

How have attitudes towards Religion changed overtime?

The attitude towards religion in society during the early modern period was ever-changing. Before the Reformation, Catholicism was deeply intertwined with society. However, efforts to reform the Catholic church gave birth to The Reformation which brought Protestantism to Europe. This new religion had different beliefs and practices than Catholicism. Due to religious tensions that arose during The Reformation, there was an invigoration of faith from both sides of the conflict. The rising tensions between Catholics and Protestants eventually led to religious warfare. Following holy warfare came the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment popularized ideas about individuals and the separation of the church and state, weakening the hold religion had on society. Attitudes towards religion changed under the influence of the church, religious conflicts, and new ideas.

Before The Reformation, Catholicism had a deep presence in society through faith and community. The church was a place of faith. People gathered at their local parish churches on Sundays to hear the Latin Mass. Besides being the center of faith, the church was interlaced with the community. Members of the community supported the church in different ways. For example, expensive candles in the church of an English village, Morebath, were paid for by wool, church ales, and other forms of donations (O'Neil, 9/28). To keep the church running, the community stepped forward to fund the church, demonstrating the intertwined relationship between religion and society. Beyond church walls, members of the community came together to support the church through societies and engagement with festive events. Confraternities consisted of laymen who helped the church by praying together to help each other's souls and

raising money for burial services. In Italy, the oratory was a group of priests and laymen who were bound together not by formal vows but through charity (O'Neil, 9/28). Besides donations and various spiritual associations, the church sometimes left its walls to engage with the community through Mystery Plays. Mystery plays involved people acting out biblical stories on wagons that moved throughout the town. Each scene was performed by different guilds such as goldsmiths and tanners (O'Neil, 9/28). The involvement of members of the community who did not necessarily work for the church such as the tanners and goldsmiths that participated in the Mystery Plays and laymen demonstrated the role the church played in bringing its community together. Communities were centered around the church. Thus, many aspects of life were in tangent with religion. The community's satisfaction with the Catholic church was displayed through active participation in religious festivals, Sunday Mass, and donations. Before Europe was divided by The Reformation, Catholicism was deeply involved with not just the faith of the society but also the community around its individual churches.

During the early years of The Reformation, the tensions between Catholics and Protestants led to an invigoration of faith on both sides of the conflict. Between 1555 and 1559, Pope Paul IV declared Protestants as heretics and exclaimed that they should be treated differently than Catholics (O'Neil, 10/12). In addition, the Pope passed the two Councils of Trent. The first council reaffirmed several ideas that Martin Luther was against. For example, in Protestantism, it was more important for one to be able to interpret the Bible on his or her own and form their own interpretations of God's words. The Council of Trent reaffirmed Catholic belief that the Bible was so sacred an object that only trained professionals can access and interpret it. The differences between Catholics and Protestants also extended to the use of images. In a series of Protestant propaganda prints of Luther, opponents to Luther were described

as “a group of the ‘godless’, whose material interests are endangered by Luther’s attack on Catholic belief and practice” (Scribner, 30). Catholic practices involved worshipping statues of saints, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. Protestants were suspicious of images and believed that statues of holy figures were idols. The differences between Catholic and Protestant practices spread arguments instead of debates throughout Europe. As a result, both Protestants and Catholics were re-energized, eager to spread their religious messages, and confront each other. There were extra pushes for lay participation, missions in poor and rural areas as well as in the Americas. Several states such as Italy and Spain also had counter-reformation movements. There were no Protestants in Italy and no vernacular bibles were printed between 1567 and 1773 (O’Neil, 10/12). In Spain, the Spanish Inquisition began to clamp down on Protestantism. The early period of The Reformation saw an increased polarization of attitudes regarding religion. People of the Catholic faith strongly believed in their own religion and regarded Protestants as heretics. On the other hand, Protestants believed that the Catholic church was corrupt and disagreed with many Catholic practices. The disapproval between Catholics and Protestants eventually led to bloodshed.

