

## The Late Middle Ages: Threshold and Foothold of the Reformations

*Age of tears, of envy, of torment, . . . Age of decline nigh to the end.*

Eustache Deschamps (1346-1406)

Deschamps may be excused for being a bit melancholic since he lived during the Hundred Years War between England and France, the "captivity of the papacy" in Avignon, and the consequent great schism of the church, not to mention outbreaks of the plague. He may have been the leading pessimist of a depressed age (Huizinga 1956: 33; Delumeau 1984: 129, 131), but his depression was not unique. Towards the end of the fifteenth century Jean Meschinot echoed his sentiment: "O miserable and very sad life! . . . We suffer from warfare, death and famine; Cold and heat, day and night, sap our strength; Fleas, scabmites and so much other vermine make war upon us. In short, have mercy, Lord, upon our wicked persons, whose life is very short" (Huizinga 1956: 34). Such "melancholy," depicted in the art of Dürer and Lucas Cranach the Elder among others, continued into the sixteenth century and beyond. Life, according to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), is "nasty, brutish, and short."

The pervasive mood of the times, of anxiety and foreboding, found a focus in widespread expectations of divine judgment:

O World, be ever mindful how in times gone by,  
When thoughtless men did truth and right deny,  
When men were faithless and in spite did wrong,  
God never tarried with his vengeance long. (Strauss 1963: 18)

Sin, death, and the devil loomed large on the stage of late medieval life and mentality. Numerous studies and textbooks speak of this period as an age of crisis. In this chapter, "crisis" will be the heuristic key to the context of the Reformations. Of course, such a broad generalization about the eve of the Reformations risks distortion and loss of nuance

and detail. Historians can always find contemporary sources that portray the world as normal in the aftermath of catastrophes; then as now, one may profit as well as suffer in a crisis. Nevertheless, I shall try to present with broad strokes the Reformations as both a part and a child of the late medieval crisis (Oberman 1973: 31). In the lapidary phrase of Steven Ozment (1975: 118), "late medieval developments were a threshold as well as a foothold" for the Reformations of the sixteenth century.

It may appear presumptuous to speak of the late medieval era as an era of crisis because crisis is not the prerogative of any single era. As Ranke said: "Every age is immediate to God." In this sense the Middle Ages have no more of a monopoly on crisis than we do. "Yet there have been few times in which the awareness of crisis has reached and encompassed all social classes, and pervaded . . . such extensive areas of Western Europe." What was being judged and called into account to a hitherto unknown extent was "the sacred basis of existence." This was more than the perennial generational questioning of the received tradition; it was a "crisis of symbols of security" (Oberman 1973: 20, 17). Traditional values and certainties were under fire and new ones had not yet been found.

The crisis of the symbols of security did not arise from an immediate cause or a single event but grew from an accumulation of events and developments, some positive and some negative. This conjuncture of developments eroded confidence and security in the medieval vision of a Christian commonwealth, the *corpus Christianum*, and its guarantor, the church. In a world in which the modern compartmentalization of religion and life was inconceivable, natural catastrophes such as famine and plague, rapid social changes related to economics and urban development, and religious uncertainty stemming from schism and corruption in the church were perceived as part and parcel of a world whose center, the church, no longer held (Graus 1969, 1971, 1993; Lutz 1986).

### **Agrarian Crisis, Famine, and Plague**

Many of the events and developments contributing to the sense of crisis were occurring concurrently. Bearing that in mind, we shall for the sake of convenience begin with an overview of the conjuncture of crises concerned with farming, famine, and the great plague of the mid-fourteenth century. Preceding this conjuncture but also as a consequence of it, there was a remarkable growth of urbanization that



drew survivors to the cities. The rise of the cities and a new social mobility were also cause and consequence of the shift from a natural economy to a money economy, commercial production, and technological development. Most of those who flocked to the cities looking for a new life did not find it; excluded from the guilds, most newcomers, if not reduced to begging, became dependent upon jobs that provided little more than a hand-to-mouth existence. New attitudes of individualism fostered by the Renaissance also contributed to the erosion of the sense of a Christian community developed over a thousand years of the *corpus Christianum*.

Increased food production during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries fed a steady population growth. However, the growing population outgrew the agrarian basis that had made it possible. By 1320 nearly all of northern Europe was suffering from widespread famine precipitated by a series of crop failures due to unusually bad weather. Chronicles of the time list a succession of floods, bitter winters, and severe droughts. In southern France, rains inundated Provence in 1307-8 and in 1315. Clergy and laity processed barefoot to appease God for the sins of humankind, but "God was slow to hear their prayers." Rivers seemed to overflow with terrible regularity, sweeping away bridges, harvests, and people. Severe winters froze rivers, vineyards, and animals. In 1355 it snowed for nearly 20 days on Avignon; in 1439 wolves prowled through Carpentras. In summer heat grilled the grain and wells went dry (Chiffolleau 1980: 101-2). In southeast Germany earthquakes and massive locust swarms followed the famine years of 1315-17. Emperor Charles IV wrote of being awakened one morning by a knight with the words, "Lord, arise, the Last Judgment is here for the whole world is full of locusts." Charles set out on horseback to measure the extent of the swarms. After a full day's ride, about 25 kilometers, he had still not come to the edge of the swarm, which devoured all vegetation in its path (Boockmann 1987: 228). Natural disasters were compounded by considerable price inflation, and urban dependence upon the immediate countryside due to lack of long-distance transportation.

Weak and malnourished, the population was hit by outbreaks of typhoid fever and then the terrible Black Death in its forms of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic plague. The spread of the plague to Europe was facilitated by improvements in the Italian merchant fleets which enabled ships to rapidly transport their deadly stowaway cargo of rats carrying plague-ridden fleas. Originating in the Far East, the plague reached Sicily in October 1347 via Genoese ships, traveled rapidly through Italy, and infested southern Germany by the spring of 1348 and England by June of that year. The densely populated and

filthy cities were an ideal habitation for the rats which carried the fleas, and thatched roofs and dirty streets provided ideal launching pads for flea-to-person trajectories. Once infected, people transmitted the pneumonic form of the disease by coughs and sneezes inhaled by others. It has been estimated on the basis of modern studies of the plague in twentieth-century Manchuria that these infections were practically 100 percent lethal (McNeill 1976; Ziegler 1969).

It is not possible to estimate accurately the mortality rate due to the plague, but it is supposed that approximately 30 percent of the population succumbed. There were, of course, local variations; some areas were passed over by the plague while others were completely wiped out. The gruesome nature of this disease increased its horror: large painful boils (the term "bubonic" comes from *buba*, Latin for groin, where lymph nodes were often the first to swell since many flea bites were on the legs) accompanied by black spots or blotches due to bleeding under the skin were the prelude to the final stage of violent coughs of blood. A contemporary description is less clinical: "All the matter which exuded from their bodies let off an unbearable stench; sweat, excrement, spittle, breath, so fetid as to be overpowering; urine turbid, thick, black or red" (McKay et al. 1988: 430). As Boccaccio makes clear in his introduction to the *Decameron* (1353), family and friends deserted the sick, leaving them to die alone and in agony.

By the Reformation period the plague had abated but it was still a real danger. The Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), nearly succumbed to it, and in 1527 the plague struck Luther's area. In Wittenberg those who could, fled; the others died or were cared for in Luther's home, which he turned into a sort of hospice. This was the occasion for his tract, *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*. Even love could not close a person's eyes to the omnipresence of death in the midst of life, for by the end of the fifteenth century syphilis appeared on the continent as the other great epidemic disease. Like the plague, syphilis created terror and helplessness in the minds of contemporaries. The shortness of life was never far from people's minds.

It is difficult for us today to realize the profound personal and social impact the plague had upon its survivors. It was an inexplicable and swift disaster. People did not know its whence and wherefore. The plague could strike down a healthy person within days or, in the septicaemic version where the bacillus entered the bloodstream, within hours. The widespread fear of both an imminent and a horrible death broke down customs and norms. Parents deserted their children, and children deserted their parents. The horror extended to the nursery, as suggested by the rhyme, "Ring Around the Rosey." The "rosey" was

the reddish "ring" that preceded the skin blotch; the "pocket full of posies" refers to the use of flowers to mask the stench and supposedly ward off infection; "ashes, ashes" is shorthand for "ashes to ashes, dust to dust;" and "we all fall down" is the inevitable result. There was often panic, bizarre behavior, and the projection of guilt and fear upon others.

