CHAPTER I

The European World about 1500

Human Geography

AT THE ancient city of Basel the river Rhine, flowing westward from Lake Constance, turns northward to begin its course through Germany to the North Sea. It was here that one of the two great church councils of the fifteenth century had been held. Here one of the famous universities of Europe was located; here John Froben, one of the great printers of the sixteenth century, had his shop; and here Erasmus, the prince of Humanists, spent his later years. Basel was a center of trade and of industry as well as of scholarship and religion. It experienced something of all the major movements of the century: the development of capitalism, Humanism, and Protestant reform.

There is a sense in which this small, busy city could be called the center of sixteenth-century Europe. If one should take a map of the continent, place the point of a compass on Basel, and describe a circle with a radius of five hundred miles, this circle would include the civilized heart of Europe in the Age of the Reformation. Within it were most of France and Germany, the southeastern corner of England and the northeastern corner of Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and northern Italy. Outside it were most of
the British Isles, all of Scandinavia, Poland, Russia, Hungary and the Balkans, southern Italy, and most of the Iberian peninsula. Generally speaking, both density of population and accumulation of wealth were greater within this imaginary circle than outside it.

The largest concentrations of population and accumulations of wealth—buildings and industries, ships, agricultural surpluses, and goods of all kinds—were in northern Italy, eastern France, the Rhine valley, and the Netherlands. There were probably over ten times as many inhabitants per square mile in these regions as there were in Russia, Scandinavia, or Scotland. England, Spain, eastern Germany, and the Balkans would fall somewhere in between. In the latter part of the century, England's four million inhabitants were only half Spain's eight million, and these in turn were but half France's sixteen (the figures are, of course, very rough). The German-speaking states contained perhaps fifteen to twenty million, Italy perhaps twelve. The contrast of population concentration within and without the circle is most evident in the fact that the vast area of Poland and Lithuania probably had very few more inhabitants than the Netherlands (three million or less).

Beyond the circle to the east the shores of the Mediterranean were still relatively thickly settled, as they had been since Roman times. Constantinople was one of the largest cities in Europe. There was still a "Mediterranean World," bound together by the trackless highway formed by the inland sea. But this sea was dominated until late in the century by an Asiatic and non-Christian people, the Ottoman Turks, and so there was a spiritual as well as a material reason for saying that the circle round Basel included the core of Christian Europe. It is not far wrong to say that the
Ottoman Empire, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and even England and Spain, were peripheral or "frontier" regions, relatively far removed in either a material or spiritual way from the center of Christendom. At any rate, cultivated persons living within the five-hundred-mile circle about Basel were aware that at any point beyond its circumference one might run into border regions (as in Wales or Scotland), trackless uncivilized areas (as in northeastern Europe), or actual frontiers of Christendom (like the boundaries between Christians and Moslems in Hungary). It is no coincidence that this book is concerned almost exclusively with events which took place within this circle—with the significant exceptions of Spain and England, peripheral lands which played leading roles in sixteenth-century Europe.

In terms of human geography, Europe was much larger than it is today. If Erasmus in Basel were writing to a friend in Madrid, he would have to count upon his letter taking anywhere from one to three months to reach its destination. Official dispatches from London to Paris might get through in two days with exceptional luck, but they would usually take a week and might take over a month. Crossing the Mediterranean from north to south was generally a matter of one or two weeks; from west to east, a matter of one or two months. The fastest travel was by sea. On the Mediterranean oar-propelled galleys with favorable winds made record times of 125 miles per day. The heavier galleons, built for the Atlantic and relying exclusively on sails, would not do so well. On land the fastest postal organizations would sometimes cover eighty-five miles a day. News of the battle of Lepanto in 1571 took eleven days to get from the Gulf of Corinth to Venice, and another thirteen days to reach Paris and Madrid. A year later news of the
Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve took fourteen days to get from Paris to Madrid. As Fernand Braudel puts it, the European world still had Roman dimensions. In terms of ease and speed of communications, Europe in the sixteenth century was larger than the whole world today.

In a study of the economic, social, and political organization of sixteenth-century Europe, this matter of scale must constantly be borne in mind. A city like Basel could not exist without the plodding mule trains and clumsy river boats which linked it with other cities, with the countryside, and with the sea. Venice had long been dependent upon her Mediterranean sea routes; Bristol, Lisbon, and Cadiz soon became dependent upon their ties to America and Asia. But the struggle against time and distance was never easy. Mule trains could be robbed or diverted hundreds of miles by war. Fleets could be delayed for months or destroyed altogether by storms. Whether it was a Venetian merchant awaiting the Flanders fleet, or the king of Spain anxiously expecting word from his governor in the Netherlands, or Calvin hoping for good news from Scotland, merchandise and news traveled with baffling slowness. Life was still more local and provincial than it is easy to imagine in the twentieth century. There were strict limits imposed by the technology of communications upon how large a business could be developed, how extensive an empire could be held together, or how strictly a movement like the Protestant Reformation could be controlled by any single leader.

**Social Classes**

Europe was still overwhelmingly rural. Nine out of ten persons made their living directly from the soil, from agriculture or some closely related pursuit. The tenth might
be an artisan, a merchant, a lawyer, or a royal official, who lived in a city or town and bought his food and clothing with money which represented the profit from his business or the salary of his profession. Most of the urban centers were small by modern standards. Wittenberg, where Luther began his career as reformer, was a little town of about 2,000, typical of the vast majority of European towns. Geneva, a large city for its day, had 16,000 inhabitants when Calvin arrived there in 1536. Probably only a half-dozen cities in Europe exceeded 100,000 in population, among them Venice, Florence, Paris, and London, which grew from 75,000 inhabitants in 1500 to 200,000 by 1600.

In spite of their small number, however, the town-dwellers or bourgeoisie were the dynamic element in European society. The three traditional classes of mediaeval society—nobility, clergy, and peasantry—were still the only classes recognized in much of law and literature. But the class-in-between, the “middle class” as it came to be called years later, was the class which was actually building the foundations of a new Europe.

It is impossible to describe these “classes” briefly and simply and still with accuracy. Each had a characteristic general function in society, but there were great differences of rank within each and the lines of separation were not always clear. Further, as the century progressed, there was increasing social mobility—probably more than there had been since Roman times, though small by modern American standards. Men could and did move up or down the social ladder in increasing numbers.

The nobles had lost much of their military power throughout Europe, but their social prestige was almost untouched and their political influence was still far beyond that of the
rising middle class. There was enormous difference, however, between a great duke with lands and power a king might envy, and an impoverished baron caught in the squeeze between rising prices and a small fixed income. In some countries, as in England and Castile, the nobility shaded off at its base into a rural middle class of gentry, whose titles were not hereditary but who were definitely something more than yeomen or free farmers.

