

Reformation to Deformation:

Secularism as the Fruit of Protestantism

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Modern Western man takes it for granted that he lives in a secular society. Indeed, for many the secularization of civilization is seen as inevitable. It is, after all, merely the fruit of humanity's recent advances in science and philosophy. As mankind learns more about itself and the world around it, people naturally shed their former religious sentiments and exchange ancient superstitions for modern facts and theories – or so the argument goes. For such individuals, “secularization” is synonymous with “progress.” On the contrary, such an equivocation constitutes a misnomer, and one based on faulty reasoning. Advances in science and philosophy need not necessarily lead men astray from religion, or at least not from true religion, since true religion would be at least as true as – and thus inherently compatible with – true science and philosophy. This is why many scholars have suggested that secularization has not in fact been caused by the introduction of new scientific and philosophical truths but is rather the result of the emergence of novel religious doctrinal errors; namely, the teachings of such Protestant revolutionaries as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, among others. With their revolutionary teachings, such men brought about a massive schism in Western Christendom during the 16th-century event commonly known as the Protestant “Reformation.” In effecting said schism and thereby shattering Christian Europe's unity, the Protestant movement unintentionally but directly paved the way for the secularization of Western civilization by introducing competing religious claims which sparked inter-Christian conflicts, thus providing ammunition to those thinkers pushing for an adoption of skepticism as well as creating a practical politico-economic environment that facilitated the emergence of secularism.

Prior to the 16th century, the Christian West was united in one Church, and this Church had in many ways served as the savior, foundation, and guide of civilization for centuries. After the fall of Rome, the Catholic Church was the only institution left standing with the capability to

pull western society out of the ash heap. By the time the Western Roman Empire fell in the fifth century, most of the nobles had either been conquered by barbarian invaders or fled east to serve in the new capital of Constantinople, thereby leaving the bishops as the only educated, literate men around to whom the confused masses could turn for guidance and leadership. Over the following centuries, the Catholic Church managed to revitalize and convert western civilization and by the High Middle Ages had become the primary – if not sole – source of education, medical care, financial assistance, and above all spiritual direction in the West. The Church founded the first universities, banks, and hospitals, and patronized significant advances in the arts. Thus, when the Protestant movement began in the 16th century, its protagonists risked not merely the introduction of some potentially problematic novel ideas but the utter disruption of a deeply ingrained and institutionalized, unifying worldview that pervaded all of western civilization. Indeed, the “Reformation ended more than a thousand years of Christianity as a framework for shared intellectual life in the Latin West.”¹

It is indisputable that the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century was in desperate need of true reform. Between rampant papal nepotism, episcopal absenteeism, simony, priestly concubinage, the sale of indulgences, etc., it was obvious to all sincere and faithful souls that something needed to change in the Church. The scandals of the Avignon Papacy and the Great Western Schism were proof enough of this, and many faithful clergy and laity had long since been pushing for church reform by the time Luther’s theses were nailed to the doors of Wittenberg. Sometimes mistakenly called the “Counter-Reformation” – as if it were merely reactionary – the Catholic Reformation had in fact been in progress for some time before the

¹ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 45.

Protestant movement broke out. The difference between the Catholic reformers and the Protestant revolutionaries was that while the former remained loyal, orthodox sons and daughters of the Church who simply wanted to root out certain corrupt practices therein, the latter went so far as to attack the very teachings and practices of the Church that had served to unify Western Civilization ever since they had been handed down by the Apostles and successfully converted the pagan Roman Empire. The main protagonists of the Protestant revolt (such men as Luther, Calvin, John Knox, Henry VIII, Zwingli, etc.) based their rejection of traditional Church teaching on a new doctrine coined *Sola Scriptura* – or “Scripture Alone” – the idea that the Bible is the only sure source of and guide for Christian doctrine. Yet, the very incapability of the earliest Protestants to maintain any semblance of substantial unity itself demonstrated the impracticability of adopting such a paradigm as *Sola Scriptura*. Protestants quickly found themselves radically disagreeing amongst themselves about such central Christian doctrines as those concerning baptism, the Eucharist, church leadership and organization, and predestination, just to name a few. Indeed, rather than a movement united by the clear teachings of the Bible, the Protestant revolution proved to be an amalgamation of splinter-groups “whose only common feature [was] a rejection of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.”² This incapability of the first Protestants to maintain any meaningful degree of unity meant that they were not only in conflict with the ancient traditions of the Catholic Church but were also immediately at each other’s throats. This proved detrimental for western civilization, which until this point had for a millennium been unified by Christianity, whereas during the 16th century “Christianity itself became the central bone of contention.”³

² Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 94.