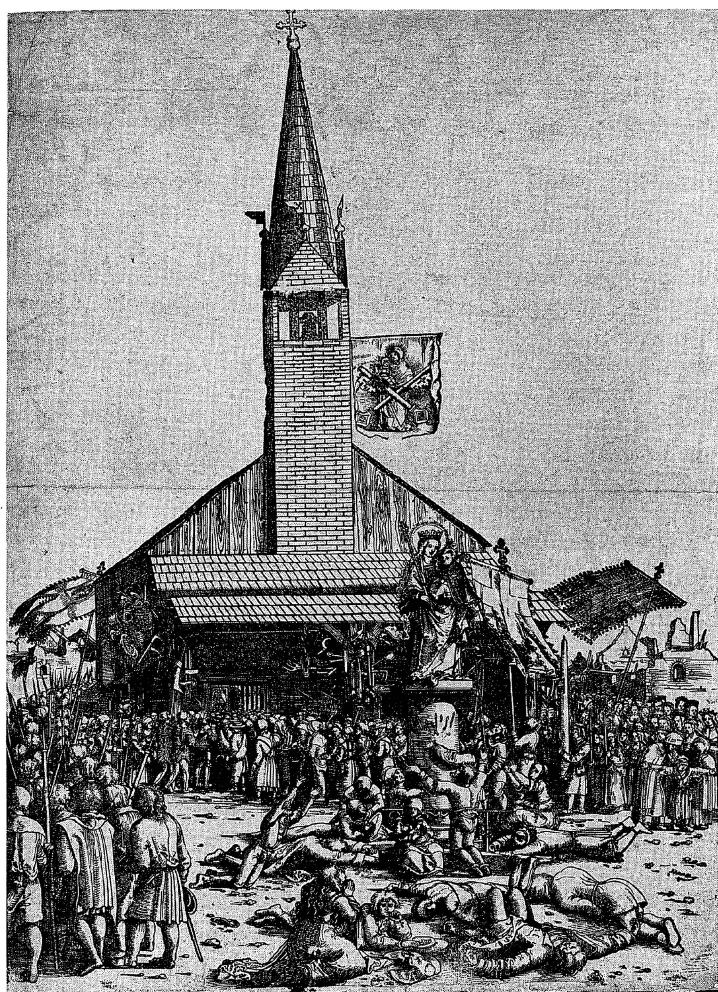
The plague was widely perceived as God's punishment for humankind's sins. Flagellation movements engaged in bloody penances for the personal and communal sins believed responsible for the plague. The Strasbourg chronicler, Fritsche Closener, reported that in 1349 two hundred flagellants arrived in Strasbourg. They carried costly pennants and candles at the head of their procession, and village and city bells announced their arrival wherever they went. Their ritual included kneeling and singing in the churches followed by throwing themselves three times on the ground in the form of a cross. Twice a day the members flagellated themselves. At the ringing of a bell they assembled in a field, removed their clothes except for a covering of the lower half of their bodies, kneeled in a circle and confessed their sins, and then engaged in spiritual songs and flagellation (Boockmann 1987: 230-1; Cohn 1961: 124-48). Ironically, their processions and the hordes of followers they attracted helped to spread the plague.

Intercession for protection from the plague was also sought from saints, especially Rochus and Sebastian: the former because he had aided plague victims and himself succumbed; the latter because of the

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*Figure 2.1* "The Pilgrimage to the 'Beautiful Mary' in Regensburg," by Michael Ostendorfer, 1520. This woodcut illustrates the excesses of the religious adoration of images on the eve of the Reformations. Pilgrims are beside themselves in ecstasy before the statue, "Beautiful Mary," in the foreground, and streaming into the chapel to view the wonder-working image of the "Beautiful Madonna" (note the huge votive candle carried by the pilgrim on the right). This pilgrimage site originated in direct connection to the 1519 persecution of the Jews in Regensburg. The provisional wooden pilgrimage chapel was erected on the very place where the Jewish synagogue had stood; the ruins of the recently destroyed Jewish quarter are depicted in the background. During the demolition of the synagogue in February 1519 the stonemason Jakob Kern was severely injured, but on the next day miraculously restored to health by petition to Mary. Through the clever management of the cathedral preacher Balthasar Hubmaier, a later Anabaptist leader, whose preaching had fomented the Jewish pogrom, this miracle sparked the pilgrimage site and a lucrative income for the city. Within a month of the erection of this shrine, 50,000 pilgrims had worshipped there. In his 1520 *Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther recommended that this and similar shrines be leveled (LW 44: 185).

Source: © Elke Walford, Hamburger Kunsthalle.



iconography associated with his martyrdom by arrows. Since it was believed that God shot plague arrows at sinful humankind, Sebastian's death by arrows made him an aide to the afflicted. Help was also sought from Mary. A panel of the high altar of the Franciscan church in Göttingen provides a classic image of Mary's protective mantle catching plague arrows. The image of Mary protecting humankind with her cloak became widespread.

The plague was perceived by some as a Jewish plot. Fear stimulated prejudice with the consequence that thousands of Jews were murdered across Europe. In spite of the fact that Jews also contracted the plague, people claimed they had poisoned wells. The Dominican, Heinrich von Herford, provided a brief description: "In this year [1349] the Jews including women and children were cruelly and inhumanly destroyed in Germany and many other lands." Reasonable people and responsible clergy such as Heinrich rejected the charge that Jews caused the plague, and suggested that a more likely cause of these pogroms was greed for Jewish wealth. A contemporary account states: "The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt" (Marcus 1973: 47).

The plague severely tested people's faith. The ensuing pessimism informed literature and art. It is at this time that the French word *macabre* first appeared and summed up a gruesome and dismal vision of death. This was graphically illustrated by the dance of death motif and by tomb inscriptions such as that of Cardinal Jean de Lagrange in Avignon (d. 1402) on the sculpture of his putrefying body: "We [the dead] are a spectacle for the world so that the great and the small may see clearly by our example the condition to which they shall be inexorably reduced whatever their condition, sex, or age. Why then, wretch, are you full of pride? You are ashes, and you shall return to ashes, a fetid corpse, food for vermin." Thousands of epitaphs on lesser graves echoed the *memento mori* theme: "As I am, so you shall be."

These images mirrored the rupture of personal and social life. The old rules of mourning that channeled and reduced the trauma of death rarely held up before the mass deaths of this time. The desertion of family and friends threatened the faith that death was a passage to a new life. The traditional religious rites and customs of death, the funeral procession and meal, which enacted the separation of the dead from the living while symbolically reconstituting the family and the continuity of society, collapsed in the face of the plague. If one was fortunate enough even to have a deathbed, there would be no relatives and friends gathered around it. Nor, after death, would there be rest among



*Figure 2.2* "Death and the Maiden" from the Heidelberg Dance of Death series. Death is portrayed as a dancer whom every person will have to follow. The woodcut series portrays persons from every walk of life being caught in the final dance. The maiden here claimed by death confesses her preoccupation with the world's pleasures to the neglect of God's commandments. Frogs and toads symbolized sins; worms and snakes signified the pangs of conscience. Huizinga (1956: 138) wrote: "No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death."

*Source:* Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte.

ancestors in the churchyard. The dead no longer earned continuity with their forebears but only darkness. Survivors more and more understood themselves to be like orphans, and were anguished by the reality of being thrown back upon themselves.

The disturbing discovery of the death of the self in this context was nearly contemporaneous with the development of new funeral practices and the writing of wills or testaments. In the church's hierarchy of contributions to the "price of passage" from this world to the next, concern to endow as many masses as possible for oneself after death now displaced the earlier emphasis upon charity to the poor. Faced by the dissolution of the qualitative boundaries of life, people turned to number and measurement as a means for creating order. The new "book-keeping mentality" substituted quantity for quality in an effort

to impose pattern and reduce anxiety before disorder (Bouwsma 1980: 234–8). This “mathematics of salvation” (Chiffolleau 1980) exalted the multiplication of liturgical intercessions to facilitate the passage of the deceased to heaven. “Catholicism at the end of the Middle Ages was in large part a cult of the living in the service of the dead” (Galpern 1974: 149). This shift from the traditional works of mercy to the mass for the dead indicated not only the church’s ability to adapt to a new situation but also the growing influence of a market mentality with its orientation toward the calculation of accounts, in this case, as Chiffolleau’s (1980) book title suggests, “the account book of the beyond.” The mass became the essential preparation for the journey through death to heaven, ritually establishing powerful bonds between this world and the next that would be exploited by the doctrines of purgatory and indulgences.