The clergy were a class in the sense that they possessed recognized privileges and immunities as a result of their ordination. Unlike the nobility, they were part of a European-wide organization, subject in theory at least to a centralized discipline. But as in the case of the nobles there was a vast difference between a wealthy bishop or abbot and a humble parish priest or mendicant friar. And at the base of the hierarchy it was sometimes difficult in practice to draw the line between those in minor orders and laymen, since almost anyone who could read Latin (like university students) was presumed to be of the clergy no matter how secular his manner of living might be.

The peasants were no more uniform than the nobles and clergy, unless it was in the common obligation to long, hard manual labor. There were complex differences in legal and economic status between different sorts of peasants—free, unfree, and semifree—in different parts of Europe. Generally speaking, they were somewhat more free and better off in western than in eastern Europe. But everywhere their lot was hard.

Between long hours of labor, and nights spent on straw with a good round log for a pillow; under the shadow of death and, worse still, of sickness unrelieved by anything but the crudest medical science; in great discomfort and many fears; in the midst
of beauty untouched by any ugliness save that of dirt, disease, or death, the common people passed their lives.¹

Of all the classes, the most difficult to describe is the middle class. Some scholars would narrow it by definition to include only the bourgeoisie or townsman and to exclude the country gentry. A wealthy banker with interests in a dozen different cities, a Roman lawyer serving as crown official, a manager of a silver mine, a ship captain, a master of a mediaeval craft gild, a journeyman worker—each of these was, strictly speaking, a bourgeois. But there might be very little in common between them, except that they were neither nobles, nor clergy, nor peasants. At the top of the bourgeoisie wealthy merchants were continually acquiring land, buying titles, and becoming nobles. At the bottom journeymen and apprentices constituted a small but growing industrial proletariat in some towns. In between there were “the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,” the small bourgeoisie, members of long-established craft gilds. Obviously it is confusing to include all such persons under any single label like “bourgeoisie,” even though historians are sometimes compelled to do so in order to emphasize the fact that they all depended upon the town for their livelihood and cannot be included in the three classes of mediaeval society.

Let us say simply that the bourgeois was the man who made the busy towns and cities of Europe what they were. Most typically he was a man on the move and on the make, building or expanding a business, acting as agent for a noble or a king, serving as notary or legal agent, teaching privately or publicly. All these activities were potentially subversive of the established order, an order which still thought in

terms of feudal obligations, traditional rights, and custom. The curiosity of explorers and the desire for gain of merchant princes were dangerous to the *status quo*. For instance, many a feudal landowner was directly affected by Columbus’ discovery of America when the influx of gold and silver from the New World led to a spectacular increase in prices, since inflation hurt everyone who lived on a relatively fixed income as did the nobility. The work of Roman lawyers, hired by kings to investigate feudal privileges, was as dangerous to the nobility as the criticism of Humanist scholars was to the clergy. This is not to say that the explorers and merchants, the lawyers and scholars, were consciously revolutionary. The vast majority of them were not. But the capitalistic enterprises, the absolute monarchies, and the new ideas which they were developing were to prove infinitely destructive of mediaeval institutions and conceptions. This is what we mean when we say that the towns and the townsmen were the dynamic element in European society.

*Economic Revolution and Social Change*

In the early sixteenth century the European economy was expanding with unprecedented rapidity. The mule trains which traveled the roads and the ships which sailed the seas carried more freight and cargo every year. Old industries like clothmaking flourished and new industries like printing, cannon founding, and the production of silk offered novel opportunities for employment and profit. The Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope just before the century began and thus short-circuited the ancient overland trade route from the Levant to India. Thus a cheaper, faster way was found of transporting the spices and textiles of the East to a Europe avid for such luxuries. Columbus’ discovery of
The Age of Reformation

a New World across the Atlantic eventually opened up a vast new hinterland to the European economy.

It is often pointed out that as a result of the great discoveries of the fifteenth century there was a significant shift of the economic center of gravity from the Mediterranean city-states to the nations bordering on the Atlantic. This is both true and important, but we are learning that Venice did not necessarily decline as Portugal and Spain rose in the early sixteenth century. Nor did Portugal and Spain immediately fade out of the picture as England, France, and the Netherlands began to build up their trade with America and Asia toward the end of the sixteenth century. We are dealing here with absolute additions to the total commerce of Europe, and although a competitive element was certainly involved, the relative decline of commerce in one area or another is not so striking as the great increase in European trade as a whole.

Economic history knows no sharp breaks, but the acceleration of economic development at the close of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century is so striking that a great French scholar, Henri Hauser, insists that it can only be described as an economic revolution. Here, he says, is the beginning of the modern economic world: capitalistic practices applied widely to finance and commerce, more narrowly to industry and agriculture; an expanding, competitive economy, now first beginning to show signs in some areas of the familiar business cycle of boom and bust; the earliest appearance of something like international money markets (at Antwerp, Lyons, and Genoa), the first mechanized industry turning out a standardized product and using the principle of interchangeable parts (printing by moveable type), and an urban proletariat using the weapon of
the strike (at Lyons in 1539). The main features of nineteenth-century European economy are certainly present in embryo by 1550.

The most important fact about sixteenth-century European society is that it was a society undergoing rapid change, change which few if any understood.

The pace was more rapid than anything Europe had known for centuries. As trade and industry expanded, prices rose, slowly at first, then precipitously. The opportunities for amassing a fortune multiplied. Individuals, families, and even whole towns rose from poverty to wealth in what seemed very brief spans of time. At the same time others saw themselves forced off their land by grasping landlords or bankrupted overnight by “monopolists” and “usurers.”

The common man had no way of understanding such things, except as the works of God or the Devil. There were no secular rationalizations through which Europeans could understand economic and social change. Certainly there was no trace of the twentieth-century American assumption that change is natural and good. In the brilliant analysis of the ills of society in the first book of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), recent change is generally condemned and attributed to the two classic Christian sins, pride and greed.

In Utopia, the author’s imaginary society, time passes but there is no essential change. The more deeply we study sixteenth-century literature, the more fundamental we find the sense of changeless social pattern to be. God created the world and man; there is a “great chain of being” in which each creature has his appointed place and function; any disturbance of this order of existence stems from sin and leads to anarchy. These in general were the assumptions of Christian Europe. They hardly provided any but the most
naïve explanations of the “sturdy beggars” who wandered helplessly about England in Elizabeth’s reign (we would call them “unemployed”), or the peasants on the continent who were moving off the land to better their condition, perhaps by becoming miners like Luther’s father, or the wealthy bankers who sometimes seemed to have more real power than earls or dukes. Unfamiliar and disturbing things were happening every day, with no apparent explanation and no moral or religious justification. The only categories through which contemporaries of Luther could understand the impact of what we call capitalism upon their society were pride and greed.

The economic and social forces were building up for revolutionary change about 1500. But since men are ultimately free and not the puppets of such forces, the direction which such change would take could not be guessed in advance.

