

The Renaissance and the Reformation

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(1) The period from the birth of poet Petrarch in 1304 to the death of the painter Titian in 1576 is known as the **Renaissance**. The other great movement of that period, the **Reformation** (a religious movement in Europe aimed at fighting the abuses within the Catholic Church) began in 1517 and lasted until 1688.

(2) During these years, kings and princes attempted to seize land and cities from one another, the emerging middle classes attempted to break free of their control, while the popes in Rome placed themselves in the middle of these disputes to protect the wealth and power of the Catholic Church.

(3) The first invention to revolutionize Western civilization during this period was: **printing**. In 1450, a German goldsmith named Johann Gutenberg invented a new way of reproducing words with reusable movable type that would be one of the major turning-points in European intellectual history. During the Middle Ages, professional copyists called scribes had been employed to hand-copy all written materials. Gutenberg's new process allowed for mass production, and made the cost of producing a single page about 400 times cheaper than copying by hand. In the realm of religion, the ability to mass produce Bibles and sermons inexpensively enabled common people for the first time to read this material for themselves, and by doing so helped carry forward the opposition to the Church (known as the Reformation) sparked by Martin Luther two generations after Gutenberg's death in 1468. It also immensely enlarged the number of readers to whom a writer might address his political opinions, thus assisting the development of European democracy in coming generations. Gutenberg's invention would be a major factor in ushering in the modern world, and its

effects were already being felt in Michelangelo's day.

(4) In 1492, **Columbus** made the first of his historic voyages that was destined to radically alter European man's view of the world. The discovery of previously unknown continents was perhaps the greatest single event in modern history. It set in motion voyages of exploration and conquest that brought the almost limitless resources of the New World flowing back to Europe, and shifted the center of power of that continent from the Mediterranean to the nations bordering the Atlantic.

(5) The voyages of Columbus (and Magellan) not only launched one of the great commercial revolutions in history, they changed the way Europeans looked at the planet itself. One can only imagine the intellectual confusion in Europe when it was first learned that huge land masses had always existed on the other side of the earth, and no one in Europe, Asia, or Africa had a clue about their location, or what type of people, plants, and animals could be found there.

(6) Adding to the intellectual confusion in Europe around 1500 was a growing dissatisfaction with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. About the time Ferdinand Magellan was preparing for his voyage around the world (1519-21), a German monk named **Martin Luther** was beginning a war of words with the Roman Church that was destined to shake Christianity to its foundations.

(7) Beginning in 1517, Luther's public protests against corruption and worldliness among the leadership of the Church split Europe into two warring camps. This conflict made Luther, a devout priest, the man most responsible for the Reformation (a period of religious and political upheaval in the 16th century in which

new churches were formed separate from the control of Rome). Such power as the Roman Church had held for many centuries over the personal lives and purses of millions of Europe's Christians was not going to be given up without a terrible fight - and that struggle took the form of religious violence by Catholics and Protestants for generations after Luther's death. The fuse was lit on October 31st, 1517 when Luther nailed a list of his religious grievances to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. With that hammer, Luther permanently shattered, whether he intended to or not, the solidarity of Christianity itself.

(8) For a 1000 years the Church had taught that the Earth was the center of the universe. In 1514 the pope's secretary asked a Polish priest named **Copernicus** to observe the stars and planets to help reform the calendar. After many years of study, Copernicus decided that the problems with the calendar were a result of placing the Earth in the center and having the planets and stars revolve around it. In 1543, he published *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*, and suggested the sun be placed in the center of the solar system instead. It was only much later, when the Church was fighting against the ideas of the Reformation that Copernicus' ideas were banned by the religious authorities.

(8) During this period, a seemingly endless stream of historic events and discoveries **called into question the core religious and political beliefs** that had held European society together for over a thousand years. The Renaissance, the Reformation, and the discovery of the New World marked the end of the Middle Ages. All that was needed to bring about the economic and political birth of the modern world would be the Industrial Revolution (1750) and the French Revolution (1789).