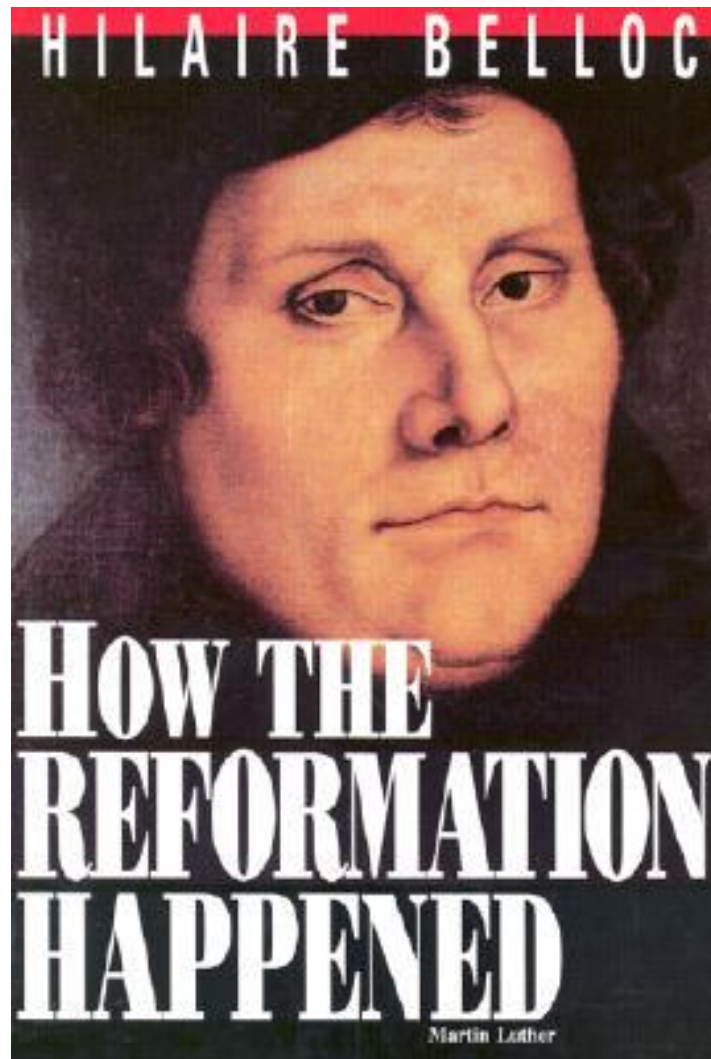


A Summary of How the Reformation Happened by Hilaire Belloc



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Note to the Reader: Odd punctuation and tense change within quotations are part of the original text.

About the Author

Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) was born Joseph Hilaire Pierre René Belloc in a village not far from Paris called La Celle-Saint-Cloud. His father was French, his mother English, and his wife American. He was educated at the Oratory School in England, served in the French military, then returned to England and attended Balliol College, Oxford. He was a Member of Parliament from 1906-1910 but left politics disillusioned. From 1914 to 1920, he edited a journal called *Land and Water* which was concerned with news of the then-current war.

Belloc graduated from Oxford in 1895, and his first book, a book of verse, was published in 1896. Then, for about fifty years, works on a myriad of subjects poured from his pen. He wrote for children and adults. He wrote poetry and essays, fiction and history, drama and biographies. One of his most well-known books, *The Path to Rome*, grew out of a pilgrimage he made on foot to Rome. He was known (and unpopular) for his vituperative criticism of many aspects of modern society. He believed that culture and Catholicism go hand in hand. He was a proponent of the economic theory of distributism. G.K. Chesterton and he were good friends. After his stroke in the 1940s, his pen, for the most part, ran dry. He died in 1953, after falling into a fire.

General Overview

The issue is between two forces. On the one hand, is the instinct that we all have within us, namely that Europe is Catholic, and must live as Catholic or must die. On the other hand is arisen an intense, fierce, increasing hatred against the Mass, the Blessed Sacrament, the whole transcendental scheme (90).

