Chapter 23

The Transformation of Europe

THE CHAPTER IN PERSPECTIVE

Profound changes began to overtake Europe beginning in the sixteenth century. Christianity, which had served as the main unifying element in Europe after the collapse of the Roman empire, was permanently fragmented by the Protestant Reformation. The age also witnessed the rise of strong centralized states. Capitalism ensured that the competition between these new states would be fought on the economic as well as the political and religious fronts. The scientific revolution and Enlightenment signaled a startling intellectual transformation. The three centuries following 1500 were highly disruptive, but they also worked to strengthen Europe as well.

OVERVIEW

The Fragmentation of Western Christendom

The religious unity of western Europe was challenged when Martin Luther, a German monk who was appalled by the hypocrisy and immorality of the Roman Catholic church, attacked the practice of selling indulgences. Beginning in 1517 his Ninety-Five Theses, aided immeasurably by the printing press, spread throughout Europe. While Luther proposed specific reforms, such as closing the monasteries and translating the Bible, his most radical stance was his refusal to recognize papal authority. To Luther the only true source of Christian religious authority resided in the Bible. Others outside Germany would take approaches that were at times very different from Luther’s. The English Reformation was much more political than religious in nature because of the political mind-set and needs of Henry VIII. In Geneva the French lawyer John Calvin would carry his reforms even further than Luther had. Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion summarized and organized early Protestant thought.

It would be a mistake to view the Catholic efforts at reform as merely a reaction to Luther and Calvin. However, the Catholic Reformation was slow and halting before picking up steam during the middle years of the sixteenth century. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) both redressed specific abuses and reaffirmed traditional Catholic theology. When St. Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus in 1540, the Catholic Reformation was supplied with very active missionaries. The Jesuits stressed education and carried their missionary zeal to India, China, Japan, the Philippines, and the Americas. The growing tension between Catholics and Protestants displayed itself in the witch-hunts, which were strongest in the areas where the religious confrontation was greatest. Over sixty thousand suspected witches, mainly women, lost their lives. The Religious Wars, which reached their peak in 1588 with the failure of the Spanish Armada to conquer England, were another symptom of this struggle. In the end neither side was wholly victorious, and compromises of varying religious, political, or geographical natures were forged.

The Consolidation of Sovereign States

The religious competition that was at the heart of the Reformation also played a role in the political centralization of increasingly powerful European states. One state that did not share in this political centralization was the Holy Roman Empire. Despite the able efforts of Charles V, the Holy Roman Empire could never overcome its internal fragmentation and its powerful external enemies to become the leading European state that its name implied. Monarchs such as Henry VIII of England, Louis XI and Francis I of France, and Fernando and Isabel of Spain made use of innovations in finance and strong standing armies to become much more powerful than their medieval predecessors. Not surprisingly, these states often tested each other militarily. Sometimes, as with the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), the results
were devastating. However, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 introduced the notion that the different states were sovereign and equal, with the right to run their own domestic affairs. This treaty hardly ended warfare. The Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) was in many ways the first global war. Nevertheless, the European notion of the balance of power ensured that no nation grew powerful enough to dominate its neighbors. Finally, this period of military confrontation between sovereign nations actually provided a greater incentive for technological innovation than in imperial China, India, or the Islamic lands.

These more powerful states developed on two distinct political paths. France, after the chaos of the civil-religious wars of the last half of the sixteenth century, recovered along absolutist lines in the seventeenth century. Louis XIV ruled from his magnificent palace at Versailles with no political, legal, social, or religious obstacles to his authority. Most European leaders, with varying degrees of success, attempted to copy Louis’s absolutism. England and the Netherlands followed a very different approach. The constitutionalism of these states featured governments that had limited powers and that recognized the rights of the individual and representative bodies. While less popular among rulers of the time period than absolutism, constitutionalism would have the greater long-term influence.

**Early Capitalist Society**

The development of capitalism, fueled by an expanding population and economy, also transformed European society during these formative centuries. Better nutrition and a decline in deaths caused by epidemic diseases led to a population explosion. In the three hundred years after 1500 the population of Europe increased from 81 million to over 180 million. Capitalism, an economic system tied to the flexibility of the free market, emerged during these centuries. Although the desire to acquire wealth was hardly a new phenomenon, the merchants of early modern Europe made use of innovations in transportation and communication to alter their society to a much greater extent than ever before. The development of banks and joint-stock companies facilitated the growth of businesses and trade. Merchants avoided the control and eventually reduced the power of the guilds by implementing the putting-out system. This advancement in turn brought changes to the countryside, many of which were devastating. Nevertheless, this burgeoning capitalism found its greatest proponent in Adam Smith.

**Science and Enlightenment**

The intellectual world of early modern Europe did not escape this period of upheaval. Even the old Ptolemaic universe with its spheres and epicycles came under attack beginning with Copernicus’s publication of his *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543. The true magnitude of Copernicus’s work is that it was more than simply an interesting hypothesis; rather, it was the beginning of the destruction of an old worldview and the origins of a new one. If Copernicus was correct, then human beings were not at the center of the universe. Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei built on the momentum started by Copernicus. The publication of Isaac Newton’s *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* in 1686 synthesized all the earlier discoveries into a universal system built on the theory of gravity. Enlightenment thinkers carried on the search for reason and logic that was such a part of the scientific revolution. Thinkers such as Locke, Montesquieu, Smith, and Voltaire looked for reason in human behavior and institutions. These philosophes carried their own ideas and those of the scientific revolution to a much larger audience. The desire for reason even carried over into the religious realm with the Enlightenment emphasis on deism. Incredible human potential ensured that the theory of progress remained one of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment.