

2a.1

Luther and the German Reformation, c1515–55

SOURCE

4

The preface to Erasmus' translation of the New Testament, published in 1516.

I wish that all women might read the gospel, and the Epistles of Paul. I wish that they might be translated into the tongues of all people, so that not only the Scots and the Irish, but also the Turk and the Saracen might read and understand. I wish the countryman might sing them at his plough, the weaver chant them at his loom, the traveller beguile with them the weariness of his journey. Only a very few can be learned, but all can be Christian, all can be devout, and - I shall boldly add - all can be theologians.

Why was anti-clericalism so prominent in the empire?

Theory 1: Because of the level of clerical abuses

Given their importance in meeting people's religious needs, whether in this life or the afterlife, one might have expected high standards of professionalism among the clergy. However, such standards were often missing. As the historian Ann Laurence states, 'Enthusiastic lay piety was not matched by a comparable movement of spiritual renewal among the clergy.'

SOURCE

5

Written in 1509 and dedicated to his friend, Thomas More, Erasmus' most famous satire, *In Praise of Folly*, made fun of serious issues. It was an instant best-seller, and by 1536, it had run to 42 editions. Narrated by 'Folly', the book ended with a fierce attack on standards in the Church. In the text below from Chapter 54, monks were the subject.

The whole tribe is so universally loathed that even a chance meeting is thought to be ill-omened - and yet they are gloriously self-satisfied. In the first place they believe it's the highest form of piety to be so uneducated that they can't even read. Then they bray like donkeys in Church repeating by rote the psalms they haven't even understood, they imagine they are charming the ears of the heavenly audience with infinite delight. Many of them too make a good living out of their squalor and beggary, bellowing for bread from door to door, and indeed making a nuisance of themselves in every inn, carriage or boat, to the great loss of other beggars. This is the way these smooth individuals, in all their filth and ignorance, their boorish and shameless behaviour, claim to bring back the apostles into our midst!

There is a view that anti-clericalism existed because the Church was riddled from top to bottom with a number of abuses. Positions in the Church were sold to the highest bidder rather than awarded to the best candidate (a practice called simony), and it was possible to hold more than one position at a time (a practice known as pluralism). The result was often unqualified bishops, who saw the Church solely as a means to make money so that they could live like princes. Pluralists were often non-resident, and their indifference to their responsibilities could be shocking. At all levels, it was possible to criticise the clergy for scandalous living and immorality, including gambling, drunkenness and womanising. Absenteeism was rife, and ignorance of Latin, let alone doctrine, was commonplace. One could find evidence for all of this.

Furthermore, such criticism was not new. For several generations before Luther, there had been prophecies that a 'holy man' would appear to reform the Church and rid it of abuses, in preparation for the Last Judgement. It is a measure of how gripped Germany was by such thoughts that even old works criticising the clergy and advocating reform were popular best-sellers.

SOURCE

6

The *Reformatio Sigismundi* was written anonymously c1438. Using the printing press (invented in about 1440), Augsburg publishers issued eight editions between 1476 and 1522. Written in German, it was probably the most widely circulated reform paper of its time. It prophesied that one day, a simple priest would come to 'bring the Christian Church into the best possible order'.

The hour will come for all faithful Christians to witness the establishment of the rightful order. Let everyone join the ranks of the pious who will pledge themselves to observe it. It is plain that the Holy Father, the pope, and all our princes have abandoned the task set them by God. It may be that God has appointed a man to set things right. Let no one, neither princes nor cities, make excuses for not heeding God's warnings...

Take a good look at how bishops act nowadays. They make war and cause unrest in the world; they behave like secular lords, which is, of course, what they are. And the money for this comes from pious donations that ought to go to honest parish work, and not to be spent on war. I agree with a remark made by Duke Frederick of Austria to the Emperor Sigismund in Basel: 'Bishops are blind; it is up to us to open their eyes...'

It seems to me that great evils have arisen in the western part of Christendom since Pope Calixtus imposed the rule of celibacy. It may be a good thing for a man to keep himself pure, but observe the wickedness now going on in the Church! Many priests have lost their livings because of women. Or they are secret sodomites. All the hatred existing between priests and laymen is due to this. In sum: secular priests should be allowed to marry. In marriage they will live more piously and honourably, and the friction between them and the laity will disappear.

AS Level Exam-Style Question Section A

Read Source 6. Why is the *Reformatio Sigismundi* valuable to the historian for an enquiry into dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church in early 16th century Germany?

Explain your answer using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context. (8 marks)

Tip

Consider first what you can learn of value from the content. What sort of complaints are being expressed? Then consider the dates this was written and then repeatedly reprinted. Why do these make this such a valuable source?

However, abuses alone do not explain the level of anti-clericalism in Germany for several reasons.

- The level of abuses was often exaggerated in anti-clerical literature: scandal meant better sales.