In this book, Hilaire Belloc traces the historical path of the Reformation from its social and ecclesiastical antecedents to the Peace of Westphalia in the Germanies in 1648. As we travel through this time period and from country to country tracing the conflict of the Reformation, Belloc constantly reminds us how much the world changes within a lifetime. He says, “What is beyond living memory ceases to have any very active effect.” Then, “Now, when the Great Schism began, only very old men...could remember the undivided and unchallenged unity of the Papal See” (18). Later, he notes, “The young man just entering public life in 1572 could barely recall the Mass...Within ten years more there was a whole generation to whom the general practice of Catholicism was unknown” (155-156). Finally, after suppression, battle, and politicking, the Reformation succeeds in splitting and culturally weakening Europe.

Chapter One: Introductory

Hilaire Belloc equates Catholicism and culture with two questions; to ask, “What threatens to destroy [our culture]” is the same as asking “How came Christendom to suffer shipwreck?” (1). The histories which have been written before this are inadequate because “they proceeded from authors who had no intimacy with the Catholic Church: who did not know ‘what it was all about’” (2). In addition, they did not “follow the true historical order of events” (5). The enigma of the Reformation only truly appears to those who understand what greatness was lost. In the days before the Reformation, European, Catholic, and civilization all meant the same thing. So the problem of the Reformation is the question: how did it happen that Europe “should have its own *being* utterly rooted out of it in certain regions” (7)? In attempting to answer this difficult question, Belloc will at least present events in their proper, historical sequence.

That the Catholic Church was *ever* at peace is an illusion. Rather, Belloc says, she lived in “perpetual peril, humanly speaking, of dissolution” (9). After its persecution in the first centuries, the Catholic Church was plagued by Arianism, Mohammedanism, pirates and Mongol hordes, the Albigenian heresy, the Black Death, and the Great Schism.

“The outstanding character of the process that went on for full two hundred years before the Reformation was not the positive growth of new doctrine, but *the weakening of moral authority in the temporal and spiritual organization of the Church*” (15). The Great Schism and the pope’s previous residence in Avignon had two effects: 1) the papacy came to be viewed as a local, rather than a universal, authority. 2) “The old unflinching direct authority, exercisable against kings...was gone” (17). “One may say that the primary condition of Christian unity, a single and powerful headship, had disappeared” (19).

After this, Belloc conducts, “[T]wo general surveys of Europe in the fifteenth century,” (19) first of the age and second of the Papacy. With regards to the first, this time period has been called “The Clearing-up,” that is, a “loss of the sense of reality upon eternal things” (20). It has also been called “The Failure of Christendom;” the Church cannot keep Europe from disunity. Most rightly, it has been called “The Spring of the Renaissance.” An expansion of knowledge and numerous changes shook the established fabric of Europe. Humanism, skepticism, “national feeling,” (26) and immorality were on the rise. The Black Death, which Belloc calls “a main origin of this breakdown called the Reformation,” besides killing at least a third of western Europe, dealt hard blows to monasticism, “ruined the old hearty structure of feudalism,” (25) and increased provinciality. A clamor for the cleansing of the Church arose, due in large part to her fiscal abuses.

“In the midst of such confusion, that which should have served to moderate by authority and to reform by example, the Papacy, failed to play its part” (23). The age was used to corrupt popes, but Alexander VI (reigned 1492-1503) outdid them all; “his life and character shook and cracked the edifice of Papal Prestige” (31). Again, by this time, the pope had been reduced to a local authority; he was Prince of Rome. He could no longer command the princes of Europe. In addition to the above situation in society and in the Church, there lay waiting to erupt the eternal hatred for the Faith. The pressure in society, at the end of the fifteenth century, was tremendous. The dike was about to break.

Chapter 2: The Flood

While it is true that in Martin Luther’s times, indulgences were abused and misunderstood, it is not true that Luther himself intended, when he tacked his thesis to the church door, any revolution. Luther was “a man of some local prominence,” (39) but the strength of the Reformation did not come from him. “[T]he point was this: Luther’s action came at a moment of perilous instability...All manner of converging forces, as we have seen, had united to produce that seismic tide – Humanism, German racial feeling, [and] the eternal hatred of the Faith” (41, 42). Luther did not become rebellious until 1519, after a Conference in Leipzig from which he returned “at once embittered against his official enemies and inspired by a feeling of popular triumph” (44). After his forthcoming excommunication, “a new, inevitable element appears in the confusion: the element of progressive denial – the loss of faith” (45). However, it was not Luther, but the priest Zwingli, in the 1520s, who formulated new doctrines. In Zurich, where Zwingli lived, the notion of sola scriptura was propagated. Marriage of the clergy and iconoclasm, as well the stamping out of the Mass, occurred there as well.

