

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

HISTORY

B.A. – I

PAPER – II

RISE OF MODERN WEST

Unit – 5

Reformation and Counter Reformation

Topic: - The Nature of the Reformation

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Introduction

The Reformation, also known as the Protestant Movement, was an event of immense significance in European history. It occurred in the 16th century. To be more precise, it began in 1517 with the publication of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses and ended (at least for the time being) with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Beginning in the northern German states, it spread all over Europe affecting some way or the other all classes and sections in the continent. The term "Reformation" points to the struggle of men, inside as well as outside the Church, to cleanse the Church of the impurities afflicting it, to bring drastic change in the Church organisation and to restore its religious and spiritual obligations. Basically a religious movement, it had a deep and far-reaching political and socio-economic impact. It split Christianity for the second time. And with Christianity the continent too was divided between catholic and Protestant blocs of nations. Now the questions arise: was it the first struggle of its kind? If not, which were the other reform movements preceding it?



In one sense, it was the first struggle of its kind. There had been no movement previously against the Papal order on such a massive scale, so well organised and with such a well-defined objective. But, at the same time, we must note that there had been several reform movements aiming at purifying the Christian church order and removing the obstacles to a good Christian life. But their scope had been very limited.

THE CLUNIAC REFORM (so named as it was initiated by the monks at the monastery of Cluny at Burgundy) took place in the mid-11th century. Of course, it aimed at strengthening the church and the Pope by freeing them from the control of kings and other secular elements. Its objective, interestingly enough, was to reform the Church by establishing the authority of the Pope over all the clergy in Europe and enforcing celibacy among clergy so that they could devote fully to religious duties. Then came the CISTERCIAN MOVEMENT in France in the early 12th century, and spread to some other parts of Europe. It attempted to restore the simplicity and spirituality of the early Benedictine monks, put emphasis on love of God, and encouraged manual labour, particularly farming. It was followed by FRANCISCAN MOVEMENT, originating in the early 13th century, which spread in France and Italy. Its followers aimed at reviving pure spirituality by practicing 'pure poverty'. A life of austerity, disdain for worldly possessions and pleasures and close attachment to the Bible had been the objectives of the Franciscans. A radical section of the Franciscan group, originating in France and called WALDENSIANS, defied the Pope and considered the Bible as the only rule of faith and life. Because of their unorthodox views and anti-Papal attitude, they were declared as heretics. The most powerful of all these reform movements, preceding the 16th century Reformation, was the CONCILIAR MOVEMENT, which started in France in the late 14th century and spread to a major part of Europe in the early 15th century. It aimed at bringing spiritual uplift of the people and better management of church affairs by setting up an ecclesiastical council with representatives from all nations of Europe. In that sense. It was an uprising against the system of Papacy itself. All the movements, mentioned above, did not last long, but they clearly prove that the effort to bring back purity in Christian life and removing ills of the Church order was a long and continuous one.

There were some individual efforts too. JOHN WYCLIFE (1320-1384), an English patriot and a highly esteemed Oxford scholar, was forthright in his condemnation of the evils of the Church. He insisted that the Church should renounce all temporal authority, and even claimed that the English were not obliged to pay taxes to the papacy. He declared that the individual was dependent upon no priestly hierarchy for salvation, but directly upon God. This led him to believe that the Bible was the true and only guide to faith. He translated the Bible into English to spread the message of Jesus to the common people. He organised preachers, known as LOLLARDS, to preach the gospel to the poor rural people. He challenged some of the Catholic doctrines.

A more vigorous Individual campaign against the Church was launched in Bohemia (modern Czechoslovakia) in the early 15th century by JOHN HUS, and his fellow heretic, Jerome of Prague. He taught at the University of Prague. He had studied the writings of Wyclif and accepted most of his religious views. In those days the Czechs developed a strong national self-consciousness. They resented German domination and eventually that resentment was turned against the German prince-bishops who ruled extensive estates under the empire. The Czechs felt that the great church-state, ruled from Avignon and Rome, was virtually a foreign institution. He advocated the formation of a Czech national church independent of Rome. This was a clear anti-papal stand, and it proved disastrous to Hus. He was excommunicated by the Pope and was forced by the king of Bohemia to withdraw from the university. He, accompanied by Jerome, went all the way to Constance in 1414 to present their case before the historic Council of Constance. The Council found them guilty of conspiring against the Holy Church. They were condemned and burnt to death. The execution of Hus and Jerome provoked a rebellion in Bohemia. The Czech nobles, numbering 452, signed a petition protesting the action of the Council. They waged a war, known as the Bohemian War (1420-31), against the German troops. Both side suffered heavy losses, and it ended with the signing of a compromise settlement. Yet it proved beyond doubt that the opposition to the papal supremacy was not negligible.

Another remarkable individual effort was that of GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA (1452-1498), which took place just a few decades before the Reformation. Savonarola was a priest at Florance and enjoyed the favour of the Medici family. His one-man reform movement was directed against Pope Alexander VI, whom he dared to call 'a devil and a monster' ruling over a 'harlot church'. His struggle for return to the pristine purity of Christianity was able to gather a extremist steps like burning religious books and making provocative speeches resulted in his gradual loss of support and eventually to his excommunication by Pope Alexander VI. In 1498 Savonarola was condemned for heresy, was hanged and his dead body was put to flame.

We can conclude from the aforesaid facts that all individual efforts at reform failed and in the last two cases they proved disastrous to the reformers.

