CHAPTER 16 - THE AGE OF REFORMATION AND RELIGIOUS WARS

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the political, social and particularly religious developments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The chapter focuses particularly on the northern Renaissance and the independent lay and clerical efforts to reform religious practice. It also delves into the various ideas of Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Henry VIII and other religious and political reformers. It then assesses the effect of the Reformation on society, religion and education.

In the fifteenth century, commercial supremacy was transferred from the Mediterranean and the Baltic to the Atlantic seaboard. Portuguese and Spanish explorers opened up great opportunities for trade in gold and spices. The flood of precious metals that flowed back into Europe over these new routes was a mixed blessing. It contributed to a steady rise in prices during the sixteenth century that created an inflation rate of about 2% a year. The new wealth permitted research and expansion in a number of industries (printing, shipping, mining, textiles, and weapons) and led to the development of capitalist institutions and practices. There was great aggravation of the traditional social divisions.

Northern Humanist culture was largely imported from the south, but northern Humanists tended to be more socially diversified and religious. Erasmus, for example, supported a simple ethical piety in contrast to the abstract and ceremonial religion of the later Middle Ages. The best known of the early English Humanists was Thomas More (Utopia). France also had an active Humanist circle, out of which came John Calvin. In Germany, England and France, then, Humanism prepared the way for Protestant reforms and entered the service of the Catholic Church in Spain, where Jimenez de Cisneros was a key figure.

The late medieval church was a failing institution which was beset with political troubles ("Babylonian Captivity," Great Schism, conciliar movement and Renaissance papacy), and had ceased to provide an example of religious piety. Lay criticism of the church increased and became more organized. One constructive lay movement was the Modern Devotion or the Brothers of the Common Life, which stressed individual piety and an active common life.

Unlike France and England, late medieval Germany lacked the political unity to enforce national religious reforms. An unorganized opposition to Rome had formed, however, and by 1517 it was strong enough to provide a solid foundation for Martin Luther's reforms. The chapter continues with Luther's dramatic career and emphasizes his opposition to indulgences (95 Theses), his doctrine of "justification
by faith alone" and his challenge to papal infallibility. In its first decade, however, the Protestant movement suffered more from internal division than from imperial interference.

Ulrich Zwingli led the Swiss Reformation on the simple guideline that whatever lacked literal support in Scripture was to be neither believed nor practiced. The unity of the Protestant movement suffered because of the theological disagreements between Zwingli and Luther and the threat of more radical groups such as the Anabaptists (who insisted upon adult baptism), Spiritualists and Anti-Trinitarians.

After discussing the efforts of Charles V to unify the church by formal decree (Diet of Augsburg), and the Protestant reaction and consolidation, the chapter relates the spread of Calvinism. John Calvin went to Geneva in 1536 after a political revolution against a local prince-bishop had paved the way for political reform. Calvin proposed strict measures to govern Geneva's moral life which created opposition. After a short exile, he returned to enforce the strictest moral discipline. After 1555, Geneva became a refuge for thousands of Protestants who had been driven out of France, England and Scotland.

The key precondition of the English Reformation was the "king's affair." Henry VIII wanted a papal annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. When this was refused by the pope, the "Reformation Parliament" (1529-1536) passed legislation which made the king supreme in English spiritual affairs. But despite his political break with Rome, Henry remained decidedly conservative in his religious beliefs and Catholic teaching remained prominent. During the reign of his son Edward, England fully enacted the Protestant Reformation only to have Catholicism restored by his successor, Mary. Not until the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603) was there a lasting religious settlement achieved in England.

The Protestant Reformation did not take the medieval church completely by surprise. There were many efforts at internal reform before there was a Counter-Reformation. These reform initiatives did not come from the papal court, but from religious orders, especially the Jesuits. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Society of Jesus, preached self-discipline and submission to authority. The success of the Protestant Reformation led to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which was strictly under papal control and made important reforms concerning internal church discipline; but not a single doctrinal concession was made to the Protestants.

After a section on the social significance of the Reformation, which includes sub-sections on religious practices, the changing role of women, and family life, the chapter covers the religious wars in France, Spain's attempt to win an empire, Spanish relations with England, and the Thirty Years' War.

Non-Lutheran Protestants were not recognized by the Peace of Augsburg. Calvinism and Catholicism were irreconcilable church systems; Calvinism was committed to changing societies and was attractive to proponents of political decentralization while Catholicism remained congenial to those who
favored absolute monarchy and "one king, one church, one law." After painful experiences, some rulers known as politiques subordinated theological doctrine to political unity.

With few interludes, the French monarchy remained a staunch Catholic foe of the French Protestants, who were called Huguenots, until 1589. Under the regency of Catherine de Medici (for Francis II and Charles IX), three powerful families tried to control France: the Guises, the Bourbons and the Montmorency-Chatillons. The Guises remained devotedly Catholic while the Bourbons and the Montmorency-Chatillons developed Huguenot sympathies. Catherine tried to play them off against each other. She wanted a Catholic France, but not under Guise domination. Three religious wars were fought between 1562 and 1570 and the Protestants were granted religious freedoms within their territories only to have the peace shattered by the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, which was supported by Catherine. Over 20,000 Huguenots were massacred on that day and Protestant reformers, who had urged strict obedience to the established political authority, now began to realize that they had to fight for their rights. Further political infighting finally resulted in the succession of the Protestant Henry of Navarre to the throne as Henry IV. Philip II of Spain was alarmed at the prospect of a Protestant France, but Henry was a politique and wisely converted to Catholicism while granting minority religious rights in an officially Catholic country (Edict of Nantes, 1598).

