

# VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE THAKURPUKUR KOLKATA-700063

NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE



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## **THE REFORMATION: NATURE AND IMPACT ON POLITICAL THOUGHT**

The reformation was no doubt a genuine religious movement, its thrust being directed against the Roman Catholic Church, which had become too worldly and political in its ways. The reformation movement aimed at the restatement of the pure, original message of Christianity, but one which had extremely important radical and progressive implications, decisively influencing philosophical, scientific and no less political thinking in the centuries to come.

The reformation acted as an agency of liberation and a spur to innovations in thought and to new forms of knowledge. While renewed claims were made on the heart of Christian believers by the reformation, their minds were made relatively free. Religious truth was a matter of faith. The reformation was more than a pure religious movement. It was essentially a movement in the guise of religion to meet the social and political needs of Europe's rising bourgeoisie.

To study the reformation movement in this context, it is imperative to begin with Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) who initiated this movement, forcing significant changes in the future course of society and politics of Europe.

The reformation movement sparked off the defiance of the Church of Rome. Martin Luther protested against the practice of selling indulgences by the Catholic Church. The idea behind the indulgences was that the Church had in store plenty of surplus grace derived from the lives of Christ and the Saints. By making a handsome payment to the Church, anyone could have a share of this surplus grace that would readily free him from the obligation to do penance of his sin. This practice of buying indulgences from the Church became highly popular among Christians which meant quick augmentation of the wealth of the Church. Martin Luther protested against this practice in his homeland, Germany. On 31 October, 1517, he nailed to the door of Wittenberg Church his famous 95 Theses against the very propriety of indulgences, the crux of which was as follows:

- Pardon being a divine prerogative could hardly be channeled through the Church
- The Pope had neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties
- Indulgences could at best free a man from punishment imposed by the Church, but certainly not free him from his sin
- Man's salvation depended only on his faith and contrition, and finally
- Sacraments and a hierarchy to administer them should be of no use at all in this regard
- There is no need of the aid and guidance of the Church to get into the aura of divinity, as Luther's renowned phrase asserted.

Martin Luther's theology grew on the basis of a flat denial of the uses of the so called institutions in man's religious life. It visualized a kind of direct personal relation between God and man where there would be no room for an intermediary. Man's faith was essentially a matter of his inward disposition and that only would put him in communion with God. It was Christians carrying this faith in their hearts that composed the Kingdom of God and in this kingdom the only thing to be accepted without question were the words of God himself;

only authority to which one should graciously submit was that of Christ and of the Holy Scripture. Among Christians, there was no superior human person or institution; they were all equal, sharing the same right and dignity with others.

Thus apparently, Luther preached a kind of radical egalitarianism by dismissing the question of superiority as irrelevant in the Christian world. The whole of his theology was punctuated by a strong anti-authoritarian attitude. By freeing Christianity of the institutional bondage forced by the Church for centuries, he promised the Christians a society liberated from the chains of authority. According to him, religion for an individual would be very much a personal and spontaneous affair that would hardly need any institutional superintendence.

### **Political Thought:**

When Martin Luther came down from the purely religious questions to the more mundane matters of life it appeared that he negated his own theology. Luther, the destroyer of authoritarian order in the ecclesiastical questions, should have ended as a fierce iconoclast in the sphere of political power. But, actually the position was just the contrary. He justified the authority of the political ruler with the same force with which he attacked that of the Catholic Church. The fiery radical on religious questions appeared to be a cold conservative on political issues. Thus he viewed the state as essentially sacred. Luther similarly took shelter in the theory of divine right in order to exalt the authority of the state. He argued that political authority ultimately flowed from the will of God, there being virtually no earthly limit to it. The political ruler, being thus responsible to no one else except God, would naturally deserve unconditional and unquestioned obedience from his subjects and no other organization, not even the church, could exist and function except by his fiat. Even when such a ruler had committed wrong his subjects would have no right of resistance. According to Luther, the remedy against an evil government lay only in prayers to God who alone could punish it. In other words, while with one hand Luther displaced the omnipotent Pope with the other he installed a very powerful state having had a fierce fight against the tyranny of the Church he finally succumbed to a crude political absolutism.

This political attitude of Luther was nakedly exposed during the tumults of Peasants' Revolt in Germany. In 1525 the oppressed peasants of Germany were inspired by the radical egalitarianism of Lutheran theology and they revolted against the existing order demanding their natural right to enjoy equality with other classes of society. The revolting peasants turned to Luther for his support, sympathy and directions. But Luther belied all their expectations. Luther initially, no doubt, showed his sympathy for some of the grievances of the peasants. But he urged them to exercise moderation, arguing that a true Christian had no right to revolt and warning that a rebellion might even cause a permanent destruction of Germany. When, however the revolting peasants refused to listen to his advices, Luther showed his real face. He sided with the German prince and, putting off the garb of a humane theologian, called upon the latter to exterminate the disturbing peasants. Thus with Luther's support, the German prince took no time to brutally crush the peasant revolt. Thus Luther, the progenitor of an almost anarchic theology, ultimately ended as a champion of coercive political authority and of an unequal social order.

This self-contradiction in Martin Luther was inevitable, for beyond his immediate religious goal, he had a much wider material goal--- a goal his embodying his commitment to the cause of the contemporary bourgeoisie and for the sake of the latter , he was ready to compromise whatever position he had taken on the religious front. When Luther waged his religious war against the Church of Rome, the German bourgeoisie lost no time to rally behind him, taking him to be their able spokesman. There was indeed sufficient reason behind this alignment. Since the middle of the fifteenth century, discontent had been brewing in Germany against the monetary exploitation of the German people by the Pope of Rome. A substantial portion of German national wealth had been flowing to the Catholic Church which seriously affected the economic stakes of the German bourgeoisie who had already started getting hostile towards the Church of Rome. Thus when Luther thundered his revolt against the Catholic Church, he got the support of his country's bourgeoisie.

Judged in this perspective, Luther's theology, his exaltation of secular authority, his betrayal of the causes of the peasant's revolt and his open support to the German territorial princes, do not at all seem to be contradictory to each other; they on the contrary appear to be essential parts of a thoroughly consistent perspective. By challenging the omnipotent spiritual authority of the Church of Rome and by making religion very much a matter of personal faith and judgment, Luther in fact, was trying to lessen the pervasive influence of religion on social life and thereby build up a social atmosphere most suitable for the mundane adventures of the bourgeoisie. Again, by influencing the growth of national Churches in different parts of Europe, he kindled a religious nationalism that paved the path for the development of nation-states in Europe which was necessitated by the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Further, by fortifying the foundation of political authority and by making it most immune from any challenge, he virtually prepared the ground for the development of strong national monarchies which, again was a historical necessity in the context of a struggle for survival on the part of the European bourgeoisie in the initial phase of their development. Thus, in the history of European political thought, the Reformation indeed was no strange interlude. Without it, a vital sequence is lost in the history of the early formation of bourgeoisie political ideas in Europe.