

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION ON THE PERCEPTION AND USE OF LEISURE

## **Introduction**

Reformation historian, Robert Kingdon in his work *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of the European Renaissance and Reformation History* defines revolution as “a sweeping, fundamental change in political organization, social structure, economic property control, and the predominant myth of a social order, thus indicating a major break in the continuity of development”.<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation, realized in many forms throughout Europe between 1500 – 1700, represents the most fundamental change in societal norms and practices since the fall of the Roman Empire. Just as the social practices of that empire continue to influence our thoughts on social order, so too does the effect of the Reformation remain significant in our perception and use of leisure. The Reformation as a reaction to the Roman Catholic Church’s structure and administration throughout Western Europe, shaped both the theological and political landscape of Western thought and praxis. Papal supremacy was challenged on theological, political, economic and social fronts. The events of the movement against the dominant social/ecclesial order, according to Kingdon, represent a true revolution. It is posited that the changes in the social order of that time retain a significant amount of influence over contemporary attitudes and behaviors regarding leisure.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Leisure, for the purpose of this study is considered to be free time, typified by the limited discretionary time experienced by inhabitants of Europe during the Reformation period. The most significant amount of free time was experienced on the Sabbath which will appropriately receive the greatest amount of scrutiny in the study.

The extent to which the Reformation and its subsequent laws and practices altered the leisure patterns of those who took up the cause constitutes the main focus of this study. An historical analysis of the events and results of the Protestant Reformation, through examination of the treatises of such religious leaders as Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, and the legislative activities of the British monarchy relative to their efforts at reform, provide primary evidence of the underlying principles and attitudes of the reform movement regarding leisure. This information serves to provide a basis for a more profound understanding of the present day attitudes towards leisure in Occidental societies. The impact of Reformation theology on leisure behavior will be noted through the resultant development of laws and corresponding sanctions that were established in order to direct and guide human moral behaviors. Reformation morality was intended to reflect a scriptural approach to living. Scriptural living is viewed by many as being in constant conflict with secular attitudes and behaviors. Such a study is challenging in that the

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historical events of that period have been documented from distinct and diverse perspectives, a result of the fierce polemics that typified those difficult times. Noted historian, Will Durant, reminds us that the Reformation is “a fascinating but difficult subject, for almost every word that one may write about it can be disputed or give offense.” Durant acknowledges human foible and prejudice as obstacles to historical authenticity, “that we are all fragments of darkness groping for the sun.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Methodology**

In addition to the original writings of the leaders of the reform movement, the study analyzes historical data and accounts of lifestyle practices in order to determine the ecclesial and civil attitudes towards leisure during the period of 1500 – 1700 CE. General studies of the Reformation by Durant (1957), Chadwick (1964), Dickens (1966) and more recently, Kingdon (1974,1995), Pettegree (2000) and Lindberg (2000), provide the reader with an understanding of the magnitude of the movement. Additional information is gleaned from works addressing the social and cultural realities of the early modern European period including Brauer (1968), Buck & Zophy (1974), Vale (1977), Burke (1978), Klassen (1980) Roney & Klauber (1998). Diaries, sermons and other direct evidence of guidance given to the faithful will be considered. Finally, ecclesial and civil law, taken as an indicator of and commitment to a proscribed use of leisure are presented. The materials are offered in a generally chronological fashion in order to position critical elements of the study in a meaningful and logical way.

The attitudes and behaviors of the ecclesial authorities, the faithful, and not so faithful provide insight into the ‘the perception and use of leisure’. Perception is used in the sense of a direct or intuitive recognition, a mental image. Perception, even of the sensory type, often does not fully or accurately represent reality. The admonitions of the Reformers towards leisure and the resultant perception of leisure by the general public may be seen to differ in many ways. Likewise, the civil laws proscribing the rightful use of leisure and appropriate recreational activities did not always match human behaviors. Perception may differ from actual practice as the enforcement of restrictive legislation concerning leisure may control behavior but may not be representative of one’s genuine perception of leisure. Disobedience and disregard for law serves as an indicator of attitudes when confronted by adverse authority. Perception would be influenced by such variables as gender, economic status and the social or class differences found in a particular society. These elements are further differentiated due to one’s proximity to the centers of power within society, namely the Church and civil government. Ecclesial regulations governing leisure are seen to be constraints or limitations upon its use. These constraints were accompanied by sanctions against particular behaviors, sometimes including rather harsh punishments.

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## Results

The information assembled in this study indicates that religion, in general, and the Reformation, in particular, had much to do with the perception and use of leisure during that particular epoch. While contemporary American perspectives on leisure necessarily pass through Weber's concept of the Protestant Work Ethic, in reality, leisure use in contemporary western cultures has been heavily influenced not only by religion but by countless other variables.

Mircea Eliade (1958) explains the inter-relationship of cultural patterns that must be considered when studying religious events:

there are no purely religious phenomena. Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic, you cannot think of man apart from language and society.

Religion, etymologically speaking, binds us to an external force; it stabilizes our meaningful interaction with the world, provides an anchor for our volatility.

The Reformation broke the existing bonds between the sacred and the profane, it eliminated much of the ritualistic behaviors that had a salutatory effect on the populace. The Reformation robbed people of their connection to the supernatural.

<sup>1</sup> Kindgon, Robert, ed. *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of the European renaissance and Reformation History* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publication, 1974) p.55

<sup>2</sup> Durant, Will, *The Reformation* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1957) p. 5