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THE SECULAR REFORMATION:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS THAT
LED TO THE SUCCESS OF PROTESTANTISM IN GERMANY

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In the 15th century Europe was undergoing a subtle yet dramatic change. Times were uncertain, life was hard, there were few scientific laws, and it seemed that the arbitrary will of God had brought plague, starvation, and war to a population already troubled by fear and superstitions. This dark and harsh period, however, was on the point of turning, and a new spirit was emerging out of the darkness of the late Middle Ages. Nowhere was this process more evident than in the German territories. The Renaissance that had already begun in Italy was beginning to infiltrate this northern land composed of many states, each with its own political interests. Towns and free cities were becoming centers of trade, and commercial merchants such as the Fuggers were developing their own spheres of influence. The printing press had been invented and learning was no longer the privilege of a small group of scholars. Literacy was spreading and humanism, combined with the availability of the printed word, stimulated criticism of the Church. Germans were starting to reexamine their spiritual beliefs as well as their political identities. In particular,

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the German princes were beginning to assert their political independence from Rome and the Holy Roman Emperor. Germany's emerging political identity was fueled by its growing wealth in commerce and industry and the rise of its business class, the burghers, who were beginning to pursue their own interests. This new spirit of nationalism was to influence German society and its relationship to the Roman Church. Secular interests were taking precedence over religious matters. Germany's newfound confidence and independence were to challenge papal and imperial authority and set forces in motion that were to affect European society during the Protestant Reformation. The force of Martin Luther's personality was certainly a factor. Luther appeared at a decisive moment in history. It was the growing interests of the princes and towns, however, that spurred and sustained this growing movement that would challenge the dominant religious and political authority of the Catholic Church. The Reformation was in part a secular movement and the rise of nationalism and economic rivalries led to its success. The growth of commerce and materialism in Germany, the emergence of German nationalism, and the German princes all played a decisive role in aiding the Reformation. The Reformation stimulated by Germany's emerging status and political power would, however, set back Germany's unification for centuries. The Reformation that would bring Germany decades of religious conflict and centuries of cultural and economic decline in fact hindered German unity and did little to contribute to German democratic institutions.

The Protestant movements were three separate revolts: Lutheranism in Germany, Calvinism in Switzerland, and Anglicanism in England. The original movement, Lutheranism, began in Germany and was named after its leader, Martin Luther. The German Reformation's immediate cause was the issuance of indulgences by the papal agent Johann Tetzel upon the direction of Pope Leo X in 1517. It was this sale that prompted Martin Luther to post his *Ninety-Five Theses* on October 31, 1517. These theses were translated from Latin into German, printed, and circulated throughout Germany. Soon a growing protest, founded in decades of papal oppression and abuses, was formed. In 1519

Luther was questioned by Church officials and debated with prominent theologians, and he openly questioned both the pope and the Roman curia, the Church council. In 1520, Luther wrote *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility*, calling on the German princes to take the initiative in the religious revolt. Pope Leo excommunicated Luther in 1521, and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms placed him under the ban. Luther, however, was protected by the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. Within the next few years, Lutheranism spread throughout Germany and soon members from all classes joined the movement. In 1531 the Lutheran princes, who had protested Charles' order against heretics, joined in the League of Schmalkald, which Charles ruthlessly put down. From then on, these dissidents were called Protestants. Charles' action, however, was not effective, as Protestant zeal increased and the League continued to meet. In 1555 the Peace of Augsburg provided that each prince establish the religion in his territory. Lutheranism was now firmly established in north and central Germany and Scandinavia.

The second major branch of Protestantism, Calvinism, was founded by John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, and became a more radical Protestant sect. Calvin adopted the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli and in 1536 united his followers, forming a theocracy in Geneva. Geneva, however, was not the religious haven it was made out to be. Since it was a theocracy, there was no separation of church and state, and therefore there was no religious freedom. Geneva was a virtual police state, almost a totalitarian state in a sense, where everyone was constantly observed and dissidence was nonexistent. Whether the status of women improved in Geneva was questionable. Many women were subject to witch burnings and trials, ironically a Catholic practice. Some women, however, were allowed a certain extent of participation in religious practices and services. It was from the upper class women, however, which Calvin drew his greatest following. Prominent women such as Marguerite of Navarre supported Calvin.¹ Calvinism soon spread to other countries including the Netherlands, England, and Scotland, where the reformer John Knox led the Presbyterian movement. By 1560, Calvinism had spread to France and the followers

were called Huguenots. This group contributed greatly to France economically and socially, and when they were forced to leave in the 17th century, France suffered greatly.

The third revolt occurred in England as a result of Henry VIII's marital troubles. Catherine of Aragon did not provide Henry with a male heir, and consequently Henry wanted his marriage annulled. When the pope would not grant an annulment, Henry broke away from the Church, married Anne Boleyn, and was excommunicated by Leo X. Henry then passed the Act of Supremacy, which made the King of England not only the political leader but also the religious authority, thus combining church and state. There were, however, underlying political reasons, as in Germany, to support the Protestant cause in England. By separating from the Catholic Church, Henry VIII acquired more power and by eliminating monasticism, he took over a lot of ecclesiastical property. He gave properties to the lesser nobility to appease them and win their support. Many historians argue that like Luther, Henry did not want to break off from the Church completely, but wanted to reform the Church from within, or, in Henry's case, to preserve the Church of England. Whatever his motives, Henry changed the established religion in England.

