

# Changes Leading to the Reformation and “Enlightenment”

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## Nominalism and Individuality

There were subtle but very significant changes in western thought leading to the Reformation and “Enlightenment” that are critical to understanding how western civilization in general and America in particular developed from this point forward. The changes in thought that are reflected in the Reformation and related political thought during the era of discovery were not a quantum shift but were at least partially traceable to changes that developed gradually throughout the latter Middle Ages. Philosophical and theological thought had been defined to this point principally by Catholic Scholasticism which is really a method of learning that placed high emphasis on analytical reasoning (1). This included some pre-Christian teaching most notably Plato through his influence on Augustine along with the teaching of Aristotle. A scholastic dispute arose involving idea of “*universals*” with one camp that of the “*realists*” who saw man in the context of a divine and social construct the includes the individual along with God, the Church, culture, family (in both a narrow and broad sense), gender, and history. Those that held to the “*reality of universalia*” reflected the classical traditions of Plato and Aristotle and were represented most prominently by Thomas Aquinas and the tradition of the Dominican monks.

The alternate view that’s only individual things and beings are real are referred to as “*nominalists*”. The nominalists position was most closely associated with William of Occam who said “*entities should not be multiplied without necessity*”. In nominalism any sort of group identity is simply an external system of classification and tends to inhibit human progress. These nominalist’s views gradually became dominant in the west first in the reformation and then in political and economic philosophy associated with the enlightenment (2 pp. 7-9). In the reformation the belief that the church was an intermediary between man and God was replaced with the belief that a person has a direct and personal relationship with God apart from the church or culture. Politically this initially tended to be reflected in an increased emphasis on the definition and protection of individual rights but there were other aspects to it that were more nihilistic and atheistic. In western thought nominalism eventually led to liberalism, neo-liberalism, and globalism that are opposed to traditional cultural identities and religion and may even reject something as basic as gender identity (2 pp. 9-15). While nominalism and classical liberalism may have developed gradually what it formed was a new ideology that departed from the flow of western civilization and western thought that had to be created and increasingly over time required the destruction of the classical realist perception (3). It is important to note here that the Eastern Orthodox Church wasn’t impacted by nominalism and this can explain some of the growing differences between the West and cultures associated with Eastern Orthodoxy going forward.

Reflecting the initial impact of nominalism in Christianity, amongst practicing believers’ emphasis was shifting from analytical to relational and from communal worship to individual devotion and piety as reflected in Northern Europe by Devotio Moderna which emphasized personal piety, scripture study in

original languages, moral reform, and personal sanctity (4). The Sisterhood and Brotherhood for the Common Life, a group consisting of both lay people and clerics, brought these teachings to a broader audience and created followers amongst some prominent people, such as Saint Thomas Moore and Erasmus, who were educated by the Brotherhood(4). The most significant literary output from this movement was by Thomas a Kempis titled *The Imitation of Christ* which is still available today. This book, which was written around 1400 (exact date cannot be determined) emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and came to be common in the libraries of both Catholics and Protestants(5). The key points associated with Devotio Moderna can readily be seen not just in the works of Luther, but are also traceable to Calvin and Reformed Theology and ultimately to Evangelicalism.

Nominalism also led to the elevation of emotions as a guide to evaluate one's spiritual life. Nominalists were skeptical about the ability of human reason to understand being or science which included an understanding of God(4). By limiting the ability of reason to ascertain truth, they directly or indirectly came to rely heavily on revelation through scripture as the only sure way to grasp spiritual truth. For the believer, the role of intellect and thought in finding God was minimized. This aligns closely with Calvinist thought and later Evangelical doctrines where emotion was seen as the validation of a conversion experience(4). The elevation of the Biblical texts as the primary or sole source of truth also corresponded with a minimization of historical precedent in interpreting scripture and aligned with the expanded availability of printed material following the invention of the printing press.

There are a great many critiques of the theology of the reformation but a very interesting historic assessment is provided by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer, who was born the son of a famous German Psychologist in 1906, spent periods of time in the United States, and returned to Germany in 1943 only to be executed for his role in the Valkerie plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, had a somewhat unique insight into Luther based on his regional identity and education along with his deep Christian faith. In his book he contrasts Costly Grace to Cheap Grace which he describes as follows: *"That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate"*(6 pp. 44-45).

After offering some praise for the monastic movement as a *"living protest against secularization"* and then saying that its fatal error was *"setting up itself as the individual achievement of a select few, and so claiming a special merit of its own"*(6 p. 47) he went on to describe Luther's departure from the monastic life. He observed that the world *"had crept into the very heart of monastic life"* and referring to Luther wrote, *"Just as the whole world of monasticism was crashing about him in ruins, he saw God in Christ stretching forth his hand to save. He grasped that hand in faith, believing that "after all, nothing we can do is of any avail, however good a life we live." The grace which gave itself to him was a costly grace, and it shattered his whole existence"*(6 p. 48).