The development of the doctrine of purgatory complemented the development of masses for the dead. The multiplication of masses for the dead popularized purgatory as a place for those snatched from life without benefit of time to amend their ways or prepare for death. These “orphaned” souls found in purgatory a refuge with a new “family.” Purgatory also offered a mitigation of the fear of damnation by its opportunity to purge the offenses occurred during life, and the possibility to benefit from the prayers and intercessions of masses and indulgences bought by the living.

But purgatory was no picnic! Thomas More (1478–1535) described its terrors in grisly detail in his *Supplication of Souls*: “If ye pity any man in pain, never knew ye pain comparable to ours; whose fire as far passeth in heat all the fires that ever burned upon earth . . . If ever ye lay sick and thought the night long and longed sore for day, while every hour seemed longer than five, bethink you then what a long night we silly souls endure, that lie sleepless, restless, burning and broiling in the dark fire one long night . . . of many years together” (Dickens 1991: 29).

As if natural disasters were not enough, the human community managed to create its own plague of wars. The long-term expression of this was the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) between the French and English monarchies. It was both a dynastic and a feudal struggle as the French king, Philip VI (r. 1328–50) sought to absorb the English duchy of Aquitaine. The war, consisting mainly of raids and sieges, dragged on and on. It was fought almost entirely in France, and is popularly remembered as the context of Joan of Arc.

Peasant rebellions also caused much destruction and impeded economic and social life. Most people in the sixteenth century were peasants

who toiled on the land from sunrise to sunset or day laborers at the mercy of urban entrepreneurs. Their life of labor found occasional relief in the festivities of major holy days and the ritual breaks occasioned by marriages and funerals. In some areas the peasant was a virtual slave; in other areas, a small landholder. Likewise, peasant diet and housing were sometimes adequate and sometimes inadequate. Diverse conditions make generalization about peasant life difficult. In any case, the life of the peasant was hard, and not infrequently hardening. The upper class frequently depicted the peasant as stupid, coarse, loathsome, untrustworthy, and prone to violence. For the nobles, of course, such self-serving descriptions rationalized and legitimated oppression of the peasants.

Not all writers and lawyers supported such prejudice against the peasants; some reproached lay and ecclesiastical nobility with the adage that true nobility derives from virtue not from blood. Nevertheless, long before the Reformation, the adverse economic and social status of the peasant was legitimated by blaming the victim. It is of interest that the Noah story (Genesis 9: 20-7) was (mis)used in medieval Europe for the same purpose as in slaveholding America: to explain that subjugated people bore the curse of God.

When pushed to extremes, the normally conservative peasant could react violently. Usually peasants acted out their rage against their conditions by turning against each other, but one picture from the period shows four peasants slaughtering an armored knight with axes. Far more serious than individual acts of violence were the outbreaks of communal peasant rebellion against the oppression of their lords. In France, taxation for the Hundred Years War fell as a heavy burden on peasants, who exploded in rage and rampage in 1358. The nobles avenged themselves by vicious suppression of the peasants, slaughtering guilty and innocent alike. The Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381 combined economic and religious grievances against noble and clerical rulers. Its revolutionary sentiment of social equality was immortalized in the famous couplet attributed to the popular preacher John Ball (d. 1381): "When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?" In England, too, the revolt was ferociously crushed. Similar rebellions occurred in Italy, some of the north German cities, and parts of Spain. In the Empire there were peasant uprisings in 1493, 1502, 1513, and 1517, before the great Peasants' War of 1524-6. The nobility believed these were orchestrated conspiracies, but they began as spontaneous revolts generated by much the same kind of rage and frustration as that which stimulated the race riots that swept through



American cities in the 1960s. This long-repressed peasant anger against the lords, including the ecclesiastical lords who were great landholders, helps to explain the enthusiastic reception of Luther's early writings that attacked church authority and extolled Christian liberty.

Population loss through plague and war put at risk the economic holdings of surviving noble and clerical landowners. The decrease in peasant population meant the increased cost of hiring laborers. At the same time, if there was a decent harvest it brought lower returns because there were fewer people to feed. In the towns wages and prices were driven up because of urban labor shortages. The lords sought to stem peasant flight from the land by establishing or intensifying serfdom. In turn, peasant opportunities and social freedoms were radically curtailed. In order to cope with the inflation that was eroding their fixed incomes, noble and clerical lords began to displace the old "divine law," i.e. the common law of the people's tradition, by Roman law based on the tenet of private property which exploited possession. These developments were also to influence the reception of the Reformation by the peasants, who perceived the social and political significance of theological critiques of Roman law.

### **Towns and Cities: Loci of Ideas and Change**

The late medieval city was the locus of change, the "foyer of modernity" (Chiffolleau 1980: 430; Greyerz 1985: 6-63) in the double sense of both "home" and "hotbed." With regard to the Reformation this is summarized in the oft-cited phrase of the English scholar A. G. Dickens (1974: 182): "the German Reformation was an urban event at once literary, technological and oratorical."

It is estimated that, at most, about a fifth of the population lived in the cities and towns. However, some areas in Germany and the Netherlands had a higher percentage of urban population, with as much as 20 percent of the population of Saxony, Luther's area, living in its many small towns. By the eve of the Reformation towns and cities were experiencing rapid growth, some even doubling in size. Cologne, the largest German city, had a population of about 40,000, and by 1500 Nuremberg had grown to about 30,000. Other major cities such as Strasbourg, Metz, Augsburg, Vienna, Prague, Lübeck, Magdeburg, and Danzig had between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. Most of the 4,000 or so other German towns were smaller than 3,000 persons.

Elsewhere in Europe the numbers were similar, except for the very large cities of Paris, Milan, and Florence.

The population growth in the urban areas was stimulated by the new money economy and by new ideas. This made urban centers places both of creative change and opportunity, and of social conflict. The feudal economy was being displaced by an early form of capitalism which in turn undermined the traditional idea of society as a sacral corporation, the *corpus Christianum* in miniature, wherein each person was ethically responsible to all others.

~~There is no doubt today concerning the strong appeal of the Reformation in late medieval towns and cities.~~ Why the Reformation appealed to the towns and cities, however, remains controversial. In a provocative study first published in 1972, Bernd Moeller (1982) argued that the appeal of the Reformation in the numerous cities of the continent rested on its support for late medieval communal values under attack from different quarters. On the other hand, Steven Ozment (1975: 9) claimed that the appeal of the Reformation lay not in the reinforcement of the ideal of a sacral community, but precisely the opposite: its desacralization, i.e. liberation "from onerous religious beliefs, practices, and institutions." For Ozment, the Reformers were theological "freedom fighters" whose preaching of justification by faith alone did not reflect social change but stimulated it. Thomas Brady (1978: 9, 12) criticized both Ozment and Moeller: the former for psychologizing the appeal of the Reformation along the lines of Luther's conversion experience, and the latter for a "romantic conception of urban society, the ideal of the sacral corporation." From Brady's perspective, the key to understanding the course of the Reformation in the cities is class struggle in which ruling coalitions related to the Reformation in light of their vested interests. Moeller, in turn, criticized Brady for ignoring the religious dimension of the Reformation, and warned against "sociologizing." And Ozment asks whether this stress on class divisions, economic and demographic conflicts "will come any closer to elucidating human motivation than the much scorned narrow theological treatments of the Reformation and so-called 'airy-fairy' intellectual history" (Moeller 1979; Brady 1979; Ozment 1979). There is no reason to assume that the medieval urban dweller was any less beset by conflicting ideological and social concerns than we are, but there is reason to think that religious concerns played a major role. For the medieval, religion was a public or corporate not a private or individualistic affair. Hence religion was the key to both preservation of the past and liberation from it.

## **The Printing Press**

As the locus for new ideas, cities were concerned with communication and therefore also with expanding lay education. By the eve of the Reformation the number of European universities had risen from 20 to 70 due to the efforts of monarchs, princes, and wealthy merchants. The University of Wittenberg, for example, was founded by Prince Frederick the Wise in 1502. A conservative estimate of literacy suggests that 5 percent of the overall population and 30 percent of the urban population could read by the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, it is important to realize that the communication of ideas was not limited by literacy; those who could read passed ideas on to those who could not. The thousands of published Reformation pamphlets and sermons were thus designed to be read to the illiterate as well as by the literate. "Faith," as Luther stressed, "comes by hearing" (Romans 10: 17).

