

The Reformation

The Renaissance aimed to restore church practice closer to the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. These changes in thinking led to the Reformation - a challenge to the established Christian church in western Europe. The Reformation is also known as the Protestant Reformation movement.

This article will give details about the events during the Reformation period within the context of the IAS Exam

Background of the Protestant Reformation

The Renaissance led to a renewed interest in the works of writers from the days of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Their works inspired a new philosophy known as humanism - the beliefs that humans were in control of their own destinies. Humanism arose during a time when there was growing discontent in the western Christian church over the way the church was run.

In 1517 Martin Luther, a monk protested publicly by nailing 95 theses against the sales of indulgences (pardons for sins) on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. He was protesting against what he saw as the church's theological corruption and called for reform. This is where the Reformation is said to have truly begun.

The Reformation led to the formation of the Protestant church as Martin Luther's ideas were taken up and spread by rebels in other countries such as Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland and John Calvin in France.

How did the Reformation Movement spread?

Not wanting to antagonise the powerful Spanish throne by any means, the Pope refused to dissolve the marriage between Catherine and Henry VIII. Henry VIII decided to break with the church in Rome as a means to grant himself the divorce and formed the Church of England centred around Protestant beliefs although he was no supporter of it. Other rulers of European kingdoms such as Sweden and the Netherlands also embraced Protestant ideals in order to minimise the influence of the Catholic Church in their respective countries.

The Counter-Reformation

From 1545, the Catholic Church fought back with a movement of its own - the Counter-Reformation, sending out Jesuit priests to campaign against the spread of Protestantism and convert the populations of the Spanish Empire in the Americas. The split

between Christians in western Europe led to wars as countries struggled with new religious alliances.

One of these was the Thirty Year's War beginning in 1618. The conflict was fought between an alliance of Catholic Countries such as Spain and the Holy Roman Empire against an alliance of Protestant countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden. France, although being a catholic power, joined with the Protestant alliances as it felt that the Spanish empire was getting too powerful on the European continent and sought to curb it. The war ended with the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which resulted in territorial gains for the Protestant alliance.

The year 1648 is considered to be the end of the Reformation period as now the focus of European monarchies (and future wars) returned to dynastic politics instead of religious ones.

Catholics and Protestants persecuted one another in their own way. As religious disputes in Europe continued in the 1600s, some people left Europe and sought religious freedom in the new world of America

The Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation era grew more spiritual, more literate and more educated. New religious orders, notably the Jesuits, combined rigorous spirituality with a globally-minded intellectualism, while mystics such as Teresa of Avila injected new passion into the older orders. Inquisitions, both in Spain and in Rome, were reorganized to fight the threat of Protestantism.

Legacy of the Reformation

Along with the religious consequences of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation came deep and lasting political changes. Northern Europe's new religious and political freedoms came at a great cost, with decades of rebellions, wars and bloody persecutions. The Thirty Years' War alone may have cost Germany 40 per cent of its population.

But the Reformation's positive repercussions can be seen in the intellectual and cultural flourishing it inspired on all sides of the schism—in the strengthened universities of Europe.