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Europe at the Time of the Reformation

Brent A. R. Hege

Thank you for the invitation to join you today in your commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. It's encouraging to see such a good group out on a fall day in the beautiful city of Columbus! I have three areas I would like to lift up as the topics of my reflections today: Europe and Germany at the time of the Reformation, Luther's life and thought, and Luther, the flawed giant. We would need several hours to go into detail on any one of these topics, of course, but I hope that we can do them some justice in the time we have together. I encourage you to share your questions and comments at the end of each session this morning, and I look forward to a productive time together.

My training is in historical theology, which means that I always want to situate a topic in its broader historical context. The topic of the Reformation is particularly well-suited for such a practice because we can't hope to understand the Reformation without understanding its background in the late medieval world. Luther himself, at various points in the history of interpretation of the man and his movement, has been described as the last medieval man and the first modern man, and he's probably both. (One of my professors once told me that the key to giving an academic lecture is to equivocate unequivocally, so I figured I would do that right out of the gate!)

Martin Luther's world was in the midst of a major transformation, thanks in no small part to his own influence. But there were also tectonic shifts happening all around him that produced the various channels along which reform efforts could move; some of those he took, while others were taken by fellow reformers. But this morning I want to focus on three main themes: the medieval religious and social climate, Renaissance humanism, and Germany on the eve of the Reformation.

The young Luther grew up in a world that was saturated with Christianity in a way that is virtually impossible for us to understand or fully appreciate. There was no part of the culture that was not completely shaped and influenced by religion, from politics to economics to education to psychology to family life. European Christians were formed by the Church as a child is formed in its mother's womb and they lived from birth to death in the shelter of the Church's guidance. This does not mean, though, that the average Christian had much understanding of the finer points of the Church's theology and teachings. Most Christians did not have access to education and relatively few were literate. Mass was said in Latin, which very few people could understand. For the average Christian in the late Middle Ages, Christianity was something that was *done* rather than something that was *thought* or even really understood. Attending mass, viewing relics, going on pilgrimages to holy sites, marking important moments in life with the assistance of a priest – this was the reality of the Christian life for many medieval people.

The cult of the saints was particularly strong in the late medieval period. Christians were encouraged to call on the saints in times of trouble and to praise the saints in times of joy. Being in the presence of relics of the saints brought relief from the trials of purgatory and indulgences could be bought to reduce the sentences of loved ones and speed their way to heaven. At the same time, late medieval Christians had a deep, all-encompassing piety that allowed them to frame every aspect of their lives within the rituals and practices of Christianity, so that everything could be understood as part of the pilgrim's path from earth to heaven. As my friend Robert Saler puts it, the Reformation will make no sense until we understand that the medieval person was obsessed with God.

Theology in the late medieval period focused on the relationship between divine grace and human effort. The Church was understood to safeguard the treasury of merit accumulated by

Christ and the saints, which was dispensed to the faithful through the seven sacraments. Full membership in the Church was essential for salvation, as outside the church there was no access to the sacraments and therefore no possibility for salvation. Everyone assumed the necessity of God's grace, but some theologians also insisted that God's grace must be matched by human effort to become effective. Viewing relics, purchasing indulgences, attending mass, saying prescribed prayers – all of these pious acts assuaged the Christian's conscience when contemplating Christ, the stern judge.

Pronouncements by the Roman hierarchy carried ultimate authority in the late medieval period. In the Church's efforts to pass on the tradition that had been entrusted to it since the time of the apostles, the process of receiving, interpreting, and handing over the "deposit of faith" produced a growing body of canon law and doctrinal statements that profoundly shaped the contours of medieval Christianity. These pronouncements filtered down to the masses through the hierarchy, from Rome and the theologians to the various bishops to the monasteries and the parish priests, and finally to the laity.

For most of the medieval period there were very few literate Europeans, as education was reserved for the social and political elite who could afford to send their children to monastery schools and universities. Books and manuscripts were rare and therefore quite valuable; it was common practice to chain books to their shelves in libraries to minimize the risk of theft. And when we consider how many hours of labor went into copying large manuscripts by hand, it makes sense why these texts were guarded as precious treasures. This meant that very few people owned or even read books, including the Bible, so most people got their information from established authorities or through word of mouth.

But in the 15th century Johannes Gutenberg developed a printing press with moveable type that revolutionized the publishing industry by drastically reducing the cost and the time of printing a book. Suddenly literature became affordable and there was an explosion of publications flooding the markets of Europe. Most of these texts were religious in nature, as these invariably proved to be bestsellers. Smaller, even more affordable pamphlets of only a few pages were produced by the thousands and collections of woodcuts found a market among illiterate Europeans who wanted to follow the developments of the day but were unable to read the work of scholars. Informal discussions and word of mouth ensured that ideas originally espoused in books filtered down to all levels of society.

At the same time, wealthy European monarchs began sending explorers and what today we might call venture capitalists to far-off lands to secure natural resources and cheap labor for expanding markets in Europe. In 1492 the most famous of these expeditions reached the shores of the New World, when Christopher Columbus made landfall in the Caribbean. Suddenly the known world grew exponentially larger as tales of the Americas seeped into the European consciousness. New wealth and resources began pouring into Europe, jumpstarting cottage industries and creating wealth seemingly overnight for entrepreneurs willing to take the risk. There was an accompanying mass migration from rural areas to cities and towns across Europe as the guilds of craftspeople required fresh labor to meet demand. The old feudal system was collapsing and something new was emerging: a moneyed, market economy, decentralized from the monarchies and concentrated in urban centers across Europe.