Prior to the media revolution caused by the invention of printing, the greatest initial expense for books was the material they were written on. Both papyrus (from the swamps of the Nile) and parchment (from the backs of sheep) were expensive. The development of a relatively inexpensive linen rag paper introduced by Marco Polo from China made the development of printing financially feasible. The next step was the development of a good ink, made by mixing carbon with an oily solution. The key invention, as is well known, was moveable metal type in the mid-fifteenth century in the Rhineland area. This durable moveable type could be arranged and rearranged and used again and again. The printing industry was first centered along the Rhine in Germany (Gutenberg at Mainz) and then spread down to Basle and up to the Low Countries. The earliest printing experts were the Germans.

New ideas now spread rapidly and reliably by means of the new technology of printing, a technology Luther deemed a gift from God. Whereas Wyclif's religious ideas spread very slowly through hand-written copies, Luther's ideas blanketed Europe within months. "By the end of the fifteenth century printing presses existed in over two hundred cities and towns. An estimated six million books had been printed and half of the thirty thousand titles were on religious subjects. More books were printed in the forty years between 1460 and 1500 than had been produced by scribes and monks throughout the entire Middle Ages" (Ozment 1980: 199; Chrisman 1982; Eisenstein 1979; Edwards 1994).

The Reformation ignited a tremendous increase in book production and rapidly expanded the book market. This ready market made printers eager to snatch every new work from Luther's hand. In Wittenberg alone there were soon seven print shops devoted to the writings of Luther and his colleagues. By Luther's death in 1546 over 3,400 editions of the Bible in whole or in part had appeared in High German and about 430 editions in Low German. Calculating on the basis of 2,000 copies per edition there appeared at least three-quarters of a million of the former and altogether about a million copies. This number is even more astonishing when it is considered that the price of books was increasing at this time. Although the common attribution of the creation of modern German to Luther's Bible translation is an exaggeration, it is true that his widely used translation contributed to the normalization of the language. His linguistic skill is evident in the continuing popularity in Germany of the Luther Bible.

Thousands of other Reformation writings in the form of brief tracts and pamphlets (*Flugblätter* and *Flugschriften*: literally "flying leaves" and "flying writings") flooded the Empire. This Reformation propaganda was not limited to the printed word but was also visual, incorporating pictures, images, and cartoons. In contrast to the Middle Ages, and even the first printed works which primarily served the preservation and transmission of knowledge, the Reformation gave the printed book a new function: the transmission of opinions. "A handful of copies of a single sixteenth-century pamphlet only a few dozen pages long could prove enormously provocative, help stimulate opponents of a government to heroic resistance, and thus arouse within a government terrible fears of subversion" (Kingdon 1988: 9). And the dominant publicist using this new tool was Martin Luther. According to Edwards (1994: xii), "he dominated to a degree that no other person to my knowledge has ever dominated a major propaganda campaign and mass movement since. Not Lenin, not Mao Tse-tung, not Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, or Patrick Henry."

### Of Mines and Militancy

Along with the invention of printing, the technology of mining and weaponry contributed weal and woe to the Reformation context. From 1460 to 1530 there was a mining boom in Germany that centered on Saxony, Luther's home area. Especially important for the context of the Reformation was the mining of silver which was unmatched in

quantity until the mid-nineteenth century. This was facilitated by solutions to the technical problems of removing water from the mines and separating the silver from other metals in the ore. The first problem was resolved by the development of ventilation systems and suction pumps allowing deep shafts to be dug; the second by developments in smelting which utilized strong hot furnaces to separate minerals on the basis of their different melting points. This required chemical catalysts, bellows, and the use of coal rather than charcoal to fire the furnaces. The engineers of the time improved the furnaces by using taller chimneys, thus increasing their draft. All these processes were gathered into a primitive factory system.

The social effects of this mining boom were manifold. Most of the silver was used for coinage, which in turn facilitated a monetary revolution. As the economy shifted from barter to money there was a growth in banking in Germany. Thus the great Fugger banking house of Augsburg displaced the Italian papal bankers, the Medici. The Fuggers involved themselves in all areas of culture, including politics, becoming closely allied with the House of Habsburg. As we shall see, their money was involved not only in the indulgence business but also in the imperial election of Charles V. The mining boom directly benefited Frederick the Wise, the elector of Saxony and Luther's future protector. Frederick's wealth not only made him a force to be reckoned with in the Empire, it also allowed him to realize one of his dreams, the founding of the University of Wittenberg, where a bright young monk, Martin Luther, soon joined the faculty. In turn, Luther had been able to obtain the education for this position because his father as a mining engineer earned enough money to send Martin to school.

Another consequence of this mining boom was inflation. The kings and princes who controlled the mines increased their wealth. Their prosperity as well as that of the bankers may still be seen in the great civic buildings and monuments of this time. But nobles dependent upon feudal rents, i.e. fixed incomes, suffered from the rise in prices, as did also the workers and artisans. Economic and social discontent issued in revolts: the Knights' Revolt in 1523 and the Peasants' War in 1524-6.

The developments in metallurgy, along with other technological advances, also found military application. After the discovery that gunpowder could be used to propel missiles, the next advance was to develop reliable cannon. The first cannon cast or wrought of bronze tended to come apart upon firing, which of course made their use somewhat exciting for all involved. Carved stone cannon balls whose rough edges might catch in the barrel were equally problematic to the

cannoneer, who, given his primitive working conditions, was exhorted to fear, honor, and love God more than any other soldier.

The first war in which cannon played a major role was the Hundred Years War. The French king engaged the Bureau brothers to set up a department (hence the beginnings of "bureaucracy") to utilize cannon offensively. Cannon were used effectively later by the Hussites, who mounted cannons on wagons as a mobile defense tactic, thus enabling Hussite survival into the Reformation era. By the time of the French-Italian wars (1494-1559) the French had a trained artillery with several hundred horsedrawn bronze cannons. Some of the best minds of the time, including such as Da Vinci, worked on improving artillery. At the battle of Ravenna (1512) the French artillery destroyed the Spanish cavalry. The development of a stable gunpowder and reliable cannons contributed to the destabilization of late medieval society. Indiscriminate death and destruction were now possible beyond the medieval's wildest dreams. When this technology was coupled with national and religious fanaticism the dreams became a devastating reality. But it also became clear that there was money to be made in arms, and so the fledgeling military-industrial complex of the late medieval era grew and bore its deadly fruit. One of the social side effects was to make an entire class - the knights - obsolete. Now anyone with a gun could bring down a knight. One more reason for their revolt.

### **Social Tensions**

The rise of a money economy created new social and religious issues and tensions. By the Reformation period cities were plagued by disunity, factiousness, and mutual suspicion due to increasing size and economic changes which raised social tensions to new levels. The expansion of commerce created both new wealth and new poverty. It became increasingly apparent that the profit economy and political centralization conflicted with the traditional ideal of urban community as a sacred corporation. Medieval towns, in contrast to the feudal vassalage system which bound inferiors to superiors, organized their members horizontally by an egalitarian oath. Each person, irrespective of social status, was ethically responsible to all other members of the body politic. By about 1500, the symbiosis of increasingly widespread literacy and printing along with Renaissance intellectual impulses stimulated an unprecedented development of individuality and the formation of individual consciousness. This, along with the ability of individuals and small groups to attain great wealth and political power

by their own initiative, gave rise to new values and political factions and challenged the old ones. Traditional morality was incapable of coping with urban and monetary development. "The received tradition was in fact biased against all the main elements of the new economy: against cities, against money, and against urban professions." The traditional morality could do little more than repeat with more volume the dictum from the early church that had been enshrined in canon law: "A merchant is rarely or never able to please God" (Little 1978: 35, 38).