While a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer had a very mixed perception of the ultimate outcome of the Reformation observing:

*“It is a fatal misunderstanding of Luther’s action to suppose that his rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace offered a general dispensation from obedience to the command of Jesus, or that it was the great discovery of the Reformation that God’s forgiving grace automatically conferred upon the world both righteousness and holiness”*(6 pp. 48-49).

*“Yet the outcome of the Reformation was the victory, not of Luther’s perception of grace in all its purity and costliness, but of the vigilant religious instinct of man for the place where grace is to be obtained at the cheapest price”*(6 p. 49).

His observations on the events leading to and following the reformation encapsulate issues that have divided and defined both the Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity and remain extremely relevant today.

### **Indulgences, Martin Luther, and the Fugger’s**

The reformation is almost always presented as a theological struggle of ideology and, to some extent it was, but there was more to the story. One of the points that Luther objected to was indulgences which was the practice of paying a tithe to lessen a loved one’s time in purgatory. This was a controversial practice that was and is, rightfully seen as heretical. The practice of indulgences grew in scope and visibility around the time of the reformation as a result of bank debt. The dominant Banking dynasty of the time was the Fugger’s who had some personal connection to the Luther family.(7 p. i)

The Fugger’s were originally cloth merchants in Augsburg, Germany who expanded to finance leveraging their connection to upper class society. During the latter years of the 15th century the Fugers developed lucrative business dealings with the Hapsburgs. The Hapsburgs were a very wealthy Austro-Hungarian family whose lands extended across Europe and provided a succession of Holy Roman Emperors for four centuries. Jakob Fugger was the man behind this strategic diversification starting with a loan of 23,627 florins to Siegmund, Archduke of Tyrol ,in 1487. This loan was secured with a mortgage on the Archduke’s Schwaz silver mines.(8)(7 p. Ch. 1)

By securing the mortgage against the mine, this meant that if Siegmund failed to make the payments, the Fugger’s would simply get paid in bullion. This was highly profitable and risk-free which established a business model that the Fugger’s quickly expanded on. By the turn of the century (1600), the Fugger family controlled all of the Schwaz mining operation, owned their own silver mines in Tyrol and Carinthia, and were expanding into copper production in Hungary.(8)

They married themselves into some of the most powerful families in Europe – particularly the Thurzos of Austria – and loaned heavily to the rest. Clients included Henry VIII of England, Charles V of Spain and the German Emperor Maximillian I. The latter proved particularly lucrative, combining overarching military and political ambitions with what economist Richard Ehrenberg claimed was a reputation as *“the worst manager of all the Hapsburgs”*.(7 p. ch. 2)

By October 1517, the reach and power of the Fugger banking family was threatening the integrity of religion and, on a broader scale, European society. In the political church, the central administrative body (Roman Curia) demanded high fees for high offices and those with enough wealth and connections could hold multiple positions for the right price. These ecclesiastical offices could be lucrative and could be seen as a sort of business investment and, like any business investments, debt was an option which the Fugger's could make happen. Martin Luther and the Luther family were familiar with the Fugger's well before he entered the ministry or wrestled with complex theology. Martin Luther spent his early years in and around the silver mines of the Harz Mountains where his father was a master smelter. (8)

When Albrecht of Brandenburg was appointed Elector of Mainz in 1514, he had to raise 21,000 ducats to pay the Curia which was more than he had. Albrecht was a prominent man holding several other ecclesiastical offices but even he did not have the means for such high fees for this position so he borrowed it from the Fugger's at an exorbitant interest rate. In order to generate enough income to pay it back Albrecht paid an additional 10,000 ducats to secure the right to administer the recently announced "*Jubilee Indulgences*" intended to pay for the work on St Paul's Basilica in Rome. While many had denounced the practice of selling indulgences as heresy, this era took the practice to entirely new levels associated very directly with borrowing and debt and this was a fairly obvious abuse of church authority that was not easily overlooked.(8)

Albrecht's appointed Pardoner was Johann Tetzel who was accompanied at all times by an agent of the Fugger family. The agent held the key to the Indulgence chest and when it was full, he controlled and distributed the contents. Half went to the Fugger agent in Rome to pay off the Curia and half to Augsburg to pay off Albrecht's loans. Luther would compare this to the story of Christ driving the moneychangers from the Temple which was too obvious and legitimate to ignore.(8)

The Fugger dynasty eventually waned but they established a banking model that would endure and be passed down to others where those who created the money would make debt slaves of people and governments who desired wealth and power beyond their means. In many cases this went as far as financing both sides of a war.

