



The Reformation

The Protestant Reformation kicked off a series of European conflicts that not only transformed the European continent but also extended across the entire world. The Protestant and Catholic (Counter) Reformations transformed communities and helped spread Christian faiths across global networks.

**0:06**

Animated pamphlet, the front page of which defines "Protestantism"; Martin Luther standing in front of a church; two swords clashing against one another

Let's look at the word Protestantism. You've likely heard it before and know it's a branch of Christianity. But do you notice the word "protest" in there? That's no coincidence. The Protestant Reformation started as a movement—a protest, if you will—to reform the Catholic Church. What resulted was an entirely new Christian church—and a religious conflict that engulfed a continent.

0:33

Animation depicting the entanglement between Church and State; satirical drawing depicting a long line of individuals awaiting judgement to enter Heaven, while to their left, a man holding an indulgence runs up the steps of the fast lane to Heaven

In the 16th century, the Catholic Church was deeply entwined in politics. The Popes ruled their own state and frequently leveraged their religious authority to pressure other European rulers and increase their own wealth. Catholic priests and bishops were the frequent beneficiaries of bribery and other unsavory practices. For instance they sold indulgences—pieces of paper to certify that a person's soul would spend less time in purgatory, a kind of middle zone between Heaven and Hell. Reformers saw these practices and the Pope's extravagant lifestyle as corrupt.

01:11

Animation describing the philosophy of humanism, featuring Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, as well as statues of ancient philosophers; image of the printing press

New ways of thinking also turned up the heat. The European Renaissance introduced the philosophy of humanism which championed intellectual and artistic pursuits, and the translation of ancient works, leading to critique of the Church and its translations of the Bible. And those critiques could now spread far and wide thanks to the printing press, including some strong opinions by an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther.

01:37

Examples of Martin Luther's theses, including the notion that indulgences are made-up and that salvation is earned by faith alone; the Book of Genesis translated into various languages

A professor in Germany, Luther was fed up with the Church's corruption. So in 1517 he published his "95 Theses." Luther's Theses objected to the sale of indulgences and the idea that people had to earn their way into heaven. He also believed that the Bible should be translated from Latin into all languages so that everyone can interpret it themselves. As his ideas spread, the powers that be of the Catholic Church excommunicated Luther in 1521. But Luther wasn't the first person to challenge Church authority—or the last.

02:11

Images of Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and Henry VIII

In Switzerland, Huldrych Zwingli had already been raising similar arguments to Luther's in his "67 articles." Later French lawyer John Calvin converted to the newly dubbed "Protestantism" with his own interpretations of church teachings. And in England, King Henry VIII took advantage of this tumultuous time to create his own church that both increased his power and allowed him to divorce his wife. Well, wives. Of course these men weren't the only influential reformers. There were also plenty of women behind the movement. Because Protestants believed that everyone should be able to interpret the Bible, they supported women's literacy. This movement led to

02:40



*Images of Marie Dentiere
and Olympia Fulvia Morata*

female thinkers like the French writer Marie Dentière, who advocated for women preachers. And Olympia Fulvia Morata, whose letters and translations of religious texts were influential in Italy.

03:08

*A letter reading, "Dear
Faculty, What gives YOU the
right? Best wishes, Argula"*

And then there's Bavarian scholar Argula von Grumbach. She stirred up controversy when she defended a young lecturer after he was expelled from his university and imprisoned for spreading Protestant ideas. Von Grumbach published an open letter and it became a best-selling pamphlet. Threatened by Protestant ideas and the very notion that a woman could exert power, Catholic superiors allegedly encouraged her husband to break her hands and cut off her fingers to keep her from writing.

03:37

*Animation depicting a sword
slashing through a text
bubble; animation of
pitchforks held up in revolt;
image of German nobility
fighting against peasants*

While some, like Luther and Morata, protested with words, many others took up arms. During the German Peasants War, from 1524 to 1525, the peasantry revolted against the nobility and the church's taxation. And hundreds of thousands of peasants were massacred. In France, a 36-year long war pitted Catholics and Protestants against each other at the cost of some 4 million lives.

04:05

*Posters describing the
changes launched by the
Catholic Church during the
Counter-Reformation*

Recognizing that they needed to regain the people's trust, the Catholic Church launched The Counter- Reformation. This movement sought to reform the Catholic Church from within. First, they set the record straight on doctrine and abuse of power. Then, to bring more people to the Church, they embraced the intellectual bent of Protestantism through religious orders like the Jesuits, who were essential in converting people to Catholicism. Many unwillingly across the Americas, Africa and Australasia.

04:40

*Animation of Ferdinand II
attempting to force
Catholicism on his lands;
image of a peace treaty
being signed; map of the
Americas*

Religious tensions erupted in 1618 when Ferdinand II, the future Holy Roman Emperor, tried to make his lands Catholic territory. The Protestants revolted and the 30 Years War, one of the deadliest conflicts in human history began.

The end of the 30 Years War is generally considered the end of the Reformation. This brutal religious conflict reshaped Europe's politics and social systems for centuries to come. But one of the biggest outcomes of the Protestant Reformation happened on another continent, with the colonization of North America.

05:14

*Animation of Protestant
settlers displacing Native
Americans; image of a
Protestant man preaching to
indigenous peoples;
collection of various religious
symbols including the Star of
David, Catholic cross,
Dharma Wheel, and Om*

Many English Protestants became colonial settlers as they sought religious freedom across the Atlantic Ocean. Gradual at first, waves of protestant settlers would eventually displace entire indigenous American communities and determine the religious character of what would become the United States.

Ironically, just because colonial settlers sought religious freedom doesn't mean they extended that right to others. And so the struggle for religious freedom, and freedom from religion, continues today.





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