How the Protestant Reformation Birthed the Modern West

The Protestant Reformation is, to some extent, the birth of the modern West and **arguably its most important event**. The reformation was a revolution not only religiously, but culturally, politically, even sexually and it terms of literacy. It left virtually no aspect of European life unchanged. Whether you are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, atheist, or otherwise, if you live and reside in the West, **you are somewhat an heir to the Reformation**. In what follows, we will track some of the Reformation's many profound effects.

1. Politics

The Reformation was an enormous political upheaval with long and substantial impacts.

- Luther did not suggest a new pope. Instead, he insisted that the final authority should not be a person but a text (the Bible). Having a text as the final authority is the basis for **constitutionalism.**
    - Suggests that even the highest ranking person can be judged by ordinary people. Opens the possibility of a non-monarchical, more egalitarian society.

Martin Luther

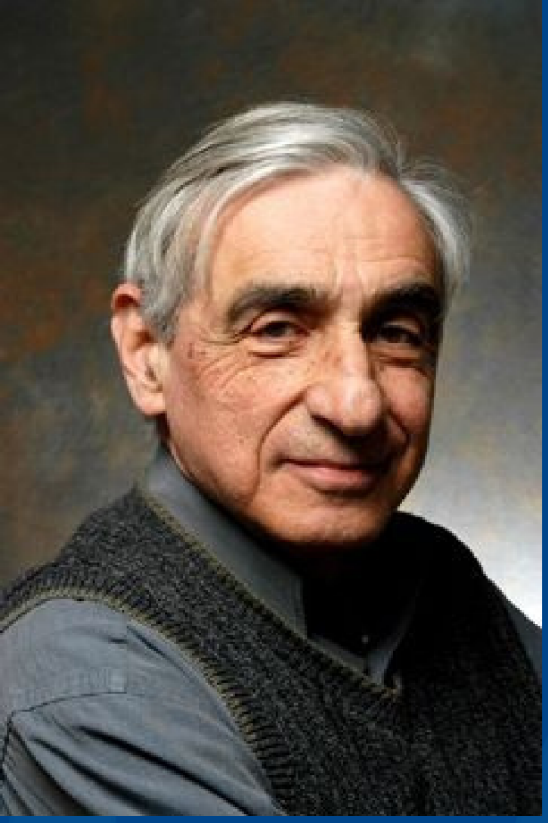
- **Calvin applies Luther's ideas to civil government**. Leading thinkers among Calvin's disciples (Puritans, Huguenots, Presbyterians, Reformed Christians) will write pivotal texts in the development of Western constitutionalism. John Knox even suggests people can overthrow a ruler who violates the rules.

- The Reformation seeds **democratic ideas**. Luther calls for a "priesthood of all believers," undermining priestly dominance over lay people. He translates the Bible into German so each person can read and interpret God's word themselves (causing a major expansion in literacy). The Radical Reformers have congregations that **elect and fire ministers**. A few years after Luther, peasants extend these impulses into the political realm, launching the Peasants' War to overthrow the rule of nobles and princes (they are eventually crushed).

Luther translates the Bible into German.

- Luther's use of the printing press is, in many ways, the **first modern political campaign** with catchy slogans and mass use of pamphlets to spread ideas.

Recreation of Gutenberg's Printing Press. The Reformation relied heavily on Luther's masterful use of this new technology.



Michael Walzer sees the Puritans as the birth of modern political movements.

- Michael Walzer argues the Puritans are the first modern political movement. More than a mere faction seeking power, the Puritans are committed to **reform**. Reform means an ideological program that seeks to **create new men** and establish new organizations and systems to achieve these ends. They seek not only power, but a new world.
  - **Shifts bonds of loyalty** from father, clan, lord to ideology, parties, states
  - Emphasizes individual agency – formally free men who choose to join.
  - Plans are **forward looking**, aspiring to create a new and better society. Strongly committed to **educate commoners** in the new ideas. Mass discussion of politics gives rise to political journalism.

2. Religion

Some excesses and corruptions had crept into the Catholic Church. In Luther's revolt, he ends up rejecting not only the corruption but many aspects of Catholic practice, redefining religion along the way.

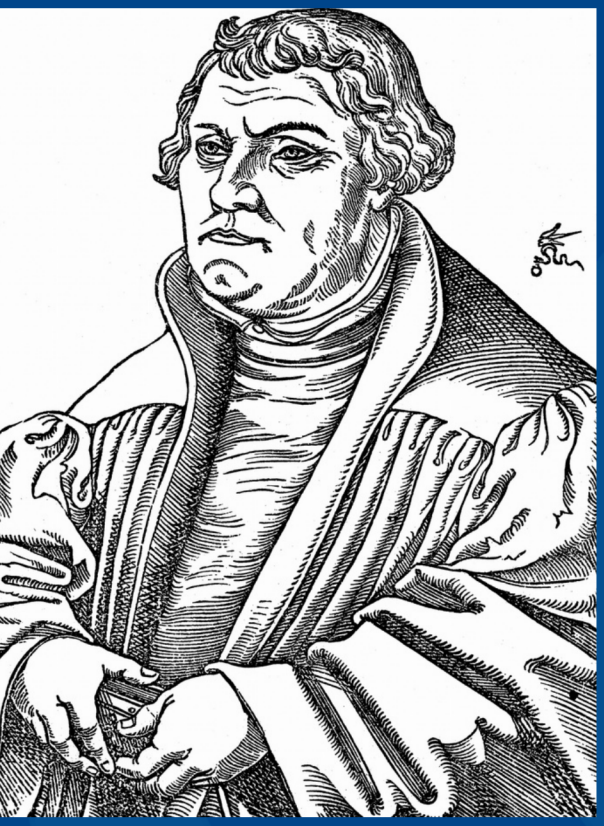
- The Church's power was partly via its control of sacraments. Luther dismisses them to some extent, countering that real religion is about **belief**.
- The Church's power also resides in the pope and the priesthood. Luther counters that the final authority in religious matters is a **book** (Bible).
- The Church has many sacred objects (statues; items connected to the saints or Mary or Jesus). The reformers argue that true religion is **immaterial.**
- Emphasizing reading, beliefs, and non-material lends itself to seeing religion as **interior** and **personal** (or private).
  - Also leads to idea of **separating religion** from other areas of life and from worldly matters like politics, statecraft, law, etc.

