

## The Reformation

- The Reformation began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German priest, sent his 'ninety-five theses' to his bishop, Albert of Mainz. In these 'theses', Luther set out all of his concerns with the Roman Catholic Church, such as the sale of indulgences (forgiveness of sins). Luther's theses were printed in both Latin and German, and quickly spread throughout Europe.
- The main objective of the early Protestant reformers was to restore the Church to its early Christian purity. This involved such changes as drastically altering the Roman Catholic Mass, proclaiming the autonomy of the individual conscience and making the Bible available in each region's native tongue, so that ordinary people could understand it.
- Protestantism became the dominant religion in many parts of Germany, Switzerland and the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands), England, Scotland, Scandinavia, and in certain areas of France, Hungary and Poland.
- The success of the Protestant Reformation encouraged the growth of a reform movement within Catholicism, known as the Counter-Reformation. Its aim was to bring about reform without destroying the structure of the Catholic Church.
- The Counter-Reformation achieved a significant measure of success. Missionaries from the newly formed Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and other religious orders helped to reconvert Protestants in many parts of Europe.
- Some historians have argued that the increased focus on the Bible caused by the Reformation helped to lead to witch-hunting, as Exodus 22:18 states 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live'.
- Some Protestant leaders, such as John Calvin, believed that the power of Satan was so strong and pervasive that a true Christian had to engage in an unceasing struggle against him.
- Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were completely confident that the Devil would fail in his attempt to triumph over the forces of good. For Calvin, the Devil operated only with the permission of God, but the Devil's earthly followers were so great in number that true Christians (who Calvin referred to as saints) could not afford to relax their efforts.
- Neither Luther or Calvin were preoccupied with witchcraft as such. Although Luther said on one occasion that all witches were the Devil's whores and on another that they should all be burned, his concern was with any form of idolatry, rather than the traditional forms which witchcraft took.
- The first witch-hunts took place almost one hundred years before the Reformation. Also, during the early years of the Reformation there were relatively few witchcraft prosecutions in Europe. It is therefore more reasonable to claim that the Reformation and Counter-Reformation helped to intensify the witch-hunts, rather than helped to cause them.
- Many Protestants saw one of the main problems with Catholicism as being its reliance on superstitious beliefs and practices, such as blessings, exorcisms, charms to protect from the 'evil eye', and so on. Protestants considered these practices to be a kind of witchcraft.
- Counter-Reformers also tried to rid the Catholic Church of superstitious and 'magical' practices, especially healing and love magic.
- The efforts of both Protestants and Catholics against superstitious practices helped to lead to witch-hunting in two ways. The first way was by encouraging the authorities to prosecute people believed to be using magic. The second way was by depriving victims of sorcery of some of the weapons they had used previously to

protect themselves, such as sprinkling holy water or making the sign of the cross. They therefore turned to witch trials instead.

- Protestant preachers took Revelation (the book of the New Testament that discusses the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world) literally and considered the existence of witches, especially in instances of demonic possession, as signs that the Devil was engaged in his final attack on Christianity and that the end of the world was nigh. In such circumstances the zealous Christian was expected to cleanse the world of these diabolical contaminants by prosecuting witches.
- A very rough correlation can be established between the intensity of witchcraft prosecutions on the one hand and the extent of religious divisions on the other. Witch-hunting was most severe in countries or regions where either large religious minorities lived within the boundaries of a state or the people of one state or territory adhered to one religion and the residents of a neighbouring state adhered to another. Also, countries where most people followed the same religion, such as Italy and Spain, generally experienced only occasional witch-hunts and relatively low numbers of executions.
- However, the reasons why more witches were prosecuted in some areas are many and varied, so it cannot be considered to be solely, or even mainly, down to religious conflict.
- For the most part, individuals who were prosecuted for witchcraft belonged at least formally to the same faith as their prosecutors.
- It is true that witches were usually considered to be heretics, but the heresy of the witch was because they had made a pact with the Devil, not because they followed the 'wrong' religion.
- Protestant beliefs helped to lead to the decline of witch-hunting. Many Protestants believed that the Devil could never be as powerful as God, and therefore witches, the Devil's minions, could never be any real threat to humanity, and so were not worth hunting. Doubts were cast over how powerful witches could really be, and whether or not they were actually capable of doing the things people claimed.
- Protestantism's emphasis on the Bible also helped to lead to the decline of witch-hunting, as there are hardly any references to witches in the Bible, so people began to view their existence as being only a minor concern, as God did not have much to say on the matter.