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The Cross and the Arquebus

A Look at the German
Reformation as a Revolution

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Introduction

The political repercussions of the Protestant Reformation are often overlooked, with most attention in scholarship focused on the changes in theological thinking and church structure. But to be clear, the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, often considered to be the start of the modern era and the birth of the nation-state concept, had its origins in the Reformation. Though all aspects and theological denominations of the Protestant Reformation are crucial to the development of this concept, the spread of Lutheranism in Germany is perhaps most critical to those political events. The German Reformation did not just affect the way individuals interacted with Christianity; it changed the functions and powers of the state as well, giving the state far more control than it had during the Middle Ages. It is for this reason that the German Reformation should be considered as a true political revolution.

Term Definitions

In order to know what makes the German Reformation a revolution, it is necessary to define a few terms. A particularly useful definition of revolution, comes from Jack A. Goldstone, as “the forcible overthrow of a government through mass mobilization (whether military or civilian or both) in the name of social justice, to create new political institutions.”¹ Goldstone does not define what *social justice* is in his book; *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction*. Based on the arguments presented in the book it is unlikely that *social justice* is related to egalitarianism and would be more akin to the Oxford English dictionary’s definition of “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities,

¹ Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

and privileges.”² Goldstone’s definition offers a few advantages over those of his contemporaries; first is that it does not restrict revolution to a particular time period and second is that it does not sideline the ideologies driving the individuals who lived during particular revolutions.

The second term to be defined is the German Reformation. The series of events that encompassed it (1517-1648) came out of the Lutheran branch of the Protestant Reformation and took place in the geographic region of the German states within the larger Holy Roman Empire. It is important to keep this in mind as this paper does not strive to cover the entire Protestant Reformation, which not only included the teachings and history of Lutheranism but also Calvinism, the Church of England, Anabaptism and many other persons and denominations. The political context for the German Reformation was the Holy Roman Empire.

The Holy Roman Empire and its Institutions

The *Holy Roman Empire* was a political entity that existed in central Europe between the ninth and nineteenth centuries. It sounds vague because the politics behind the Holy Roman Empire were very complicated. According to Peter H. Wilson:

The Holy Roman Empire was once famously dismissed by Voltaire as neither holy, Roman nor an empire. Despite covering most of central Europe for over a millennium, the Empire is still poorly understood in comparison to European states, even to the point that many scholars dispute whether it was indeed a state at all.³

The Holy Roman Empire could be more accurately described as a political confederation of various kingdoms, duchies, principalities, city states, bishoprics, imperial holdings etc., all

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “social justice,” accessed April 15, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183739?redirectedFrom=social+justice#eid132635088>.

³ Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire 1495-1806*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc., 1999), 1.

under the jurisdiction of an elected monarchy, seven electors, a Reichstag (or assembly) of electors and princes, a number of imperial courts and the Catholic Church.

The Holy Roman Emperor was the elected monarch of the Holy Roman Empire. He wielded a number of powers, most of which stemmed from his role as feudal overlord, which included; the right to reassign vacant lesser imperial fiefs, to make elevations to the nobility, appoint judges for the imperial courts and set the agenda for the Reichstag.⁴ He also held shared powers with the Reichstag and the electors regarding key legislative, judicial, fiscal, military and diplomatic powers as well as informal powers through patronage and the resources of his hereditary lands.⁵ He was seen as the protector of the empire from foreign threats, namely France and the Ottoman Empire and also as the “defender of Catholicism.”⁶

The emperorship was an elected title, chosen by seven electors; the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, the King of Bohemia, Count Palatinate of the Rhine, Elector of Saxony and the Margrave of Brandenburg. Due to their status, the electors held more privileges than other princes in the empire and held wider influence in the governance of the empire. The ecclesiastical electors were given higher prestige and powers than the secular ones such as gaining certain imperial powers in the case of an interregnum.⁷ They were also given more votes in Reichstag decisions.

The Reichstag of the Holy Roman Empire acted in a similar fashion to the Estates-General in France since it was an assembly of representatives from the clergy and the nobility. Unlike the French Estates-General however, The Reichstag did not have representation from the

⁴ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 36.

⁵ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 36-37.

⁶ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 60.