Protestantism, although broken up into many different denominations, still shared common beliefs and practices. In Protestantism, the pope was rejected as the chief religious authority and replaced by the Bible. Unlike Catholicism, which practiced many rituals, traditions, and sacraments, Protestantism proposed to simplify religious practice. The core of Protestant belief, set down by Luther, was the priesthood of all believers, where one was saved through faith rather than good works. Rituals and most sacraments, therefore, were not needed, and unlike Catholicism, clergy were allowed to marry. Monasteries were abolished in Protestant lands, and all Protestants rejected the belief of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine during the worship service was said to become the actual body and blood of Jesus. Many Protestant leaders, such as Luther and Calvin, disagreed on this belief. Luther believed in the principle of consubstantiation,

where the bread and wine were held to be symbols of the body and blood. Calvin, however, rejected all notions of transubstantiation and symbolism, and did away with this sacrament. Calvinism was unique for its belief in predestination, where only an elect few would attain salvation. Many radical Protestant sects, such as the Anabaptists and Unitarians, formed, but did not have the impact that Lutheranism or Calvinism had.²

The German Reformation had its unique beginnings. Germany before the Reformation was prospering. All classes, except for the knights, were enjoying a better standard of living than ever before. Population throughout Germany had risen, education had spread, literacy was growing, and the princes, bishops and the Holy Roman Emperors were patrons of scholarship and the arts.³ The humanist movement in Germany was welcomed by the aristocracy, the intellectual community, and the German church. German humanists such as Jacob Wimpheling were determined to elevate Germany to Italy's level in the arts, education, and literature. In his *Response*, Wimpheling wrote, "Is Rome not also indebted to us? Have not two of our compatriots...invented the noble art of printing, which makes it possible to propagate the correct doctrines of faith and morals throughout the world and in all languages?"⁴ In the decades before Luther, Germany's cultural vitality was remarkable and it can be contended that Germany was on the threshold of its own Renaissance. Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pius II, wrote in 1457 that "Never had Germany been richer, or more resplendent, than today...Without exaggeration it may be said that no country in Europe has better or more beautiful cities."⁵ Nuremberg with its sculptures, churches, and architecture represented this growing German cultural spirit. Augsburg was Germany's financial and commercial center and the hub of trade with Italy.

German humanism, however, contrary to its Italian counterpart, was more conservative in theology. Germany's Renaissance, apart from cultural differences, had no classical past. German humanism was a revival of its early Christian roots rather than of classical Roman and Greek antiquity. In religious matters

it sought to simplify Catholic faith. The very issues of the Reformation, which included sale of indulgences, worship of relics, immorality of clerics, the authority of the pope, were denounced by the German humanists before Luther. "If I am not mistaken," argued Wimpheling, "the conciliar fathers wished to see the true Gospel of Christ preached everywhere...if every priest...were to serve God and celebrate the Eucharist, if popes and emperors, if the whole Church were to draw rich benefit from this holy work, the most efficacious office of them all."⁶ Desiderus Erasmus, who profoundly influenced the German humanists, further denounced ecclesiastical abuses in his *In Praise of Folly* when he wrote, "What shall I say of such as cry up and maintain the cheat of pardons and indulgences?...Or what can be said bad enough of others, who pretend that by force of such magical charms...they shall procure riches, honor, pleasure...after death a sitting at the right hand of our Savior and His Kingdom."⁷ Humanists, like Erasmus and Wimpheling, therefore, helped to ready the mind of Germany to take up Luther's challenge against Tetzl and the popes. Humanism, with its extension of literacy and education, contributed to the questioning of traditional beliefs. In addition, educated people disliked the superstitions connected with pilgrimages, relics, indulgences, and other practices. Unfortunately, the German humanist movement became lost in the upheaval of the Reformation that centered its teachings of personal salvation in heaven and discouraged classical studies and human fulfillment on earth. In promoting the Reformation, Germany reverted to intolerance and prejudice.

A major growth, meanwhile, was proceeding in German industry and commerce. Although industry was still in handicrafts, it was controlled by new entrepreneurs who were to comprise a rising merchant class, which came to power in Germany as it had in the rest of Europe. The social structure was changing. A new class of men were looking to trade and manufacturing instead of land to improve their livelihood. Money, rather than the aristocracy of birth, controlled the economy. The business class, with this new money economy, soon dominated the cities, and expanding trade provided new opportunities to the emerging burgher middle

class. The mining industry was also making progress. Great profits were made from the mining of silver, copper, and gold, and the royalties paid from mining to the territorial princes gave them the financial independence that they needed to resist both the pope and the emperor.⁸ These economic changes transformed German society and the national spirit reflected these changes.

