

## ECONOMIC ABUSE OF THE LAITY: A PRIMARY CAUSE OF THE REFORMATION

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Time and again scholars have evaluated the Reformation period in Europe, seeking more evidence for the causes of the revolt. Too often they have been unduly influenced by the abuses of the Renaissance popes and have not realized that the causes of the Reformation had been developing since the time of Gregory VII. In the re-evaluation of the causes of the great religious upheaval, there are at least three prime factors which precipitated the movement, namely: (a) increased control of the church over political and economic policies of Europe, (b) rising anticlericalism, and (c) economic and religious abuse of the laity.

Temporal control by the church over Europe began to develop after the discovery of the "Donation of Constantine" during the reign of Pippin the Short, King of the Franks (751-768). That remarkable document declared that the "... districts and cities of Italy and the western regions" were subject to the pope (1, p. 186). The dramatic growth in church influence was evidenced in 800 A.D. with the crowning of Charlemagne by Pope Zacharias. This historic event moved the crown of Constantine back to Western Europe and enhanced both the power and influence of the papacy over rulers and politics (1, p. 186).

The constantly growing control of the church over temporal affairs brought about a need for reform, and for the first time reform emanated from the papal office. During the pontificate of Gregory VII, a papal-sanctioned reform was initiated to renew the the spiritual fervor of the church. To maintain purity of corrective measures, the curia, a papal court was established. Until the time of the last Gregorian reformers, Paschal II, the curia held firm to spiritual principles of the church. Under the latter Paschal, significantly, the curia began to favor the church's control over the temporal realm of Europe. (2, pp. 290-292).

The church began to accumulate lands and by the 16th century was the largest landowner in the whole of Europe. By the golden age of the high Renaissance, the pope had become a "landowner first, then a political prince and then a prince of the world" (3, pp. 69-70). As Europe dozed away the years under the palsied hand of feudalism, the church expanded its control of religious, political and economic affairs. Its administrative apparatus and canon law were expanded to include its own language, income and government. The church came to be regarded as a state superior to other states. The temptation to abuse their power was irresistible (4, p. 29).

Abuses perpetuated by churchmen were both spiritual and economic. Church policies were flexible and could be changed to suit the needs of affluent individuals who were willing to purchase exceptions. The result was disintegration of moral precepts of the church. This debilitating influence effectuated a general decline of the spiritual life of both higher and lower clergy, a pernicious malevolence that reached into the monasteries and finally to the people.

The people were incensed by the shameful conduct of the clergy. The scandalous deportment of such individuals as Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, who later became Pope Alexander VI, brought the holy state and office into disgrace. The wealth of the church, extracted at great sacrifice from its people, was often used to achieve secular goals of important clerics rather than to promote spiritual guidance for the Christian faithful. Among means utilized by clerics to fill their bottomless coffers, no abuses were more flagrant than those which attended the selling of church offices. Bishops were ordained for gold, and thus in turn, sold church offices often for princely sums. The iniquity of simony reached into the lower

offices of the church until the people felt its burden (5, p. 215).

Religious unrest, growing since the Babylonian Captivity (1309-1376) and the Great Schism (1378-1417), developed into a strong anticlerical movement by the beginning of the 16th century. Symptoms of the laity's hostility were noted as early as the Diet of Worms (1495), when the Saxon nobleman, Hans von Hermannsgrun, proposed to the emperor that the "pope should be refused obedience and a German patriarchate erected." In Switzerland the growing desire for a national church incited the cantons to demand that "the pope, bishops, abbots and the generals of religious orders be ousted" (2, p. 159).

The movement soon spread into a revolt over Roman Catholic dogma. It became evident that reformers were supported by large numbers of dissatisfied patrons who could not be suppressed or destroyed because their composite opposition was deeply rooted in the economic, political and intellectual attitudes of the day. The movement affected economic doctrine, political theory and state policy. The international scene was marred by hostilities such as the wars caused by the unsuccessful Hussite movement, a harbinger of things to come.

As long as the economy of Europe could support the heavy pressure of the church's economic policies, cries for fiscal reform were weak and scattered. The intensity of Europe's economic burden was greatly increased as capitalism's advocates negotiated with higher ecclesiastics. Out of these negotiations the merchants of the Antwerp Bourse gained the concession that capitalism was not adverse to cannon law, while John Eck secured authority to charge interest. Thereafter, banking, a lucrative but unpopular function once confined to the management of the Jews, became a vocation both proper and profitable for Catholics to pursue (6, p. 73).

When Portugal opened maritime trade routes from Western Europe to the Far East during the early 15th century, trade was diverted from Venice, the mistress of commerce, and her German consignees. This left Germany in a state of financial collapse.

The German states because of the rupture of their economy, broke under the fiscal burden of the church. Widespread dissatisfaction with the religious establishment spawned a tidal wave which swept all before it in one of the great reform movements of Western History.

Two fateful attempts at financial exploitation of Germany through the sale of indulgences, the first by Pope Leo X in 1512, the second by the Archbishop of Mainz in 1517, motivated the lower clergy to cry out for fiscal reform. When their appeals for change went unheeded, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Pope Leo X, engaged in contracting for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica, sought to extract still more funds, from a laity already groaning under an oppressive financial weight, by issuing the infamous St. Peter's Indulgence. He sent John Tetzel, a cleric skilled in arts of religious extortion, into the mining fields of St. Anaberg, Germany. Little concerned with the spiritual meaning of the Indulgence, this purveyor of pardon occupied his every waking hour with the tasks of filling the papal coffers. Tetzel promised that if the miners of the area contributed readily and bought grace and indulgence, the hills of St. Anaberg would become masses of pure silver (5, p. 218).

It was not until the Archbishop of Mainz authorized the resale of the Indulgence, that the scandalous issue came to a head. The archbishop was in debt to the pope and to the House of Fugger for a papal dispensation by which he had purchased the right to occupy three church offices concurrently. The income derived from the 1517 indulgences was to be divided equally between the archbishop and the pope. The Mainz cleric could pay off his debt for the dispensation, and the pope would be furnished additional funds for the erection of his beloved St. Peter's.

Once again John Tetzel was summoned and authorized to practice his black arts. The abuse of the people by the church, without regard to the economic or spiritual condition of the laity, so infuriated Luther that he wrote to the archbishop denouncing Tetzel's hawking of indulgences with

the pious pretense that they would purchase the forgiveness of future sin and would instantly release the souls of loved ones from Purgatory. Further motivated, Luther prepared his ninety-five theses, and nailed them to the door of the Wittenburg castle church. In his "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," Luther asked that the church return to the pattern of purity of the primitive church. He requested the calling of councils to rectify abuses of the papacy, but the only reply the church hierarchy offered was that the pope alone had the power to call councils. Thus it became clear to Teutonic critics that reform was not to come from within the church, but must be developed outside (7, pp. 109-117).

Religious reformers were convinced that unscrupulous commercialism of the church had to be terminated. The church had to return to the economic posture that had prevailed prior to the Medieval period. The curia, however, repudiated the ideas of the German critics and the reformers turned to secular authorities to rectify the abuses.

Continuation of Luther's crusade against the ecclesiastical abuses of the laity prompted the development of a new power struggle between the princes of Germany and

the Roman curia. The Reformation resulted. This religious cataclysm was a result of the acquisition by the church of powers which its clerics were ill-equipped to exercise or curb. The scandalous department of the clergy resulted in the anticlerical movement. Most important of all, however, the Reformation developed as a result of the church's economic abuse of its laity. The reform sprouted in Germany, but it blossomed throughout the Holy Roman Empire. When the movement had run its course, the Catholic church would never be as it was before.

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