The new profit economy affected virtually every institution, group, area, and idea of medieval society. It affected the size of communities and the human relationships within them. The increasing size of cities led to changes in the quality of life within them. Money affected the kind of work people did and how they were rewarded for it, often bringing in its wake distress for individuals and institutions alike. The old Christian morality no longer seemed relevant to the new urban realities and their acute social and religious problems involving impersonalism, money, and moral uncertainty. "The psychological boundaries by which the old culture had sought to understand the nature of man and predict his behavior were useless when he was no longer inhibited by the pressures of traditional community . . . He then seemed thrown, disoriented, back into the void from which it was the task of culture to rescue him. [This] . . . is the immediate explanation for the extraordinary anxiety of this period. It was an inevitable response to the growing inability of an inherited culture to invest experience with meaning" (Bouwmsma 1980: 230). The new morality of achievement, of accounts, of accumulation, a capitalist not a Protestant ethic, infected both personal and religious relations. This slowly developing individualism stimulated both a heady sense of liberation and a morbid insecurity and terror before the loss of this newly found self in death. The fear of purgatory was nothing compared now to the fear of hell where the damned were portrayed as feeding on their own flesh, and one spark of hellfire was more painful than a thousand years of a woman in childbirth.

Externally, the cities found themselves increasingly involved in battles against royal and princely overlords, both lay and episcopal, who wanted to subject them to higher territorial or national policy as well as benefit from their economy and holdings. There was a rising national consciousness; vernacular literature aided by the printing press displaced Latin; the Augustinian aspiration for the *corpus Christianum* was eroding. The process of nation building had already advanced the farthest in Spain and France; and, although the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation would continue to lag behind the rest of Europe for

centuries, the desire for nation building by the Germans is evident in the popularity of Luther's tract *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520).


However, it is difficult to build a nation when its major centers are infected by loss of moral direction, distrust, depersonalization and social fragmentation due to competing selfish interests. Long before Machiavelli, the animal epic of Reynard the Fox expressed cunning and the brutal self-seeking drive for advantage and success. As Reynard says to his nephew, Grimbert the Badger: "Little crooks are hanged; big crooks govern our lands and cities. I grew wise to this long ago, nephew, which is why I seek my own profit in life. Sometimes, I think that, since everybody does it, this is the way it ought to be." Reynard is the master of the big lie and extravagant flattery. The epic ends with the moral:

He who has not learned Reynard's craft is not made for this world and his advice is not heeded. But with the aid of which Reynard is past master, success and power are within everyone's reach. For this reason our world is full of Reynards, and we find them at the pope's court no less than at the emperor's. Simon [i.e. buying and selling of church offices] is on the throne. Money counts, and nothing else. He who has money to give gets the benefice; he who has not does not get it. Whoever knows Reynard's cunning best is on his way to the top. (Strauss 1971: 91, 95-6)

Luther would later echo this widespread cynicism in the adages "the big crooks hang the little crooks" and "the big fish eat the little fish."

### The Crisis of Values

This brings us to the main point of this chapter. The major crisis of the late medieval era was a crisis of values. There were numerous contributing factors, some of which we have already enumerated. But the core of the crisis was the tottering of the symbols of security. The late medieval crisis was not primarily economic or political or feudal, but a crisis of the symbols of security. This crisis came to a head in the crisis of the guarantor of those symbols – the church. "The Middle Ages was primarily concerned with the guarantee of security which the Church offered to believers" (Graus 1971: 98). That is why the full impact of all these factors found expression in the ecclesiastical crisis marked by the western schism and by anticlericalism.





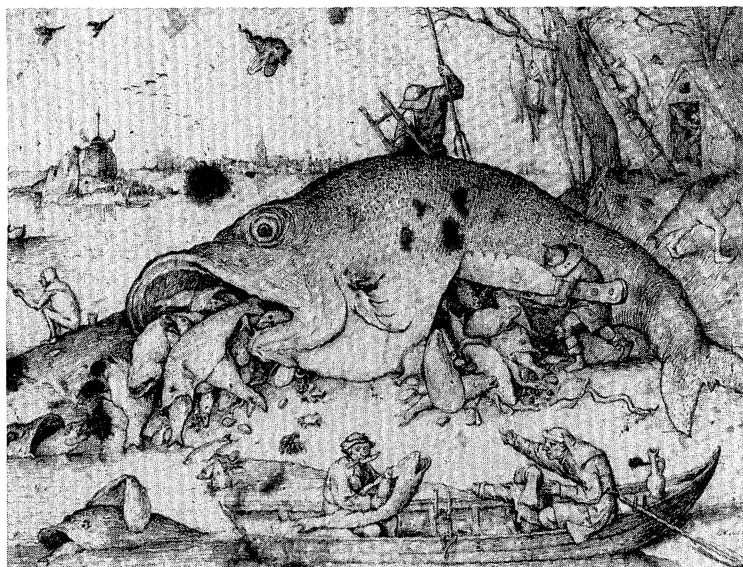


Figure 2.3 "The Big Fish Eat the Little Fish," by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–69), a copper engraving in the style of Bosch. Note the anthropomorphizing of the fish in the figure at the right which denotes the greed of townsmen preying on each other for self-benefit.

Source: Private collection.

### *The Western Schism*

The roots of the western schism reach deep into the early relationships of the bishop of Rome to the western Empire. Through skillful use of Roman law and creative "documentation" such as the "Donation of Constantine" and its affirmation in the "Donation of Pepin" (756), and the crowning of Charlemagne (800), the papacy legitimated its assertion of the divine right to crown the western emperor; the theory being that if the pope had the right to crown an emperor, he had the right to take the crown away. This papal ideology of political control foundered with the rise of national kings whose political authority, unlike that of the emperor, did not rest on papal crowning. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Pope Boniface VIII discovered to his dismay that since he had not "made" the French king, he could not control him. The humiliation of Boniface and his immediate successors at the hands of the French led to the so-called "Babylonian captivity of the

church" at Avignon (1309–78). Although the papacy bought Avignon, still situated in the German Empire, all of Europe now perceived the papacy as a French satellite.

In this broad context the first critical studies of the church and its theological and legal bases began appearing. The French Dominican, John of Paris (ca. 1250–1306), had already argued in his treatise *On Papal and Royal Power* that secular government was rooted in the natural human community, and that since royal authority was not derived from the papacy, the popes had no authority to depose kings. Marsiglio of Padua's (ca. 1275–1342) *The Defender of the Peace* (1324) was a far more radical expression of such "secularism." Marsiglio, one-time rector of the University of Paris, argued that the papacy was destroying world peace. The solution was to limit the executive authority of the papacy by the laws governing all human institutions, laws which derived from the whole community. Marsiglio not only stressed the principle of popular consent as the basis for legitimate government but also denied that the papacy was divinely established.

These attacks upon the papacy, which went to the heart of its legitimacy as an institution, utilized arguments from Aristotle and Roman law. The Franciscan William of Ockham (ca. 1285–1347) concluded that Pope John XXII was a heretic because of his rejection of the Franciscan theology of poverty. Ockham went beyond reviving older canonistic arguments regarding the possibility of deposing a heretical pope to posit that no ecclesiastical institution, not even a general council, could claim to define with certainty the faith of the church. To claim that the whole church could not err meant, according to Ockham, only that the true faith would survive in unspecified individuals even when popes and councils denied the truth. The Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), who had been exiled from Florence in 1301 for supporting the opponents of Boniface VIII, assailed the papacy and popes not only in his *Divine Comedy* but also in his *On Monarchy*. In the latter he argued that the papacy should abandon all temporal authority and possessions, and that temporal peace required a universal monarchy under the emperor. Papal condemnations and excommunications could no longer either control rulers or silence critics. As sharp as these criticisms of the papacy appear, it is important to realize that medieval critics did not want to abolish the papacy but to reform it and to conform the church to the model of the early church.

However, the Avignonese papacy continued to alienate Christians throughout Europe by a building craze that left splendid palaces and monuments in Avignon but severely taxed the faithful to pay for them. The poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–74), who had lived in and around

Avignon, described the luxury and worldliness of the papal court as "the sewer of the world." A bureaucratic mentality and materialism clouded the spiritual vision of the papacy. Instead of responding to the philosophical, theological, and literary critiques against it, the papacy developed increasingly efficient administrative machinery to collect more and more taxes, shuffle its thousands of pages of documents concerned with benefices and indulgences and politics, and administer its webs of patronage. Pastoral work was displaced by work to create greener and greener pastures. Critics began to murmur that Jesus had commanded Peter to "feed my sheep" (John 21: 15-17), not fleece them.