As a result of this growing money economy, a new class of financiers became a major political power. Christian family firms, primarily the Fuggers, were controlling the flow of money within and without Germany, and with this money came power. Centered in Augsburg, which became the financial capital of Europe, the Fuggers raised their firm to supreme status by loaning money to the princes of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. They were described as the financiers of the Habsburgs. The Fuggers now surpassed the Medicis, the Italian banking family, and had more funds at their disposal than any other banker in Europe.⁹ When loans defaulted, the Fuggers received revenues of mines, lands, or cities. From these investments, the Fuggers became the richest and most influential family in Europe, and a major political force. Jakob II was the culminating financial genius of the family, and from him the free-market era in Germany is dated. So powerful had the Fuggers become that in 1519, when Charles V borrowed 543,000 florins from them to become emperor and delayed repayment, Jakob Fugger II did not hesitate to send him a clear reminder:

It is well known that your Majesty without me might not have acquired the Imperial honor, as I can attest with the written statement of all the delegates...My respectful request is that you will graciously...order that the money...shall be returned without further delay.¹⁰

These financiers knew who had the power and these men who financed princes, popes, and emperors would not be dictated to by a foreign power located in Rome.

To add to this growing prosperity, a spirit of *laissez faire* was reaping profits for many German investors, and many cities not under the territorial jurisdiction of the princes prospered from the growth of unimpeded trade. These imperial free cities in-

cluded Strasbourg, Metz, Augsburg, and Worms, among many others. These free cities became thriving centers of industry, commerce, and the arts. They were labeled “free” because they were governed by guilds controlled by the new business class, the burghers. These cities made their own laws, sent representatives to the provincial and imperial diets, and acknowledged no political obedience except to an emperor who was too indebted to them for financial and military help to restrict their activities. These cities were developing centralizing governments, in which the guild representatives played important roles, and emerged as virtually independent states.¹¹ Like the princes, these free cities cherished their independence and sought to preserve their secular interests. Economics more than religion was their primary concern. They were to play an important role in the Reformation. Population was concentrated in these centers, and the dissemination of ideas by the printing press could be more effective in an urban setting. These free cities would be the first to side with Luther against the Church to protect their economy and secular interests.

It was against this background that the German Reformation began. This growth of trade and commerce brought about a new awareness of being German. Germans were becoming too vigorous and prosperous to tolerate the medieval restraints of feudalism and the demands imposed by Rome. With this prosperity came a new confidence and a proud sense of German nationality. German cities were flourishing, German ideas were thriving, and German princes were relishing their new financial and political independence. Previously fragmented territories suddenly became proudly independent states interdependent upon one another as never before and bound together economically. As the Roman pope and Holy Roman Emperor sought to maintain their authority, the new German spirit resisted. It was this new political and economic climate that fostered Lutheranism.

Moreover, the oppressive fiscal policy of the Catholic Church in Germany was to fuel this growing force of nationalism. Far more than theology was at issue in Luther’s revolt, and one reason for his success was his specific attack on the exploitation of

Germans by Italians.¹² Nationalized churches and the supremacy of the state over church affairs existed in France, Spain, and England long before Luther. Italy and Germany, however, did not experience this trend toward a nationalized church since they lacked effective national monarchies.¹³ The monarchies of France and England had little money diverted from their treasuries to Rome. In Germany, on the other hand, clerical and papal abuses would supply ample incentive for religious reformers. Anti-clericalism and anti-papalism were bound to flourish in a society that allowed the clergy excessive power and wealth. Since Germany had no centralized political organization, the growing sentiment of German nationalism was frustrated. Germany had failed to provide a government that was able to protect Germany against the fiscal and legal claims of Rome. The German tradition of princely territorial sovereignty was too strong to allow a centralized, absolute monarchy, and imperial power was too weak. Every social group in Germany perhaps felt the economic liabilities of its connection to Rome more than the moral. German resentment of Roman economic exploitation and Roman attempts to dominate Germany politically and culturally played a large role in the birth of Protestantism.¹⁴ Economic resentment, when combined with social and religious issues, proved too overwhelming to be contained.

Furthermore, the ethical and moral reasons for this Church fund-raising were questionable. It was the general opinion in Germany that in the matter of taxation, the Roman Curia, a council that acted as a parliamentary body of the Church, placed unbearable burdens on the population. Numerous new indulgences were published without the consent of the German bishops and tithes were raised for a crusade, only to be diverted to another subject.¹⁵ German grievances against Rome from a financial point of view were getting more vocal and more frequent. "The Italians," wrote Archbishop Berthold von Hennesberg in 1496, "ought to reward the Germans for their services, and not drain the sacerdotal body with frequent extortions of gold."¹⁶ The relationship between the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy, furthermore, was not an easy one. It was often hostile and charged with

political jealousy and intrigue. Even Emperor Maximilian resented that the pope drew a hundred times more revenue from Germany than he himself could collect.¹⁷ This conflict further complicated the political events in Germany. In 1510, for example, Emperor Maximilian was at war with Pope Julius II. For a time, he even considered the separation of the German Church from Rome. Maximilian would have had no objection to the establishment of a Germanic national church with only the loosest of ties with Rome.¹⁸ However, Jacob Wimpheling, the humanist and advisor to Maximilian, warned against separation on the basis that he could not expect persistent support from the princes, who were jealous of imperial power.¹⁹ If such a separation had been accomplished, the course of Germany's history would have been changed. Germany would have followed an example similar to that of England under Henry VIII. A national church would have probably unified Germany and continued its cultural progress, as it did in England. Germany's political situation, however, was different. The political struggle between the emperor and the princes was too strong and the emperor had limited authority. This tug of war between the emperor and the princes would prove beneficial to Luther many years later, but detrimental to Germany's unification and progress.

