

## The Effects of Martin Luther's Reforms on European Christians

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For modern Christians of all denominations, Martin Luther remains a controversial figure. Seen in one respect he was a revolutionary who fragmented Christendom and exacerbated the splintering of Christianity into numerous denominations, yet in another respect he led a spiritual revival of Christianity, expunging the corrupt bureaucracy that had attached itself and returned the church to its Biblical roots. Neither of these views is complete as each contains elements of popular sentiments which overlook the complex and nuanced picture of Luther, the Reformation and the effect it had on the lives of European Christians. While Martin Luther was not the first, nor the last, to reform the church he became the symbol of the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Aided by the new medium of print,<sup>2</sup> Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and later works,<sup>3</sup> spread rapidly to those who wanted to reform the church and they disseminated his message to their congregations. His message of salvation through the unmerited grace of God was not readily accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, in part because it undermined the authority they exercised through the priests and the administration of the sacraments. However, Luther's message resonated with those in Europe who sought reform in the Roman Catholic Church. As a consequence of Luther's interpretation of the Bible and mankind's relationship with God, the

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<sup>1</sup>Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom: Christianity in the Sixteenth Century*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 214, 320. The English religious thinker John Wycliffe (d.1384), who Luther was often compared to along with Jan Hus by Catholic authorities, had promoted a doctrine of salvation through grace, Scripture and faith centuries earlier. Catholic authorities considered all three men to be heretics.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620 (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought)*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 19-20. Kolb states that the Reformation was transmitted orally to the population at large, but the spread of Luther's message among the literate elites aided its propagation.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Küng, *Great Christian Thinkers*, (New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company), 138-139.

lives of European Christians underwent significant changes. Whether or not Luther's reforms constituted an improvement in the lives of European Christians is debatable, however, as there were positive and negative consequences in cultural, personal, political,<sup>4</sup> martial, social and theological realms.

Culturally, the arts, with the exception of music and architecture, suffered a loss of ecclesiastical patronage from Luther's reforms.<sup>5</sup> Popular music was not as impoverished the movement of reformers used the vernacular and not Latin as the liturgical language of the church. This helped raise the status of music because composers were free to create pieces which appealed to people of a particular language and culture, encouraging diversity. Also, Luther was a lover and proponent of vernacular music for the church and in spite of some regional criticism promoted the concept of the "singing church."<sup>6</sup> Architecture remained grand and exuberant as the various denominations competed to build houses of worship which out shown competing denominations; however, the other arts lost denominational patronage by Luther's reforms. The patronage of the visual arts, even religious images, was unsupported amongst the Protestant churches. Early struggles amongst the reformers over iconoclasm led to disputes over the place of images within the sanctuary. The indifference of Luther and the hostility of Calvin to visual images served to hamper the support churches provided for art.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Joseph R. Mitchell; Helen Buss Mitchell, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in World History*. (Dubuque, Iowa: McGraw-Hill Contemporary Learning Series), 261. I have borrowed from Mitchell and Mitchell the concept of judging Luther's reform movement based on the theological and political dimensions.

<sup>5</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 149. Küng briefly mentions only music as an art which was not impoverished because of Luther's reforms. See Andrew Spicer, *Calvinist Churches in Early Modern Europe*, (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 2007), and Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500-2000*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), for more details on how architecture was impoverished.

<sup>6</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 421. The church had engaged in singing since the age of the Apostles; however, the idea of using vernacular music in worship faced stiff resistance in places such as Zürich.

<sup>7</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 430. Hillerbrand asserts that Calvinist churches, following Zwingli's ideas,

Financing art required a large amount of resources, not only in the art's creation but also in the support of the artist as they created. Financially the Catholic Church could draw upon the financial resources of numerous churches spread out over the continent of Europe while the early Protestant churches had a more limited financial base. This was made more acute since the breakaway churches and princes were fighting to prevent their recapitulation back into the Catholic institution and the struggle for survival took precedence. The result of this cultural impoverishment was a loss of visual art for Protestants who otherwise would have gained a deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure from viewing art which reinforced their religious convictions.<sup>8</sup> The development of a Protestant culture would include the use of art as a propagandistic method for delivering the ideas of the reformation to the people at large; however, ultimately an aversion to church sponsored visual art developed.<sup>9</sup>