The European States

Political change was developing in 1500 almost as rapidly as economic and social change. At certain points, political developments were shaped and even determined by the economic forces we have described; at others, the changes in political institutions and boundaries shaped or determined the economic developments. At all points, the two kinds of change were closely related, as even statesmen of the time were vaguely aware.

Europe in the sixteenth century was composed of independent “states,” separated by fairly definite boundaries, controlled by central governments headed usually by kings or princes, competing with each other for power and prestige in peace and war. However modern these features
might seem, the political institutions of these states, as well as their relations with each other, showed unmistakable links with the mediaeval past. Governments were neither so supremely "sovereign" over all the territories within their boundaries nor so admittedly "sovereign" with respect to other governments as those of three or four centuries later. A sixteenth-century monarch had far more independence of action and actual power over his territories than his mediaeval predecessors, but he could not hold a candle to a modern totalitarian dictator in the irresponsibility and efficiency of his power.

Generally speaking, the rulers of Europe about 1500 were stronger than they had been a century earlier. In Spain, France, and England the civil wars of the fifteenth century had decimated the feudal nobility, exasperated the middle classes, and made the lot of the peasants more miserable. Wherever a monarch of any force of character at all appeared, he found he had the solid backing of the bourgeoisie, who much preferred royal tyranny to feudal anarchy since it meant the establishment of law and order over wider areas of the land. A ruler who was serious about putting down overmighty subjects could usually count upon the financial support of the middle classes. Money could buy the services of Roman lawyers, who were adept at investigating feudal rights and expanding the area of royal jurisdiction. Money could also buy artillery, which was too expensive for most nobles and which could pulverize feudal castles if need be. A king or prince who could tap the new sources of wealth was in a position to rest his power not upon the older idea of feudal "suzerainty" over individual vassals, but upon the more modern idea of "sovereignty" over all "subjects" within certain territorial boundaries, whether they were
nobles, priests, peasants, or townsmen. The idea of sovereignty was not clearly defined till 1576, by Jean Bodin, but it was no accident that the political thought of the early sixteenth century concentrated upon the dual theme of the rights of rulers and the duties of subjects. The trend was toward strong, centralized government. In theory as in practice the need of the age was for authority rather than for liberty, for order first and freedom afterward.

The Western Monarchies: France, Spain, and England

France was the political hub of sixteenth-century Europe. Although its eastern frontier was not so far east as it is today, the kingdom of France was the largest territory in Europe under a single, effective government. There was a growing sense of French nationality which was paralleled by the growing power of the royal government in Paris. There were still great duchies like Brittany which were relatively independent even though united to the crown, great families like that of Bourbon which controlled large holdings of land and could act much as they pleased, and institutions like the Estates-General, the provincial estates, and the parlements (or high courts) which could hamper the royal will on occasions. But nowhere else in Europe was there such a large and relatively homogeneous people under a single government which could make its will felt in all corners of the land. As Niccolo Machiavelli contemplated France in 1513 from an Italy which was a welter of independent city-states, he was filled with a mixture of admiration and envy. When he thought of the problem of successfully unifying large territories, the two contemporary examples which sprang first to his mind were the despotism
of the Ottoman Empire and the more constitutional monarchy of France.

In the early part of the century France was the aggressive and disturbing element in European international affairs. It was tempting for the French king to divert the energies of great nobles who had recently been shorn of much of their power at home to military adventures abroad, and generally the nobles welcomed the chance to find fame and plunder in a foreign war. After the middle of the century, as we shall see, the French found themselves in the throes of a civil war so devastating and crippling to the royal power that all the gains of the past three centuries seemed to have been lost. But until 1560 France appeared to be the strongest and most aggressive power on the continent.

Strictly speaking, there was as yet no "Spain" in 1500. The Iberian peninsula was divided among Portugal in the west, Castile in the center, and Aragon (whose king was also king of Catalonia and Valencia) in the east. Ferdinand of Aragon was husband to Isabella of Castile, and this meant unity of the two eastern realms in foreign policy. To speak of "Spain" had meaning, therefore, outside the peninsula. But except for the famous Inquisition, there was no institution common to the two kingdoms. Each had its own councils and courts and representative assemblies, and a customs barrier ran between them. Within each kingdom, however, the same sort of expansion of the royal power at the expense of feudal nobles and local rights was taking place as had taken place somewhat earlier in France. Backed by the towns and their representatives, both Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile clipped the wings of their unruly nobility, centralized administration in royal councils, and increased the revenues of the crown. The growing Portu-
work of government was carried on by middle-class career
men, creatures of the monarchy and therefore willing in-
struments of royal absolutism. Henry VII (1485–1509) de-
fended his newly founded dynasty against domestic
conspiracy and foreign intervention, crushed feudal gang-
sterism, kept the country out of war, and passed on a full
treasury to his son, Henry VIII. The Tudors were generally
careful to nurture the English sense of nationality—but not
by long exhausting wars on the continent. Thanks to the
firm but usually popular policies of the three great Tudors
—Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth—England was
more populous, more prosperous, more united, and more
aggressive at the close of the sixteenth century than at the
start.

*Italy and the Empire*

Northern Italy was the cultural center of sixteenth-
century Europe. Its cities were wealthier, its industries more
advanced, and its trade more flourishing than any other
area of comparable size except the Netherlands. By 1500
much of the wealth of its citizens was being devoted to
cultural activities. Italian painting, Italian architecture, Italian
literature and historical writing, Italian craftsmanship,
and Italian business methods—all these were the models of
northern countries. The busy, brilliant, hectic life of the
Italian city-states is hard to describe in brief compass be-
cause of its variety and vitality. Italians were proud of their
Roman heritage, proud of their contemporary cultural
achievements, contemptuous of northern “barbarians,” and
yet uneasily aware of their political inferiority to great
powers like France. “Italy” was a geographical expression,
not a political reality. Five fairly large political units and a
host of lesser ones divided the peninsula into small independent principalities and republics of bewildering variety. The kingdom of Naples in the south was something like the western monarchies. The Papal States in the center were unique in that they were the secular possessions of the spiritual head of Christendom, but otherwise they were like other Italian principalities. The dukedom of Milan commanding the Po Valley, the republic of Florence dominating the valley of the Arno, and the republic of Venice at the head of the Adriatic Sea had distinct political personalities of their own.

Italy, it has been said, was a microcosm of the modern world, a kind of social laboratory in which many of the main devices of modern politics and international relations were first tested experimentally. Some of the typical problems of modern politics, such as the conflict of classes and organized pressure groups, first became clear on the small stage of these city-states. Many of the typical devices of modern government such as census-taking, graduated income taxes, and public works programs to meet unemployment were tried out by their governments.