Resentment, meanwhile, was mounting. In a letter to the Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, Ulrich von Hutton, a spokesman for the German knights, complained vehemently about the Italian exploitation of German resources. He reflected general German sentiment when he wrote,

...there is no gold and almost no silver in our German land. What little may perhaps be left is drawn away daily by the new schemes invented by the council of the most holy members of the Roman Curia. What is thus squeezed out of us is put to the most shameful uses...Does not Your Grace [Frederick] perceive how many bold robbers, how many cunning hypocrites commit repeatedly the greatest crimes under the monk's cowl...?²⁰

Hutton's complaints were directed to a receptive audience. The German princes were particularly frustrated with Italy's careless disregard of Germany's economic and political considerations.

Territorial princes had long resented papal encroachment upon their political aims, and all wanted to rid their territories of papal taxation and jurisdiction.²¹ Princes wanted what the free imperial cities already had, independence from the Church. They witnessed their territorial resources diverted to Rome to finance the Italian Renaissance, and their resentment and frustration intensified. A power struggle began in which the secular interests of the princes conflicted with the religious demands of the Church. Not only were the princes opposed to the papacy, but historically they were opposed to the imperial authority of the emperor as well. From the beginning, the impulse to reform the Church had mingled with the political intrigues and alliances of the time. Luther very cleverly appealed to the German princes in his *Appeal to the Ruling Class*, in August 1520. It was to be his most effective political writing. In it, Luther wrote, "The distress and oppression which weigh down all the Estates of Christendom, especially of German...have forced me even now to cry aloud that God may inspire someone with His Spirit to lend this suffering nation a helping hand."²² In Luther's writings, the princes could find religious justification for their political aims. As Luther put it, that prince who left the welfare of the Church to the Romans was violating his obligations as a German prince: "...In such a case, is it not the duty of every citizen to call the rest?"²³ These princes were not primarily concerned in the power of the intellect or the advancement of humanism, nor were they concerned with the divine inspirations of Luther, but rather their main concern was with their interests and maintaining their political power.²⁴ Political expediency outweighed religious convictions and theological issues.

In addition, the German nobility began to covet Church wealth that they saw as belonging to them. "Under cover of the Gospel," wrote Philip Melanchthon, the German humanist and theologian, "the princes were only intent on the plunder of the churches."²⁵ The German church was the richest in Christendom and it was estimated that nearly a third of the whole landed property of the country was in the hands of the Church.²⁶ The Church infringed on the wealth of these princes and they became

inclined to a religious reform that would allow them to confiscate ecclesiastical wealth. In conjunction with Luther's movement, inflation, military costs, and the inflexibility of the nobility's revenues made secularization of Church properties more attractive than ever before.²⁷ The knights, members of the lesser nobility, were one group that was not benefiting from Germany's rising prosperity. Luther's challenge to the established order appealed to them. This group, led by von Hutton, was waiting to seize rich Church lands to improve their economic status, and supported Luther's cause. Luther in turn exploited this motivation and aligned the princes and knights to his cause. He wrote, "...I fear, it came to pass in former times that the good princes, and emperors Frederick I and II, and many other German Emperors, were shamelessly trodden under foot and oppressed by the popes..."²⁸ Luther's appeal to and support of the princes and lesser nobility won many of them to his side.

Anti-clericalism, however, was not confined to the princes and members of the nobility. The rising burgher business class and the poor also resented their monies being diverted to Rome. They saw the higher ecclesiastical orders, prelates, and bishops enjoy wealth, which many of them displayed openly. As a result, these actions provoked the indignation of the people, the jealousy of the upper classes, and the anger of the general public.²⁹ Businessmen resented Church monasteries claiming exemption from taxation as well as Church competition in manufacturing and trade. The middle class especially resented Rome for curbing their economic opportunities. The peasants particularly hated the annual tithe levied by the Church on their harvests. To the peasants, the Lutheran movement meant not only freedom from Rome, but also from the landowners who they felt forced them to work and yet remain to live in poverty. The peasants were as interested in political freedom as in religious reform. Long before Luther, tension was building. Discontent cut across class lines. When Luther proclaimed in his *Appeal to the Ruling Class*, "All classes...are now oppressed by distress and affliction, and this has stirred not only me but every man to cry out anxiously for help," he was voicing the sentiments of the German people.³⁰ Fundamentally,

Luther succeeded because his ideas appealed to people of all classes.³¹ His words caught their mood and captured their growing frustrations with a Church that disregarded their general welfare. The issue at this time was over material concerns rather than over religious differences. In 1457, Martin Heyer, Chancellor to Archbishop Dietrich of Mainz, wrote to Cardinal Piccolomini, the future Pius II, of the wrongs suffered by Germany: "...The Germans have been treated as if they were rich and stupid barbarians, and drained of their money by a thousand cunning devices..."³² All classes were now focused on protecting their financial interests specifically against the Church. Rejection of Rome, therefore, was a further move toward financial and political independence.

