

Main Currents of Modern History (HSS F234)

Test II

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- a) Martin Luther was born in November 1483 as the son of an entrepreneur and leaseholder of copper mines, of the trading class stock. He was born to quite a wealthy and prosperous family, which led him to get a good education from an early age and hence may have been a factor in his success later on in life. He studied at the University of Erfurt and later, on his father's insistence, went on to study law, but dropped out, due to his greater interests in Christian theology and philosophy. In 1505, after being caught outside in a storm and making a vow to become a monk if his life were spared, he joined the Augustinian Order, where, for the most part, he lived in fear of his sins and of God, whom he had been led to believe was of an angry disposition. He became a professor of Holy Scriptures at the University of Wittenburg (under Frederick of Saxony) and on carefully reading the Bible, particularly Paul's Epistle to Romans, he realized that God was indeed benevolent and merciful, to all those who had faith and entrusted their salvation to God, and this proved to be a turning point in his life. His belief in this "sweet" yet cruel concept that man is irredeemably evil and sinful, that God grants salvation only to those who are predestined to salvation and have complete faith in God, and that any number of good deeds or penances could not help one's soul attain salvation became the cornerstone of Protestant faith and doctrine. He posted his 95 Theses against the indulgences, the new techniques in printing aiding the dissemination and circulation of his works, stood up against the Roman authority's unjust practices and abuses and sought to reform Christianity into a religion based solely on the scriptures, as these were all he claimed had any truth or validity in the context of Christian practices and faith. He was sequestered and greatly aided by Frederick of Saxony, after he was to be excommunicated. He later married a nun and died in 1546.
- b) Luther criticized the Roman Catholic Church on multiple grounds, during his years as a reformer. His scepticism regarding the kindness of God, blown away by a critical reading of the Bible (particularly Paul's letter to the Romans) and his new belief based on these texts that God only granted salvation to a select few, regardless of their sins or penances, as long as they had remained faithful to God led him to realise the extreme unjustness and lack of validity of some of the practices of the Church, mainly, the indulgences. He did not believe that money could be used to attain salvation, nor would penances help, and realized that the money was being collected (often through brutal and barbaric methods) simply to further the opulence and luxury of the papacy. Thus began his war against the almost monarchical Roman Catholic Church. He criticized the following aspects of their conduct :
1. The papacy and clergy were seen to be the highest authorities in the Church, holding all the power to grant salvation and pardon sins. Luther believed that salvation was attained through faith alone, and that anyone baptized as a Christian was a priest, thus deconstructing the hierarchy of power.

2. Luther brought back the primacy of the Bible, and stated that only those Christian practices and rituals that were backed by the scriptures were valid, all others were inventions of the corrupt Church. He translated the Bible to simple German, while in exile, making it more accessible to the public, as compared to the original Latin and Greek versions, giving people greater religious responsibility (although he maintained that the Bible could only be interpreted through the Holy Spirit).
3. He shunned the ecclesiastical corruption of the Church, the barbaric acts carried out by them in the name of God, concubinage, opulence and their abuse of the people's faith in them. He attacked the indulgences and denied that the pope or the Church and any power over purgatory or salvation.
4. He denied the validity of all but 2 sacraments (baptism and Eucharist/communion) as he believed that these had no scriptural foundations and hence were not the Word of God.

c) Luther's attacks against the organization and conduct of the Roman Catholic Church thus started the Protestant (protests against the King and the Church) Reformation which divided Europe and espoused the values of critical thinking, reasoning and the importance of the individual. Luther's key beliefs that shaped Protestantism are :

1. Sola fide : Only faith and trust in God alone can help one attain salvation. Man is justified and pardoned his sins by faith alone.
2. Sola scriptura : Only the Word of God is absolute. Whatever is contained in the Bible and practices based solely on the Bible are valid and should be practiced. All other rituals are farcical as the Bible is authoritative and is the means by which God speaks to the people to whom he has granted the gift of faith.
3. Sola gratia : Only God's grace and kindness can save a man's soul. No amount of good deeds carried out can help him as man is irredeemably sinful. All good and virtue comes from God's grace, while man is inherently wicked and evil. Faith is the sole method to attain salvation.
4. Only the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are valid sacraments while marriage, penance, ordination, confirmation and extreme unction have no scriptural basis and are hence inventions of man and do not convey the Word of God.
5. The Papacy and the clergy do not hold a monopoly on salvation and grace. They do not have the power to save one's soul from purgatory through any means and are not the highest Christian authority. Anyone baptized as a Christian is a priest and has the power to read the Bible and interpret with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God alone stood between possible salvation and purgatory.