The conflict between Protestants and Catholics eventually boiled over to popular violence and religious warfare. Since both sides possessed hatred towards each other, nations with a mix of both religions such as France were unstable. In 1562, the Duke of Guise, a Catholic nobleman, rode through the village of Vassy and heard Protestant bells ringing for service. He discovered that the Catholics were unhappy that a Protestant service was being held in the village, and went to stop the service. However, several people were killed in the process. Following the Massacre of Vassy, Huguenots were angered and revolted (O’Neil, 10/12). The killing of several people in a confrontation between Catholics and French Huguenots in Vassy signified the heightened

tensions between the two faiths. Following the massacre of Vassy, religious violence in France occurred in sporadic frequencies throughout France. However, the assassination of Coligny, a Protestant French nobleman, led to the infamous Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Catholics descended on Huguenots and over 8000 people across France were killed, over 2000 were killed in Paris (O'Neil, 10/12). Francis Dubois, a French Huguenot, likely survived the massacre and painted the event. Dubois painted Catholics slaughtering Protestants regardless of age or gender. He included a dead baby lying on the ground on the right side of the painting to exhibit the Catholic's savagery and their lack of morality. Dubois was further able to depict the gruesomeness and violent nature of the scene by painting piles of dead bodies in the background (Diefendorf, 96). The escalation of popular violence reflected society's attitude towards religion at the time. Many were willing to kill and die for their faiths because they felt betrayed by people of the opposing religion and believed that they were dealing with souls. Besides the bloodshed of religious conflict during the French Wars of Religion, religious views also influenced politics. In a power struggle between Henry III of France, Henry, the Duke of Guise, and Henry of Bourbon, religion and politics intersected. When the Duke of Guise and Henry III were both assassinated, Henry of Bourbon, a Protestant nobleman, was left to inherit the throne. France, especially Paris, was very Catholic and did not accept him as their king. Henry said, "Paris is worth a mass" and promised to convert to Catholicism if France accepts him (O'Neil, 10/14). As a result, Henry converted to Catholicism and became Henry IV. Religion played a role in determining the power holder in France. In other words, as more people became theologically involved, they inherently set religious standards to those in power. Consequently, religion became increasingly associated with the state. For example, England was viewed as a Protestant nation while countries like France and Spain were Catholic. The French Wars of Religion saw a rise in religious fanaticism

as the common people as well as nobles involved themselves in popular violence as well as intertwining the state and the church.

The Enlightenment pushed forth ideas that shifted the state as well as the individual away from the Church. Voltaire was a French thinker and writer who criticized the authority of the church. He disliked organized religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism. Rather than regarding Catholicism and Protestantism as of the utmost importance in an individual's life, Voltaire believed that these forms of religion prohibited freedom and were tools of repression (O'Neil, 10/28). Voltaire himself was a Deist. He believed that while God existed and created the world, God does not involve himself in worldly matters. In other words, Voltaire is religious but not tied to any organized religions. He also viewed favorably of religious tolerance. At the time, Voltaire was a controversial figure and many of his ideas were unwelcomed. However, his publications and ideas signified a change from earlier attitudes towards religion. Before The Reformation, religion was a significant part of one's life. The involvement of religion in society significantly increased during the Protestant Reformation. People became willing to kill and die for their religion. On the other hand, The Enlightenment saw changing attitudes that shifted away from complete devotion to the church. Another influential figure of the Enlightenment was John Locke. In 1690, Locke published *Two Treatises of Government*. Religion was not mentioned in his publication. Instead, Locke's idea of government included: "Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent" (Locke, 224). Locke's idea of authority stemmed from consent. People had to give up some of their natural freedom in order to become part of a community. Through a community, a body politic will be governed by the majority. Locke's ideas of government countered the traditional idea that the right to govern came from

God. During the Enlightenment, ideas about government and religious freedom highlighted the changing perception towards religion at a time when faith no longer dictated an individual or society.

Through the different events in history, people's attitudes towards religion changed. Catholicism was the center of community and society was satisfied with the religion overall. People attended Mass on Sundays, participated in religious festivities, and supported the church through donations and volunteering efforts. However, The Reformation diminished religious satisfaction as conflicts between Catholics and Protestants arose. People viewed their own religion as the true religion and believed the opposing as false, making co-existence between the two faiths difficult to achieve. The religious zeal eventually led to violence. After the Reformation, the Enlightenment brought forth new ideas about religion. Voltaire's idea about the oppression of organized religions and Locke's views on government weakened the previously dominant stance religion had on society. Under the influence of the Catholic church, The Reformation, and the Enlightenment, attitudes toward religion changed throughout early modern Europe.

Sources:

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