

Key terms:

**Protestant Reformation**

The Protestant Reformation was a movement which began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a series of attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but ended in the establishment of several new Christian denominations—including Lutheranism, named for Martin Luther (see below).

**Renaissance**

French for “rebirth,” this term describes the intellectual and economic changes that occurred in Europe from the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the era known by this name, Europe emerged from the economic stagnation of the Middle Ages and experienced a time of financial growth. Perhaps more importantly, the Renaissance was an age in which artistic, social, scientific, and political thought turned in new directions (see “humanism” and “secularism”).

**Early modern**

This is another label for the period known as the Renaissance. This term is preferred by scholars who choose to focus on the ways in which the economic, political, and cultural developments of this period prefigure our own “modern” worldview.

**Secularism**

This is the term used to refer to a gradual shift away from the unity between the Catholic church and other aspects of early modern life. Thanks in part to the Protestant Reformation, we now live in a “secular” time—although religion is not absent from our lives, it is no longer presumed to be the primary lens through which we experience the world.

**Humanism**

Humanism emphasized the perfectability of the individual through reason and secular learning; humanist scholars learned Greek and Latin so that they could read classical sources in the original and attempt to recover the knowledge contained in them. The invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1450 facilitated the spread of such learning, which encouraged authors to criticize acts of theological speculation that were divorced from the realities of daily life and to attack the immorality of church leaders and structures.

**The Reformation and the history of Western art**

Unleashed in the early sixteenth century, the Reformation put an abrupt end to the relative unity that had existed for the previous thousand years in Western Christendom under the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation, which began in Germany but spread quickly throughout Europe, was initiated in response to the growing sense of corruption and administrative abuse in the church. It expressed an alternate vision of Christian practice, and

led to the creation and rise of Protestantism, with all its individual branches. Images, especially, became effective tools for disseminating negative portrayals of the church, and for popularizing Reformation ideas; art, in turn, was revolutionized by the movement.

Though rooted in a broad dissatisfaction with the church, the birth of the Reformation can be traced to the protests of one man, the German Augustinian monk Martin Luther (1483–1546). In 1517, he nailed to a church door in Wittenberg, Saxony, a manifesto listing 95 arguments, or Theses, against the use and abuse of indulgences, which were official pardons for sins granted after guilt had been forgiven through penance. Particularly objectionable to the reformers was the selling of indulgences, which essentially allowed sinners to buy their way into heaven, and which, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, had become common practice. But, more fundamentally, Luther questioned basic tenets of the Roman Church, including the clergy's exclusive right to grant salvation. He believed human salvation depended on individual faith, not on clerical mediation, and conceived of the Bible as the ultimate and sole source of Christian truth. He also advocated the abolition of monasteries and criticized the church's materialistic use of art. Luther was excommunicated in 1520, but was granted protection by the elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, and given safe conduct to the Imperial Diet in Worms and then asylum in Wartburg.

The movement Luther initiated spread and grew in popularity—especially in Northern Europe, though reaction to the protests against the church varied from country to country. In 1529, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V tried, for the most part unsuccessfully, to stamp out dissension among German Catholics. Elector John the Steadfast (1468–1532), Frederick's brother and successor, was actively hostile to the emperor and one of the fiercest defenders of Protestantism. By the middle of the century, most of north and west Germany had become Protestant. King Henry VIII of England, who had been a steadfast Catholic, broke with the church over the pope's refusal to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, the first of Henry's six wives. With the Act of Supremacy in 1534, Henry was made head of the Church of England, a title that would be shared by all future kings. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) codified the doctrines of the new faith, becoming the basis for Presbyterianism. In the moderate camp, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1466–1536), though an opponent of the Reformation, remained committed to the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants—an ideal that would be at least partially realized in 1555 with the Religious Peace of Augsburg, a ruling by the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire granting freedom of worship to Protestants.

With recognition of the reformers' criticism and acceptance of their ideology, Protestants were able to put their beliefs on display in art. Artists sympathetic to the movement developed a new repertoire of subjects, or adapted traditional ones, to reflect and emphasize Protestant ideals and teaching. More broadly, the balance of power gradually shifted from religious to secular authorities in western Europe, initiating a decline of Christian imagery in the Protestant Church. Meanwhile, the Roman Church mounted the Counter-Reformation, through which it denounced Lutheranism and reaffirmed Catholic doctrine. In Italy and Spain, the Counter-Reformation had an immense impact on the visual arts; while in the North, the sound made by the nails driven through Luther's manifesto continued to reverberate.