It was perhaps to be expected that the earliest attempt to study political power solely from the point of view of “what is,” and not of “what ought to be,” was made by an Italian. Niccolo Machiavelli, in exile from his native Florence, wrote the amazing handbook on how to get and keep power which he called *The Prince*, as well as the longer work, *The Discourses*, on why some states endure and grow while others weaken and decline. Italians passed on to the rest of Europe not only artistic and literary models, but also political techniques and speculative hypotheses from their “social laboratory.” Together with his contemporary
Guicciardini, Machiavelli formulated some of the shrewdest analysis of power politics ever written and left Europe in debt to Italy for generations. But like the Greek city-states before them, the Italian states were never able to unite or even to federate successfully in the face of threats from great powers outside. To the northern "barbarian," Italy presented the spectacle of great wealth and luxury, superb achievement in the arts, penetrating comment upon the whole gamut of human activity from family life to business and politics—and political fragmentation and frustration.

In the center of Europe was the Holy Roman Empire. The empire was predominantly German, although it was still called Roman and although it included Slavs, Italians, and Netherlanders as well as Germans. The empire was not hereditary, as the western monarchies were; the emperor was elected by the king of Bohemia, the electors of Brandenburg, Saxony, and the Palatinate, and the bishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne, all of them powerful princes in their own right. By now the Habsburgs, whose family holdings were in Austria and the Tyrol, always managed to keep the election in their family. But the imperial title brought only prestige, not power, to its holders. The kingdom of France had a solid core of royal lands attached to the crown, a royal army, a system of national taxation under the control of the king, and a supreme court which served as a court of highest appeal for even the mightiest duke or count. The empire had none of these. At the very end of the fifteenth century a farsighted reformer named Berchtold of Henneberg almost persuaded his fellow electors and the members of the Reichstag (the imperial assembly) to set up an imperial army, revenue system, and supreme court. But Emperor Maximilian himself opposed the scheme and treated
Brechtold as a traitor. As Hapsburg ruler of Austria, Maximilian centralized and strengthened his power much as the kings of the West were doing, but he was too shortsighted to attempt the same job for the empire.

It would have been an almost impossible task in any case. What we today call Germany was a patchwork of practically independent political units of confusing variety: feudal duchies of fair extent but no great power, rich bishoprics ruled by churchmen, wealthy and well-walled cities which acted much like the Italian city-states, and tiny territories, sometimes no more than a castle, ruled by knights who claimed complete autonomy under the emperor. Warfare between these miniature states was almost endemic. One knight had a personal feud with the city of Worms, for instance. He tortured one of the city fathers, diverted the water supply, and cut the roads. A provincial assembly called to deal with him decided it could do nothing, nor could the emperor. The knight stopped causing trouble for a while only when he passed into the service of the king of France. In the end the growing power of the territorial princes curbed feudal anarchy, but as the princes grew stronger the imperial authority grew weaker. Continued weakness at the center and foreign intervention were to lead to the disaster of the Thirty Years' War in the next century.

Since neither the emperor nor the Reichstag could maintain law and order, raise money, and maintain an army, cities sometimes formed alliances with each other for these purposes in order to protect the commerce which was their lifeblood. The most famous league of cities was the Hanse, a federation of northern German towns now past the peak of its power and influence. A kind of vigilante association
called the Veme was moderately successful in preserving order in other areas. Such an association formed by townsmen in Castile had been taken over by the crown before 1500 and made an instrument of royal power, but significantly the German emperor was not strong enough to do the same. Dukes, bishops, cities, and knights were a law unto themselves in the empire. What public order there was was either on a very local scale or the result of voluntary associations of towns or individuals.

As a result of these and other factors, there were tensions in Germany more serious than those in any other part of Europe as the century opened. The lot of the peasants was deteriorating in many districts because of a kind of feudal reaction, and there had been some serious peasant rebellions during the fifteenth century. The towns were rich but insecure, ready to grasp at any doctrine or scheme which promised law and order. A vague but palpable national sentiment had been growing among the educated classes for a century, fed on the enthusiasm of a few Humanists for the virtues of the early Germans as described by Tacitus. It was directed not so much against the Turks or the French as against the Roman Church. It could hardly look to the emperor for leadership, since his pretensions and responsibilities were supranational, but it was ready to concentrate upon any other figure who might fire the popular imagination as the defender of a prostrate Germany against the vultures of Rome. Germany was the tinderbox of Europe as the century opened.

Scandinavia, the East, and the Turks

Beyond the eastern half of the circle about Basel already described, there lay a number of sparsely settled states. All
of them were influenced in varying degrees by the economic, political, and religious developments at the center of sixteenth-century Europe, but only one of them—the Ottoman Empire—reacted with sufficient vigor to influence Europe to any important degree.

The three Scandinavian monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden had been formally united under one crown in 1395, but Sweden was already restive and was to assert her independence early in the sixteenth century. Economic and cultural ties between Scandinavia and Germany were close, since the Hanse had dominated Scandinavian trade for two centuries. As the Hanse declined, a native middle class began to appear. The kings of Denmark-Norway and later of Sweden followed much the same policies as the western monarchs in strengthening their own power at the expense of feudal competitors.

In the vast plains of Poland and Lithuania, which were united under the same crown, the story was quite different. A monarchy which had become elective in the previous century was passed around from one princely family of Europe to another and steadily lost what little power it had at the start of the century. Real power in Poland lay with a very numerous and very turbulent nobility, which did everything possible to prevent the rise of a native bourgeoisie and so left trade in the hands of the Jews and the Germans, rigged the Diet (or national assembly) so that it represented only themselves and was incapable of acting against their interests, and ground down the peasantry into a serfdom more intolerable than anything found west of the Elbe. Thus the political and social evolution of Poland was exactly opposite to that of the western monarchies. At the same time there were close cultural ties between the few Polish cities
and the rest of Europe, particularly Germany and Italy.

In the grand duchy of Muscovy the consolidation of autocracy and the growth of the idea that Moscow was "the Third Rome" (after Rome herself and Constantinople) provided interesting analogies to the centralization of the western monarchies. But the Russia of Ivan the Terrible (1533–1584) was a long way both physically and spiritually from the England of Elizabeth, even though the two rulers corresponded and exchanged trade missions. Russia was not to make her influence felt appreciably in Europe until another century had gone by.

The presence of the Ottoman Empire astride Asia Minor and the Balkan Peninsula gave Europe what sense of common Christian citizenship it still retained. The Turkish peril to Christendom was at its height in the early sixteenth century. The Ottoman Turks had conquered Constantinople in 1453 and had consolidated their power up to the Danube before the sixteenth century opened. They then turned to the east and south, and conquered parts of Persia, in addition to Syria and Egypt. In 1517 they moved the caliphate from Cairo to Constantinople as a symbol that the religious as well as the political leadership of Islam had passed into their hands. Under their great sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566) the pressure against Christian Europe was renewed. In 1520 Belgrade fell; in 1521 Rhodes capitulated. In 1526 the Turkish Janizaries broke a Christian army at Mohacs on the Danube and a thrill of terror ran through European capitals. In 1529 the Turkish army almost captured Vienna. For the next thirty years there was almost continual fighting in Hungary, while an ally of the sultan, Kheireddin Barbarossa, ousted the Spanish from one after another of their strongholds on the north coast of Africa
and occasionally raided the coasts of Italy and Spain with his galleys.