The development of the printing press, furthermore, aided Luther's success. The time was ripe for change and the Reformation grew out of the conditions that permitted the spread and fostered the popularity of Luther's ideas.³³ He addressed a nation that more than any other in Europe wished to separate itself from Rome, and he spoke not to the intellectual elite as Erasmus and the other humanists had done, but to the people in a language that they could understand. To this end, the printing press would prove to be decisive. Printing was a German invention, and therefore it is not surprising that it spread more rapidly in Germany than anywhere else. The printing press quickly made Luther's ideas more accessible and assured that they were recorded in permanent form.³⁴ This invention would have a profound effect on the success of Luther's movement. The swift dissemination of Luther's ideas was assured with revolutionary results. Printing fell in with Luther's purpose and he used it with skill, being the first to make it an instrument of propaganda.³⁵ Soon after his *Ninety-Five Theses* were posted on October 31, 1517, printing presses of Wittenberg printed it so copies of it reached thousands of Germans. Luther had seized the moment. Within a few months, the theses became the talk of literate Germany; the pent-up anti-clericalism of generations thrilled at having a voice.³⁶ In addition, Luther soon abandoned Latin and wrote in a tongue that everyone, not just the educated elite, could understand: German. Intelligible to Low Germans and High Germans alike,

Luther's works played a large role in the birth of the nation.³⁷ As literacy rose, a wider audience had access to Luther's ideas and his words were understood by them. Between 1517 and 1520, Luther's 30 publications probably sold well over 300,000 copies.³⁸ Luther had not set out to be a revolutionary; his initial intention had been to reform the Church from within. Encouraged, however, by the general support of the Germans and such learned men as Melancthon, Andreas Carlstadt, and von Hutton, Luther changed course. In 1520, he wrote to his mentor George Spalatin, "I have cast the die...Now I no longer fear, and I am publishing a book in the German tongue about Christian reform, directed against the pope, in language as violent as if I were addressing Antichrist."³⁹ The use of the vernacular for his words was critical in solidifying the support of the German people and appealing to their new spirit of nationalism. The printing industry, moreover, had an economic stake in encouraging religious conflict by publishing Protestant propaganda.⁴⁰ Luther now not only had the support of the princes, the peasants, and the burghers; Luther now had support of the printers themselves.

The papacy in Rome, however, did nothing to quiet German discontent, and continued their policy of conciliation, even though prominent leaders warned Pope Leo X. The action of Leo on March 15, 1517, in which he announced the renewal of indulgences in order to finance the erection of a new basilica created a receptive audience for Luther's challenge. Luther voiced the feelings of many when he asked in his *Ninety-Five Theses*, "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"⁴¹ As tensions mounted, Emperor Maximilian wrote to Leo and beseeched him to bring action against "the said friar [Luther]" who "obstinately adheres to his doctrine and is said to have found several defenders...among the great....If the authority of your Holiness...does not put an end to such doctrines their authors will not only impose on the unlearned multitude, but will win the favor of princes."⁴² Leo, a humanist, allowed dissent and ignored the warnings. International affairs and political expediency absorbed

his interests, and he did not take sufficient action to suppress Luther. The warnings, nevertheless, kept coming. In 1521 the papal nuncio warned Leo X of an imminent uprising against the Church, saying that five years earlier he had heard from many Germans that they were only waiting for “some fool” to open his mouth against Rome.⁴³ If the pope had acted sooner, the movement may have been suppressed. Leo, however, recognized the threat too late. By the time he took action, the Church was not able to exert its influence over events that moved too quickly and took hold of the German people.

Had it not been for the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, however, Luther might not have succeeded. From the beginning, the movement to reform the Church had mingled with political considerations. Spiritual reform was dominated by dynastic imperial intrigue, greed and war, and in the end national politics.⁴⁴ Luther’s main appeal, as noted previously, was to the princes and it was to Frederick the Wise, in particular, that Luther owed his very life. Without the Elector’s perseverance and protection, the Reformation movement would have come to an end in 1518 and Luther the reformer would never have existed, only Luther the heretic like the Bohemian Jan Hus and the Florentine Girolamo Savonarola.⁴⁵ German princes had been striving for over a century to assert their territorial rights over the Church. In this regard, Tetzl had infringed upon Frederick’s territorial rights when he approached too closely to Saxony after Frederick had forbid the preaching and sale of the 1517 indulgence.⁴⁶ In the battle between Church and state, Frederick was the true hero. He had such a strong sense of duty to his subjects that neither the Roman curia, nor the imperial court, nor even Luther could shake his commitment to their welfare and spiritual concerns. Luther’s *Appeal to the Ruling Class*, written in 1520, appealed especially to Frederick’s long-standing commitment: “Therefore, when need requires it, and the pope is acting harmfully to Christian well-being, let anyone who is a true member of the Christian community as a whole take steps as early as possible to bring about a genuinely free council.”⁴⁷ Frederick would become a leader among the princes in the revolt against ecclesiastical power.

In addition, by 1518, because of the changing political situation, Frederick's political status had risen, which benefited Luther. In 1518 Maximilian needed Elector Frederick's vote to ensure the election of his successor, Charles V.⁴⁸ Consequently, Frederick's political clout was increased and he gained imperial support in his case for Luther. Emperor Maximilian had additional concerns and he was not above playing one group against another. He was waging a crusade against the Turks and now more than ever he needed German revenues. Maximilian, furthermore, seeing in Luther a card to play in diplomatic contests with Rome, advised Frederick to "take good care of that monk."⁴⁹ These political circumstances favored the Reformation. Frederick's protection was crucial for it enabled Luther's ideas to take hold before resistance to them could be established. Luther had become a factor in national and imperial politics.