In Luther's age people questioned whether the Reformation was worth the trouble they were going through, this was because of the numerous personal detriments they were undergoing in spite of the theological reform taking place.<sup>10</sup> These effects were the result of the diminished authority of the Catholic priesthood and a Protestant priesthood with considerably less authority in comparison to their Catholic peers. This happened through the promotion of the priesthood of all believers whereby lay Christians were given the opportunity to study Scripture in their own language, ask for repentance and pray to God directly without a human intermediary such as a

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propagated the idea that art was no longer a necessary part of liturgical life.

<sup>8</sup> Carlos M.N. Eire, "The Reformation," in *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, ed. James J. Buckley, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, and Trent Pomplun, 76-77 (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). In light of the Council of Trent, 1545-63, the Roman Catholic Church made an effort to promote religious art and music in a propaganda campaign to challenge the "stark aesthetics of Protestantism."

<sup>9</sup> Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 76, 85-86, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Küng, *Thinkers*, 149.

priest.<sup>11</sup> However, Luther intended for the priestly functions of administering the sacraments to remain with the clergy.<sup>12</sup> While Protestants argued for this priesthood being scriptural and providing for individuals to personally have a relationship with God, the result was not a rise in Biblical literacy among the lay population, despite Luther's support for education of the youth.<sup>13</sup> Literacy was limited to an educated few such as priests and professionals and they dominated the study of scripture and the determination of doctrine.<sup>14</sup> However, the priests' dominance of their congregations' spiritual life and their monopoly on theological knowledge was still diminished by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. With the expulsion of the Catholic Church from certain areas of Germany, England and parts of France, some people lost the support of the Church sponsored monastic orders, charities and confraternities.<sup>15</sup> It became permissible in Protestant territories during this time to translate the Bible into the vernacular in lieu of Latin. This allowed a greater number of people to read and understand the Bible and reduced the power of the priests to determine doctrine; however, the widespread illiteracy in Europe at the time meant the priests, both Catholic and Protestant; continued to hold influential power over others because they were among the literate few. Although the priests' position in the lives of Catholics gave them the power to manipulate and influence people, it also gave them the ability to be a

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<sup>11</sup>Mitchell, *Taking Sides*, 261.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, "On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church," ed. and trans. by Henry Wace; and C.A. Buchheim, in *Luther's Primary Works*, (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton), 302, 339, 365, 375, 377, 390, 401, 408-409. The two sacraments that Luther expected the clergy to administer were baptism and Communion. The five sacraments he considered institutes of the Roman Catholic Church were penance, confirmation, matrimony, orders and extreme unction. Luther argued that Biblical baptism and Communion were the only two sacraments with divinely applied signs and promises of remission of sins. Initially in his argument Luther included the sacrament of penance, however, he removed it after arguing that it did not have a sign or promise attached to it.

<sup>13</sup>Hans Küng, *Women in Christianity*, trans. by John Bowden, (New York, NY: Continuum), 65.

<sup>14</sup>H.G. Haile, "Luther as Renaissance Writer," ed by Gerhart Hoffmeister, in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Germany: An Introduction*, (New York, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.), 142-143. Haile asserts that while literacy was the province of the few, Luther's reforms gave way to the expansion of literacy as more people became interested in the religious discussions going on around them.

<sup>15</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 149.

confidante and guide for others. As the Reformation spiraled out of Luther's control, more radical reformers questioned the need for the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, a heretical position from Luther's standpoint. The division of Christendom left the lower classes at the mercy of local lords to decide which religion, Catholic or Protestant, served them for spiritual guidance and administration of the sacraments.<sup>16</sup> While the reforms eventually resulted in personal improvements for Christians, these took centuries to fully develop because the converts maintained old social hierarchies and customs. This was a further detriment to the personal lives of Europeans who believed Luther's reforms would result in social benefits for the oppressed lower classes, a political development that the upper classes of the time were unwilling to see come to pass.<sup>17</sup> With the spread of the belief that people could be their own interpreters of the Bible, there was a staggering rise in denominations within Protestant Christianity, which resulted in arguments between the various denominations regarding theological issues, even though schism was not Luther's original intention.<sup>18,19</sup>

Luther's reforms did not improve the lives of European Christians politically because nationalist groups garnered support by identifying with a particular denomination. This resulted in a fragmentation of Western Christianity even though for a Christian to place more loyalty towards their nation or political group instead of their faith runs contrary to the idea of Christian

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<sup>16</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 207.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Marius. *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 419.