The Turkish peril was real. The Janizaries were the best-trained troops in Europe, if not necessarily the best armed. The Turkish genius for war was as well adapted to the sea as to the land. Turkish administration of conquered provinces, at least in comparison with preceding regimes, was so efficient and fair that there seems to have been a disturbing drift of population from Christian states to Turkish territory in the Balkans. The lamentations of scholars about the Turkish threat and the calls to crusades of the popes, therefore, had some justification. But all the evidence suggests that Suleiman did not intend to conquer Christendom, and that he did not have the resources to do so if he had wished. A military equilibrium between Christians and Moslems was established about mid-century, in Hungary and in the Mediterranean, and it was not upset for over a century more. In spite of Suleiman's early victories, the Christians were not so helpless as their writers and propagandists sometimes pictured them to be.

The attitude of Europeans to the Turk was ambiguous. The Venetians and the Hungarians had fought the Turk hard in the fifteenth century, but both were ready at any time to make an advantageous deal with him in order to turn their forces against some Christian enemy. Pope Alexander VI tried to get Turkish support in the face of the French invasion of Italy in 1494. In 1525 the French began a fairly regular policy of going to Constantinople for help whenever the pressure of the Hapsburgs became particularly heavy. The conflict of religious ideology between the Crescent and the Cross was certainly a reality, particularly in countries like Spain and Hungary. But the political and
religious differences within Christendom were usually more important than hatred of the Turk in determining the actual policy of any given government at any given time.

The European State System and the Hapsburgs

During the sixteenth century the relationships between the independent and autonomous states which we have described began to assume patterns which were recognizably modern.

The mediaeval conception of a Christendom in which all political units were subdivisions of the Respublica Christiana, under the spiritual leadership of the pope and the temporal lordship of the emperor, could still be found in the arguments of diplomatic dispatches, political pamphlets, and religious treatises. The “common corps of Christendom,” as Sir Thomas More called it, was still a living reality in men’s imaginations. But this conception had long since ceased to correspond very closely with the actual conduct of interstate relations. The real world was the world of practically sovereign, territorial states, competing sharply and constantly with each other for economic advantage, dynastic prestige, national honor, or religious truth.

The monarchs who were so jealous of their power within the boundaries of their states were just as jealous of their independence with respect to other states. “Sovereignty” at home went hand in hand with “sovereignty” abroad. The two were opposite sides of the same political ideal: rightful power over a certain territory with no interference from lesser powers within or greater powers without. This meant that the only law which could govern the relations of sovereign states with each other was the law of the jungle —and Machiavelli came close to saying exactly this. Others
were not so clear-sighted or so frank, but the actual policies of rulers were based more and more upon pure “reason of state.” This does not mean that the kings were not swayed by irrational motives or outdated ideals like chivalry. They often were. But if the safety of the state or the prestige of the dynasty was at stake, European princes were not scrupulous about the means used to defend their position.

One of the patterns assumed by interstate relations was the maintenance of regular diplomatic contact between governments by means of resident ambassadors. The Italian city-states began the practice in the mid-fifteenth century when the Venetians, the Florentines, the Milanese, and others began to exchange permanent ambassadors who were sent for more than a single *ad hoc* mission. By the early sixteenth century the practice began to spread to the larger states outside Italy until France, Spain, England, and the Holy Roman Empire were maintaining regular representatives at as many as half a dozen other courts. In the techniques of gathering information, evaluating it, and influencing the policy of foreign courts, the Italians—particularly the Venetians—led the way. But the French and Spanish were particularly quick to learn what contemporaries sometimes called the art of privileged spying and lying.

A second pattern was the appearance of a working balance of power. The five leading states of Italy first developed such a balance between themselves in the second half of the fifteenth century. Machiavelli in 1513 duly noted the tacit agreement among the five that no one of them should be allowed to grow so strong as to upset the balance. Actually this miniature system of equilibrium was permanently destroyed when the king of France invaded Italy in 1494 to follow up a dynastic claim to Naples and Milan. This
invasion has sometimes been represented as the beginning of modern international politics, and it can be taken so in one sense. During the Italian Wars which followed from 1494 to 1516, one after another of the major European powers was drawn into the conflict until the balance of power, which had once been limited to Italy, began to operate on a European-wide scale.

France was the aggressor in Italy, but Spain was the victor in the long run. The French were unable to make good their rather flimsy dynastic claims to either state, and when Ferdinand of Aragon died in 1516 the Spanish already had a strong foothold in Italy which they steadily consolidated, until the French gave up their Italian expeditions about mid-century. The new and larger balance of power, then, was between the Valois of France and the Hapsburgs of Spain and the empire. The first test of strength came in the Italian Wars (1494–1516), the second in the Hapsburg-Valois Wars (1522–1559). The fact that neither side was able to win a decisive victory in half a century of intermittent fighting was the result partly of limitation of military technology and organization, partly of the half-conscious and awkward efforts of secondary powers like England and the papacy to preserve the balance by shifting their weight at crucial moments to the weaker side.

One of the two major power centers of this new European balance—the French monarchy—has already been described. The other—the large, unwieldy empire of the Hapsburgs—was the product of a curious chain of dynastic accidents.

In 1500 a male child was born to the archduke Philip, heir to the Hapsburg emperor Maximilian (1494–1519), and to Philip’s wife Joanna, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. It was not exactly planned that this child, who was chris-
tended Charles, should inherit or acquire titles to almost half of Europe and most of the New World. But the Hapsburgs were notoriously lucky in their marriages. "Others wage wars," the saying went, "but you, happy Austria, make marriages." By the time Charles's grandfather Ferdinand died in 1516 (Isabella was already dead), several others (including his own father) who stood between the sixteen-year-old boy and the crowns of Castile and Aragon had died, and since his mother Joanna was insane, the boy became King Charles I of Spain, including the Spanish possessions in Italy and America. In 1519 his other grandfather Maximilian died, and Charles, who was already lord of the Netherlands, Maximilian's richest acquisition by marriage, now became ruler of the Hapsburg lands in Austria as well. That same year, money advanced by the House of Fugger helped him to be elected emperor as Charles V.