Philip II (1556-1598) inherited the western Hapsburg kingdom, where new American wealth had greatly increased Spanish power. During the first half of his reign he focused attention on the Turkish threat, and in the battle of Lepanto (1571) the Turks were decisively beaten by the Holy League. In 1580, Spain annexed Portugal. But Spanish armies were not successful in the Netherlands, which were composed of Europe's wealthiest and most independent towns; many were also Calvinist strongholds. Initial resistance was brutally arrested by the Duke of Alba. But after 1573, the independence movement was headed by William of Orange. By 1577, a unified Netherlands forced the withdrawal of all Spanish troops. It was especially the resistance of the Netherlands that undid Spanish dreams of world empire. Although efforts to reconquer the Netherlands continued into the 1580s, Spain soon became preoccupied with England and France.

In England, Mary I (1553-1558) reverted to the strict Catholic practice of her father, Henry VIII. Her successor, Elizabeth I (1558-1603), was a politique who merged a centralized episcopal system with broadly defined Protestant doctrine and traditional Catholic ritual. English relations with Spain soon deteriorated. In 1570, Elizabeth was excommunicated for heresy and throughout the decade English seamen preyed on Spanish shipping in the Americas. In 1585, Elizabeth committed English soldiers to fight against the Spanish in the Netherlands. Finally, she was compelled to execute her Catholic cousin.
Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587. Philip launched his Armada against England in 1588, but was soundly defeated; Spain never really recovered from this defeat.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Germany (the Holy Roman Empire) was a land of about 300 autonomous political entities (secular and ecclesiastical principalities, free cities and castle regions). Religious conflict accentuated these divisions; during this time, the population was about equally divided between Catholics and Protestants. In 1609, Maximilian of Bavaria organized a Catholic League to counter a Protestant alliance recently formed under the leadership of the Elector Palatine, Frederick IV. The stage was set for the worst of the religious wars, the Thirty Years' War.

The chapter then details the conflict. About one-third of the German population died in this war which was ended by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Among other provisions, it asserted the cuius regio, eius religio principle of the Peace of Augsburg and gave legal recognition to the Calvinists. This treaty perpetuated German division and political weakness into the modern period.

The Protestant reformers perhaps never contemplated a reform outside or against their societies. Nevertheless, the Reformation brought about lasting changes in religious life, education and the image and role of women. The chapter continues with a section on witchcraft and witch hunts in Early Modern Europe. An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 people were sentenced to death for harmful magic and diabolical witchcraft. Most (about 80%) of these victims were older women, spinsters or widows who were insecure, non-productive and rather vulnerable to accusation. This may have been because of a general fear by men that women were beginning to break away from their control, or that women, as midwives, were responsible for the death of children and spouses during birth. The witch hunts were the result of a general belief in the powers of magic, a belief which died with the more scientific worldview of the seventeenth century.

The Scientific Revolution is reflected in the works of the great writers and philosophers of the 17th century, who knew that they were living in a period of transition. Some embraced the new science completely, some tried to straddle the two ages, still others opposed the new developments that seemed to threaten traditional morality and had made the universe less mysterious and the Creator less loving than before. The chapter then gives brief accounts of the lives and works of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, William Shakespeare and John Milton.

French thought can be represented by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), a mathematician, scientist and philosopher. Pascal believed that faith and divine grace were more necessary for human happiness than reason and science. An even more controversial religious thinker, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) argued that everything exists in God and cannot be conceived apart from him, a position condemned as pantheism but applauded by many late thinkers as the basis of rational religion.
The most original political philosopher of the age was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). An enthusiast for the new science, Hobbes advocated a commonwealth tightly ruled by law and order, free from the dangers of anarchy (Leviathan, 1651). A less original, but more influential political thinker was John Locke (1632-1704). Locke opposed Hobbes and denied the argument that rulers were absolute in their power; man's natural state was one of perfect freedom and equality. If a ruler failed in his responsibilities toward his subjects, he violated the social contract and could be replaced. Locke's philosophy came to be embodied in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **The Reforms of Martin Luther**: Luther focused his initial protest to Catholic doctrine on two related issues: 1) the sale of indulgences to remit temporal penalties for confessed sins and even time in purgatory was criticized by Luther, since it seemed to make salvation something that could be bought and sold; 2) indeed, salvation could be achieved, not by religious works and ceremonies, but by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

2. **The English Reformation**: The Reformation in England did not stem from religious principles as it did in Germany, but from political expediency. Henry VIII was driven by the need for a male heir, which he evidently could not obtain from his wife, Catherine of Aragon. Henry's subsequent efforts to rid himself of Catherine exemplify the subversion of religion to the political needs of state.