⁷ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 41.

peasantry.⁸ It could perform legislative actions but could only assemble on the orders of the emperor who also held veto power on any decisions made by the Reichstag.⁹ As such the Reichstag's practical political influence relied more on informal powers of persuasion. Representatives of similar status and power would often consolidate into coalitions in order to advance a common political goal. Noble families often worked together to pursue dynastic aims such as the Hapsburgs, who were able to gain a de facto monopoly on the emperorship, as well as other lands and titles such as; the Duchy of Burgundy, the Kingdom of Spain and the Kingdom of Bohemia, an electorate position.

Much like the Reichstag, the imperial courts were limited in their actual power during the sixteenth century. The "imperial judicial system was highly complex, comprising several layers of overlapping jurisdictions, various exclusions preventing appeals from one level to another, and a penchant for lengthy, voluminous deliberations."¹⁰ The emperor was the only authority who could enforce the laws of the empire. Since he was usually off fighting wars against the empire's many neighbors, court decisions were usually minor compared to the governing dominance of the papacy in Rome.

It should not surprise us to know that the Catholic Church was a governing force that was present in nearly all aspects of life. In the mindset of most sixteenth century Germans, the church held sway over one's soul, which was considered the most important part of oneself. Not only did the church hold ultimate power regarding a person's fate after death, but it also intruded into the daily lives of all people by asserting authority over many matters of one's temporal existence. For example, "The Church declared whose birth was legitimate, it declared whose marriages

⁸ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 40-42.

⁹ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 43.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 45.

were lawful, it declared whose wills were valid, and in that way it actually inserted itself and its legal system into the lives of ordinary people at every point. Not just its own members but all the rest of the community.”¹¹ The power of the church was so large in in the 16th century that:

The church was... in fact, an international state, with its monarch, its representative legislative assemblies, its laws and its code. It was not a voluntary society, for if citizens were not born into it they were baptized into it before they could exercise any choice. It kept prisons and passed sentence (virtually if not nominally) of death; it treated with other governments as one power with another; it took principalities and kingdoms in fief. It was supported by involuntary contributions.¹²

The emperor held a vested interest in the maintenance and security of the Roman Catholic Church as it provided the prestige and sacral element embodied by the imperial title. The Catholic Church was so important to the empire that it was given direct control over three of the seven electors and over a third of the empire’s territory. In “the 1521 matricular list of imperial estates contained 50 ecclesiastical princes to only 24 secular, and 83 prelates compared with 143 counts.”¹³ The collective ecclesiastical territories were known as the imperial church to distinguish those territories from church lands outside of the empire.

The important thing to note about the politics of the Holy Roman Empire was that political power lay in three institutions, the emperorship, the Roman Catholic Church and the nobility. The German Reformation, brought enormous change to the dynamics, powers and relationships between these three institutions. It truly was a revolution, as the Roman Catholic Church lost governing powers to the nobility in the name of social justice provided by Martin Luther’s teachings.

¹¹ Euan Cameron, *Martin Luther*, directed by Cassian Harrison (2002; Public Broadcasting Service, 2014), YouTube.

¹² Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation*, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1920), chap. 1.

¹³ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, 60.

Martin Luther and his Writings

Martin Luther's (1483-1546) publication of *The 95 Theses* in October of 1517 is largely labeled by historians as the starting point of the Protestant Reformation. In *The 95 Theses* Luther pointed out the ethical flaws in the sale of indulgences and claimed that the Pope did not have the authority to "remit any penalties except those which he has imposed by his own authority or by that of the canons. In Luther's view, the Pope had no power to remit any guilt except by declaring or warranting it to have been remitted by God or, at most, by remitting cases reserved for himself."¹⁴ Luther stated that it is the responsibility of the individual for the forgiveness of sin and not by decree of the Pope. By condemning the sale of indulgences, *The 95 Theses* challenged the authority of the Catholic Church over the most important aspect of one's being, the soul, as indulgences were "pardons of sins past and future, offered on a sliding scale according to the applicant's ability to pay."¹⁵