- The situation was not uniformly bad. About half the priests in southern Germany had a degree, which was an exceptionally high proportion, given the rarity of university places. Furthermore, some monastic orders had already reformed themselves (including Luther's order, the Augustinians). Some bishops were conscientious: the Bishop of Basle in Switzerland warned his clergy 'not to curl their hair with curling tongs, nor to carry on trade in the churches, or to raise a disturbance there, nor to keep drinking booths or engage in horse trading, and not to buy stolen property'.
- Some 'abuses' were actually valued and in high demand: convents were used to 'dump' the excess daughters of the well-to-do, for example, which would explain any lack of vocation among nuns, while there was an open market in buying church positions.
- Most ordinary people did not mind if their priest lived with a woman, or could not understand Latin, or sometimes got drunk. The one abuse that they really resented was non-residency: they just wanted their priest to be there in order to provide them with the sacraments and sacramentals.
- Many of the fiercest critics were clergy themselves, and they had been openly criticising abuses for a long time without causing a crisis. They did not contemplate splitting the Church over the issue. Rather, like Erasmus, they hoped to promote reform from within the Church.

The chief cause of anti-clericalism was therefore not the level of abuses. However, attacking abuses had created a climate where it was acceptable to criticise and laugh at the Church.

Furthermore, Luther unquestionably benefited from the fact that a 'holy man' was expected. Many felt God's displeasure with man's sinfulness was reaching a climax – the warnings were clear. A terrible new disease, the pox or syphilis, had appeared in the 1490s. Other ill omens were eagerly lapped up by the public: broadsheets circulated showing comets and 'monstrous births' (babies or animals born with significant abnormalities). Adding to the mood of anticipation was the fact that 1500 was a half millennium. This passed disappointingly peacefully, but a Great Conjunction of the Stars was predicted to coincide in 1524 with a conjunction of all the planets in Pisces. This happens only once every 750 years and was interpreted as heralding the Second Coming of Christ, and the end of the world. So Luther succeeded in part because of a coincidence: reform (of some abuses, but not doctrine) was wanted, and he was 'expected'.

DA=

Theory 2: Because of the power of the Church and the privileges of the clergy

Almost everyone in Germany accepted the Church's teachings, and most could put up with the failings of their local parish priest and probably did not know about the excesses of their bishop. However, there was widespread resentment at the extent to which the Church interfered in everyday life and the way in which the Church abused its power and its privileges.

It would be hard to underestimate the Church's power in the empire in 1500. It was the largest landowner, controlling about one-sixth of German land. Three of the seven electors were members of the Church, while more than half of the second college in the diet were ecclesiastical princes. These prince bishops acted as secular rulers. The Church also had huge legal power: it processed everyone's wills for example, while members of the clergy had the privilege of only being tried in Church courts, where they invariably got off lightly. Clerical privileges were a source of real resentment: they were exempt from paying taxes and contributing to defence funds.

SOURCE



'Grievances and Demands' of Cologne's burghers, 1513. In 1513, the craft guilds and leading merchants of Cologne rose in revolt against their city council. It was a brave thing to do, since a previous revolt, in 1482, had ended with the ringleaders being tortured and executed. The guild leaders and merchants put together a list of 154 complaints, including corruption and financial mismanagement by the council, abuses of weights and the lack of regulation in trade. Many of their grievances were directed against the clergy, including the following.

Clerical persons should from now on bear the same civic burdens as burghers.

Let the clergy pay taxes on the wine they tap for themselves.

Let the clergy be asked to make a substantial loan to the city.

Every cleric, secular or regular, young or old, who has committed a felony against the Council is to be taken to the Dean of the Cathedral Chapter, who should punish the cleric as though he were a lay person.

Every pastor should be paid a fixed salary. In return for this the pastor shall perform his offices without making a charge.

No monk shall henceforth become a parish priest. [Monks should] stay in their monasteries [so that] the sacraments are not bartered to the faithful for money.

KEY TERM

Indulgence

A certificate, sold with the approval of the Church, offering a specified reduction in the time (which might be millions of years) that a soul spent in purgatory. The indulgence effectively forgave the sins of the purchaser. From 1476, indulgences could even be bought for a dead friend or relative whose soul was already in purgatory.

Most deeply resented were the financial demands made by the Church. Everyone resented the price put on the means to salvation: one had to pay for baptisms, marriages and burials, pay for confession, pay to see relics, pay to go on pilgrimages, pay for **indulgences**. The historian Alister McGrath explains that 'The clergy came to be seen as exploiting the new interest in religion without contributing to it.'

The Church made poor people even poorer. One-tenth of every person's income or produce had to go to the Church (the 'tithe'). The Church's lands were controlled by bishops, who behaved as secular rulers, and tenants on these lands resented the speedy way rents were put up by their uncaring, absentee ecclesiastical landlords, especially in a time of inflation.

Meanwhile, employers were angered by the economic power of the Church, and the increasingly large number (over 100 by 1500) of holy days and feast days during which work was forbidden. The Church even determined what one could eat: on three days a week, and on the eve of every holy day, and during the 40 days of Lent, no meat could be eaten, which made life difficult for those who lived far from rivers or the sea, and almost ruinous for butchers. Even a trivial matter could cause resentment: no butter could be eaten during Lent, for example – a rule that might have been easy to adhere to in Rome, but was almost impossible in Germany, where butter was the fat used to cook with, and olive oil had to be imported at huge cost. Of course, it was possible to buy a dispensation to eat butter – yet another irritating example of Church exploitation. Perhaps because of the vacuum of central authority in the empire, there was a feeling that the Church had more power in Germany than anywhere else in Europe, and that Rome was exploiting Germany. Anyone who challenged this exploitation would have a favourable reception.