3. **Religious Change in the Reformation**: During the Reformation period, there was sharp conflict between two very old foes: the emerging nation-states of Europe, bent on centralizing their realms, and the many self-governing towns and regions. In addition, there was conflict between those social and economic groups who stood to gain from change in society (such as printers, guilds, and peasants), and secular and ecclesiastical landlords who ruled over them. Protestantism had revolutionary effects on the European religious world. By the end of the sixteenth century, overall numbers of clergy had fallen by two-thirds, monasteries and nunneries were nearly absent, the laity observed no obligatory fasts, indulgence preachers ceased to exist, and anyone openly venerating saints or relics was subject to fine and punishment.
4. The Social and Intellectual Heritage of the Reformation: The Reformation brought about basic and lasting changes in education and the image and role of women in society. The Reformation implemented the educational ideas of Humanism which emphasized the study of primary sources in the original languages. This was a much more effective tool for the defense of Protestant doctrine than was Scholastic dialectic. The Protestant reformers also approved clerical marriages and challenged the medieval tendency to degrade women as temptresses. Women were praised particularly in their biblical vocation as mother and housewife. The reformers encouraged the education of girls and in so doing gave some women a role in the Reformation as independent authors. Family life during the Reformation also changed as later marriages reflected the difficulties couples had supporting themselves independently. Although marriages tended to be “arranged” in the sense that parents met and discussed terms before the prospective bride and groom became party to the discussions, parents did not force marriages and emotional feeling for one another was increasingly respected by parents. Issues of birth control and wet-nursing remained controversial, since they presented both advantages and disadvantages for the health and propagation of heirs for the nobility.

5. Extension of the Political Conflict of the Reformation: In the second half of the 16th century, the political conflict, which had previously been confined to central Europe and a struggle for Lutheran rights and freedoms, was extended to France, the Netherlands, England and Scotland - and became a struggle for Calvinist recognition. German Lutherans and Catholics had agreed to live and let live in the Peace of Augsburg (1555) with the credo that he who controls the land may determine its religion. The Calvinists were excluded from this treaty and it was not until 1648 after the bloody Thirty Years' War and the Treaty of Westphalia, that they too received legal recognition.

6. The Spanish Armada: As a response to growing English power and disruption of Spanish shipping and land interests, Philip II of Spain launched the Armada of 130 ships against England. The swifter English vessels together with inclement weather inflicted defeat on Spain and the loss of over one-third of her vessels. The news of the Armada's defeat gave heart to Protestant resistance. Although Spain continued to win impressive victories in the 1590s, it never fully recovered from the defeat.
7. **The Anglican Church**: One of the most skillful religious compromises attained during this period of religious war was the establishment of the Anglican Church. Elizabeth sought a compromise between Catholics and Protestants which resulted in a church which was officially Protestant in doctrine and Catholic in ritual. Extremists on either side opposed the arrangement and there were conspiracies against Elizabeth. But the compromise proved lasting (with incidental changes) to the modern day. Elizabeth was a classic politico and it was due to her efforts that England did not succumb to the bloody warfare on the Continent.

8. **The Renaissance and Reformation in World Perspective**: During the Renaissance, Western Europe recovered its classical heritage and established permanent centralized states and regional government. But western history between 1500 and 1650 was shaped by an unprecedented schism in Christianity. Other world civilizations maintained greater social and political unity, and remained more tolerant religiously. China managed successfully to balance the interests of the one with the many and remained more unified and patriarchal than the governments of the West. The Chinese also readily tolerated other religions (as their warm contact with Jesuit missionaries attests). There is no similar tolerance of Asian religious philosophy demonstrated by the West. Like the West, Japanese manorial society experienced a breakdown after 1467. Under Tokugawa rule (1500-1850), Japanese government stabilized and yet avoided political absolutism. Christianity was banned in the late sixteenth century as a part of an internal unification program, but Western culture would again be welcomed in the nineteenth century. The three main Islamic cultures (the Safavids in Iran, the Mughals in India, and the Ottoman empire) integrated religion with government to such an extent that they never knew the political divisiveness that dogged the West. However, the Shi’ite faction of Iran increasingly isolated itself. As in China and Japan, India too was prepared to live and learn from the West.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*The Age of Exploration and Expansion.* Centron Films. 17 min.

*The Colonial Expansion of European Nations.* Coronet. 13 min.
Cortez and the Legend. McGraw-Hill. 52 min.


Ten Who Dared: Christopher Columbus. Time-Life. 30 min.


Civilization VI: Protest and Communication. Time-Life. 52 min.

Civilization VII: Obedience and Grandeur. Time-Life. 52 min.

The Reformation. Coronet. 14 min.

The Reformation. McGraw-Hill. 52 min.

The Reformation: Age of Revolt. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 24 min.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Time-Life. 30 min.

English History: Tudor Period. Coronet. 11 min.

The England of Elizabeth. International Film Bureau. 26 min.


The Spanish Armada. McGraw-Hill. 31 min.


Age of Elizabeth. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.