<sup>18</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 40. Factionalism begins with the establishment of the Anabaptist, Calvinist, Lutheran and Reformed denominations.

<sup>19</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 68. For inter-Protestant debates see *The Division of Christendom* by Hans Hillerbrand.

unity and brotherhood found in the Bible.<sup>20</sup> This fragmentation of Christianity along nationalistic lines altered the political landscape of Europe and sparked religious conflicts which engulfed Europe to the present day.<sup>21</sup> These Wars of Religion were detrimental to Christians because they resulted in numerous civilian and military casualties, demoralizing society with the dissolution of the unified church. The rise in nationalism, the identification of people with others of a common religious or ethnic group, such as Lutheran or German; Catholic or Spanish; and not a larger political or religious entity, such as Europe or Christendom, proved detrimental. Groups of oppressed and subjugated people considered regional political unions embracing regional religious and ethnic heritages where they were the majority to be more desirable than being minority subjects within a multi ethnic empire.<sup>22</sup> The European monarchies and principalities which used a common religion to help unify their diverse populations faced unrest from these separatist groups.<sup>23</sup> With the reform movement initiated by Luther, the separatist groups, sometimes consisting of disenfranchised peasants, affiliated themselves with one of the new Christian denominations in order to attract more supporters to their cause, such as the German Peasant's Revolt affiliation with the teaching of Luther.<sup>24</sup> While nationalists claimed this enhanced a nation's prestige and unity, it also did not slow the march to war. Eventually, citizens of one nation viewed citizens of other nations as outsiders, disregarding a more

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<sup>20</sup>Jn. 17:20–23 KJV. Here Jesus prays that his followers to be united just as he and his Father are united, without division.

<sup>21</sup>Justo L. González. *A History of Christian Thought*. (Nashville, Tennessee: The Parthenon Press), 33. González asserts that the Reformation became entwined with German nationalism.

<sup>22</sup>Martin Luther, "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate," ed. and trans. by Henry Wace; and C.A. Buchheim, in *Luther's Primary Works*, (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton), 161,237-238. This treatise by Luther identified many German nationalistic grievances against the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>23</sup>Rourke, *Politics*, 38.

<sup>24</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 150.

cosmopolitan European and Christian heritage. The political landscape of Europe was altered by Luther's reforms because many of the separatist groups succeeded in breaking from the Catholic Church and the multi-ethnic empires.

While Luther was motivated to reform the Church for the sake of the salvation of Christians, it is apparent that he did not desire nor envision the fragmentation of Christendom and lack of central religious authority that were the result. By enacting reforms in the Christian Church Luther wanted to maintain the church and the priests in a position of power regarding the administration of the sacraments. The physical presence of Jesus in the sacrament of the altar, Communion, was advocated by Luther but was not shared by some of his contemporaries, namely Zwingli.<sup>25</sup> As the Reformation progressed Luther and Zwingli developed an antagonistic relationship, one more example of the further divisions erupting in Christianity. As various sects emerged in Protestantism Luther found himself engaged in denouncing other “reformers” such as Zwingli, as much as the Catholic Church which had originally provoked his ire.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the fragmentation and disunity that resulted from his challenge to the Roman Catholic Church was unforeseen by Luther. Issues and practices which had been standardized by the monolithic presence of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe became sources of contention amongst the various reformers.<sup>27</sup> For example, the break between Zwingli and a community of Anabaptists was ostensibly over the mode of baptism.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 101.

<sup>26</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 108.

<sup>27</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 414. While many of the Reformers were alike in acknowledging only two of the seven sacraments, disagreements over how to precisely define those sacraments theologically would promote further division.

<sup>28</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 114. The Anabaptist defied millennia of Christian convention and Zwingli's preference by administering baptism by pouring instead of immersion.