Here was a dynastic empire of startling extent. On paper at least, the sway of Charles V extended from the Spanish settlements in the Caribbean, to posts in North Africa and the western Mediterranean, garrisons in Naples and Milan, and control of the county of Burgundy and the wealth of the Netherlands, with the manpower of Spain as the solid core of the empire. Well might the French think they were being encircled. If the Hapsburgs should ever gain control of England, the circle round France would be closed. Early in the struggle it looked as if the young emperor would have an easy time of it when he defeated and captured Francis I, the aggressive and flamboyant king of France, at Pavia in 1525, took him off to Madrid, and there imposed a humiliating peace treaty upon him in the next year. But at this point the balance of power clearly began to operate. Francis appealed for help to England, the pope, and even
the sultan, and got enough of it to put his country back on even terms by 1529.

This suggests the fact that Charles V’s dynastic empire was more impressive on paper than in reality. Upon his election as Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, Charles was told by one of his counselors, “Now that God has given you the prodigious grace of raising you above all kings and princes of Christendom, to such a degree as only Charlemagne among your predecessors ever realized, you are on the road to universal monarchy, on the point of gathering Christendom together beneath a single shepherd.” But the road to universal monarchy was a rocky one, and there is not much evidence that the cautious, conscientious, conservative Charles ever really meant to travel it. Actually he spent most of his life fighting against time and distance in a long and weary effort simply to hold together his sprawling inheritance. At the very beginning of his reign in Spain he had to face a serious rebellion. This was hardly quelled when the religious troubles in Germany commanded his attention. Within a year or so he was facing French armies in North Italy, and no sooner were they defeated than the Turkish Janizaries began their terrifying advance up the Danube. For thirty more years until his abdication in 1556, Charles V was like a man desperately trying to extinguish fires in half a dozen different parts of a large forest. In any given two or three years he might be in Barcelona, Tunis, Milan, Augsburg, and Antwerp, traveling by sea because the land routes through France were often closed to him by war, trying wearily to contain the French, to push back the Turk, to settle religious questions which he never quite understood, and to solve the political problems of his conglomerate empire, all more or less simultaneously. It is remarkable
that he was as successful as he was in his "sturdy defensiveness," as one historian calls it.

Of the four dominating political personalities of the early sixteenth century—Henry VIII of England (1509–1547), Francis I of France (1515–1547), Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566), and Charles V (1519–1556)—Charles was the central figure if only because the ambitions of all the others impinged upon the Hapsburg dominions. In fact, a good biography of Charles is almost a general history of Europe during his lifetime. Nothing illustrates more clearly than this the fact that thanks to the appearance of resident ambassadors, the development of a balance of power, and the presence of the curious dynastic empire of the Hapsburgs, there was now a new sort of unity in Europe. It was not the moral unity of mediaeval Christendom, but rather the troubled sort of unity which we mean today when we speak of "one world." Like the world today, Europe in the sixteenth century was an arena in which independent political powers competed for advantage, a network of political relationships in which a battle, a rebellion, or a heresy anywhere on the continent might have its repercussions everywhere. As Europe lost its spiritual unity, it acquired in return a grim sort of economic and diplomatic unity.

The Church

Above all towns and cities, all counties and duchies, all monarchies and even the empire itself, yet reaching down to touch the life of the humblest peasant, was the Roman Catholic Church. It was the one institution common to all of Europe up to the frontiers of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the East and of Islam in the South. It was the largest and wealthiest institution in Europe, almost impossi-
ble to describe in terms of twentieth-century experience.

"Thou art Peter," Jesus had said to the chief of his disciples, "and on this rock [petros in Greek] will I found my church." The church was the visible historical institution founded by Christ himself upon Peter and his confession of his Lord’s divinity. Peter was reputed to have died in Rome, and succeeding bishops of Rome were taken to be his successors, the vicars of Christ on earth.

The church, then, was a divine, not a human, institution. Yet it was composed of human material—certain human beings set aside from all others to act as ministers of the sacraments and mediators between God and man. These clerics, or "men chosen," were of two kinds: the secular clergy, or priests and bishops, who acted as pastors or shepherds of the flock of Christian laymen; and the regular clergy, or monks and mendicant friars, who lived by a special rule of life which released them from all worldly ties and freed them either for a life of prayer or for a sort of wandering ministry. The paradox of the church from the beginning was that it was a divinely founded institution with the highest purpose—that of mediating God’s grace to man through the sacraments and bringing man to salvation in God—and yet an organization inevitably composed of human beings and deeply involved in worldly affairs. This is simply to say that there never was a time when the church was not "corrupt," unworthy of its high purpose, and in need of "reform," if judged by religious standards.

This was particularly true in the early sixteenth century. Not that the abuses were any worse than they had been for a century or two. There are evidences that they were not, that conditions were improving to some extent. Nor was it that the Christian religion was on the wane. The later fif-
teenth century was, if anything, a period of religious revival. Rather, familiar abuses, such as clerical immorality and the sale of church offices, were now more conspicuous, more talked about, and more resented than they had been. The economic and political changes we have described were having their effect on the church, and new ways of looking at things were encouraging men to regard long-standing abuses in a new light. The church was certainly not in a healthy state. It had lost unity and influence steadily since the height of its prestige in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But this was not simply the result of the sins of the priests and monks who composed it. It was not even the result of evil practices and questionable doctrines which had crept into the ecclesiastical organization, though there seemed to be much of this. It was rather the result of a long and slow shifting of social conditions and human values to which the church was not responding readily enough. The sheer inertia of an enormous and complex organization, the drag of powerful vested interests, the helplessness of individuals with intelligent schemes of reform—this is what strikes the historian in studying the church of the later Middle Ages. The church as a human institution had apparently lost its ability to adapt and change and grow.

The main evidence of this was that the church had lost the administrative efficiency and centralization which it had had three centuries earlier. The three key powers of thirteenth-century popes—those of appointment, taxation, and jurisdiction—had been steadily circumscribed in the fifteenth century by the rising national monarchs. Whenever a monarch had pretensions to real sovereignty in his realm, he claimed the right to control the appointment of
bishops (whom he often used as his own civil servants in important positions), to limit the amount of money the church could take out of his dominions, and to curtail the appeal of ecclesiastical cases to Rome.

