The causes of the Reformation

Introduction

As you will have studied previously, during the Middle Ages the powerful authority of the Church had extended over all areas of political, economic, social and cultural life. The Reformation did much to destroy this control. The Reformation was a revolt against the authority of the Catholic Church in Rome. The Reformation was also a rebellion against the corruption and abuses in the Church and the interference of the leader of the Church - the Pope - in non religious affairs. Those who rebelled against the Pope demanding a reform of the Church were called ‘Protestants’.

Understanding causes is central to what history is about. Historians like to link different events together that share something in common. For example, as you saw last year, historians use categories like political, economic, social and cultural (PESC) to explain clearly why things happen. Another way of organizing causes (and consequences) is to divide them into long-term and short-term. Long-term causes take place a long-time before the event and are not an obvious, direct cause of the event. They often provide the context in which the event is more likely to happen. Short-term causes happen immediately before the event and are obviously and directly linked to the event.

Long-term cause ⇔ Short-term cause ⇔ Event ⇔ Short-term consequence ⇔ Long-term consequence

The long-term causes of the Reformation

1. The decline in the influence of the Church

The Black Death (1348-50) had a major impact on the influence of the church, especially in Western Europe. A very high percentage of priests were killed and the credibility of the church was damaged by its inability to explain the disease. As the biggest landowner in Europe the church also suffered from the damage done to the feudal system by peasants rebelling against their masters.

The Pope’s power had already begun to decline with the rise of powerful Kings. For example, the French King Philip IV (1285-1314 - left) succeeded in establishing the right to tax church property, despite opposition by the Pope. He also forced the Pope to live in Avignon in France, instead of Rome, after the Pope’s interference in his political affairs. This ‘Babylonian Captivity’ lasted for 70 years and greatly damaged the Pope’s prestige and power. The election of two Popes, one by the Italian Church and another by the French Church, damaged the Church still further. A Great Schism arose since Christians in Western Europe were divided in their recognition of the Popes. The matter was settled in 1417 when a new Pope was elected and accepted by all.

2. New ways of thinking

As we saw at the end of last year (revise this if necessary) the transition from the medieval to the modern period involved changes in every aspect of life in Europe. The church was bound to feel the impact of these changes. The Crusades (1095 and 1291) had opened up Europe to external influences and this continued with the great voyages of discovery, notably the European exploration of America after 1492. People began to question the church and its teachings and this led to the Renaissance, the revival spirit of ancient Greece and Rome. Central to this new spirit of inquiry was the invention of the printing press (Gutenberg 1436) which enabled ideas to be spread reasonably quickly and outside of the influence of the Church.
3. Earlier opposition to the Church

During the 14th and 15th centuries, strong criticism was made about the practices of clergymen. The clergy’s wealth made it appear that they were worshippers of money rather than of God. Church rituals and practices became a source of profits. There was an unlimited sale of relics, such as objects supposed to have been used by Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles and the Saints, and also of holy splinters from the true cross or from the bones of saints. Several scholars raised their voices in opposition to certain Catholic teachings and practices. Among them was John Wycliffe (1320-1384), an English priest and professor at the University of Oxford who declared that the Pope was not Christ’s representative on earth. He also felt that individual Christians should only be guided by what they read in the Bible. His followers were known as the Lollards. The English Kings, tried to stop the spread of the Lollard movement through fines, imprisonment and burning. After Wycliffe’s death his writings were spread in Bohemia by John Huss, a priest and professor in the University of Prague. The Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund invited John Huss to attend a general church council at Constance where he was burned at the stake in 1415. This led to a popular protest in what is today’s Czech Republic. The Hussite Wars (right) lasted for many years.

The short-term cause of the Reformation

Martin Luther (1483-1546 - left), was the first reformer to lead a large number of people to openly break with the Church. Luther was a native German who became a monk at the age of twenty-two and was then appointed as professor of theology in the University of Wittenberg. He questioned the sale of indulgences in 1517 by agents of Pope Leo X, who were collecting money for the construction of St. Peter’s Church at Rome. He pinned his 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenberg which were statements on points of difference between the beliefs and practices of the Church. In 1520, Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X who requested the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V to punish him as a heretic. There were several people in Germany who protected Luther. Frederick III, of Saxony hid Luther at Wartburg Castle at Eisenach from 1521 to 1522. Thus he succeeded in defying the emperor and also the Pope. Luther was asked to come before the Imperial Diet or Church Council at Worms in 1520-21, where he refused to take back anything he had said. He advocated that “it is neither right nor safe to act against conscience”.

Activities

1. Explain what is meant by long-term and short-term causes. Give an example from your own life to explain the long and short-term causes of an event that happened to you.

2. Comprehension. The words in bold are words you need to understand. Make a note of them and make sure you learn them.

3. Make a diagram of the causes of the Reformation using the information and headings given to you in this text. The diagram should distinguish between short-term and long term causes. It should be a full page of A4 in size; it should be carefully designed, accurate and attractive to look at.

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