The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 symbolized the change because power in Europe was no longer centralized with the Roman Catholic Church allowing national entities such as France and England to emerge from the conflict with a secure foundation for their independence.<sup>29</sup> Luther's reforms therefore resulted in the creation of a Western Europe that was no longer held together by the common thread of Roman Catholicism. The division of Christianity in Western Europe can in part be traced to the loss of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which, with a pope to serve as God's representative on earth, the vicar of Christ, had acted with the College of Cardinals to keep Christianity, at least in Western Europe, doctrinally unified under a particular institution. As more reformers followed in Luther's footsteps and interpreted the Bible independently, there was no longer a single authority to determine what was appropriate, resulting in numerous divergences from tradition. In a very short time this manifested itself in the martial realm with the numerous Wars of Religion which raged throughout Europe during the Sixteenth century.

The martial effect of Luther's reforms on the lives of European Christians were a series of religious wars which were very detrimental because they created political instability, displaced untold numbers of people and resulted in numerous military and civilian casualties. While Christians had occasionally fought other Christians for economic or political reasons, such as the assaults on Zara and Constantinople by crusaders, the theological differences between Protestant and Catholic dogma resulted in centuries of hostilities and bloodshed which consumed Europe. The differences between denominations led to centuries of debates and armed conflicts as to who followed the true path to salvation. Although the debates occurred initially between the

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<sup>29</sup>Rourke, *Politics*, 40.

followers of Luther and the Catholic loyalists, it became inter-Protestant as the differences between the various Protestant movements, Lutherans, Anglicans, Anabaptists and Calvinist, developed into doctrinal divides. It was the question of salvation, as well as others, such as the necessity of the sacraments, which separated the various Christian sects for centuries.

The origin of the Wars of Religion was the opposing positions of Martin Luther and the Catholic Church. Luther considered the Church corrupt and in need of extensive reform and the Church believed Luther was a heretic since his teachings regarding the papacy contradicted their own and threatened their claim to Papal supremacy.<sup>30</sup> Due to the Church being opposed to Luther spreading his teachings, he forced to seek refuge at Wartburg and remained there for about a year.<sup>31</sup> Luther's challenge to Catholic authority and arguments for the reformation of the Christian Church caused supporters to flock to the Reformation banner. These supporters, many later converts to the Protestant churches, came for various reasons and represented the divide which would separate the Protestant churches. Some, like Luther, were disenchanted with the corruption of the Catholic Church.<sup>32</sup> Others such as Huldrych Zwingli, whose movement Luther would break from, were social revolutionaries who believed the Bible's message was a call to arms for social revolution.<sup>33</sup> As the supporters grew in number, the empires of Portugal and Spain, the states of the Italian peninsula, and the rest of Catholic Europe mustered their armies to put down this rebellion, forcing the Protestant regions and municipalities to marshal a

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<sup>30</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 143.

<sup>31</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 149.

<sup>32</sup>Marius, *Martin Luther*, 419.

<sup>33</sup>Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books), 137-138. After Luther and Zwingli's relationship deteriorated, Zwingli affirmed that he had independently reached similar conclusions as Luther regarding the need for reformation.

defensive.<sup>34</sup> The source of the political instability was the tension created between Protestants and Catholics and the nations affiliated with either denomination as these groups and nations fought for doctrinal superiority. Contributing to the loss of life and tension were the numerous followers of denominations which were regional minorities, who were displaced over the centuries as these factions vied for power. Eventually, after large scale settlement of the Americas began, many of the settlers came from fringe religious groups seeking land where they could freely practice their religion. The persecution different groups inflicted upon one another further aggravated tensions between denominations. For example, the Catholic Church's Inquisition, while co-opted by the leaders of Catholic nations to persecute their political opponents and rivals, was orchestrated primarily to find and eliminate heretics, such as the Protestant Huguenots in Catholic France as well as other non-Catholics.<sup>35</sup>

Luther's reforms did not benefit the political or social situation for the German peasantry, at least in the beginning. Luther had initially considered these groups allies, but political and theological views eventually limited Luther's support for them.<sup>36</sup> Due to the revolutionary nature of Luther's message and his views on the freedom of a Christian many peasants believed the timing of Luther's reformation of the church was also a perfect opportunity to practice their interpretation of Luther's message.<sup>37</sup> In the early stages of the Reformation, the German peasantry lobbied Luther to support their quest for political and economic rights. Despite having the sympathy of Luther and his followers, who felt that fair treatment of peasants was only just,

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<sup>34</sup>MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 400, 406, 417. The Portuguese and Spanish Empires were briefly united in 1580 by King Philip II of Spain.

