

Reformation and its political consequences.

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Reformation, also called protestant reformation is the religious revolution that took place in the 16th Century. Its greatest leaders undoubtedly were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Having far-reaching political economic and social effects the reformation became the basis for the founding of protestant is one of the three major branches of Christianity.

It was started by Martin Luther as a movement for ecclesiastical reform and theological reinterpretation. There are two wings of the reformation Lutheran/ Evangelical and the Calvinist/reformed movement. The Lutheran phase began with Martin Luther 95 theses in 1517 and insofar as it aimed at the reform of the church it can be regarded as a continuation of the conciliar movement.

Political Consequences of Reformation

In its inception and motives the protestant reformation was a purely religious movement having nothing to do with politics but the changes it brought about in the Roman Church were of immense political importance.

The changes it brought are as follows:

1. The reformation set the stage for the modern world. The decline in the power of church was brought about through

- destruction of the medieval theory that all Europe formed a single Christian community

-destruction of the idea that the pope was the supreme arbiter over the whole of Christendom

-and also the destruction of the concept that the church was the ultimate master of human affairs were of great political significance as they destroyed the medieval concept regarding Church and also supplemented the work of the Renaissance in creating the nation state and bringing modern Europe into existence.

2. Stronger authority of the state with despotic or absolute monarchy as the typical form of government. The states gained power in two ways.

- a. The movement in order to be successful needed the support of the secular authorities which were not interested in the theological aspect of the movement but the proposal that the jurisdiction of the pope outside the estates of the Roman Church and his control over the great wealth and vast possessions of the church in all parts of Christendom should be abolished appealed to the princes. They saw in it way to increase the wealth of the state. National protestant churches were established in England and Germany with the ruler as the head or protector of the new religious system thus strengthening the position of the secular authorities.
- b. Another way in which the reformation strengthened secular monarchy was the exaltation of the individual. Luther opposed the principle of authority and demanded freedom of conscience for the individual. His teachings concerning human equality and the duty of men to remedy religious abuses, however, lead to revolts (peasants war in Germany) 1525 and anarchy rather than bringing justice. To undo this, Luther began to preach the duty of passive obedience to secular authorities as they received the authority from god. This not only amounted to a denial of his earlier thesis on individual freedom and authority of state, but also an admission of the divine origin of state and importance and majesty of kings thus strengthening the control of the temporal rulers over their subjects and consequently strengthening monarchy.

3. End of United Christendom.

Luther's emphasis on the freedom of conscience and the right of the individual to interpret the scriptures in his own way led to the birth of numerous religious minorities over a large part of Northern Europe. New churches, intolerant of each

other, came into being, each claiming to have a clear vision of religious truth than the others. As a result Europe witnessed religious wars for more than hundred years which left it religiously divided and also shattered the last unified unifying element in Europe i.e. the Roman Church.

4. Mixing of politics and religion

The presence of many splinter religious groups had become a potential source of public disorder. Since every religious group sought for its members the benefits of legal establishment, every religious question became a political question. Politics and religion were thus mixed up. Under such conditions, Machiavelli's separation of the state from religion could have no meaning. The reformation was thus a retrograde movement in political theory; it undid what Machiavelli had attempted to achieve.

5. Development of anti monarchical doctrines

The religious feuds and fanaticism brought into fore the question of citizens right to resist their rulers. Luther and Calvin held that the citizens had no such rights (Luther had advocated passive obedience which led to the theory of divine right of kings). A second view was that the citizens could resist the king's authority because the latter derived his power from the people and so could be called to account for sufficient cause. It became the fore runner of the contract theory in the 17th century.

Contrary to Calvin's views, his followers in France and Scotland developed the theory that persons could resist the state in the interest of religious reform. Knox of Scotland openly advocated the right of rebellion and even of tyrannicide against catholic rulers. Thus, to meet the divine right theory anti monarchical doctrines were developed.

6. Revival of natural law

Prior to the reformation, the Roman Church acted as an effective institution capable of limiting and judging the secular authorities. But with the disruption of the universal Church, the suppression of the monastic institutions and the abrogation of canon law this healthy check was removed. The temporal state was left without any superior international authority to regulate and control its acts. To meet this need for a higher authority the mediaeval idea of natural law which

even the pope could not alter or dispense with was revived. This natural law was a universal norm or standard by which human relations were regulated; or by which they ought to be regulated. It was Richard Hooker who brought this medieval idea of natural law into the modern world and Locke who translated it into the theory of natural rights of individuals.

7. The idea of religious toleration

The idea of toleration as the only solution of religious differences may be regarded as another important contribution of the reformation. The immediate result of the reformation was to divide Christendom into two opposed and hostile camps, the Protestants and the catholic, which persecuted each other. Only slowly and under the compulsion of events, the idea developed that if the national state were to survive and give to its subjects a regime of law and order in which life could go on an arts, commerce and industry prosper, and Church and state must be separated. The state must permit the citizens to practice any religion they liked without any interference on its parts. But Europe had to pay a very heavy price in human blood and suffering in order to learn this lesson of religious toleration.

8. Enlightenment

The reformations questioning of beliefs laid the foundation for the Enlightenment, which was an intellectual movement that swept through Europe during the 1700s.