There are three main points to remember about this early stage of the Reformation. Firstly, it was anti-clerical. Those customs and doctrines which were attacked had in common that they were powers of the clergy. Secondly, it did not originate in a doctrinal attack on the Church. The Reformation had merely a destructive and negative quality until Calvin raised a “new counter-church” (47). Thirdly, the Reformation would have blown over had not the Muslims won a victory on Mohács Field. After Mohács, the Holy Roman Emperor, already a weak power, lost all sway over the German princes.

Chapter Three: The English Accident

“Accident:” the word choice was deliberate.

There was no national movement against the Catholic Church in England – the little that happened at first was a government movement, and not even a doctrinal movement. It was a mere political and even a personal act. What followed it was not a normal process generally desired by the people. It was an artificial process managed by a very few men and these acting...for money. (55)

Henry VIII “was profoundly Catholic” (60). Belloc excuses him and lays initial blame for the break with Rome primarily on Anne Boleyn and on her “determination to be Queen” (63). However, the government ministers Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, as well as Archbishop Cranmer, receive their share of blame, too. The break with Rome did not alarm or shock the Catholic populace. Even after Henry was declared Head of the Church in England and the clergy swore the Oath of Supremacy, still it was not perceived as final.

“Unity could have been restored had it not been for the second act which was of permanent effect: the seizure of the Abbey Lands” (68). The practice of ecclesiastical endowments, though not bad in England, was “warped” (70). The suppression first of smaller monasteries and finally of all monasteries, was seen by the people as an economic revolution. It was that and more. “A religious revolution because communal religious life suddenly ceased: an economic revolution because the Crown became suddenly possessed of a vast capital sum” (73). The seizure of the monasteries had two important effects. “It made reconciliation with Rome in any permanent fashion far more difficult” (74). It also increased the power of the upper class at the expense of the Crown, for Henry dispersed the new-gained wealth.

If England had remained in the Church, Catholicism in Europe would have been saved. “[T]he English Movement was the first great *official*, or Government, Movement away from unity” (57).

Chapter Four: Calvin

“Calvinism is the core of Protestantism” (77). Jean Cauvin (Calvin) created a situation in which, “it was who put up a new positive force against the positive force of the Catholic Church” (79). John Calvin’s book, the *Institute*, changed the course of history. Belloc attributes the book’s success to its timely appearance and to the fact that it rendered the priest superfluous, that it resurrected the pagan idea of inescapable fate, “an implacable God,” (80) and that it appealed to men’s greed.

The *Institute* came out in 1536. “The ten years that followed were the gradual permeation of Europe with the effects of a new philosophy” (82). 1540 to 1549 “was still a time of argument” (82), not settlement. Belloc calls this decade the “Period of Debate.” He sketches the situation in three countries: France, England, and the Germanies. France had unsuccessfully attempted reform from within. This decade saw the establishment of the Calvinist Church at Rouen and the death of the Catholic monarch Francis I. France is shortly to become a bloody battlefield. In England, one could distinguish two groups: the king and the populace who were Catholic versus the anti-Catholic minority which included those who had gained wealth in the loot of Church property. Then Henry died in 1547 and the government of England began its attack on the Mass. Germany was not united, and the Emperor had no power to unite her. Between the Emperor and the rebellious princes occurred truces known as *Interims*. So stood the affairs in 1549.

The average man of this decade has been introduced to opposition. Most would have been in favor of retaining Catholicism, but would have denied the necessity of the pope as the center of unity. The necessity of reform would have been almost universally recognized. “Meanwhile, the essential thing – reform from within...was gathering strength – but it was not yet strong enough to save unity” (90).