<sup>35</sup>MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 420-421.

<sup>36</sup>Martin Luther, "On Governmental Authority," ed. by Hans J. Hillerbrand, in *The Protestant Reformation*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers), 62-63.

<sup>37</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 143-144.

the peasants did not receive his overt support.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Luther opposed any efforts by the peasantry to overturn the social order because such actions jeopardized the nobility's support of Luther. Luther and his followers required the support of the nobility in order to keep the nascent Protestant movement from being crushed by the Catholic Church and its affiliated nobility. Luther, while a proponent of Christian freedom, viewed this freedom as a mental and spiritual release from the guilt which accompanied being a sinner.<sup>39</sup> The Peasant Revolt of 1524-1525 was condemned by Luther as unchristian and he lent his support to the princes as they put down the rebellion, killing thousands of peasants.<sup>40</sup> While there were pertinent political necessities involved in Luther's condemnation of the revolting peasants, his theology regarding the Two Kingdoms, the theological status of Christians and non-Christians, influenced his position as well.<sup>41</sup> Luther argued that the Two Kingdoms, the Law and the Gospel, were established by God and under His direction. The Law was the civil world, applying to all people and the second, the Gospel, applied only to believers. Believers were covered by God's grace and no longer subject to judgment by the Law but remained under the authority of civil bodies. Therefore, in Luther's theology, to rebel against the established civil authority was rebellion against God as well; however a revolution, such as his movement against Catholic authority, was justified because it was undertaken against an unjust rule. This presents an interesting dichotomy for the Luther's stance on the European lower classes; the peasants, the poor, serfs and Jews, who did not find equality in the immediate wake of Luther's reformation. These groups, with the exception of the

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<sup>38</sup>Luther, "Authority," in *The Protestant Reformation*, 43-44.

<sup>39</sup>Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty," ed. and trans. by Henry Wace; and C.A. Buchheim in *Luther's Primary Works* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton), 256.

<sup>40</sup>Martin Luther, "Concerning Christian Liberty," in *Luther's Primary Works*, 262. In calling the rebellion unchristian Luther may have been considering 1 Samuel 15:23 where rebellion is compared to witchcraft.

<sup>41</sup>González, *History*, 60-61.

Jews, attached special significance to Luther's teachings regarding equality and believed it called for equality in the current life as well as the afterlife. A result of this teaching was the Peasant Revolt of 1524-1535, which Luther opposed. The culmination of the political struggles, military engagements and bitter feuds which developed out of the Reformation was a perpetuation of the class system, with post-Reformation society differing little from the pre-Luther era.

The status of women in Christianity after the Protestant Reformation underwent a reevaluation because Luther declared that celibacy was not mandatory for clergy.<sup>42</sup> Church canon law proscribed a second class status for women and this patriarchal culture remained unchanged by the actions of Luther or the other major reformers.<sup>43</sup> However, since the clergy were no longer required to remain celibate women could find new social roles, though society remained patriarchal, in being the spouses of officials within the developing ecclesiastical hierarchy of some Protestant denominations.<sup>44</sup> Traditionally the Christian church understood women in two contexts, the biblical matriarchs Eve and the Virgin Mary. One served as an exemplar of feminine susceptibility to temptation while the other was the epitome of the chaste, devout virgin.<sup>45</sup> As the spouse of a clergyman, a greater number of women could enter into a position to affect the religious life of their community in ways which combined their culturally accepted role as wives and mothers with society's idealized role of a Christian as a dutiful servant to God. Furthermore, Luther reinterpreted the role of women as participants in the

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<sup>42</sup>Küng, *Women*, 63.

<sup>43</sup>Küng, *Women*, 47, 65.