Though it challenged the sale of indulgences and the power of the Church, Luther did not call for the outright abolition of the Church as an institution in his writings. Instead he acted as an "appellant with a grievance, bringing it to the attention of ever-widening circles of tribunals who might hear his case."¹⁶ He sent out copies of the *Theses* to high ranking clergymen including Archbishop Albrecht von Hohenzollern and Hieronymus Schulze, Bishop of Brandenburg, who "was initially sympathetic to their contents."¹⁷ The Church however, did not take Luther's criticisms lightly. In December of 1517, Archbishop Albrecht sent a copy of *The 95 Theses* to Rome where it was read by Pope Leo X who decided that Luther needed to be

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *The 95 Theses*, in *From the Horse's Mouth*, eds. George Mandel, 1st ed., (New York: Robert M. McBride Co., Inc., 1956), 66.

¹⁵ George Mandel, *From the Horse's Mouth*, 65.

¹⁶ Michael A. Mullett, *Martin Luther*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 77.

¹⁷ Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 77.

brought to book.¹⁸ Luther appealed to the pope in the Spring of 1518, claiming that he wished to “publish the defense of the 95 Theses under papal protection in order to deflect the malice of his foes and he protested his loyalty to the holy father, whose words he would recognise as Christ’s.”¹⁹

Despite this, Pope Leo continued his anti-Lutheran campaign, and the Church ordered Luther to appear for a trial in Rome in early August of 1518. It is at this time that Luther begins to rely on the nobility for protection and distribution of his writings as Frederick III, the Elector of Saxony and Luther’s feudal overlord, protected him from the papal summons.²⁰ Frederick’s justification for this protection appears to be based on his interpretation of Luther’s writings and of his own theological thought. He was a well-known patron of academia, so much so that he was also known as Frederick the Wise.

Having the legal protection afforded to him by an elector, Luther was allowed to write more criticisms concerning the Church’s authority over the next few years, such as the *Acta Augustana* in 1518 and *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estates* in 1520. In the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Luther laid out his argument for dismantling what he calls the “Three Walls of the Romanists,” which were three main arguments that the papacy made in order to protect and execute its wide range of powers. All three arguments revolve around the abilities of temporal powers and the existence of a priesthood of all Christians.

Luther argued that “when pressed by [T]he (sic) temporal power, they [the Church] have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other

¹⁸ Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 78.

¹⁹ Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 81.

²⁰ Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 82.

hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power.”²¹ He added credence to this claim by pointing out “that in the canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life and property of the clergy, as though the laity were not also as spiritual as good Christians as they, or did not belong to the Church. Why are your life and limb, your property and honor so free, and mine not? We are all alike Christians, and have baptism, faith, Spirit and all things alike.”²² To Luther, this was injustice, both to society and to God:

Since, then, the temporal authorities are baptized with the same baptism and have the same faith and Gospel as we, we must grant that they are priests and bishops, and count their office one which has a proper and a useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that every one should exercise the office. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community.²³

In regards to Goldstone’s definition of revolution, this was the critical call for social justice that drives revolutions. The Church had overstepped its boundaries in trying to claim impunity from temporal or secular power. Since all Christians have equal claim to clerical offices, therefore all Christians must be held accountable to both secular and religious law. The language of Luther’s statement also indicates an early reference to social contract theory, particularly when he states “no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent

²¹ Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estates*, in *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*, trans. C. M. Jacobs, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/nblty-03.html>.

²² Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*.

²³ Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*.

and election, to do what is in the power of all of us.”²⁴ There were conflicting interpretations of this idea as the Reformation progressed, particularly between the nobility and the peasantry, but Luther’s ideas would have faltered had it not been for the utilization of the printing press.

The Printing Press

Luther was not the first theologian to call for reformation or revolutionary actions against the papacy. What distinguished his success from that of his predecessors such as John Wycliffe (1331-1384) or Jan Hus (1369-1415) was his successful utilization of the printing press to spread his message. In his magnum opus, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that one of the cornerstones for the development of nationalism was the adoption of “national print-languages” through a process of “print capitalism.”²⁵ The process entailed the replacement of older, scripture based languages (such as Latin or Hebrew) with commonplace vernacular languages (such as German or French).²⁶ Though Anderson formulated this theory around the creation of nationalism, it is also applicable to the formation of an imagined Protestant community in the Holy Roman Empire.