([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/refo/hd\\_refo.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/refo/hd_refo.htm))

## Reformation timeline

### *Laying the groundwork*

#### **John Wycliffe / 1320-84**

The first English language Bibles were produced in 1380s by John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor, scholar, and theologian. Wycliffe was well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible. With the help of his followers, called the Lollards, Wycliffe produced dozens of English language manuscript copies of the scriptures. They were translated out of the Latin Vulgate, which was the only source text available to Wycliffe. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river.

#### **John Hus / 1369-1415**

John Hus (a.k.a. Jan Huss) was a religious thinker and reformer born in Southern Bohemia in 1369. He initiated a reform movement based on the ideas of John Wycliffe. His followers became known as Hussites. The Catholic Church did not condone such uprisings, and Hus was excommunicated in 1411 and burned at the stake in Constance on July 6, 1415.

#### **Ignatius Loyola / 1491?-1556**

The Roman-Catholic knight, Ignatius of Loyola (1491?-1556), founded the Order of the Jesuits in 1534 as a reform movement within the Roman Catholic church and to counter the influence of the Reformation on the spiritual side.

### *Major figures*

#### **Martin Luther / 1483-1546**

Martin Luther was a Christian theologian and Augustinian monk whose teachings inspired the Lutheran and Protestant Reformations and deeply influenced subsequent Christian theology.

On October 31, 1517 Luther preached a sermon against indulgences and, according to traditional accounts, posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Church of All Saints in Wittenberg (the University's customary notice board) as an open invitation to debate them. The Theses condemn the Church's greed and worldliness (especially the selling of indulgences) as an abuse and ask for a theological disputation. Soon they were widely copied and printed; within two weeks they spread throughout Germany, and within two months throughout Europe.

#### **Ulrich Zwingli / 1484-1531**

Ulrich Zwingli was a leader of the Swiss Reformation. While Germany struggled under the political and religious consequences of Luther's reform movement, the movement itself quickly spilled out of the German borders into neighboring Switzerland.

Zwingli brought to Luther's revolution an education steeped in northern humanism, particularly that of Erasmus. He was monumentally popular in Zurich for his opposition to Swiss mercenary service in foreign wars and his attacks on indulgences; he was, in fact, as significant a player in the critique of indulgences as Luther himself.

### **Henry VIII / 1495-1547**

Henry VIII was King of England and Lord of Ireland from 22 April 1509 until his death. He is famous for having been married six times and for wielding the most untrammled power of any British monarch. The Church of England was constituted when king Henry VIII was not granted an annulment of marriage from Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn. To obtain his divorce, Henry broke from Rome and was recognized as head of the church in England in 1531.

### **John Calvin / 1509-1564**

Calvin, a French-born reformer, initiated a similar campaign to Zwingli's in the city of Geneva. In 1536, Calvin felt compelled to write, with all respect to his monarch, a reply to Francis' suspicions about the "protestants": *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was Calvin's hope that Francis I, through this long essay, would come to understand that the protestants posed no threat to his rule—but only sought to revitalize the original Christian ideal on which the whole Christian realm ought to be properly based.

### *Aftermath*

### **The Council of Trent / 1545-1563**

The Council of Trent was held from December 13, 1545, to December 4, 1563 in the Italian city of Trent. Although called an Ecumenical Council, only Roman Catholics attended. Indeed it was called as a reposte to the growth of Protestantism. It is considered one of the most important councils in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, establishing church doctrine in response to the Reformation and condemning Protestantism. It clearly specified Catholic doctrines on salvation, the sacraments and the biblical canon, and standardized the mass throughout the church, largely abolishing local variations.

### **The Thirty Year War / 1618-1648**

The Thirty Year War, a series of bloody skirmishes between Roman Catholic and evangelical or Lutheran countries, led to great suffering and the decimation of the population in central Europe. Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden eventually came to the rescue of the beleaguered evangelicals and is often seen as the national hero of Protestantism.