Nowhere, however, was the growing power of Frederick and the princes more evident than at the Diet of Augsburg, convened in 1518. At this time Maximilian had summoned this Imperial Diet to consider Pope Leo's request that it should tax Germany to finance a new crusade against the Turks and to ensure his succession. The Diet, composed of the princes and representatives of the imperial cities, resisted. On the contrary, the princes restated the grievances of the German nation against the pope that were providing the background of Luther's success and asserted themselves.⁵⁰ What Luther started was soon taken out of his hands by princes, who joined the reform movement in part to strengthen their political power and fill their treasuries.⁵¹ Though Maximilian finally prevailed, it was demonstrated that papal and imperial authority was no longer absolute and territorial demands were increasing. When Pope Leo finally acted and issued his Bull of 1520, which denounced Luther's teachings and called for Luther's extradition to Rome, Luther was protected from his arrest by Frederick. In addition, when Charles V was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, he promised, as a condition of his election, that no German would be condemned without a fair trial in Germany.⁵² Frederick enforced this promise on legal grounds. Luther, therefore, was interrogated in Augsburg and not in Rome. If Luther had

been arrested and sent to Rome, his movement might have been suppressed as previous reform movements had been. Luther, however, was again protected by the political considerations of the day. In 1521, Pope Leo excommunicated Luther, and the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire, meeting at Worms and presided over by Charles V, placed him under the ban.⁵³ Luther, however, was protected from both Pope and Emperor again by Frederick, and was hidden at Wartburg Castle. The Pope and Emperor had waited too long to act. Within the next few years, the reform movement spread throughout northern and central Germany and took hold. At this crucial time, Charles V was involved in an international conflict with France and left Germany for ten years.⁵⁴ When he returned, it was too late. Again the political situation favored Luther as well as the princes. In the emperor's absence, both became stronger and more influential. Charles, meanwhile, hindered by the princes and even the pope himself, lacked the power to suppress the growing movement. By this time princes and peasants, burghers and knights, and even the lower clergy joined the Lutheran movement and made it a German one.

Some historians contend, however, that Luther was the reason that the Reformation succeeded and that it was solely a religious reform movement. In addition, Luther gave the movement effective leadership and theological justification. Luther, the man, certainly cannot be discounted. He provided the leadership and the force of his personality to the Reformation and challenged Church authorities effectively and eloquently. As noted by his friend, Melancthon, Luther "...knew the wants of the state, and clearly understood the feelings and wishes of his fellow-citizens."⁵⁵ It was, however, the German national spirit that gave the Reformation its momentum. It was the people who transformed his religious challenge into a national movement that had little to do with theological issues. The Catholic Church had faced many reform movements in the Middle Ages begun by reformers who also had religious convictions and forceful personalities. Luther's ideas, therefore, were not new. In the 14th century before Luther, John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in Bohemia also began movements which challenged church authorities and de-

manded reform. These movements, however, were not successful and were suppressed quickly and decisively. People were not ready to listen. Luther's movement, on the other hand, came at a time of significant economic and political changes. These developments provided the difference. Secular considerations allowed Luther's ideas to spread and permitted the movement to take hold. Social and political groups, therefore, used the Lutheran movement to assert themselves.

The Protestant Reformation was successful at its onset because at the core it was a secular, rather than religious, movement. Germany, in the years prior to the Reformation, was undergoing tremendous change politically and particularly economically. The humanistic attitude, with its origins in Italy, had finally taken hold in northern Europe, and German society as a result became increasingly secular. Free cities began to form, as did a new social class in Germany, the merchant burghers. German banking and commerce also flourished, and the Fuggers became a financial powerhouse. When Church taxation and the selling of indulgences escalated to preposterous levels, the princes, burghers, lower nobility, and even the peasants grew increasingly discontented. The time was right for change, and when Luther arrived, he had a very strong base from which to draw his support. Luther provided the voice that Germans needed to break from the Church to secure their secular interests as well as defend their national identity. Nationalism, therefore, emerged in full force and was a major factor in the Protestant success. The Church, amidst this dissension, hesitated and failed to act at the crucial moment. When the Church finally did act, it was too late. Protestantism had grown tremendously, and Luther's appeal to the princes, specifically Frederick the Wise, secured his safety. The Protestant cause was alive. German unification, however, was to be delayed for centuries. The Reformation, in effect, denied Germany the continued economic prosperity and cultural vitality that had contributed to its success, and did little to contribute to democratic German traditions. Its impact would be felt even into the 20th century, when another leader, Adolph Hitler, would use nationalism to bring about grave consequences for Germany.

Endnotes

¹ Mr. Thompson, AP European History, Delbarton School, 2002

² Robin W. Winks, A History of Civilization (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995) pp. 245-246

³ Leonard W. Cowie, The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century (Toronto: Wayland, 1970) p. 11

⁴ Jacob Wimpheling, Response rpt. in Brian Tierney, Donald Kagan, and L. Pearce Williams, Great Issues in Western Civilization: Volume I: From Ancient Egypt through Louis XIV (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992) p. 562

⁵ Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Letters, rpt. in Johannes Janssen, History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages (St. Louis: Houghton Mifflin, 1967) p. 198

⁶ Wimpheling, rpt. in Tierney, p. 564

⁷ Desiderus Erasmus, In Praise of Folly rpt. in The Protestant Reformation ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966) p. 18

⁸ Will Durant, The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957) p. 196

⁹ Carlton J. H. Hayes, Marshall Whithed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, History of Western Civilization (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962) p. 339