The German Reformation prompted a massive expansion in the use of print to distribute new ideas. Between Luther’s publication of *The 95 Theses* in October of 1517 and the spring of 1524, “the empire-wide production of pamphlets had skyrocketed, increasing more than forty-fold.”²⁷ Invented around 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg, the printing press “existed in over two

²⁴ Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*.

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised ed., (London: Verso, 2006), 67-70.

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 70-72.

²⁷ Mark U. Edwards, Jr. *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14.

hundred cities throughout Europe” by 1500, with Cologne, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Wittenberg and Augsburg being the major publishing centers.²⁸

Most publications of Luther’s time would not be considered lengthy by modern standards. Most were pamphlets or small books “frequently in quarto format- that is, made up of sheets folded twice to make four leaves or eight pages – and without a hard cover, these pamphlets were handy, relatively cheap, readily concealed and transported... a scant quarter of the pamphlets were longer” than thirty-two pages.²⁹ A good estimate of cost would be around one or two pennies per sheet, which would mean eight pennies for average pamphlet size of thirty-two pages.³⁰ This would be the equivalent price for that of a hen or a wooden pitchfork in sixteenth century commodities, not insignificant in price, “but certainly within reach of the common man.”³¹

Martin Luther’s teachings were directly responsible for this massive increase in publications. It is estimated: “that approximately 10,000 pamphlet editions (first editions and reprints) issued from the presses of the German-speaking lands between 1500 and 1530. Of these almost three-quarters appeared between 1520 and 1526, and most were due to the Reformation movement. Martin Luther alone was responsible for approximately 20 percent of the overall total.”³²

The use of German over Latin for these early publications exemplifies Anderson’s category of print capitalism to create a wider Protestant community. The best example comes from Leipzig in 1524 where:

²⁸ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 15.

²⁹ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 15.

³⁰ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 16.

³¹ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 16.

³² Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 17.

...the Leipzig city council petitioned its duke [not the Elector of Saxony, who did not govern the city] on behalf of its printers. The printers, the council explained, were complaining bitterly that they were in danger of losing “house, home, and all their livelihood” because they were not allowed “to print or sell anything new that is made in Wittenberg [where Luther resided] or elsewhere. For that which one would gladly sell and for which there is demand,” the council continued, referring to the torrent of Evangelical pamphlets pouring from the presses in Wittenberg and elsewhere, “they are [ot] (sic) allowed to have or sell. But what they have in over abundance,” namely Catholic treatises, “is desired by no one and cannot even be given away”!³³

By the late 1520’s, the presses of the Holy Roman Empire “put out nine German pamphlets for every one Latin pamphlet.”³⁴ This meant that many noblemen, merchants and upper class peasants who could read German, but not Latin, were able to read and further disseminate Lutheran ideals about God, the Church and government. The press had allowed Luther’s work to be spread far beyond the limitations held by word of mouth.

This was the tool for mass mobilization, which is another key piece of Goldstone’s definition of revolution. Luther’s inciting works would have had no power if they could not be heard by the powerful nobility, who were critical in his plans to reform the Catholic Church as was laid out in the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*:

They, like all of us, are subject to the temporal sword; they have no power to interpret the Scriptures by mere authority, without learning; they have no authority to prevent a council or, in sheer wantonness, to pledge it, bind it, or take away its liberty; but if they do this, they are in truth the communion of Antichrist and of the devil, and have nothing at all of Christ except the name.³⁵

³³ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 14.

³⁴ Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, 21.

³⁵ Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*.

The Reformation would not unfold so smoothly however, as the nobility and the peasantry developed two differing interpretations of Luther's writings.

The Nobility, Bringers of the Revolution

As was explained earlier, the nobility played third fiddle in the Holy Roman Empire behind the Church and the Emperor. Their influence was limited even in their own territories as the Church had a large number of legal powers. Marriages had to be recognized by the Church for them to be considered legitimate and by extension, the Church decided who was a legitimate heir. The Church could also levy tithes, taking away potential tax revenue from the nobility. When Luther's writings reached the nobility, calling for the clergy to be brought under the dominion of the temporal sword, they wasted no time in dictating who wielded that sword.