## **The Printing Press and Fundamental Changes in Human Communication**

The advent of the printing press fundamentally changed society from hearing dominant to text dominant. The change happened relatively quickly and it's important to grasp the significance of this not just in regard to its effect on history, culture, and politics, starting around the reformation time period, but because it also affects our understanding of what came before. John H Walton of Wheaton University has written a number of books on this topic specifically with regard to the interpretation of the Bible and other ancient texts. In terms of religious doctrine, these writings could be considered controversial but the general points he addresses about how communication changed throughout history are both valid and necessary to understand in order to avoid the trap of "*presentism*".

Our modern world runs on the premise of literacy and the written word is considered authoritative while oral communication is seen as unreliable and inferior. Literacy isn't just desirable, it's essential. Prior to the printing press, which gave the ability to reproduce and distribute written documents, the

economics of creating and distributing printed information on a large scale simply didn't allow this. The principal means of communication had to be predominantly oral with writing and recording left to a small specialized subset of society that was trained to perform this function. (9 pp. 17-18) Writing was seen as something that was applied to specific functions like religious texts, legal and family archives, economic transactions, and other things that were considered important to retain as records not unlike items we may tend to keep in secure file cabinets (or servers) today. Scribes were hired to support these tasks similar to how in modern society we may hire a lawyer or escrow company. (9 pp. 17-22)

In the hearing dominant world, information was disseminated orally and oral traditions typically existed for some considerable period of time before they were recorded. In the text dominant world of today, the author is in most cases the authority behind the document. Prior to the world becoming text dominant, the authority was based on the originator of the message, who was typically a person of authority and power, while the scribe or scribes were the recorders. To use a Biblical example of this concept, the books of Moses, although originating with Moses, were not necessarily penned by Moses, even though he would have been literate, because he was in a position of authority and would have had scribes who effectively worked for him. Books were not published as intellectual property as they are today and words that are translated today as "*book*" generally simply referred to a document as distinctions to type of documents and means of publication didn't exist. (9 p. 28)

The scribe, in transposing and preserving documents, also played a vital role in what could be considered incremental translation as languages morphed over time and social, technological, and cultural contexts gradually changed. For example, cultural metaphors and references to antiquated technologies could easily lose their meaning over a couple hundred years. The scribe's purpose, therefore, wasn't simply to preserve verbiage but content and there was some degree of discretion in doing this although there is every indication they generally made every attempt to maintain the purpose and meaning of the original document. While there were generally not personal or political agendas at play, this is always a possibility that shouldn't be discounted without consideration (9 pp. 31-35). A key interpretational question in assessing ancient documents is whether something referenced in the text is part of the intended message, or illocution, or whether it is just background context, referred to locution. In the hearing dominant world, authority would be inferred only for the illocution and not the locution.

Under Christendom prior to the printing press and time period of the Reformation, we are dealing with a hearing dominant culture who understood scripture in the context as coming from a hearing dominant culture. Written documents and argumentation was controlled by the Church because the monasteries transposed and maintained these. The fact that it was a significant economic effort to do that recognized this as an important and worthy task because this was not something that couldn't be readily monetized. Under Christendom, the monasteries and universities were the gateway to literature and education which helped to preserve a somewhat common culture. When it became fairly easy to create and reproduce written documents, this changed in a way similar to the impact the internet has had on broadcast media in recent history.

The Reformation produced a vast number of books and other writings. By Luther's death it is estimated that one million copies of the Bible had been printed in German. Luther wrote extensively and many believe his writing actually shaped the language. The Bible could be a dangerous book in that, unlike other ancient pieces of literature, much of it can be read without any understanding of context but doing so can lead to clear misinterpretations and this was a fear at the time that didn't prove to be unfounded.

The church and the Catholic Church in particular, is often seen as suppressing literary expression with practices like book burnings. The image this would create would be something like crowds clamoring for the works of enlightenment philosophers to free them from religious dogma. Back in reality, this sort of material wouldn't be any more widely appreciated then than it is now. There were, however, many other types of printed material available as writers began to produce commercial works for local markets. Some focused on legend, local folklore, and regional history but another common type of literary product was pornography. The pattern repeated itself with the invention of still photography, movies, and then digital media. To the extent book burning did occur, this was typically the targeted material.(10 p. 133)

## **Protestant Origins and the Rise of the Nation State**

For someone raised in a protestant tradition in America, the reformation is commonly seen as a rebirth of real Christianity returning to the teaching and values of the early church after centuries of corruption at the hand of the Catholics. The reformation ushered in an era of religious awakening, economic progress, and religious freedom. Unfortunately again none of this is even remotely factual.