¹⁰ Jacob Streider, Jacob Fugger rpt. in Durant, p. 358

¹¹ G.R. Potter, ed., The New Cambridge Modern History: The Renaissance vol. 1, 1493-1520 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 195

¹² Winks, p. 240

¹³ A.G. Dickens, Reformation and Society in Sixteenth Century Europe (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966) p. 22

¹⁴ Steven Zoment, Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1992) p. 4

¹⁵ Ludwig Pastor, History of the Popes Vol. III (New York) 195 rpt. in Durant, p. 330

¹⁶ Johannes Janssen, History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages (St. Louis: Houghton Mifflin, 1967) p. 296

¹⁷ Durant, p. 331

¹⁸ Potter, p. 89

¹⁹ Durant, p. 332

- ²⁰ Ulrich von Hutton, Letter to Elector Frederick of Saxony rpt. in Spitz, pp. 34-35
- ²¹ Dickens, p. 75
- ²² Martin Luther, An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom rpt. in Career of the Reformer, V.I. Luther's Works ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957) p. 51
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59
- ²⁴ Edith Simon, The Reformation (New York: Time, Inc., 1966) p. 42
- ²⁵ Janssen, p. 534
- ²⁶ Durant, p. 292
- ²⁷ Dickens, p. 75
- ²⁸ Luther, rpt. in Grimm, p. 52
- ²⁹ Janssen, p. 295
- ³⁰ Luther, rpt. in Grimm, p. 51
- ³¹ Winks, p. 239
- ³² Pastor, p. 194, rpt. in Durant, p. 331
- ³³ Winks, p. 238
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 239
- ³⁵ Simon, p. 13
- ³⁶ Ozment, p. 4
- ³⁷ Dickens, p. 84
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51
- ³⁹ Pastor, p. 194, rpt. in Durant, p. 389
- ⁴⁰ Ozment, p. 16
- ⁴¹ Luther, Ninety-Five Theses rpt. in Spitz, p. 50
- ⁴² Maximilian's Letter to Leo X rpt. in Tierney, pp. 580-581
- ⁴³ Durant, p. 332
- ⁴⁴ Simon, p. 24
- ⁴⁵ Heiko A. Oberman, Luther, Man Between God and the Devil trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1982) p. 21
- ⁴⁶ Durant, p. 340
- ⁴⁷ Luther, rpt. in Grimm, p. 57
- ⁴⁸ Potter, p. 218
- ⁴⁹ Durant, p. 347
- ⁵⁰ Oberman, p. 204
- ⁵¹ Winks, p. 240
- ⁵² Oberman, p. 205
- ⁵³ Hayes, p. 353
- ⁵⁴ William Manchester, A World Lit Only By Fire: The

Medieval Mind and the Renaissance (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992) p. 175

⁵⁵ Philip Melancthon, Funeral Oration Over Luther rpt. in Spitz, p. 73

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Erasmus, Desiderus, In Praise of Folly Rpt. in The Protestant Reformation Ed. Lewis W. Spitz, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966

Erasmus is said to have “laid the eggs that Luther hatched,” and therefore is critical in discerning Church resentment in the years before Luther arrived. Erasmus’s In Praise of Folly was a perfect portrayal of the growth of German humanism and the Church criticism that would eventually aid Luther and the Reformation. Since Erasmus was a Dutch humanist, his writings often display a condescending attitude toward the Germans.

Hutton, Ulrich von, Letter to Elector Frederick of Saxony Rpt. in The Protestant Reformation Ed. Lewis W. Spitz, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966

Hutton’s letter to Frederick the Wise perfectly demonstrated the resentment that was growing against Rome. This source particularly helped me in learning about German concerns over taxation and how the lower nobility supported Frederick and Luther. Hutton was very biased and portrayed the Roman officials in a very negative way.

Luther, Martin, An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom Rpt. in Career of the Reform: I. Luther’s Works Ed. Harold J. Grimm, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957

This was one of the most important sources I used for several reasons. First of all, it was written by Martin Luther, the man my research paper focuses on and the man who started the Protestant Reformation. It also revealed how Luther, once he became a target of the Church, used the princes to his advantage for protection and support. Luther displayed great bias against the Church and church officials. This work also displays his manipulative skills.

Luther, Martin, Ninety-Five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences Rpt. in The Protestant Reformation Ed. Lewis W. Spitz, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966

This source was also very important, for it was the first work Luther produced and its issuance was considered the spark of the whole Reformation. This work gave me an idea of what Germans resented, particularly Church corruption. Luther's argument, though effective, was clearly critical and showed bias.

Luther, Martin, Treatise on the Liberty of a Christian Man Rpt. in Career of the Reformer: I. Luther's Works Ed. Harold J. Grimm, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957

This work was not as important to my argument but was important in my understanding of Luther's theology. It attacked the Catholic Church and displayed much disdain for church doctrine.

Melanchthon, Philip, Funeral Oration Over Luther Rpt. in The Protestant Reformation Ed. Lewis W. Spitz, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966

I used this work to show the efficacy of Luther's leadership and the kind of support he received, specifically in my refuting paragraph. This work, however, because it is a funeral oration, may have glorified Luther a bit too much and exaggerated justification for Luther's cause.