Chapter Five: The Lining up for Battle: 1549-1559

We begin with England. Englishmen, for various reasons, had become “passive subjects” (92) of a strong central government. The real power behind the young crowned head of Edward VI was his uncles, the

Seymours. Looking to line their pockets, they suppressed the Mass and any uprisings. The gentry, who should have led the people in the defense of the faith, stood to gain financially from the Church's destruction. And so the small minority of anti-Catholics was able to wipe out the Mass in England. "With Mary [Tudor] the Church was restored, and that restoration had the people behind it" (95). Her efforts were unsuccessful, partly because of the gentry and because she died untimely in 1558. Elizabeth was put on the throne by William Cecil, a clever and dangerous man. "He was a clerk to the Governing Council and knew all its secrets" (94).

France was key. Had she fallen, so would have the Catholic Church in Europe. But she stood and this greatly aided the Catholic cause. In France, there was active combat between the Catholics and their enemies. "There are three things we must appreciate about the French situation in these years" (98). First, the monarchy was with the people and a defender of the Faith. Second, she was also at odds with Austria and Spain, both Catholic countries. The result of these conflicting interests is that "the French monarchy was perpetually playing with the Reformation as a political factor: opposing it at home; defending it abroad" (99). Thirdly, the Reformation tempts the gentry with the taking of Church wealth. In addition, it offered "greater independence from the Crown" (100). In France, as in England, 1559 does not look promising for the Catholic Church.

Chapter 6: The Universal Battle: 1559-1572

The "old unquestioned Unity of Christendom" (103) was forgotten. At the end of these 13 years of battle, we will see no settlement but only a divided Europe.

The French Sector "What saved Catholicism in France was, in the first place, the strong attachment of the people to the unbroken national monarchy" (106). The queen mother, at this time, was the politically skillful Catherine de Medici. Opposing the Catholic monarchy and populace stood the Huguenot nobles. They were encouraged in their opposition by the lure of Church loot, the weakness of the monarchy, and their jealousy of the Duke of Guise. In addition, "Calvinism was a French thing" (106). "The whole situation is exceedingly confused, because nobles and princes changed sides continually" (107).

The important and decisive defeat of the Huguenots came on the eve of St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572. Paris was full of Huguenots, for the king of Navarre, the heir to the French throne, was marrying the princess. The young lord of Guise, a Catholic, took vengeance on one of the Colignys, a Protestant. After that, fighting between the two factions broke out. The people of Paris joined in and the massacre of St. Bartholomew occurred. Though some portion of responsibility for the massacre belonged to Guise and some to Catherine de Medici, yet "[i]t was the populace who were the main agents of the affair" (109). The French civil war continued, but after 1572 "the destruction of the French monarchy and national religion [was] impossible" (109).

The English Sector In England, suppression of the Faith was a long and slow process. Contrary to the popular myth which states that England was Protestant,

The mass of England was Catholic in tradition and feeling during all the last half of the sixteenth century. Even into the beginning of the seventeenth, the tradition survived...But during the whole time the steady official persecuting pressure continued; the practice of a Catholic life was rendered impossible. (111)

Queen Elizabeth, who had "no real sympathy with the growing Protestant cause upon the Continent," (113) also had no real power. This was "the period of the Cecils" (111). William Cecil, who betrayed Seymour and put Elizabeth on the throne, headed what Belloc calls the "New Millionaires," (112) the men who had benefited from the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. Cecil carefully and subtly discouraged Catholicism. There did occur, in 1570, an uprising, but it occurred around the same time as the pope's denunciation of the English government. This denunciation gave Cecil the opportunity of violently suppressing the uprising and of increasing his persecution of Catholicism. Cecil "became Lord Burghley, and we may take

here, as in France, the year 1572, after his new title and with the last embers of the rebellion grown cold, as the turning point” (114). But what truly determined the English situation in Cecil’s favor was the Scottish situation.