One of the first noblemen to openly convert to Lutheranism was not even a nobleman to begin with. Grandmaster Albrecht (1490-1568) was the head of the Teutonic Order of Knights, a monastic military order created during the Crusades. Though they failed to hold onto the Holy Land, the Teutonic Order found better luck converting the pagans of Poland and the Baltic regions in the thirteenth century. Their home territory was established in the coastal, Baltic region called Prussia which is today northern Poland. Being a monastic order, the Teutonic Knights were bound by ecclesiastical laws which greatly weakened their political standing. Being unable to father children and conscript healthy men gradually reduced the number of knights the order could field. Since the surrounding territories were Christian lands by the sixteenth century, the purpose of their existence was called into question, especially by the Polish

kings. In 1522, on a mission of supplication to the Emperor, Albrecht “had his head turned by an adherent of Lutheranism in Nuremberg, one Andreas Osiander, a former Augustinian.”³⁶

Having been dumbfounded by Osiander, Albrecht travelled to Wittenberg to meet Martin Luther and question him. Luther told him to perform some revolutionary actions. “Renounce the order, Luther advised, break your vows, take a wife, sire an heir, seize Prussia for yourself and your progeny to come, and above all, implant the new faith.” Albrecht took Luther’s advice to heart. He secularized the order and crowned himself as Duke of Prussia in 1525. He seized Church lands “helping himself to the booty of abbots and bishops alike.”³⁷ He established the University of Königsberg in 1544, as a university headed by himself and staffed by Lutheran professors.

Albrecht overthrew the Church government that had ruled over Prussia since the Crusades and replaced it with new political institutions such as a state run university and an inheritable office of power. Albrecht used Luther’s teachings as his call for social justice, as he brought the clergy under the jurisdiction of the temporal sword. Albrecht’s dynasty, the Hohenzollerns, would later inherit the electorate title held by Brandenburg in 1618 and eventually unify Germany into a single state in 1871. Without Albrecht’s conversion and revolutionary implementations, Prussia as a state, and by extension modern Germany, may have never come into existence.

Albrecht’s actions were revolutionary, with particular emphasis in overthrowing a distinct governing body, the Church, from a distinct territorial region, Prussia. But what can be

³⁶ James Charles Roy, *The Vanished Kingdom: Travels Through the History of Prussia*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 99.

³⁷ Roy, *The Vanished Kingdom*, 100.

said for revolutionary actions taken in lands already held by the nobility? For that we turn to Philip I (1504-1567).

Philip was the Landgrave of Hesse, a medium sized territory just west of Saxony where Luther resided. Philip first encountered Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where Luther laid out the defense of his writings to a council of clergymen, nobility and even the emperor, Charles V (1500-1558). Philip converted to Lutheranism in 1524 after reading the *Epitome*, a Lutheran pamphlet.³⁸ He quickly set out to enforce his new, Lutheran bestowed powers over the Church. He oversaw the conversion of the Hessian bureaucracy, in order to secure uniformity across the Landgraviate. He seized Church lands and collected the tax revenue that they held, as well as establishing the state run University of Marburg in 1527, similar actions that would be taken by Albrecht.

Philip also took up the Church's function as guardians of the poor. He established charity organizations and built four territorial hospitals to be used and staffed by neighboring villages, whose residents formerly had to travel long distances to a large town in order to receive medical aid.³⁹ Philip also established welfare programs for peasants who were considered house poor, those who could afford a roof over their head but still struggled financially.⁴⁰ These grand acts of charity earned Philip the favor of Hessian peasants and Lutherans across the Holy Roman Empire, securing his position as Landgrave from the Church and the Emperor, who sought to curb the rising support for Lutheranism.

³⁸ William John Wright, *Capitalism, the State, and the Lutheran Reformation: Sixteenth-Century Hesse*, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1988), 65.

³⁹ Wright, *Capitalism, State and Lutheran Reformation*, 190-191.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Capitalism, State and Lutheran Reformation*, 195-196.

