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Honors 104 (H03)

The Reformation and its Effect on the People

Every major societal change throughout history has had unforeseen consequences for the people who are caught in the middle of it. Alexander's sweeping conquests led to a spreading and preservation of Greek culture through many areas that otherwise would have never felt the touch of Hellenism. The rise of monasticism helped preserve classical writings that otherwise may have been destroyed. The Reformation was no different. Luther and other such reformers plied their trade in the name of correcting how and what people worshipped, but there were unforeseen consequences. The Reformation sewed the seeds of religious tolerance, societal revolutions, and a greater emphasis on the written word for the spreading of ideas.

While the Reformation did cause a large amount of bloodshed and wanton destruction in the name of religion, it did eventually lead to the only solution that didn't involve slaughtering all the non-believers, a somewhat peaceful co-existence. "The meaning of the formula is that rulers have the right to determine the religion of their subjects, who, if they are unhappy with the decision made over their heads, may sell their property and emigrate" (page 147). The author was talking about the Religious Peace of Augsburg, which was signed on September 25, 1555. This however did not put an end to religious tension, or even really help out the problem at all, but it did set a precedent. Many towns adopted a philosophy of "live and let live" that allowed both Lutherans and Catholics, and sometimes even peoples of other Protestant faiths, to peacefully coexist and practice in their own ways. Some towns even offered special benefits to those of other faiths (page 147). When these beginnings at religious tolerance failed, people had to resort to emigrating far beyond the care of the Catholic Church and other religious authorities and to places such as Moravia where the desire for able workers trumped

the desire to live among those of the same faith. While this in no way stopped the religious tension throughout Europe, it provided a brief respite for the people and set a non-violent precedent for future policymakers.

As well as opening the way for religious toleration, the Reformation also stoked the flames of revolution in the common man. The move for change in the way religion was practiced also pushed forward a move for change against the landowners and their draconian attempts at land control and food monopolies. Luther did not spare the nobility his pen, writing such things as “God Almighty has made our rulers mad. They actually think they have the power to do and command their subjects to do whatever they please,” in his book *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (page 151). Luther and his writings combined with the injustices of the nobility caused the Peasant’s War of 1525, which is so famed because among other things it claimed “godly law” as its authority and took names such as the “Christian Federation” (page 174). Eventually the revolt was smashed and the nobility became the driving force of the Reformation, but the “Reformation of the People” survived in the form of Anabaptism and later in the minds of people such as Friedrich Engels.

Finally, the Reformation ensured the written word as a means of communication would prosper. The Reformation came at a good time for the newly developed printing presses, as the main vehicle for spreading its ideas was the pamphlet, and the woodcut print before that. This meant two things. One, it was easier for more people’s ideas to get out, as it was much cheaper to print and spread an idea than it had been in previous times. While most pamphlets were produced by humanists and clergy, a massive variety of people contributed, including bakers, gunsmiths, and even women (page 172). Second, for people to understand this new explosion of pamphlets, they had to be able to read them, which meant that literacy became a more valued trait, leading to an increase in the desire for education.

The Reformation had a variety of unintended side effects, such as the idea of religious tolerance, the spark of revolution, and the rise of the written word as a popular medium. Each of these things in turn spawned more societal changes. The beginnings of religious tolerance and the emigration to new lands served as an example to Puritans in Great Britain who eventually emigrated to North America and later founded the United States on principles of religious tolerance. The spark of revolution led to further peasant rebellions throughout the next several centuries, and inspired early Marxist philosophy. The survival and rise of the written word helped fuel the Scientific Revolution and led to a rise in literacy among the common man, which helped along the first two points. In the end, the Reformation had several unintended side effects that helped both the founders of the movement and the people it was supposed to be for.