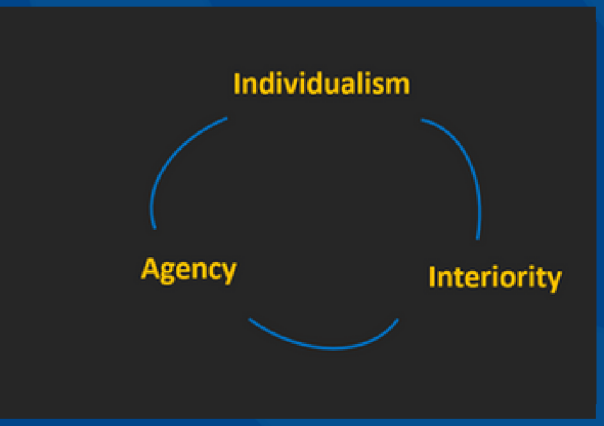
Reformation makes religion more personal

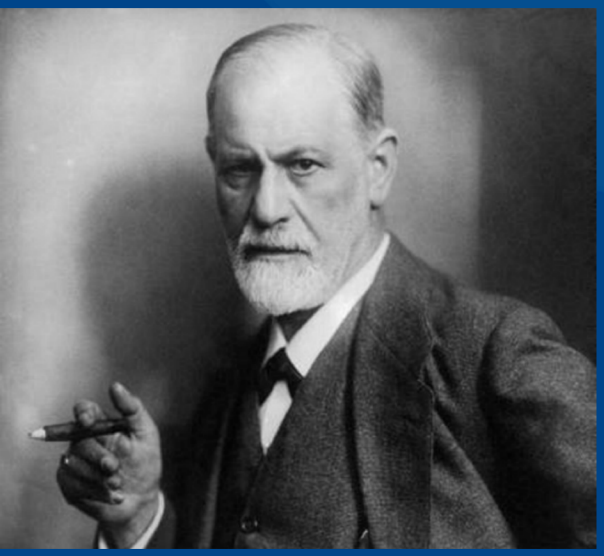
3. Ordinary Life

- Luther was terrified of hell, given the sin and selfishness he finds in himself.
    - Reading a single line in the epistle to the Romans ("the righteous shall live by faith") frees him from this terror – he concludes **faith saves, not good deeds.**
    - Eventually, he **rejects monastic life** as arrogant (presuming we can 'earn' heaven). Vocation had meant forgoing ordinary life to live as a monk or nun but Luther redefines vocation as ordinary life lived well.
- Reformers **rehabilitate sexuality**. Since Christianity's birth, lifelong celibacy had been the holy ideal. Reformers see it as unnatural and sacralize family life.
- **Family also redefined**. Family had meant a sprawling extended patriarchal unit living beside kin and including servants and apprentices. Intimacy felt with one's brothers, sisters, servants, etc. who you live and work with. Marriages were sometimes arranged.
- Puritan idea of free men elevates voluntary, chosen marriages and **separating the conjugal unit from others**. Fatherhood becomes a calling – father is prince, minister, schoolmaster and judge in his own home. Ideally, the **father is an agent of reform**, his household a local unit of the state.
- Sacralizing the family and seeing the domestic unit as the local unit of the state sows the seeds of **family values politics**.

4. View of the Person







Sigmund Freud

- The major change is a strong **boost to individualism**.
- This change begins prior to the Reformation with evidence from Catholic penance. Documents show a shift from communal, social sins (e.g. violence, anger) to personal sins that violate holiness (e.g. sexual sins). There had also been piety movements stressing one's personal connection to God.
- Luther greatly bolsters this trend. He emphasizes no intermediaries between oneself and God ("priesthood of all believers;" translating the Bible). By making religion essentially about faith, he **locates religion on a person's interior** (rather than partaking in sacraments or the mass of an institutional church).
- Other Protestant movements further stress **agency**. Puritans emphasize choice in choosing a church, choosing a spouse, choosing baptism (i.e. adult, not infant baptism).
- **Individualism, interiority** and **agency** form a mutually supporting set of outlooks that grow together in the modern West with the Reformation as a key spark.
- This mind-centred view of the person also emphasizes a **buffered self**. Europeans had seen the self as penetrated by forces, spirits, demons, etc. but now increasingly see the self as somewhat separate from the outer world and more autonomous.
    - Eventually, the depths of meaning once found in the cosmos came to be found in the depths of our psyche. Freud epitomizes this shift.

5. Secularism

- The Protestant desire to **worship only God** – to strip sacredness from images or rituals or sacred days – leads to the "**disenchantment of the world**".

- The buffered self similarly opens the door to a **secular self**.

- Reformers are not at all secular; but they inadvertently lay the groundwork for seeing the world this way.

St Sylvan the martyr, died 350 CE. Catholic Europe had places, objects and times of spiritual power.

Cumulatively, the Reformation dramatically altered European's understanding of politics and of what religion was, elevated ordinary life into an ideal, shifted the view of the person and, inadvertently, laid the groundwork for more secular understandings of both the world and of humans. It is, in many ways, the birth of the modern West.

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