Since Hesse did not produce nearly as much wealth as the papacy did in Rome, Philip had to manage his new expenses by creating new bureaucracies. Whereas Catholic almsgiving was sporadic and random, Hessian chestmasters:

were required to write down what they gave out, in money or kind, “to each person every week.” In addition, they were required to write down the names of the individuals to whom they proposed to give aid in advance so that the appropriate local authorities could screen unworthy selections from the list.⁴¹

Philip, like Albrecht, overthrew the economic government of the Catholic Church and replaced it with new, state run institutions such as the university, hospitals and state welfare programs. In the process, Philip had to establish new bureaucracies in order to manage his new governing powers, a revolutionary process at the time.

To a contemporary reader some of Albrecht’s and Philip’s actions seem to fly in the face of Luther’s teachings, especially the injunction that “no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us.”⁴² That issue was resolved early in the German Reformation but at the cost of thousands of lives, as the German peasants took Luther’s call for equality among Christians to heart.

The German Reformation as an Accidental Revolution 1524-1525

By the mid 1520’s, Luther and his works were widely known throughout the Holy Roman Empire, with varying levels of enthusiasm for his writings as was seen with the Leipzig example. Beginning in 1524 a series of revolts led by peasants quickly spread throughout the German states, this was the start of the German Peasants’ War. The war had two main causes;

⁴¹ Wright, *Capitalism, State and Lutheran Reformation*, 197.

⁴² Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*

the economic burdens that the peasantry had to endure and the new teachings being preached by Luther. These can be seen in the various articles and proclamations made by the peasantry during the war:

It is our humble and most sincere request and plea that we may now elect a pastor for ourselves, who will proclaim the divine, almighty, and living Word and holy Gospel, which is a food for our souls, [and do so] purely and clearly, without any human addition, doctrine or command. We will provide the same pastor with a suitable competency. If such a pastor behaves improperly, then we may dismiss him and take on another in his place, but always with the knowledge of the entire commune. For without proclamation of the divine Word we cannot be saved, as St Paul has shown us... It has hitherto been the usage that we have been held as your poor serfs, which is pitiable, given that Christ has purchased and redeemed us with his precious blood, the shepherd the same as the Emperor. It is not our intention to have no authority, for we will be obedient to all authority appointed by God in all fair and reasonable matters, and we do not doubt that as Christian lords you will release us from serfdom.⁴³

The peasants had taken Luther's writings to be applicable not just in their religious life but also their secular one. If God, as Luther proclaimed, made all Christians equal why then does society hold some Christians as being higher than others? If man should not be bound by other men for the interpretation of the scriptures, why should he be bound by other men in his temporal life? The peasants laid down their grievances and revolted in response to these questions. They believed that the Christian body, not the Church or nobility, should be the ones to determine the governing body of fellow Christians.

The grievances of the peasantry were not foreign to the politicians of the time, but serfdom had existed for centuries prior to the sixteenth century with little resistance being shown

⁴³ "Articles of the Peasants of Memmingen, 24 February-3 March, and the Reply of the Memmingen Town Council, 15 March 1525," in *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents*, eds. and trans. Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International Inc., 1991), 78.

by the peasantry. It was not until the spread of Lutheran pamphlets did the peasants begin to revolt en masse, as Lucerne town clerk, Johannes Salat explained:

It can be concealed by no one that the origin of the peasant uproar, dissension, and affliction lies with the transgressions and oppressions of the clergy and nobility who have serfs... the cart is broken down, and the unwilling communities have slipped the harness... Those two cunning men, Luther and Zwingli [another Protestant preacher], and their fellow sectaries were quite able to know and assess this, and were well informed why the common man was so recalcitrant... Yes, it was a powerful weapon in their [the rebels'] arsenal that they [the preachers] constantly declared and pretended to the common man "Christian freedom, Christian freedom; the hour has come when you will be saved and rid of your burdens if you so desire".⁴⁴

The noblemen, especially the Lutheran ones, were slower to pick up on this as Count Wilhelm von Henneberg wrote to Albert of Prussia:

Your excellency has written to us about how the peasant rebellion took place... At first we all looked on, for it pleased us well that it befell the priests and the monks, unawares that misfortune was creeping up on us. No one wanted to go to another; instead all the noblemen remained in their houses in order to protect their goods and to retain them. The peasants at first used this skillfully by writing to the nobility to come to them and to promise to march with them. Whoever came had to go with them and no one was allowed to go on horseback [a sign of nobility, and higher status]; they took nothing from them until they brought the majority of the nobility over to their side. But whoever [noblemen] would not join them was plundered and their houses burnt. After they had the [local]