<sup>44</sup>Küng, *Women*, 63, 65. Though officially excluded from church offices, forbidden from preaching or administering the sacraments and losing the convent structure which had validated a life of celibacy for women, Küng asserts that the reevaluation of marriage which came about because of the Reformation improved the condition and self esteem of women by engaging them directly with their faith and society. Women became co-workers alongside their husbands in ministry within the emerging Protestant groups, formally ministry was the realm of the celibate priests.

<sup>45</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 432-433.

priesthood of all believers alongside the men as an attribute of the universality of the application of Christianity.<sup>46</sup> However, Luther was not an advocate of women in the hierarchy of the church, rather he was concerned with each person having a role and purpose, for women it was “wife and mother.”<sup>47</sup>

The theology of Christianity underwent numerous changes in the wake of Luther’s ideas and the Protestant Reformation. Theologically, Luther’s reforms can be said to have improved the lives of Christians because they allowed for the Bible to be translated into the vernacular and therefore accessible to those who didn’t read Latin, removed the imposing authority of the Catholic priesthood and ultimately culminated in a world view of salvation which bypassed the necessity of the sacraments.<sup>48</sup> The Catholic priests were criticized for being little more than corrupt feudal princes who ruled over their bishoprics as fiefdoms<sup>49</sup> and engaged in practices, such as the sale of indulgences, which were considered corrupt by some critics.<sup>50</sup> These practices resulted in European Christians existing to serve the institution of the Catholic Church and its members, in opposition to Luther’s belief.<sup>51</sup> For Luther, only God could pronounce an individual

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<sup>46</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 435.

<sup>47</sup>Hillerbrand, *Division of Christendom*, 435.

<sup>48</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 142. Luther translated the New Testament into High German while in exile in Germany where his princely patrons kept him from the forces of the Catholic emperor, Charles V.

<sup>49</sup>Eire, “The Reformation,” in *Catholicism*, 66. The charges often leveled against priests included absenteeism, not being at their parish, pluralism, holding multiple Church offices, nepotism, which made some Church quasi-hereditary and allowed particular families to dominate some offices for generations, and simony, the sale of Church offices.

<sup>50</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 134.

<sup>51</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 139. Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian Man,” *The Protestant Reformation*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968). Küng cites Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian Man” as the example of Luther’s understanding and development of the belief in man’s justification before God via faith and not good works or service.

justified and free of sin and not a particular human institution.<sup>52</sup> With Luther's new interpretation of the vehicle for salvation, the church took on a new dimension, propagating the doctrine that the sole way to Heaven is the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, *sola fide*, and not good deeds or piety.<sup>53</sup> Theologically, this resulted in European Christians being freed from works and service to the ideology of the Catholic Church in exchange for salvation.<sup>54</sup> However, Luther's reforms also resulted in detrimental theological developments because of the fragmentation of Christianity and Wars of Religion.

It is apparent that Luther's reforms did not lead to improvements in the physical lives of Christians, at least initially. It would be centuries before the Gospel would be effectively used for social reforms or before the level of literacy would allow for practically all people to read the Bible. In the interim there was a great deal of political unrest and loss of life due to the violence which erupted from theological arguments and political unrest. Even so, the reforms initiated by Luther represented a paradigm shift in European thinking at the time; no longer was the church the supreme authority of the land, nor were priests able to operate as feudal princes.<sup>55</sup> Christians who joined the Protestant movement experienced some initial benefits from the Reformation, such as freedom from Catholic hierarchy. However, they also incurred many costs and took great risks with their own well being in terms of lives lost during the Wars of Religion and the further fragmentation of Christendom. Looking at Martin Luther's intentions for reforming the

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<sup>52</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 131. Martin Luther, "A Treatise On Good Works," Project Gutenberg, (January 24, 2008. [http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page) (accessed February 23, 2009). Luther reached this conclusion after studying Paul's Letter to the Romans.

<sup>53</sup>Kolb, *Prophet*, 23. Kolb hints that the Catholic Church used the people's fear that their works would not merit forgiveness for their sins to control the population. Luther's conclusion about salvation being through grace and not works refuted this argument.