NATURE

Basically a Religious Reform Movement

The cardinal fact about the European Reformation is that it was fundamentally a religious reform movement. Its reformist character was reflected in its concern with the degeneration in religious life and negligence of spiritual duties on the part of the clergy, particularly the upper clergy and the ways to remove them. Its reformist character was again reflected in its effort to bring some ecclesiastical changes - the changes in church organisations, so that it could serve the spiritual and religious needs of the people in a better way. It put emphasis on faith, love, purity of thoughts and good deeds rather than on long ceremonies and cumbrous rituals. The Church must not be the sole guardian of man's spiritual and religious life and the individual must be given the freedom to pursue a religious life that would bring him close to God. That is exactly what the followers of Martin Luther thought.

Protestant and Anti-Papal in Character

The Reformation was again a 'protesting' movement. It protested against the irreligious, irregular and outright corrupt practices that had crept into the Church. The Church is basically the holiest of places where the worship of God should be performed with utmost solemnity. But degradation came in the practices of the Church. Solemnity and holiness gave way to urge for worldly possessions and luxurious living. The Christendom turned into a domain of the Pope and he ruled it like an emperor. The sanctity of the Papal office greatly eroded. Through protest the Reformation indicated its determination to change the system. So, it is also called the PROTESTANT REFORMATION.

The Reformation affected all classes and sections in the society and so, the people rich or poor, clergy or laity, ruler or subject, merchant or trader, all got involved with it some way or the other, directly or indirectly. Some supported it, while some opposed. Here it is interesting to note that the Reformation differed with 'the Renaissance on this point. The Renaissance was an urban elitist movement, being

confined only to towns and cities, and that too among the small educated and intellectual section of the society. Of course, it also derived support from some of the wealthy merchants in cities. So, the Renaissance had its limitations so far as the support-base is concerned. But the Reformation was widespread among the ordinary folks too - both in urban and rural areas.

Continuance of the Renaissance

The chief source of inspiration for the Reformation was the Renaissance. The humanist and rationalist trends generated by the Renaissance motivated the Reformation. The Renaissance rediscovered the knowledge and wisdom of the ancient Greek scholars and philosophers, inculcated the spirit of enquiry in understanding the laws of the universe and nature, opened the way for rationality and humanism, put men on the path of freedom and ascendancy and above all questioned the religious beliefs and superstitions cultivated by the Church. It was the Renaissance scholars who inspired the people to read the Bible in original and derive inspiration from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Erasmus's book on the New Testament, written in simple Latin prose, proved to be a path-finder for Martin Luther. The latter was so inspired by Erasmus' work, particularly his humanist and rationalist approach, that he translated it into German to spread the message of Jesus among the large German populace. We must add that it was during the Renaissance that printing was invented and a large number of printing presses came into existence. The large scale printing of the Bible and the works of the Renaissance scholars motivated independent thinking among the people. They began to question the religious practices and orthodoxy of the time.

Moreover, the Reformation came at a time when people, inspired by the Renaissance, were struggling to replace the old values and institutions with new ones. People, depressed by the prevalent situation in the Church, were searching for spiritual peace and salvation. This peace would come to them not through difficult rituals, rigid sacraments and long ceremonies, but through simple presentation of the high ideals and strong moral force of Christianity. So, Luther's emphasis on faith appealed deeply to the people.

The above-mentioned facts lead us to believe that in several respects the Reformation was a continuation of the Renaissance. Even if some historians raise objection to this interpretation on the ground that the Renaissance was a secular and intellectual awakening, while the Reformation was a religious reform movement. But none will have doubts on the fact that for more than one reason the Renaissance prepared the ground of the Reformation.

Democratic and Nationalist Trends

The Reformation, during its fairly long course, demonstrated democratic and nationalist trends. This is indeed a remarkable feature, so much so as to be unbelievable. In modern European history, the nineteenth century is supposed to have brought forth the ideas and institutions of democracy and nationalism. To be more precise, they are traced to the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. How did the Reformation foster these trends? The very basis of the Protestant Reformation was democratic. It regarded the 'papal system as authoritarian, in which the Pope was the supreme authority, and the cardinals and bishops too enjoyed overwhelming power and privilege in their own national churches. The Protestants introduced the system of CONGREGATION, by which all positions in the Church were filled through election. This was in contrast to the system of nomination that persisted in the Catholic Church. As regards the nationalist trend, it was very much boosted by the Reformation. The kings and ruling authorities of several nation-states disliked the papal authority which created various problems for them (to be discussed later). The Reformation provided them an opportunity to fight against the papal excesses and to free themselves from the papal authority. This, in turn, instilled among the subjects of those nation-states a sense of nationality, the feeling of belonging to a particular national entity marked by one language, one culture and one religion. In other words, a king's acceptance of Protestant faith meant freedom from papal control" a free national church and a nation freed from the control of formidable Catholic powers.

On the basis of the above discussion on the nature of the Reformation, we come to a very interesting truth. The Reformation was a movement in the real sense of the term. The Renaissance, on the other hand, was not a movement. It was just an intellectual

awakening - a state of mind, born out of peculiar forces and factors that inspired us to think anew and search for truth with a rationalist and humanist attitude. The Reformation was a full-fledged movement, with a large number of followers, a set of principles and objectives a leadership and above all possessed of the zeal to struggle for attaining those objectives.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
