the Palatinate and head of the Protestant Union.

By 1619, Ferdinand had been elected Holy Roman Emperor, and he had refused to accept his deposition as King of Bohemia. Frederick was backed by the Protestant Union, Ferdinand could count on the military forces of Maximilian of Bavaria and the Catholic League. On 8th November 1620, the imperial forces defeated Frederick and the Bohemian nobles at the Battle of White Mountain outside Prague. The Catholic side now seized the opportunity and, by the end of 1622, Spanish troops had even conquered Frederick's home, the Palatinate, and Frederick fled to Holland. The emperor and the Catholic League seemed to have achieved complete victory, as the Palatinate was now in Catholic hands – the west was given to Spain, the rest to Maximilian of Bavaria – and Ferdinand was re-established as King of Bohemia. Ferdinand was full of self-confidence now and took revenge on the Bohemian Protestants by confiscating their land and declaring Bohemia a hereditary Habsburg possession. Moreover, he declared Catholicism as the sole religion in Bohemia. At the same time Spanish forces launched an attack on the Protestant Netherlands and it seemed as if the Catholic forces were on the road to final victory, but the war had only entered a new stage and was far from being over.

**The Danish Phase (1625–1629).** In order to prevent a complete Catholic victory in the Holy Roman Empire, King Christian IV of Denmark (1588–1648), a Lutheran, intervened in the war by invading northern Germany. The emperor had to react. The imperial forces were now led by Albrecht von Wallenstein, a Bohemian nobleman who had become the country's wealthiest landowner because he had loyally backed the Emperor in his conflict with the Bohemian rebels. Wallenstein attacked the Danes in northern Germany and crushed the emperor's Protestant enemies. Christian IV's defeat was a disaster for Denmark because it put an end to Danish supremacy in the Baltic.

With his imperial armies having defeated the Danish invaders, Emperor Ferdinand II was at the height of his power. He now wanted to take this opportunity to restore the Catholic faith – and with it imperial power – in all parts of the Holy Roman Empire. In the *Edict of Restitution*, issued in March 1629, Ferdinand prohibited Calvinist worship and restored all property taken by Protestant princes or cities during the preceding seventy-five years

to the Catholic Church. This sudden growth of imperial power went too far even for the Catholic princes. They feared for their independence and forced the emperor to dismiss Wallenstein, his brilliant military leader.

**The Swedish Phase (1630–1635).** After Wallenstein had been dismissed by the emperor, King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (1611–1632) entered the war on behalf of the Protestant side. Gustavus Adolphus had been successful in reviving Sweden and turning it into a great Baltic power. He was a brilliant military leader and invaded northern Germany with a well-equipped and disciplined Swedish army. The German Protestants soon regarded Gustavus Adolphus as their saviour.

Gustavus's army drove the imperial forces out of the north and marched on into the heart of Germany. As nobody in the Catholic camp seemed to be able to stand up to Gustavus Adolphus, the emperor gave the command of the imperial army back to Wallenstein. The decisive battle between the Swedish king and his Catholic opponent took place at Lützen in 1632. Wallenstein could not defeat the Protestant forces, but the Swedish paid a high price for victory since Gustavus Adolphus was killed in battle. The Swedish troops remained in Germany, yet without their brilliant leader, they were far less effective. Although Wallenstein had been assassinated in 1634, the imperial army finally defeated the Swedish forces at the Battle of Nördlingen at the end of 1634. Both the Catholic League and the Protestant Union were exhausted by now, and the emperor made peace with the German princes by agreeing to revoke the Edict of Restitution of 1629. However, the war was not over yet. The Swedes were not willing to withdraw their forces from war-weary Germany, and the French, de facto ruled by Cardinal Richelieu, the chief minister of King Louis XIII of France, entered the war.

**The Franco-Swedish Phase (1635 – 1648).** In the last phase of the Thirty Years' War, religious matters had lost their significance which can be seen by the fact that the Catholic French – under the direction of a cardinal – now allied with the Protestant Swedes against the Catholic Habsburgs of Germany and Spain. Having achieved a decisive victory over Spain in 1643, the French invaded southern Germany and defeated the imperial forces. All parties were ready for peace now, and after five years of negotiations, the war in Germany was finally ended by the *Peace of Westphalia* in 1648. The war between France and Spain continued until 1659. Its outcome was that Spain became a second-class power, while France emerged as the dominant nation in Europe.

The Peace of Westphalia guaranteed that all German states, including the Calvinist ones, could freely determine their own religion. In terms of territorial changes, France won parts of western Germany and the three cities of Metz, Toul, and Verdun. This gave the French control of the Franco-German border area. Sweden and the German principalities of Brandenburg and Bavaria gained some territory in Germany. The Austrian Habsburgs did not really suffer any territorial losses, but their authority as the rulers of Germany declined. The more than 300 states that formed the Holy Roman Empire were recognized as effectively independent states, receiving the power to conduct their own foreign policy. The result was the end of the Holy Roman Empire as a political entity and German disunity for another two hundred years. Furthermore, the Peace of Westphalia clearly separated the world of religion from the world of politics. It was a first step for religion to become primarily a matter of personal conviction and individual choice.

The social and economic impact of the Thirty Years' War on Germany was enormous. The war and its side effects had ruined the German economy, and the German population decreased from 21 to 16 million between 1618 and 1650. Some areas of Germany – e. g. the Palatinate – were completely devastated, though others remained relatively untouched. In conclusion, the Thirty Years' War can undoubtedly be regarded as the most destructive conflict Europe has ever experienced.

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