7 The Reformation – opposition, persecution and war

The Reformation had adverse consequences for many in the 16th and 17th centuries. These included civil war or war with neighbouring states, civil disorder and famine, persecution for religious faith and displacement of many refugees, features mirrored in many conflicts today.

Scene from the Thirty Years' War, by Pieter Meulener. Commons.wikimedia.org

War

Where the Protestant reformers gained civic power and started to change the civic organisation, this presented a major challenge to rulers and the church who often had an uneasy co-existence. This flared into war in the Germanic princedoms, rulers not being above using religious excuses for bellicose actions. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, there were rebellions by Protestants against Catholic rulers or actions by Catholics against Protestants. Even England had rebellions against the move away from the Catholic church order, and there was a large religious element to the English Civil War although it was nominally between King and Parliament. The Thirty Years' War brought misery to much of central Europe between 1618 and 1648.

Famine and civil disorder

Many faced want as rampaging armies moved across the countryside, living on what they could scavenge or seize from the populace. This led to widespread famine, as commerce was also disrupted and food supplies became scarce. People lost their lives as a direct result of military action, of looting and scavenging by bands from the opposing armies. Those who survived often lost their homes and livelihoods and had to flee empty-handed from the combatants. It is estimated that some states in Germany lost almost three quarters of their population over the course of the Thirty Years' War.

Martyrs' Memorial, Lewes Town Hall, Lewes, East Sussex. Photo T. Gray

different religious beliefs from that of the state into traitors who were then persecuted by the state. This situation pertained to countries on all sides of the religious questions of the Reformation although some were more inclined to persecute those of differing faith than others. In 1555, the English Parliament revived the old medieval heresy laws at Mary's instigation and Protestants who refused to accept the Catholic faith were sentenced to death. Over the next four years 280 men and women were burnt at the stake and 30 more died in prison. Graphically described in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, this persecution revealed that there were many who believed the Protestant faith. Although the South East was the principal area of martyrdoms, only three individuals from Surrey lost their lives, though many more were martyred in Sussex.

Martyrs' Memorial, Heathfield, East Sussex. Photo T. Gray

Displacement of refugees

Faced with a ruler or civil power that would compel belief against their principles, many fled to other states which reflected their religious persuasion. In central Europe there was mass movement of peoples across state boundaries to avoid persecution. English Protestants fled Mary's persecution for the continent and returned under Elizabeth.

The emigration of the Huguenots, by Jan Antoon Neuhuys. Commons.wikimedia.org

Although French Protestants, the Huguenots, had originally been granted freedom of worship in the Edict of Nantes in 1598, when this was revoked in 1685 and persecution started again, an estimated 200,000 fled France to countries such as England, South Africa and the Americas. Many Puritans found the English religious settlement unacceptable and sailed for America as the 'Pilgrim Fathers'.

Persecution

At the time of the Reformation, there was a convergence of church and state in that the rulers of countries were held to have the right to determine the religion of their subjects. An institutional example of this was the Peace of Augsburg (1555) which dealt with the differing religious affiliations of the numerous (mainly German) principalities in the Holy Roman Empire. Those who dissented from the prevailing religious settlement had to move to one which accorded with their beliefs. Far from religious tolerance this alignment of church and state turned those who held

St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, by Francois Dubois. Commons.wikimedia.org