Ebbing papal prestige and authority was noted by many, and calls increased to return the papacy to Rome. Gregory XI (1370-8) heeded these calls in 1377. Ironically, the end of the Babylonian captivity of the church led almost immediately to the western schism. Gregory XI died on 27 March 1378. His body was barely cold when Romans began rioting in the streets, demanding that the papacy remain in Rome and that a Roman or at least an Italian be chosen pope. The cardinals chose Bartolomeo Prignano, the efficient, hard-working administrator of the Avignonese curia. He was neither a Roman nor an Italian nor even a Frenchman, but a Neapolitan (Naples was closely related to France through the House of Anjou). Although a respected administrator, he was essentially a civil servant with no experience in policy-making. He took the title Urban VI (1378-89). In spite of the riotous behavior during the election process, there is no indication that the cardinals were intimidated by the mobs. Indeed, the very choice of Prignano may indicate the cardinals' resistance to threats. It is important to note this, because soon after the enthronement of Urban the cardinals decided they had made a serious mistake and used the supposed pressure of the mobs to claim that the election was invalid. Concluding that Urban was unfit to be pope, the cardinals impugned their own election process on the basis that it had taken place under conditions of duress and fear. One by one they slipped out of Rome and gathered at Anagni, where they declared that Urban had been uncanonically elected and that the papacy was to be considered vacant. In September they elected Cardinal Robert of Geneva, who took the title of Clement VII (1378-94). Urban did not accept the cardinals' request that he abdicate, but instead excommunicated Clement, who returned the favor. The sorry spectacle of pope excommunicating pope, and vice versa, would continue for nearly forty years (1378-1417).

There had been anti-popes before in the history of the church, but this was the first time that the same legitimate college of cardinals had

legitimately elected two popes within a few months. Urban VI and his successors remained in Rome. Clement VII and his successor resided in Avignon. It is difficult today to appreciate fully the depth of the religious insecurity and the intensity of institutional criticism this schism caused. If, as decreed by Boniface VIII's bull *Unam sanctam* (1302), salvation itself was contingent upon obedience to the pope, it was crucial to know who was the true vicar of Christ. But how could this be decided? Now, too, not only were there two popes, each claiming to be the sole vicar of Christ, there were also two colleges of cardinals, and so on down the line even to some parishes that had two priests. Europe itself split its allegiance. Clement VII was followed by France, Scotland, Aragon, Castile, and Navarre, while Urban VI was followed by much of Italy, Germany, Hungary, England, Poland, and Scandinavia. Public opinion was hopelessly confused. Even the learned and the holy clashed over who was the true pope. St Catherine of Siena worked tirelessly to secure universal recognition of Urban. She called the cardinals who elected Clement "fools, liars, and devils in human form." On the other hand, the noted Spanish Dominican preacher, Vincent Ferrar, was equally zealous for the Avignon popes and labelled the adherents of Urban as "dupes of the devil and heretics."

In the course of this protracted struggle the prestige of the papacy and the credibility of the church sank to a new low. The rise of renewal movements in England under Wyclif and in Bohemia under Hus further complicated efforts to restore the credibility of the church. John Wyclif (ca. 1330–84) was an English philosopher and theologian whose concern for reform of the church led to his condemnation by synods of the English church and finally by the council of Constance in 1415. He was for a time in the service of the English crown, and his claim that the state could lawfully deprive corrupt clergy of their endowments was certainly of interest to the crown but was condemned by Pope Gregory XI in 1377. He further argued that papal claims to temporal power had no biblical warrant, and he appealed to the English government to reform the whole church in England. The extent to which he was an influence upon the Lollard movement for a biblically based Christianity, which supposedly prepared the soil for the seeds of Reformation in England, remains controversial (Aston 1984; Hudson 1988).

Wyclif's ideas were widespread among the lower English clergy and spread to Bohemia after the marriage in 1382 of Richard II of England to Anne, the sister of King Wenceslaus IV of Bohemia. The Bohemian reformer John Hus (ca. 1372–1415) translated some of Wyclif's writing into Czech. Hus, rector of the University of Prague, was a fiery preacher against the immorality of the papacy and the higher clergy in

general, and a champion of the distribution of wine as well as bread to the laity in the Lord's Supper. In spite of a safe conduct from the Emperor Sigismund, Hus was condemned and executed at the council of Constance in 1415. His follower, Jerome of Prague, suffered the same fate.

The Hussite account of Hus's trial provided parallels to the crucifixion of Christ. "On the seventh day of June [1415] – it was the sixth day of the week – in the eleventh hour, there was a total eclipse of the sun so that no mass could be celebrated without candles, thus indicating that Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, was eclipsed in the hearts of many of the prelates, who breathlessly panted for the death of Master John Hus who should be killed as soon as possible by the Council." Falsely accused, the account continues, Hus was led from Constance, bound to a post and burned to death while he serenely sang to the end "Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me" (Bujnoch 1988: 45). A century later, Luther would be compared to Hus, and Müntzer would appeal to the Hussites in his "Prague Manifesto." Both Wyclif and Hus were signs of growing national consciousness and criticism of the church. After his execution, Hus was declared a martyr and national hero by the University of Prague. Hus's prophecy that though his enemies were burning a goose at the stake ("Hus" in Czech means "goose") a swan would follow that they could not burn was popularly applied to Luther a century later (Pelikan 1964: 106–46).

### *Conciliarism*

The western schism had to be solved. It was proposed that both popes abdicate in order to allow a new election. Neither the Roman nor the Avignonese line favored this. Other solutions included the establishment of a tribunal, whose verdict would be acknowledged by each pope, and the proposal that government supporters of the popes withdraw allegiance and thus prepare the way for a new election. The universities favored and advanced the recovery of the ancient principle that in an emergency, such as the case of a heretical pope, a general council would decide what to do. This "royal way of the ancient church" was already suggested at the beginning of the schism by two German professors at the University of Paris, Henry of Langenstein (d. 1397) and Conrad of Gelnhausen (d. 1390). Their writings promoting this solution were augmented by the concurrence of others in the many new universities founded at this time.

Finally, in June 1408, cardinals of both popes met and resolved to summon a general council to meet at Pisa. Both popes were invited to

attend but they refused. The council of Pisa (March to July 1409) met anyway and was well attended by cardinals, bishops, hundreds of theologians, and representatives of almost every western country. Among the participants were distinguished scholars of conciliarism such as Pierre d'Ailly, chancellor of the university of Paris, and Jean Gerson, his successor. Their argument that supreme ecclesiastical power was located in the council was accepted. The council proceeded to depose both popes as notorious schismatics and heretics, and then elected a new pope, Alexander V (1409–10), archbishop of Milan and a cardinal of the Roman line. But the deposed popes refused to recognize the validity of the Pisan council; thus there were now three popes!

This scandalous situation was further aggravated after the death of Alexander V by the election to this new Pisan papacy of a man reputed to have engaged in piracy during his previous military career. Baldassare Cossa had been such a successful commander of papal troops that Boniface IX had made him a cardinal in 1402, and then a papal legate. Cossa took the title John XXIII and reigned from 1410 until 1415, when he was imprisoned and deposed by the council of Constance. His title and efforts to manipulate the council of Constance were redeemed approximately 450 years later by John XXIII (1958–63) and the "open" council Vatican II. Without being unduly concerned about the means used, John was able to achieve his initial goal of expelling the pope of the Roman obedience from Rome. However, political and military events in central Italy forced him to take shelter with his curia in Florence, and to seek a protector. He turned to the king, later (1433) emperor, of Germany, Sigismund.

Sigismund had already endorsed the Pisan line of popes established at the council of Pisa and thus was a natural source of assistance for John XXIII. However, Sigismund was also greatly concerned for the unity of the church. He had been persuaded by conciliarists, especially Dietrich of Niem (1340–1418), that in an ecclesiastical emergency the emperor should follow the model of the ancient Christian emperors and convoke a general council. Dietrich further argued that a general council had plenary powers, including the rights to depose a pope and to reform the church. Although not yet emperor, Sigismund decided to act on the arguments that a general council is superior to the pope and that the emperor as first prince of Christendom and protector of the church has the duty to call a council when needed. He successfully arranged to organize such a council on German soil at the city of Constance.

The council of Constance (1414–17) was convoked in 1414 by Pope John. The council faced three main issues: the great schism, extirpation

of heresy, and reform of the church in "head and members." The active participation of Sigismund not only stimulated a large and representative attendance, but also overcame threats to its validity. By early 1415 the attendance included 29 cardinals, 33 archbishops, 3 patriarchs, over 300 bishops, and numerous abbots, priors, theologians, canonists, and representatives of rulers. The council vindicated conciliarism and defeated the papal hierocratic system.

