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### The Protestant Reformation and Christianity

Catholicism was the dominant practiced sect of Christianity in Western Europe up until the 1500's. With extreme financial value, accepted doctrines, the support of the people, and political influence, the Roman Catholic Church acted as the authoritative beacon of Christianity in Western Europe. The Renaissance in the 1500's sparked a newfound way of thinking. As a result, human's first began to live through the concept of individualism. The doctrines and beliefs of the Catholic Church began to be objectified by the newly found realism of individuality resulting in the movement of the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation is directly responsible for branching out Christianity from the beliefs and indulgence system of the Catholic Church which created a new way of thinking within Christianity, ushered in a new era of churches and denominations, and created great conflict within the Christian Church that would change the religion of Christianity forever.

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church dominated life in Western Europe. The Catholic Church owned massive amounts of land, the pope acted as the most influential figure in European politics, and the doctrines being taught were accepted. The success of the Catholic Church at the time directly correlated with the rituals that were being practiced. The Catholic Church focused the concept of salvation on rituals within the church. These rituals such as indulgences were extremely influential

throughout Western Europe. According to Catholic teachings of the time, indulgences could only be granted by bishops and were used to help pay off the sins of people in order to reduce one's time spent in purgatory. The costs of indulgences varied depending on the amount of time that was to be reduced, and whom the indulgence was for as indulgences could be bought for both the living and the dead. According to a Cambridge article titled, *Indulgences for Prayers for the Dead in the Diocese of Lincoln in the Early Fourteenth Century*, which examines the influence of indulgences in pre-Reformation England, "These indulgences for prayers for souls obviously reflects the concern for purgatory which was integral to fourteenth century spirituality." (Swanson 207). The mindset prior to the Renaissance and Reformation had individuals completely dependent on the Catholic Church. The use of the Catholic Church being the sole institution with the ability to grant indulgences in order to minimize one's or a loved one's time in purgatory even furthered one's sense of dependence upon the Catholic Church. The use of indulgences furthered the notion that the Catholic Church emphasized the concept that salvation was obtained by following the Church's doctrines and practicing works or good deeds. The Catholic Church was also solely responsible in delivering the Holy Scripture to people as it was written in Latin at the time. The dependence on the Catholic Church at the time that made it the most powerful institution in the world also led to corruption within the church, which eventually sparked The Protestant Reformation.

The emergence of the Renaissance in the 1400's was a key reason for a newly found dissent towards the Catholic Church. The Oxford University Press book titled, *Invitation to World Religions 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, regarding Renaissance influence on reform to the church states, "Calls for reform were also encouraged by the revival of humanism, a

deep faith in human beings that inspired the Renaissance, a cultural movement that was flourishing at the time of the Reformation” (Oxford University 440). The Renaissance ushered in a new era that saw the development of the movement of humanism.

Humanism stressed the concepts of truth, and individualism. During the time of the Renaissance, Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, extended his influence on Christian theology. Martin Luther was directly responsible for forming a new foundation of faith within Christianity. His direct actions led to the rejection of Catholic doctrine, and the acceptance of a new way of thinking. Living as a monk in the Catholic Church, Luther immersed himself within Catholic doctrine, and studied scripture intensely. According to Luther, he found fundamental flaws in the way the Catholic Church taught how to obtain salvation. Luther in reading his scripture familiarized himself with the book of Romans chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, verses that shaped his belief in Christianity and salvation forever. Romans 1:16-1:17 states, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed- a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (NIV). Luther recognized the obvious corruption within the Catholic Church of the time, and through his individual study of scripture recognized that scripture states that salvation is gained through faith in God. As a result, Luther developed his dispute with the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church’s belief in purgatory created the system of indulgences. Purgatory was the concept that after death, one is stuck in a middle ground between heaven and hell awaiting God’s judgment. The Catholic Church sold indulgences as a

way to push a person further to heaven by minimizing their time in purgatory. Through his studies of the bible, Luther pointed out the flaws of this belief. Luther saw that in scripture it says that salvation is received through faith rather than any other way.

Branching out from the Catholic Church, Luther nailed 95 theses challenging Catholicism on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. Luther's 95 theses was the foundation to the entire Protestant Reformation. The 95 theses pointed out the flaws in the Catholic Church including the sale of indulgences, and questioned the power of the Pope as the spiritual head of the church. This document completely discredited the sale of indulgences to gain salvation, introduced the idea of salvation through faith, and contributed to the branch out of the Catholic Church.

The nailing of the 95 theses marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, or a break from the Catholic Church. The people of Germany began opposing the teachings and immorality of the Catholic Church, and embraced the new way of individually gaining salvation. The Protestant Reformation was responsible for switching the dependence of people in their reliance of the Catholic Church to a more personal approach in which a relationship with God and scripture was built upon each individual. Protestantism emerged as a result of these concepts and Luther's work, which revolutionized the religion of Christianity by incorporating the new concept of individual salvation rather than the Catholic teachings of salvation through some type of achievement.

The influence of Luther's teachings and concept of Christianity, which sparked the Reformation also, not only was responsible for the formation of Protestantism, but also sparked new forms of Christianity. The branch out from the Catholic Church to

Protestantism encouraged individual study of scripture. Prior to the Reformation, all required teachings and scripture was in Latin. According to Oxford University Press in the book, *Invitation to World Religions 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, "Luther translated the Bible into German. Because he found no mandate in the Bible for an ecclesiastical hierarchy, he rejected the authority of bishops and popes." (Oxford University Press 441). Luther's translation of the bible gained extreme public attention, as it had been done just after the invention of the printing press. Thousands of bibles for the first time were accessible to anyone in the public, and for the first time as well, could actually be understood, as it was not in Latin. With Luther's new concept of individual scripture study, more and more people began to formulate different interpretations on the bible. With the introduction to self-exploration within the bible, new views began to form and oppose one another. Following the emergence of Protestantism, Europe experienced religious conflict. With the Catholic Church dominating the political world of Europe and a significant group of people finally opposing the teachings of the Church, conflict developed quickly within the German state and Europe. The Protestant Reformation triggered a series of additional Reformations throughout Europe as individuals began exploring scripture and forming their own separate interpretations. Additional movements that emerged during this time that were significant were the Calvinist, Zwinglian, and Anabaptist movement. The Reformations eventually spread throughout all of Europe creating extreme conflicts within the Catholic Church and other religious denominations.

The Catholic Church was virtually uncontested up until the 1500's, and despite it's corruption had dominated all of Europe. Following the Renaissance, a new era of thinking spread throughout the people of Europe. This new era of thinking brought upon

dissent regarding the corruption of the Catholic Church, and eventually became the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, directly responsible for the Protestant Reformation, translated the bible to German exposing thousands of people to scripture. Introducing the concept of individual salvation through faith rather than good works or achievement, Luther changed the religion of Christianity forever. With a new concept of individual exploration in scripture introduced through Luther, new denominations of Christianity emerged throughout Europe such as the Calvinism, Lutheran, and Zwinglian movements. As a result of the Protestant Reformation, the religion of Christianity was changed forever.

Work Cited

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