Piccolimini, Enea Silvio, Letters Rpt. in Janssen, Johannes History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages St. Louis: Houghton Mifflin, 1967

I used the future pope's letters to demonstrate how far German commerce had come and the presence of materialism in Germany. Though he was an Italian, he clearly admired Germany's progress which showed just how far Germany had come to be praised by an influential Italian.

Tierney, Brian, Donald Kagan, and L. Pearce Williams, Great Issues in Western Civilization: Volume I: From Ancient Egypt through Louis XIV New York: McGraw Hill, 1992

I used this book multiple times in finding primary resources to support my points. This book provided me with accounts by

Wimpheling and Emperor Maximilian that illustrated German advanced culture and specifically, in Maximilian's case, what might have happened if the pope had listened to Maximilian's warnings regarding Luther's power. Each primary source, because of his position, showed bias for his cause and motivations are certainly questionable.

Wimpheling, Jacob, Response Rpt. in Tierney, Brian, Donald Kagan, and L. Pearce Williams *Great Issues in Western Civilization: Volume I: From Ancient Egypt through Louis XIV* New York: McGraw Hill, 1992

I used this source to provide first-hand accounts of Germany's culture and Church denunciation by a German humanist in the years before Luther. Being a German, Wimpheling certainly showed bias against Roman influence.

Secondary Sources

Cowie, Leonard W., *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* Toronto: Wayland, 1970

I used this book in many cases to get a good idea of life before the Reformation. This book provided me with information regarding German humanism and culture, and papal abuses of the time.

Dickens, A.G., *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth Century Europe* London: Thames and Hudson, 1966

Along with providing me with a background on Germany, this simple and easy-to-read book was essential to my paper. It had much information particularly on the role of the princes in aiding Luther, and also concentrated on the growth of Free Cities, such as Nuremberg and Strasbourg, within Germany.

Durant, Will, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957

This book was essential to my argument. It provided me with a great deal of information on the growth of commerce in Germany, Church taxation, and the extent of German discontent before Luther's influence. It also provided me with a great deal of primary sources and specific examples. I used it particularly in researching the Fuggers and finding quotes on the papacy in the 1500s. It provided a fair account of Church

abuses and oppression although it did seem to be more favorable toward the German point of view.

Gritsch, Eric W., Martin—God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983

This source was not as important to my argument, and therefore I did not quote from it for my paper. This source was good, however, in showing how Luther was a conservative revolutionary.

Hayes, Carlton J.H., Marshall Whithed Baldwin, and Charles Woolsey Cole, History of Western Civilization New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962

This book was an easy to understand account of the events leading to the Reformation. It was informative, but had no analysis.

Janssen, Johannes, History of the German People at the Close of the Middle Ages St Louis: Houghton Mifflin, 1967

This book provided me with a lot of information on Church materialism and corruption at the end of the 15th century. Like Durant, it contained first-hand accounts as well as historical analysis on Germany before the Reformation. This source was essential to my argument because it provided me with many first-hand accounts by members of the clergy and German humanists at the time. These primary sources particularly concentrated on Church materialism and the princes' support of Luther. Although the material was presented in a scholarly manner, it displayed some bias against the princes and their political motivations.

Manchester, William, A World Lit Only By Fire: The Medieval Mind and The Renaissance Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992

This book dealt a great deal with Luther's personality, focusing on his negative traits. Since my focus was on the background of the Reformation, this book had limited relevance.

Oberman, Heiko A., Luther, Man Between God and the Devil Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarsbart, New York: Doubleday, 1982

This book was an excellent and extensive source on Luther and provided excellent insight into the personalities that played major roles, including Frederick and Melancthon. The author is German and was strongly critical of the Italian influence in Germany.

Ozment, Steven, Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution New York: Doubleday & Co., 1992

This source was a good critique of the overall Protestant Reformation, including Calvinism and Anglicanism up to modern times. It, however, provided little information on German background.

Pastor, Ludwig, History of the Popes Vol. 3, New York, Rpt. in Durant, Will, The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564 New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957

This source provided me with accounts regarding papal abuses and specifically on Luther's effective use of the vernacular, which contributed to German nationalism. It was a fair representation.

Potter, G.R., ed., The New Cambridge Modern History: The Renaissance 1493-1520, Vol. 1, London: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 14 vols.

This was a very scholarly and comprehensive source. It provided basic facts about the events leading up to the movement, but had little analysis.

Previt -Orton, C.W., The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History Vol. 2, London: Cambridge University Press, 1952, 2 vols.

This source provided basic facts about the Reformation but contained little analysis. It was useful in outlining the events leading up to the Reformation in a fair way.

Simon, Edith, The Reformation New York: Time, Inc., 1966

This book was very effective in addressing the social and cultural issues that contributed to the Reformation. It presented a fair account of the events and people involved although the author was a bit dramatic when describing Luther.

Spitz, Lewis W., ed., The Protestant Reformation Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966

This source was crucial in my finding of primary sources. This book provided me with excerpts from Erasmus, von Hutton, and Luther. This book also contained summaries of general trends.

Streider, Jacob, Jacob Fugger Rpt. in Durant, Will, The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564 New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957

Streider's source on the Fugger family helped show me the extent of power that the banking family wielded. These bankers particularly wished to break free from Germany's financial burdens.

Winks, Robin W., A History of Civilization Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995

This was an excellent resource about the events that led to the Reformation. It also provided background information about the personalities involved in the movement.