Starting first with the Reformation and the origins of the Protestant churches, what made Luther's outcome different from other dissidents and reformers within Catholicism that came before him was not his ideas (taken largely from St. Augustine and frequently representing minority positions)(11) nor his writing or oratory skill, although he was very good. It was the political situation surrounding the Germanic kingdoms in which he lived. The Catholic Church had vast land holdings and acted as a de facto confederation over a large number of small political units although it didn't have any direct governmental power as we would define it today. The Germanic principalities who supported Luther benefited greatly from doing so in that it allowed them to seize the church's land holdings, establish their own state church that was under their control, and divert the resources that would have gone to the Catholic Church to themselves and this is exactly what happened. (12 pp. 17-19)

This same process repeated itself across Europe first with Calvin in Geneva (modern Switzerland) and the Anglicans in England and in the Middle American colonies (mainly Virginia – came to be known as Episcopalians after 1770's), the Presbyterians in Scotland, and the Puritans (Congregationalists) in New England. The myriad of protestant denominations that came into existence with rare exception stemmed from these state supported and state controlled churches. Amongst them there was no concept of freedom of religion or even acknowledgement that someone's religious affiliation was not established by their ethnic or tribal association. The only exceptions to this prior to the late 1700's were the Dutch Calvinists, who were economically dependent on trade and had strong economic motivation

for religious tolerance, and the Baptists in Rhode Island who firmly grasped and defended religious freedom and the concept of separation of Church and State although with this idea came the corollary concept that the role of government is also or should be firmly limited.

While discussions on the Reformation typically go directly to theoretical theology if we look at the cultural, political, and economic outcomes we see some very clear patterns:

- The church instead of existing apart from the state became absorbed by the state as an extension of state authority used to justify and support state policies.(12 pp. 26-34)
- Participation in the state church becomes mandatory per law or edict and the clergy became, in effect, state employees. While the Catholics didn't recognize freedom of religion they didn't attempt to compel acts of individual or group piety; this was something new.(12 pp. 26-34) The most aggressive efforts to enforce piety were in Calvin's Geneva.
- Participation in religious services, which was never high to begin with, got far worse (in the single digits as a percentage) despite the threat of state enforcement and clergy became lazier and less motivated. Religious orders, like in ancient Rome, were enforced principally on the elite or influential. Religious affiliation in Europe is very low today and this is commonly thought to be a modern condition but it is largely traceable to the legacy of the state church.(12 p. 26)
- The common cultural influences provided by Christendom were swept away and were replaced by regional ethnic identities along with associated hatreds that coalesced in Nation States (Political entities that are defined by a pervasive common culture).
- Under Christendom, the Catholic Church provided some level of education, charity, and medical assistance even to the poorest and this disappeared also along with the Church's land and resources which were taken by the state in Protestant countries.(10 pp. 195-96) (13 pp. 171-188)
- Wars which were generally small and fought with professional armies' that exercised restraint, especially with civilian populations, came to be fought with huge armies that increasingly waged unlimited warfare on civilian populations. The Protestant-Catholic 30 Year War in Germany was an early example of this. Negotiated settlements were replaced eventually replaced with the idea of "*absolute surrender*" followed by plundering and attempted eradication of the vanquished. To raise armies of this size, conflicts would have to be sold to the masses as some sort of moral mandate generally by creating a contrived event for propaganda purposes.(12 pp. 61-66)
- The Christian concept that believers should be subservient to and comply with civil authority, which was a relatively constant teaching stemming from Romans 13 and subsequent writings of St Augustine, was taken to entirely new levels under Luther, Calvin, and other state/church authorities. Coercion was the sole right of the state authority as an extension of divine authority while the government was accountable to no moral standard.
- Most importantly the Nation/State came to be seen and portrayed as an extension of God and ultimately and in effect, a replacement of God by collective man.

Christendom could best be described as a sort of federalist system with no strong central political authority but rather a spiritual and cultural authority. When this fell it gave way to nationalism as a result of a large number of states in close proximity to each with distinctive cultures that were bound by a shared overarching culture which was shattered. The common education of nobility that was provided

by the church and helped to create a standard worldview was also swept away. The development of the state churches greatly accelerated and facilitated the development of nationalism and separate cultural-religious systems that frequently saw those outside of the state church as evil. The development of separate written languages also contributed to this process along with the rapid growth of printed materials(12 pp. 54-56). Spain was the largest remaining Catholic civilization and became a target of all the protestant states which produced a good deal of propaganda that was historically assimilated as fact.