Pope John hoped that the council would depose the popes of the Roman and Avignonese obediences and legitimize him. He soon discovered there was a consensus that all three popes should resign. John's own plans for the council were further jeopardized by the conciliar decision to vote by nations rather than by persons, with each nation having one vote. This procedure counterbalanced the preponderance of Italian prelates upon whom John depended.

The decision to vote by nations had a significance which extended beyond the immediate politics of John's efforts to win conciliar endorsement. It was a democratizing event, because in the separate deliberations of the nations it was now not only the prelates but also representatives of cathedral chapters and universities, theologians, canonists, and representatives of princes who had a voice. Furthermore, the idea of a nation as a unit, an idea taken over from the universities, contributed to the already developing sense of nationalism that was undermining the old idea of a universal Christian commonwealth under the headship of the papacy. The further consequences of this nationalism will be seen in the rise of national churches and in the Reformation.

The council's famous decree *Haec sancta* (1415) placed the authority of the council over that of the pope and sanctioned conciliar theory as the official teaching of the church. The character of a general council was set forth as a lawful assembly, representing the universal church, whose power was directly from Christ and whose authority therefore extended over every office holder in the church, including the pope. The council deposed the rival popes and on 11 November 1417 Cardinal Odo Colonna was elected pope by the college of cardinals and six representatives of each of the five nations present at the council. He took the title of Martin V in honor of the saint of the day. The great western schism was over.

Concerned that reform of the church would falter without conciliar direction and support, the council passed the decree *Frequens* in 1417. In unmistakable language, the council stated that the holding of frequent meetings of general councils "is a principal means for tilling the Lord's field for it uproots the brambles, thorns and thistles of heresies, errors

and schisms, corrects excesses and reforms what is amiss, and restores the vineyard of the Lord to rich and fruitful bearing" (Kidd 1941: 210-11). The decree provided that the next council was to be held in five years, a second in seven years, and thereafter every ten years "in perpetuity." It concluded that it is lawful for the pope to "shorten the period but on no account to put it off."

Martin V closed the council in April 1418. He did not however confirm or approve it, an omission probably little noted because of the profound relief over resolving the schism. His successor Eugene IV (1431-47), however, approved it in 1446 in so far as it was not prejudicial to the rights, dignity, and supremacy of the papacy. However, Pius II (1458-64) in his bull *Execrabilis* (1460) prohibited any and all appeals to a council over the pope, such an appeal to be regarded as heresy and schism. This would later be applied against Luther who called for reform of the church through an ecumenical council.

Some of the decrees of the council of Constance became parts of special agreements between Martin V and particular nations, now for the first time called "concordats." This development further indicates the displacement of the ideal of a universal Christian commonwealth by individual independent nations. The papacy, hitherto claiming sovereignty over all peoples, was now reduced to one government among many national governments which bound itself to them in a contractual manner. This, too, was to have significance a century later in the Reformation.

The immediate aftermath of the council of Constance may perhaps be best described in terms of battle fatigue. The spiritual and physical anxiety and stress occasioned by the long schism and the energy required for its resolution left an inheritance of confusion and uncertainty. The church was now entering a period of transition in which the old hierocratic papal institution had not yet become merely a memory, and the new conciliar orientation was still an innovation. Was the *corpus Christianum* to be reformed and renewed from below or from above?

Martin V, in accordance with the decree *Frequens*, convoked a council at Basle for 1431. By December only a few participants had arrived, and in February Martin died. His successor, Eugene IV, opposed to the council from the start, dissolved it on the basis of insufficient attendance and the argument that the appropriate setting for reunion discussions with the Greeks was an Italian city. The mutual hostility between Eugene and the council increased when Eugene transferred the council to Ferrara to advance his aim of reunion with the east. A minority of the council acceded to the pope's decision; the



majority declared Eugene deposed. In turn, the pope declared those remaining at Basle heretics and schismatics. The election of an anti-pope, Felix V (1439–49) had little significance because he received little or no support from the nations. The French had already embodied no fewer than 23 decrees of Basle into national law in the “pragmatic sanction of Bourges” (7 July 1438), which supported the older claims of the French national church to a privileged position in relation to the papacy. This “Gallicanism,” so-called from these *libertés de l'Eglise gallicane*, continued to assert the autonomy of the French church until the definition of papal infallibility at the first Vatican council (1869–70).

Meanwhile, the authority of the council of Basle eroded as its leading spokesmen deserted their own camp and joined the forces of the very papacy they had vigorously attacked. One of these men, the secretary of the council, later became a robust opponent of conciliarism when he was elected as Pius II. These one-time conciliarists now sensed what the representatives of rulers also saw in the conciliar movement – the danger that the governed everywhere would become the masters of their kings and princes as well as of their pope. Now that the papacy had been demoted to the status of one monarchical government among others, it dawned on other monarchs that conciliarism was a two-edged sword. As rulers came to realize that the means developed to control the papacy could become a weapon used against them, they raised gloomy predictions of sedition and anarchy. Thus the papacy and monarchs were now disposed to conclude concordats with each other. The possibility of democracy drove all theocratic monarchs, including the papacy, toward cooperation for the sake of mutual preservation. Hence Felix V was the last anti-pope, and his role was negligible because monarchs saw that any short-term benefit in supporting him would be outweighed by long-term costs.

The papacy's own effort to overcome the challenge of conciliarism and to consolidate its patrimony in Italy diverted its energy and attention from the widespread cry for reform of the church in head and members. In less than a century this cry would become the full-throated roar of the Reformations that blew away the last vestiges of the ideal of the *corpus Christianum* and the papal efforts to realize a universal headship over Christians. That roar included a cacophany of voices: those alienated by poverty, the profit economy, and the stress of urban growth; those made anxious by terrors of famine, plague, and war; those angered by the frustration of the renewal movements of Wyclif and Hus; and those enamored of the individualism of the Renaissance. Altogether, people by the end of the Middle Ages were in one way or another being thrown back upon themselves as the external

supports of their Christian commonwealth were undermined. "The Western Schism, with its concatenation of abortive solutions from Pisa and Constance to Basel . . . called the sacred basis of existence into question to an extent hitherto unknown" (Oberman 1973: 17).

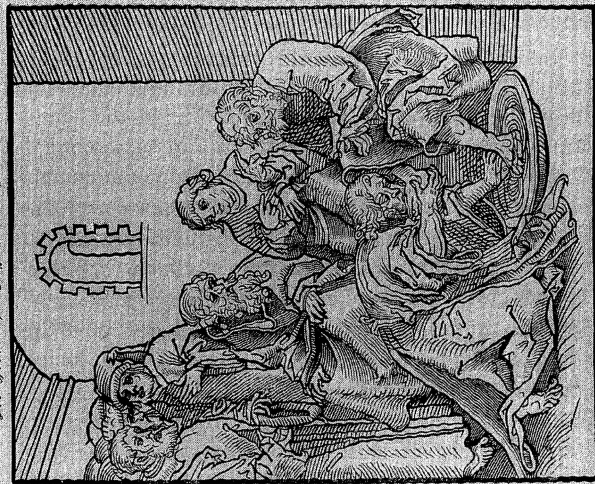
The clue to the magnitude of this crisis resides in the fact that the whole of medieval society had striven to attain the Augustinian vision of the City of God. Within this vision the church encompassed the whole of human society subject to the will of God. The church was the ark of salvation in the treacherous and mortal seas of life. "It was membership in the church that gave men a thoroughly intelligible purpose and place in God's universe. So that the church was not only a state, it was *the* state; it was not only a society, it was *the* society – the human *societas perfecta*" (Southern 1970: 22).

Sociological perspectives shed light on the depth of this crisis. In *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger (1969: 28) argues that every human society is involved in the continuous task of structuring a meaningful world for itself. In the face of the precariousness of personal and social life, society strives to shield itself from chaos, formlessness, meaninglessness, and the terror of the void by structuring a meaning which can deal with the marginal situations of life. Faced by the constant possibility of personal and cultural collapse into anomie, humankind has perpetually grounded social structures in the cosmos, and thereby given ontological status to institutions. "Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the universe as being humanly significant."