These developments took place within the context of a broader cultural movement that we now call the Renaissance, which began in the 14th century and lasted until the early 17th century. As wealth spread beyond the confines of the aristocracy into powerful merchant families

and as new cities emerged as centers of commerce and learning, there was a growing interest in the study of history and the powers of the human being, rooted in the great works of Greek and Roman civilization. Thanks to the Crusades and trade routes around the Mediterranean basin, Christian travelers interacted with Muslim scholars who had preserved the ancient Greek and Roman texts that had been all but lost to Europeans after the fall of Rome in the 5th century. Crusaders and traders brought texts in history, philosophy, the sciences, medicine, architecture, politics, economics, literature, and more back to Europe, sparking a rebirth of learning and a fascination with ancient cultures and what they might contribute to the present.

These great leaps forward in human achievement heralded a new age of confidence in human ability, creating a philosophy known as humanism. The human being became the subject of considerable attention and study, first in Italy but eventually spreading north over the Alps. Study of politics, culture, language, literature, music, art, and science flourished in the Renaissance, thanks to the influx of new texts and ideas from the Islamic world and, through it, from Greek and Roman civilization.

The motto of the Renaissance was *Ad fontes*: “Back to the sources!” European intellectuals scoured Greek, Roman, and Islamic sources of wisdom for guidance in their experimentation with new ways of organizing society and living meaningful lives. European scholars became reacquainted with ancient wisdom, read texts in ancient Latin and Greek, and translated these texts into medieval Latin and eventually into vernacular languages as well. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and other ancients became the new currency of knowledge and prestige in the Renaissance, sparking generations of liberally educated Europeans endowed with a newfound trust in the powers of reason and the human spirit to hope for a golden age of human progress.

With these new tools and resources at their disposal, it was inevitable that scholars would turn their attention to issues of the day and return to the sources for insights on contemporary problems. Armed with Greek and Roman political and philosophical texts extolling the powers of reason and democracy, many scholars were emboldened to criticize the absolute monarchies of Europe and to suggest alternative political and social arrangements. Attention to the historical context and development of ancient texts prompted some scholars to approach the Bible with critical eyes, hoping to discover the origins of these texts and their subsequent history of interpretation. Pagan sources of wisdom from the Greek and Roman world, as well as Muslim and Jewish sources, entered into conversations in ways that would have been unthinkable just a few generations before. Scholars saw the world with fresh eyes through these ancient texts and practices and began to question the received wisdom of previous generations, not least in matters of church and theology. It was perhaps inevitable that this new generation of scholars would eventually turn their critical eye toward the Catholic Church and its traditions.

Meanwhile, north of the Alps, the Renaissance had been slow in arriving, but nevertheless there were some humanist scholars at work in German universities in the late medieval period. However, the political and social situation in which they did their work was quite different than it was south of the Alps. In the late medieval period, north-central Europe was divided into hundreds of principalities, duchies, independent city-states, and other domains lumped together into the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, with an emperor elected by powerful princes known as Electors. Most of these territories were German-speaking and all were, by default, Roman Catholic, but otherwise very little held these disparate regions together except for the will and power of the Emperor. This was no absolute monarchy, however, as the Electors wielded considerable influence in the politics and economics of the empire. Nominally,

the Holy Roman Emperor was a subject of Rome and of the Pope, and there is a long and fascinating history of the power struggles that played out between these two centers of Europe in the Middle Ages. But for our purposes it's enough to say that by the late Middle Ages the Electors were beginning to resent the power of the Pope and the Emperor and longed to exert their independence. As the market economy began to form, the Electors and other princes discovered that they possessed within their territories considerable wealth and power, such that they were growing increasingly unwilling to submit themselves to the control of the Emperor and the Pope.

In Germany this political and economic tension came to a head beginning in the middle of the 15th century when Pope Nicholas V, a prominent patron of Italian art and culture, declared an indulgence for the sake of building a new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the church that still stands in the center of the Vatican today. Several subsequent popes continued the practice of declaring indulgences to raise revenues for the construction project, and by the early 16th century many German princes felt that the Holy Roman Empire was being fleeced for the sake of papal greed and glory. Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz and one of the most powerful figures in the Empire, had accrued massive debts to pay for his elevation to Cardinal Elector and he agreed to spearhead a new indulgence in Germany to pay off his debts and also help build St. Peter's. He appointed a Dominican monk and itinerant preacher, Johann Tetzel, to manage the indulgence in German lands. Tetzel and his retinue would travel from town to town, holding mass gatherings in town squares and other public venues to drum up support for the indulgence. We have some records of his preaching and sales pitches, including the famous line, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Given the popular piety of the day and its fear of punishment in purgatory, Tetzel was quite successful in making huge sums of money from these

traveling indulgence sales, which only further enraged local rulers who would have preferred that money to stay in their own territories.

These events naturally led to increasing tension and open conflicts with the papacy, as German princes and Electors desired to assert their independence from the institution that they believed was robbing them blind. This, coupled with the fact that all of the popes in living memory and far beyond had been Italians, sparked a growing German nationalism that sought to celebrate all things German in opposition to Italian politics and culture south of the Alps. German culture, German ways of life, and the German language were emphasized in schools, literature, and public life in new ways that profoundly shaped the impact of the Reformation, as we will see when we turn our attention to a small German university and one of its new professors, Martin Luther.