⁴⁴ Johannes Salat, "A Catholic Commentary: from the Reformation Chronicle of Johannes Salat," in *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents*, eds. and trans. Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International Inc., 1991), 95.

nobility, they billeted them in the inns in neighboring towns and allowed no more than ten of them to remain together in a band.⁴⁵

The nobility responded with force and were able to put down the revolting peasants in less than a year. Though they had lost militarily, the plight of the German peasants calls into question what Luther's vision of a proper "Christian government" looked like? He proclaimed in the *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility* that "what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community." It appears that noblemen, like Landgrave Philip of Hesse or Duke Albrecht of Prussia, took it upon themselves to lead the charge against the Church and only placated the will of the peasants after they had already overthrown the papacy's governing power. At the same time Luther addressed his *Open Letter* to the nobility and not to all Christians. He knew as well as anyone that the nobility were the key to dismantling the power of the Church as they held governing experience, existing legal powers and could raise armies. The nobility had already dictated the temporal laws so naturally it would be up to them to expand those laws to apply to all Christians.

In the wave of accusations that Luther was purposefully instigating the peasants to revolt, Luther published one of his more scathing works, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* in 1525. In it Luther describes the peasants as "doing the devil's work" for starting a rebellion and "plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs," actions that he encouraged when speaking to Albrecht.⁴⁶ Luther's contradiction stems from his reliance on the nobility, both for his personal safety and for the distribution of his writings. This is made clearer at the end of *Against the Hordes of Peasants* where Luther proclaims:

⁴⁵"Count Wilhelm von Henneberg to Duke Albert of Prussia, 2 February 1526," in *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents*, eds. and trans. Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International Inc., 1991), 197-198.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Luther-Peasants.html>.

Thus, anyone who is killed fighting on the side of the rulers may be a true martyr in the eyes of God, if he fights with the kind of conscience I have just described, for he acts in obedience to God's word. On the other hand, anyone who perishes on the peasants' side is an eternal firebrand of hell, for he bears the sword against God's word and is disobedient to him, and is a member of the devil. And even if the peasants happen to gain the upper hand (God forbid!)—for to God all things are possible, and we do not know whether it may be his will, through the devil, to destroy all rule and order and cast the world upon a desolate heap, as a prelude to the Last Day, which cannot be far off nevertheless, those who are found exercising the duties of their office can die without worry and go to the scaffold with a good conscience; and leave the kingdom of this world to the devil and take in exchange the everlasting kingdom. These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!⁴⁷

With this work, Luther clarified his early statements regarding Christian equality. To him the nobility were to be the most important figures in a truly Christian government. They were to be the arbiters of both temporal and ecclesiastical law. Order dictated by the nobility, not equality, was to be regarded as the highest value in temporal governance.

Conclusion

For the areas that it affected, the German Reformation was truly revolutionary. Following Jack Goldstone's definition that revolution is "the forcible overthrow of a government through mass mobilization (whether military or civilian or both) in the name of social justice, to create new political institutions" we see Martin Luther's theology as the call for social justice, the printing press being the tool of mass mobilization for the nobility and the expulsion of Catholic, political institutions as the forcible overthrow of government. These institutions were replaced

⁴⁷ Luther, *Against the Murderous Hordes of Peasants*.

by new, state controlled ones that greatly enhanced the power of the nobility over the clergy where it had been the opposite in the centuries preceding the German Reformation.

With their new-found powers, the nobility would later challenge the influence of the emperor over the next century. Protestant princes formed political and military alliances such as the Schmalkaldic League and the Protestant Union in order to protect their interests and expand their influence. The end to this century of political feuding between the emperor and the nobility resulted in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which reaffirmed the concept of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”), which gave recognized legal authority throughout the Holy Roman Empire, that the nobility would be the ones to determine the religion of their land. The German Reformation was a revolution which radically changed the government of the Holy Roman Empire. In further investigations, it would be interesting to study the effects of the German Reformation on the rise of the state.

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