This theoretical orientation helps us to see that the famous effort by Pope Boniface VIII to subordinate the French king Philip was more than just political aggrandizement gone awry – though that certainly was part of it. The high papology of *Unam sanctam* (1302) "is not novel, but a fine summary of the political consequences of that hierarchy of being where peace and justice in the world are derived from the sacred, from sanctification and legitimation through the sacraments and the jurisdiction of the Church" (Oberman 1973: 27). For medieval society, the church is the "agency through which the divine order is brought into human order, by which divine law becomes positive legal codes" (Wilks 1963: 163–4). That is, human institutions and values have an ontological validity because they are rooted in the mind of God. More succinctly put: "The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it" (Berger 1969: 51). By the eve of the Reformations the credibility of these banners was in question as never before.

## Passional Christi und

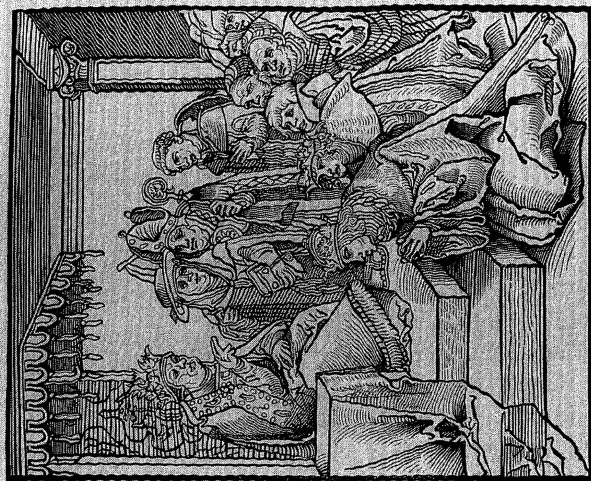
Der Herrre ihre Füß den Jungern wusch



So ich eure Füße habe gewaschen, der ich euer Herr  
und Meister bin, vielmehr sollt ihr einander unter euch die  
Füße waschen. Sonst habe ich euch ein Anzeigung und  
Beispiel geben: wie ich ihm than habe, also sollt ihr  
einander auch thun. Wahrlich, wahrlich sage ich euch,  
der Anecht ist nicht mehr, dann sein Herrre: so ist auch  
nicht der geringste Bote mehr, dann der ihn gesandt  
hat. Wißt ihr das? Selig seid ihr, so ihr das thun  
werdet. Johann. 13. (B. 17)

## Antichristi.

Dem Papst sein Fuß man küssen muß.



Der Papst magt sich an, izzlichen Tyrannen und heid-  
nischen Fürsten, so ihre Füß den Aemern zu Fußten dar-  
gebracht nachzufolgen, damit es besser werde, das  
geschrieben ist: Welcher dieser Bestien Bilde nicht an-  
betet, soll getödt werden. (Apokalyp. 13. (B. 13))  
Dieses Auffsens darf sich der Papst in seinen Decretalen  
unvorschampt rühmen, c. cum oli. de pri. cle. si summus pont.  
de sen. excom.

1. best. 2. C. 1608.

Figure 2.4 "Passional Christi und Antichristi," by Lucas Cranach the Elder. The contrast between Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and the pope requiring that his foot be kissed was reused during the *Kulturkampf* between Kaiser Wilhelm and Pope Pius IX in the 1870s.

## Anticlericalism and the Renaissance Papacy

It was not the doctrine emblazoned on the banners of late medieval Christianity that was in question so much as it was the lives of those who bore them. Although the term "anticlericalism" itself is of nineteenth-century coinage, it is a useful designator for the wide range of criticism – oral, literary, and physical – directed against the perceived gap between Jesus and the apostles on the one hand and the contemporary clergy on the other.

The personal characters of the Renaissance papacy raised more issues than they resolved. Sharp and tough-minded, they set out to smash the conciliar movement's strictures on papal authority. Their success in this endeavor may be seen in the fact that, apart from the council of Trent (1545–63), there was not another council until the first Vatican council (1869–70), which in its declaration of papal primacy and infallibility was the final answer to the council of Constance. Late medieval people, of course, could not see that far ahead. What they could see was the great gulf between the biblical image of the shepherd guiding the flock toward the heavenly city and the series of Renaissance popes who exploited the flock for their own advancement in the earthly city. The papacy became an Italian Renaissance court and the pope was increasingly perceived to be nothing more than an Italian prince whose problems and interests were now local and egoistic rather than universal and pastoral. Two particularly notorious popes exemplify the depths to which the papacy sank at this time: Alexander VI (1431–1503, pope from 1492) and Julius II (1443–1513, pope from 1503).

A Spaniard by birth, Rodrigo Borgia was made a cardinal by his uncle, Pope Callistus III, in 1456 and won the papacy largely through bribery. Rooted in nepotism and simony from its beginning, it is no surprise that Alexander VI's reign was determined by continuing familial and financial concerns. He is one pope to whom the title "father," if not "holy," may be literally applied. His many mistresses bore him at least eight known children, the most famous of whom are Cesare Borgia and Lucrezia Borgia. The former is infamous for his ruthless exaction of total obedience as his father's military leader, as well as for his immorality, murders, and possibly the assassination of his brother. He is reputedly the model for Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513). Lucrezia served her father's plans by a series of ambitious political marriages marked by extravagant wedding parties in the Vatican palace. One of her husbands was murdered by order of her

brother Cesare. At one point, when absent from Rome for a military campaign, Alexander appointed his daughter regent of the Holy See.

Alexander's own involvement in sexual promiscuity, alleged poisonings, and intrigue made the name Borgia a synonym for corruption. He was denounced in his own time by the influential and fiery Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98). When Alexander could not persuade Savonarola to discontinue his attacks by offering him a cardinal's hat, he proceeded against him and was at least partly responsible for Savonarola's execution in Florence. Alexander's political efforts to strengthen the papal state abetted French intervention in northern Italy, which helped initiate a new period of power politics with Italy as the focus of international struggles.

Ironically, the worldliness of Alexander's life also included the patronage of great artists whose legacy may still be enjoyed by the visitor to Rome. Cynics of the time, however, played upon the traditional image of the church as the ark of salvation by comparing it to Noah's ark without benefit of shovelled stalls. It was common to suggest that the closer one got to Rome the worse the Christians, and that everything was for sale in Rome. The ambition and avarice of the Renaissance popes was spelled out by arranging the first letters of the saying "avarice is the root of all evil" to spell "Rome" (*Radix Omnia Malorum Avaritia = ROMA*).

Julius II continued patronage of the arts by his support of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bramante; his enthusiasm for rebuilding St Peter's led to the indulgence which later occasioned Martin Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses." But in his own time, the art by which Julius was primarily known was the art of war; Raphael painted Julius mounted and in armor. Julius continued the political and military efforts of the Borgias to control the Papal States and expel all foreigners from Italy. He himself led his troops with such strength and drive that he became known as *terribilita*, the terrible man. So much of his reign was characterized by warfare that more and more of the laity began to wonder in disgust what this pontiff had to do with the Prince of Peace. The great humanist, Erasmus (1469-1536), who had witnessed Julius's triumphal martial entry into Bologna, angrily criticized and satirized Julius in *The Praise of Folly* (1511), *The Complaint of Peace* (1517), and *Julius Exclusus* (1517). The latter writing, in dialogue form, spread rapidly all over Europe and portrays Julius appearing before the gates of heaven upon his death. For all his threats and bombast, Julius cannot force his way into heaven. In response to Julius's demand that Peter recognize him as the Vicar of Christ, Peter says:

I see the man who wants to be regarded as next to Christ and, in fact equal to Him, submerged in the filthiest of all things by far: money, power, armies, wars, alliances – not to say anything at this point about his vices. But then, although you are as remote as possible from Christ, nevertheless you misuse the name of Christ for your own arrogant purposes; and under the pretext of Him who despised the world, you act the part of a tyrant of the world; and although a true enemy of Christ, you take the honor due Him. You bless others, yourself accursed; to others you open heaven, from which you yourself are locked out and kept far away; you consecrate, and are execrated; you excommunicate, when you have no communion with the saints. (Erasmus 1968: 87–8).

On the eve of the Reformation, the question was not whether the church should be reformed, but when. The successor to Julius II was a son of the famous Florentine political and banking family, the Medici. He took the title Leo X (1513–21) and was pope during the early years of the Reformation. The words with which he reputedly opened his reign indicate how well prepared he was to respond to the widespread desire for reform of the church: “Now that God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.”

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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