Ferdinand and Isabella went furthest along these lines. By the early sixteenth century they had set up a kind of national church in which the powers of appointment, of taxation, and of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Castile and Aragon were in effect theirs. In 1516 Francis I of France made a famous and important deal, known as the Concordat of Bologna, with the Medici pope Leo X. This gave the French king almost the same powers that the Catholic kings of Spain had gained, particularly in appointment of the higher clergy, in return for renouncing the doctrine, dear to French hearts for a century, that a church council is superior to the pope. In England much the same limitations of papal power had been on the parliamentary statute books since the fourteenth century, but the kings were sometimes inclined to wink at the law and allow the pope somewhat more influence over appointments, somewhat more revenue and jurisdiction, than he was allowed in Spain or France. Between 1515 and 1529 Cardinal Wolsey was able to build up a kind of dictatorship over the English Church with the blessing of both the pope and King Henry VIII. This centralized ecclesiastical power might of course have served to establish full Roman control over the English Church, but it was more likely to serve (as in the end it did) as a model for complete royal control. Strict royal control over national churches was no invention of the sixteenth century. By 1517 the pope's power to appoint, to tax, and to judge had been stringently limited in several nations which (like Spain) were otherwise zealously Catholic.
Significantly there was no such limitation in Germany because there was no secular power strong enough to stand up to the pope. The great bishops in Germany were prince-bishops, ruling wealthy ecclesiastical principalities which were practically independent. The papacy drew a relatively enormous revenue from Germany, in spite of continual and futile complaints from the Imperial Diet or Reichstag about abuses and the burden of ecclesiastical taxation. Unlike the western monarchs, the emperor generally divided the spoil with the pope instead of attempting to stop the flow of gold to Rome. The rising national resentment of the papal powers of appointment, taxation, and jurisdiction in the empire made Germany potentially the most likely scene of revolt against the church in all of Christendom.

There were other limitations on the hierarchical centralization and administrative efficiency of the church beside the pretensions of secular rulers. Many bishops no longer had control either of the monks or of the parish priests within their dioceses. Monastic orders were largely exempt from episcopal jurisdiction, and the appointment of priests was often in the hands of others than the bishop. Most bishops were nobles, with little interest in anything but the revenues and prestige of their position. The gift of a bishopric was a good way for a great lord to provide for a younger son or for a king to support a clever administrator—or his bastard children. Too many bishops held more than one bishopric; many never bothered even to visit their dioceses. The parish clergy—generally poor, ignorant, often indistinguishable from their lay parishioners in mind and morals—were left largely to themselves to administer the sacraments and care for their flock as best they could. The state of the monastic orders varied greatly from order to
order and from country to country. But in spite of the
genuine zeal and strict discipline of some like the Carthus-
sians, the general trend of monastic piety and morals was
downward throughout a good deal of Europe. Even if a
reforming bishop or abbot appeared—and there were a few
shining examples—he found almost insuperable difficulties
in his way because of the general decentralization within
the church and the strength of vested interests all down the
line.

If reform was to come at all, apparently it could come
only from the top, from the papacy itself. But the papacy
of the Renaissance was a most unlikely source of reform. In
1500 the worst of all the popes was on the papal throne,
Alexander VI, indulgent father of the notorious Cesare
Borgia and benefactor of hordes of rapacious relatives from
Spain. Under Alexander the immorality, the venality, and
the conspicuous spending which had already made the papal
court a by-word among those who knew Rome reached
their height. Typically, the contributions which flowed in
from the faithful all over Europe during the jubilee year
of 1500 went mostly to help Cesare carve out a principality
for himself in central Italy. There were reformers at the
Vatican, but they were helpless because any real reform
which was proposed had the effect of cutting down the
papal revenues, and this promptly sent panic through the
host of officials and hangers-on who made up the cumbersome
machinery of papal government.

*The Sacred and the Secular: Indulgences*

This brings us to the heart of the problem of the condition
of the church. The papacy of the early sixteenth century
was only one step ahead of bankruptcy a good deal of the
time. The necessity of defending the papal states (and the desire to enlarge them), the burden of supporting an elaborate administrative organization (and a luxurious court), the obligation to support anti-Turkish crusades (and perhaps also wars against papal enemies closer to home in France, Germany, or Italy)—all this cost money. This money was squeezed out of the higher clergy in various ways, particularly by what was called simony, or the sale of spiritual offices. But the clergy had in the end to squeeze the money out of the producing classes in society, the peasants and artisans, the merchants and professional people. Rents were raised on the enormous holdings of church lands, and fees were increased for spiritual services performed by the clergy. In the end the squeeze imposed by the papacy on the higher clergy was passed on to the laity in the form of higher charges by the parish clergy for everything from burials and the probate of wills to administration of the sacraments themselves.

The practice of issuing indulgences in return for “contributions” from the faithful is the best illustration of how a hard-pressed papacy was tempted to trade spiritual benefits for hard cash. An indulgence was originally a remission of the “penance,” or temporal penalty for sin, imposed by the priest in the sacrament of penance. Indulgences were granted by papal dispensation to crusaders, to pilgrims, and finally to any who contributed to some such cause as building a church. Indulgences were very lucrative. The revenue which they brought into the papal treasury was greatly increased in the fifteenth century by the popular belief that an indulgence could not only assure divine forgiveness of sins with a minimum of contrition, but also release the souls of the dead from Purgatory. The best teaching of the
church insisted upon the necessity of full contrition and was very cautious about asserting the pope's power over Purgatory. But extravagant claims were made for the papal power by some. During the fifteenth century it became official dogma that there was a treasury of superfluous merits accumulated by Christ and the saints, and that the church could dispense these merits to the buyers of indulgences. In this as in so many other contemporary practices—including the veneration of saints and relics, pilgrimages, and the administration of the sacraments themselves—the line between the spiritual and the material became blurred in the eyes of many ordinary believers. The church was trading upon its monopoly of the means of salvation in order to raise money for largely secular purposes, or so it seemed to increasing numbers of laymen and conscientious clergymen. The sacred and the secular were inextricably confused in innumerable ways and at every level in ecclesiastical practice.

Many Catholic writers put the whole blame for this general situation on the "greed, thirst for power, and lusts of the flesh" of secular rulers who sabotaged every attempt at reform. Many Protestant writers tend to blame the same faults in clergymen, from the pope down. Clearly one must look deeper for the underlying causes—in the economic expansion, the growing need for political consolidation, and the increasing worldliness of taste and thought both within and outside the clergy. The impulse to be a Christian was probably as strong in as many people then as it had been three centuries earlier, but disturbing and half-formulated questions were occurring to many people. What was it to be a Christian? To buy an indulgence? To become a monk? Or to read the Bible and live a good life? Was a great supranational organization centered in Rome a necessary
part of Christianity? Was a mediating priesthood necessary to represent the divine power on earth, and were the sacraments the only channels of God's grace to man? Not one of these questions was new, but unless reform could be accomplished, they would grow in urgency and poignancy.

Conceptions of Reform

Before Luther appeared on the scene there were four main theories of how the church might be reformed.

The first looked to saintly individuals to spread new life through the church by the contagion of their example. This conception was based upon a conviction widely held in the Middle Ages that institutions were patterned by God and so could not be made better or worse. Therefore the proper approach was to pray for the conversion of individuals rather than to attempt the futile task of reorganizing the church as an institution. This was the hope of the great mystics of the later Middle Ages. It was the guiding conception of the Dominican friar Savonarola in his brief and tragic attempt to call the city of Florence to repentance, as preacher, prophet, and political leader of the city from 1494 to his execution in 1498. There was much to be said for the proposition that without individual conversion no ecclesiastical reform would be possible. But the mystics and the prophets of the fifteenth century who conceived of reform in these terms had been singularly helpless in the face of the deeply entrenched evils which they deplored and denounced.