The development of capitalism is often associated with the Reformation but the British historian, H.M. Robertson demonstrated that capitalism long preceded the reformation and was largely of Catholic origin based around the development of a middle class. Note, however, that capitalism in this context refers to industrial capitalism and not financialized capitalism that is representative of what we find today in Europe and America. These two concepts of capitalism are in most respects quite different with one emphasizing production and the other currency manipulation although it can be argued that one ultimately in time will lead to the other. A subsequent study published in 2011 assessed European GDP as far back as 1500 found no significant correlation between the rise of Protestantism and the rise of industrial capitalism (12 p. 73). Trade and specialization again developed to a large extent from the monastery system. As a monastery grew it developed specialized management that was not subject to heredity rights as positions tended to be assigned based on merit. Because commitments to the monastery were long term, short term decision making for near term reward was not common. Specialization led to the development of a cash economy because of the size and complexity of what were, in effect, complex manufacturing businesses. Finally, from cash economies developed credit to address the time value of money allowing for larger investments (12 pp. 73-78) however, credit was yet to be linked to fiat currencies which acted as a constraint to avoid the massive expansion of credit and debt that is associated with financialized capitalism.

Relating the rise of the Nation State and gradually the concept of nationalism to nominalism that seeks to minimize or break natural group identities like church, culture, and family, the two ideas seemed to mesh together. Regarding nominalism, it would raise the question of whether it is even possible for an individual to exist outside of layers of group identity or whether removing these things that naturally exist simply requires them to be replaced something else.(3)

## **Perceptions of Christendom and the Erasure of History**

The enlightenment was a myth created during the enlightenment that was also very strongly anti-Catholic and evolved fairly quickly to be anti-Christian in a broader sense. The Dark Ages was the other part of the myth used to create contrast and the appearance of deliverance. There were technological breakthroughs that were frequently supported by the church in varying degrees, that changed western civilization and there were external factors that at times stunted its growth, which the church helped it endure.

To be very clear though, the economic and technological advancements that came into being were not caused by a group of atheistic philosophers and political opportunists any more than Al Gore invented



the internet. The enlightenment philosophers and commentators that created the false images that people retain in collective memory as fact, even though they have been debunked academically, were not in any way scientists (same as today). They were angry anti-Christian activists who succeeded in erasing large parts of western history for centuries although now there is an evolving academic consensus reversing some aspects of this.

The erasure of history has become a repetitive process since the rise of secular humanism reaching a peak with the rise of Marxism and related statist philosophies in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This is in part because of the repetitive failures of these sorts of political systems to produce anything other than poverty, violence, and death that would require a very short memory in order to believe that *“it will be different this time”* yet, there is another element to consider. Statist political philosophies are more than simply political, they have the basic elements of a religion but, unlike Christianity, are collective belief systems where those who don’t conform must be dealt with and conflicting arguments eliminated. This includes common memories and any sort of deep cultural identity apart from the state, which effectively becomes God or the representation of God.

The process of erasing people or groups of people from the historical record starts with them being accused of not living up to either a modern standard, that wasn’t applied or interpreted the same way in earlier time, or failure of the accused to live up to their own standards. The practice is inherently steeped in *“presentism”* (applying modern paradigms to other times and places), and is somewhat ironic in that their prosecutors generally don’t hold to absolute moral standards of reference. In the case of Postmodernism and Critical Theory, they don’t even hold to a consistent definition of reality. It does, however, bring up a couple of important points to consider. Is lack of absolute moral purity according to any standard reason to be cast aside from history? There is a saying that *“Great men and rarely good men, and good men are rarely great men,”* and there is some truth to this. Big decisions have big consequences; sometimes they are not good but they were made in the context of the uncertainty of time which the latter day analyst isn’t constrained by. *“History is complicated”* and does not exist to be liked or disliked, but understood.

The era of exploration produced many notable figures that, although not entirely morally pure especially by modern racial standards, were remarkable and displayed characteristics that very few people in modern society could begin to live up to. Instead of being revered, however, they are vilified by modern academics and political commentators. We have lost our historical heroes to political correctness. Great efforts have in recent years been made to erase the South and the Confederacy as a first step to erasing virtually all western history before the 1970’s and the modern heirs to the anti-Christian philosophers and academics of the “enlightenment” have come precariously close to achieving that goal.

So when a living generation purges history, who is really hurt by that? Those who have passed through this world don’t need the approval of the living, their race is over. The real loss is to the living generation and those who would come after it. A society with no memory of itself is not a society.

*‘The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the*

*nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.'*  
– Milan Kundera(14)

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