<sup>54</sup>Marius, *Martin Luther*, 139.

<sup>55</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 142, 152.

Christian church,<sup>56</sup> his actions during the peasant revolts<sup>57</sup> and his writings,<sup>58</sup> leaves one to conclude that the main improvement Luther sought was existential, to be gained in the afterlife. In effect, he did not seek to improve the physical lives of Europeans but to safeguard their spiritual future by excising what he considered to be detrimental aspects of the religious institution. To Luther, this meant reforming the church, which was at the time teaching what he considered heretical and unchristian doctrines, such as the selling of indulgences. For Luther, ensuring a stable society where the gospel could be preached to the masses was more desirable than a revolution to bring about social equality.<sup>59</sup>

The arguments made by Luther and the other reformers and their challenge to the Catholic Church's authority did not go unanswered or unnoticed, it too engaged in a period reform, the Counter Reformation, otherwise known as the Catholic Reformation. However, to try and identify a singular Catholic Reformation that took place solely because of Martin Luther would be to miss the point that the Catholic Church had reformers who engaged in periodic bouts of reform in order to deal with pressing ecclesiastical and heretical challenges.<sup>60</sup> The reforms undertaken by the Catholic Church were not of the same quick paced tones exemplified by the Protestant Reformation but rather a willingness to work within the existing system, much as Luther initially did as well. It was this attitude as opposed to wanting to remove the system and

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<sup>56</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 131.

<sup>57</sup>Marius, *Martin Luther*, 419.

<sup>58</sup>Küng, *Thinkers*, 138.

<sup>59</sup>Marius, *Martin Luther*, 419.

<sup>60</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 70, 328. Ximenez de Cisneros of Toledo was one such figure who used his position to remove incompetent priests and pursue literacy reforms for the laity. The Church's prosecution of the Albigensian Crusade would be an example of their swift reaction to stopping heretical movements.

replace it with something radically different, that defined Catholic reformation thought.<sup>61</sup> However, in the wake of the successful secession of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin's churches from the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, the Catholic Church undertook the Council of Trent, 1545-63, in order to answer the challenge presented by the Protestants.<sup>62</sup> This council's pronouncements influenced the course of Catholicism for the next 400 years.<sup>63</sup> The reformers of the Council of Trent took a critical view to the charges leveled by Protestants, debating doctrinal stances,<sup>64</sup> removing practices both Protestant and Catholic reformers found offensive and attacking Protestantism while defending Catholicism.<sup>65</sup> The Catholic Reformation would not go unopposed even in the Catholic countries of Europe.<sup>66</sup> There were countries that continued to affirm Catholicism while at the same time challenging papal authority for dominance in Europe, such as France.<sup>67</sup> The Protestant Reformation's support from the German princes and the new balance of power which resulted from Peace of Westphalia emboldened the nations of Europe to establish themselves as actors independent of the control of the foreign papal order.

Though Luther's reforms did not signal significant improvement in the physical lives of Christians the existential aspect of Luther's reforms could prove otherwise. This determination depended upon the acceptance or rejection of two assertions by Luther, the existence of an afterlife accessible only to Christians and the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to present

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<sup>61</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 71.

<sup>62</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 72. The Council of Trent took place over an 18 year time span and was overseen by a variety of leaders and reformers.

<sup>63</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 72.

<sup>64</sup>A.D. Wright, *The Counter-Reformation: Catholic Europe and the Non-Christian World*, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press), 35.

<sup>65</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 73, 76. The sale of indulgences and abuses of power, absenteeism, pluralism and simony, were condemned by the Council.

<sup>66</sup>Wright, *Counter-Reformation*, 268.

<sup>67</sup>Eire, "The Reformation," in *Catholicism*, 73.

the way to reach this afterlife. If one accepts Luther's assertions, then one may reason that Luther's reforms were necessary and constitute an improvement in spite of the cost in human life and Christian unity. However, if an individual does not accept one or either of Luther's assertions, then one may consider Luther's reforms to be the source of centuries of European religious strife which claimed millions of lives and continues today.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Inter-Christian religious strife is taking place in Ireland (Catholic versus Protestant) and the Balkans (Catholic versus Orthodox).

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