³ *ibid.*, 45.

In order to justify their break with the Catholic Church, the earliest Protestants had to immediately and strenuously deny much of the supernatural and miraculous aspects of Christian history up to that point. If, for example, all of the traditionally believed stories about Saints healing people were true or if it were actually the case that miracles continued to occur in the Church on a daily basis, all of this would serve as great evidence for the legitimacy of Roman Catholic claims. Recognizing this, the Protestant revolutionaries quickly set about eschewing all such ideas. As Reaves observes:

According to this new form of Christian thought, miracles no longer occurred with the same frequency, or had the same significance as they once had. Mass, with its deep meanings and weekly miracle of transubstantiation (the conversion of bread and wine to the actual body and blood of Christ), was done away with entirely. All communication with the souls of the dead, or any significance of the saints beyond historical interest, was eliminated. Protestants did not believe the world was constantly being affected by divine forces; instead, God had a more laissez-faire approach, though certainly not to the extent of Deism. The sacred and the profane were pulled further from one another, existing in two entirely separate and rarely, if ever, connected realities. Many of these beliefs were long held to be essential to belief in God, or Christianity. When people began to lose the miraculous and transcendent aspects of religion, it became easier and easier to pull away from the religion as a whole – in other words, to become secularized.⁴

Beyond disenchanting Christian theology with their dismissal of miraculous claims, the Protestant revolutionaries also introduced a great deal of relativism into its practice. As noted, Protestants were never united but rather immediately broke out into numerous sub-schisms after their initial split from the ancient Catholic Church. Sola Scriptura's inability to provide unity caused Protestant theologians to quickly qualify their claims concerning the utility of Scripture alone. Many so-called Protestant spiritualists did so by arguing that Scripture by itself is not truly the ultimate rule of faith, but Scripture as interpreted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Dylan Reaves, "Peter Berger and the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization," *Denison Journal of Religion*, Volume 11, Article 3 (2012): 12, <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=religion>.

Those who misinterpreted Scripture, and consequently disagreed with ‘True Protestant Christianity’ could therefore simply be dismissed as those to whom the Spirit had not elected to grant proper guidance. This explanation, however, only exacerbated the issue as it “compounded competing claims about the understanding of scripture with competing claims to genuine inspiration by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Subsequent and similar appeals to the necessary use of reason alongside Scripture and the Spirit’s guidance only proved to create further problems still, as they not only begged the question of who was reasoning rightly but also generated a debate about the efficacy of reason itself. After all, depending on just how fallen a particular theologian believes man to be, he may or may not lend much credence to said fallen man’s ability to engage in rational activity. Protestantism’s contribution to Christian theology thus proved largely to consist of its subjectification. Each theologian was left to his own interpretation, his own reason, and his own hope in the Spirit’s guidance over and against all competing and allegedly equally correct, reasonable, and Spirit-guided doctrinal claims. As Gregory notes, “It is easy to see the influence of this historical trajectory and present-day reality on the relativization of religious truth claims in general.”⁶ After all, if which religion might be true is essentially anyone’s guess, wouldn’t it just be simpler (and no less rooted in subjective reasoning) to reject religious claims altogether? Moreover, shouldn’t humanity instead turn to science, which in comparison to the increasingly dramatically contradictory claims made by post-Protestant Christians seems to provide a much more stable and objective framework within which to pursue the truth?

In addition to thus seceding philosophical ground to secular thinkers and skeptics with their increasingly disenchanted and relativistic theological claims, the protagonists of the

⁵ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 98.

⁶ *ibid*, 111.

Protestant movement also paved the way for secular rulers to assert their own claims to authority over against those of the Church. In the centuries leading up to the Protestant revolution, “the idea that the spiritual and temporal realms were separate entities was a matter of great debate.”⁷ There were obviously distinctions to be made, but the fact that everyone in any particular state also belonged to a single Church left the precise boundaries between the secular and spiritual realms somewhat uncertain. Yet, this uncertainty provided a source of healthy checks and balances. Fuzzy lines made it easier for the representatives of secular and spiritual authority to push back against those on the other side who appeared to be overreaching. Secular rulers were encouraged to limit their jurisdiction to matters temporal and ecclesiastical authority was generally limited to speaking on matters spiritual; however, once the unity of the Church was broken the lines of dispute became clearer and secular authorities universally came out on top. Perhaps the clearest example of such secular triumph over ecclesiastical authority resulting from the Protestant movement is found in King Henry VIII’s invention of the Church of England. With the birth of the Anglican Church, other European princes and queens discovered that they too, like Henry, could place themselves at the top of their own national churches, thereby securing for themselves both absolute secular and total spiritual authority in their realms. After the 16th-century Peace of Augsburg and the 17th-century Peace of Westphalia, both of which attempted to put to rest the decades of religious wars that had been sparked by the Protestant revolution, this idea that secular rulers should control religious matters in their kingdoms was enshrined in European politics as the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* – “whose land, his religion.” As a result, now “Churches were entirely subordinate and dependent institutions . . . With the