In contrast, the second conception of reform was strongly institutional. It was the conciliar theory, the theory that since the papacy itself was corrupt, a general council representing the church as a whole should shoulder the burden
of reform. In spite of the failure of the Councils of Constance (1414–1418) and of Basel (1431–1449) either to reform the church or to make good their authority over the popes, the conciliar theory still had wide appeal in the sixteenth century. It rested upon the belief that while parts of the church and even the papacy itself might be utterly corrupt, God's truth and grace were preserved in the church as a whole, in the "whole company of the faithful." Twentieth-century democratic faith that the common man remains uncorrupted in spite of the politicians who prey upon him has something in common with this conciliar theory. But there was surprisingly little real foundation for such optimism about the beneficial results of setting up a limited, constitutional monarchy in the church. Secular rulers had acquired the habit of using an appeal to a council as a club to hold over the pope, in order to gain purely secular advantages. In reply the pope was apt to summon a subservient and unrepresentative council (as Julius II did in 1512) merely to head off the threat from secular monarchs. No wonder that the attitude of many toward reform by a general council was compounded of both hope and despair.

The third conception of reform was that it should be carried out by the secular rulers. This was the most illogical conception of the three, but probably the most widespread. It was always assumed in mediaeval theory that the secular ruler had a wide responsibility for defending and protecting the church. Conscientious emperors and kings often assumed that this included the duty of aiding or even initiating ecclesiastical reforms. As the secular rulers of Europe grew more powerful in their dominions, "reforming" everything from feudal anarchy to business practices and personal dress, it was perhaps natural that more and more of their subjects
should look to them as the real image of God's power on earth and therefore the proper castigators of a corrupt clergy. This theory appealed to all those who feared the wealth and power of the clergy, whether for disinterested or selfish reasons. It formed common theoretical ground on which the sincere religious reformer and the rapacious ruler with a hungry eye on church lands could meet, at least for a time. There was of course no guarantee that a monarch would be any more zealous for real ecclesiastical reform than a pope. But the monarch's interest, both public and private, usually lay on the side of reform. At least he had no vested interest in the financial abuses of the church—quite the contrary. The most outstanding example of successful reform in the early years of the sixteenth century was that accomplished by Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros, who stamped out some of the worst abuses and made strenuous efforts to raise the educational level of the clergy in Spain. The success of Ximenes' efforts in Spain was made possible by the strong backing he received from Ferdinand and Isabella, not by any impetus received from the Vatican. It appeared that wherever there was a strong monarch, reform was at least possible. Where the national ruler was weak as in Germany, reform seemed almost hopeless.

Christian Humanism

The fourth conception of reform was newer and therefore more exciting than any of the others to many of the best minds in Europe. It was the program of a group of scholars whom we now call Christian Humanists. The essence of it was that the new learning would save the church. As scholars gradually restored direct contact with the best in classical and early Christian thought, so the Christian
Humanists believed, the church would inevitably be cleansed and invigorated. To read the dialogues of Plato and the epistles of Paul in the original Greek was to recover the greatness and simplicity of the Greek ideal and the Christian Gospel, obscured for centuries by the arid and undiscerning commentaries of theologians who never read the original texts. No wonder abuses and false doctrine had crept in. The church had lost touch with its roots in the religion of Palestine and the civilization of Greece and Rome. What was needed, the Christian Humanists insisted, was to publish the original texts of the Greek philosophers, the Biblical writers, and the early Fathers of the Christian church, to study them afresh as human documents which speak straight to the heart, and to base the education of the younger generation, particularly the rulers, on these classics of western thought rather than on the narrow scholastic learning of the past few centuries. The result would be assured. The way to men’s wills and hearts is through their minds. As men came to know the good through such an education, they would do the good. The saintliness of Socrates and the simple religion of Jesus himself, the “philosophy of Christ,” would so move men by contrast with the mechanistic religious practices of some fifteen centuries later that abuses would simply wither away. Who would buy an indulgence if he knew that what God demands is not sacrifice and sacrament but a humble and a contrite heart? Who would split theological hairs and burn heretics if he realized that the essence of Christianity is to lead a Christlike life?

The authors of this program included the Italian Pico della Mirandola, the Frenchman Lefèvre d’Étaples, the Spaniard Luis Vives, the Englishman Sir Thomas More (statesman as well as scholar), and the acknowledged leader
of them all, Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus was the soul of the movement. A first-rate scholar and enthusiastic lover of the classics, he became slowly converted to an ambitious calling, that of saving Christendom through Christian scholarship. He did yeoman service to the cause of reform by his learning, his intelligence, his humor, and his tolerant understanding. He had the honor of being the first actually to publish the New Testament in the original Greek (1516), although Cardinal Ximenes and fellow scholars in Spain were already far along on their great edition of the whole Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek. He edited the first scholarly editions of many of the Fathers, and in a scholarly joke called *The Praise of Folly*, he ridiculed some of the worst abuses among the clergy as seen from the point of view of a simple ethical Christianity strongly flavored with Platonism.

Erasmus represented the best in Christian Humanism—its faith in man’s reason and fundamental goodness, its confidence in education, its tolerance and sense of proportion. He also illustrated many of its weaknesses. Most of its leaders (except Sir Thomas More) were scholars and writers, but not men of affairs. It was perhaps natural therefore that they exaggerated the power of the pen and the importance of scholarship. There was something contagious about their enthusiasm for what they found in the newly read sources of Greek and Christian tradition, but the contagion could not be expected to spread very far down in society. Erasmian reformers were scattered in key positions in the church throughout Europe, and their scholarship and their ideas had important influence on more dogmatic reformers as far apart as Luther and Loyola. But their program proved to be too reasonable, too mild, too unmindful of the radical
evil in human nature, to triumph. Like the "philosophers" of the eighteenth century, they gave their contemporaries a new perspective from which to criticize ancient abuses and outworn ideas. The fact that abuses were so talked about and deplored was largely their work. They looked at sixteenth-century practices through the eyes of the disciples of Socrates and of Jesus. In so doing they presented their readers and listeners with a vague but stirring alternative to the contemporary state of affairs—and without an alternative in men's minds to the status quo, revolutions are never possible. Like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, however, they were generally shocked by the form which revolution actually took. When Europe became divided between Catholic and Protestant, the Christian Humanists remained Catholic almost to a man.

As so often in human affairs, the actual form taken by the major reform movements of the sixteenth century was not a simple incarnation of any one of these four conceptions, which have just been distinguished with artificial sharpness. In varying degrees, all four conceptions had their influence on both Protestant and Catholic Reformations. But the actual historical form which Protestantism took was to a large extent unexpected, unprecedented, and therefore unique.