⁷ Catherine Larson, “Her Majesty’s dignity: Secularization in the age of Reformation” (MA thesis, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, 2015), 15, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1049&context=master201019>.

exception of the Papal States in central Italy before 1870 and some small Catholic ecclesiastical principalities before the Napoleonic era, never since the Reformation era has a church exercised sovereignty over a state.”⁸ Europeans were now no longer guaranteed the freedom and the right to adhere to the consistently-held faith of generations upon generations of their ancestors, but rather were subject to the religious whims of their secular overlords. Thus, after nearly a millennium of the Catholic Church’s guidance and Christianity’s unification of western civilization, the Protestant revolt had successfully ensured the total triumph of secular over ecclesiastical power. Over time, religion would go from being subjected to secular interests in the public realm to being expected to exist solely in the private sphere. The numerous inter-Christian European wars that followed the Protestant revolt left Western man exhausted and simply created too much political and economic turmoil to be allowed to continue. It was slowly but steadily decided that one’s religion should largely remain a private, internal affair that only rarely spilled out into public life – and then only when it involved celebrations during which people could all get along. As Gregory pithily summarizes this transition, Western man “decided to go shopping instead of continuing to fight about religion.”⁹

The famously cliché ‘Protestant work ethic’ also played a major role in the increasing secularization of western civilization, as “Protestant ideas about work and wealth accumulation influenced European societies by changing values and orientations toward profit-seeking activities.”¹⁰ Just as Protestants had to eschew previous ideas about Christianity’s miraculous and supernatural history in order to delegitimize Catholic claims, the Protestant movement’s

⁸ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 154.

⁹ *ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ Sascha O. Becker, Steven Pfaff, and Jared Rubin, “Causes and Consequences of the Protestant Reformation,” Chapman University, Orange, CA (2016): 5, https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1177&context=esi_working_papers.

protagonists also had to downplay the importance of clerical and monastic vocations as valuable aspects of Christian and European life – and this not in small part due to the fact that many such Protestant leaders, including Martin Luther himself, had to justify the breaking of their own religious vows after abandoning their orders and parishes and starting families with women who had themselves transgressed their promises to God and become runaway nuns. Prior to the 16th century, clerical and monastic life had been a bedrock institution in western civilization and were in many respects the sources of much of the West’s cultural and educational advances after the fall of Rome. Now, leaving these mainstay religious vocations behind, Protestants increasingly glorified work and family life over against lives dedicated solely to God and the Church. Thus, “Over time, Protestant ideas secularized, informing the cultural materialism and economic rationalism at the heart of industrial capitalism.”¹¹ The physical and practical outcomes of this Protestant-induced shift toward secular endeavors can for example be seen in the fact that after the Protestant movement took hold in Europe, projects to construct buildings intended for secular use began for the first time in centuries to outpace the construction of religiously-affiliated structures. Hence, studies into the allocation of resources following the emergence of Protestantism have found “that the introduction of religious competition during the Protestant Reformation had an unintended consequence: the reallocation of economic resources from religious uses to secular ones.”¹²

Overall, the long-term effects of the Protestant revolution on western civilization have variously included a disruption of a once incredibly stable and deeply unifying institutional

¹¹ Sascha O. Becker, Steven Pfaff, and Jared Rubin, “Causes and Consequences of the Protestant Reformation,” 6.

¹² Davide Cantoni, Jeremiah Dittmar, and Noam Yuchtman, “Religious Competition and Reallocation: the Political Economy of Secularization in the Protestant Reformation,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 133, Issue 4 (November 2018): 2091, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjy011>.

worldview, the introduction of religious pluralism and theological relativism and their resulting issues into society, and a general shift away from a focus on ecclesiastical concerns in preference for an increasingly secularized society. Rather than secularization being caused by advances in science and philosophy, the very idea that science and philosophy contradict and should replace religion is itself a result of the doctrinal confusion produced by the Protestant experiment.

Consequently, the only hope, however lingering it may be, that the West – once simply called “Christendom” – has of desecularizing itself and returning to its former unified glory rests in the potential repentance and conversion of many souls and their subsequent reembrace of the ancient Catholic Faith.

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