The Scottish Factor Scotland was, from of old, the enemy of England and, therefore, the ally of France. The Reformation “put an end – slowly – to this ancient habit of mind” (116) and gave the two countries one monarch and one moral system. Due to Scotland’s bad luck in the way of monarchs, the Scottish nobles were inordinately powerful. Also, the Church in Scotland suffered more corruption than in most other countries. In this poor country, “clerical wealth was extravagantly large” (118). Church revenue was given to the sons of great families. The corruption was so great that no popular Scottish movement arose in defense of Catholicism. As elsewhere, Church wealth and opposition to the monarchy made the Reformation appealing to the nobles.

The Queen Mother, who ruled Scotland in Mary’s absence, was French and unpopular with the nobles, as were the French troops in Scotland. “The Scottish Movement began as the assault on the official and decayed clerical organism” (121). When John Knox led a Calvinist rebellion in 1559, “Cecil threw all the weight of the English Government onto the rebel side in Scotland” (121). In 1560, “there was a violent outbreak of burning and destruction of churches” (121). In 1561, the nineteen year old Catholic widow, Mary Queen of Scots, returned to Scotland. Her morals, her religion, her new marriages all worked against her. Her nobles rose against her, and she fled to England.

Mary Stuart, not Elizabeth, should have ascended the English throne after Mary Tudor. Naturally, Elizabeth did not aid her rival. But Mary Stuart became “the national rallying point of the large Catholic majority in England” (123). An attempt to get rid of Cecil was made and failed. Consequently, the English people in the North rose up in defense of their religion, but the revolt was brutally crushed (as mentioned in the previous chapter). Then came the Pope’s Bull “which released Elizabeth’s subjects from their oath of allegiance” (124) and which gave Cecil full rein for action against Catholicism.

The Netherlands Sector The Netherlands played a model role in the Reformation. Belloc says, “It was on the model of the Dutch that the English pitted Parliament against the Crown: made commerce a new foundation for national wealth: learned how shipping could control Continental military supply” (125-126). Moreover, the Netherlands were responsible for the decline of Spanish power, and Spain was the traditional power of the time. Belloc even asserts that if the Netherlands had remained one country, World War I would not have happened.

As usual, we are given points to consider with regard to the Netherlands. First, that the “origin of the trouble was economic” (126). The religious factor, at first secondary, grew as time went on. Second, we are admonished not to read history backwards. “There was no Dutch nation,” for example (126). The Dutch did not view the Spaniards as wicked oppressors either. Third, that without the support of England, i.e. of Cecil, the revolt could not have succeeded. It was a matter, not popular, but oligarchic. The wealthy, such as William of Orange, saw it through. Lastly, there is the Burgundian influence.

The Dukes of Burgundy...had given a common form to the Low Countries; it was they who had increased the power and freedom of the little local town governments, who had deferred to and even deliberately fostered the free expression of opinion by the commercial and aristocratic bodies called the “Estates”... (129)

Yet Philip II of Spain brought to the Netherlands Spanish taxes, Spanish government, “Spanish judicial methods” (129), Spanish churchmen, and even the Spanish Inquisition. Rich and poor alike were not happy. The problem was not religion; the problem was politics and economics. “The first protests, then, were universal” (131).

The nobles, including the house of Orange, motivated by pecuniary interests, led the revolt. Philip II gave battle, defeated the Netherlands, and imposed a new, intolerable tax. The commercial Netherlands were to pay

“a ten percent tax on all trade transactions”! (135) Years later, in 1572, pirates seized “the mouths of the rivers” and “were never dislodged” (135). Orange returned and led the Calvinist resistance in the North. Spain failed. The Netherlands split and has remained split since.

Chapter Seven: The Defense

Why, when Europe was in such turmoil, did the Catholic Church not act and act quickly? Consider, first, that she herself was disorganized and burdened with corruption. Penance would have cured all, but corruption is a habit. Secondly, it always takes a routinely traditional organization to rouse itself, rediscover, and defend itself. Thirdly, the Church had to recover her health. She was weak inside and out. “But in spite of all these elements of delay, the *attempt* to call the necessary council came early” (140). The anti-Catholic myth claims the popes were afraid to call a council because of the power of such councils. The truth is that the secular rulers of Europe prevented it time and again. Only twenty four members of the hierarchy attended the first session of the Council of Trent! Yet this council (1545-1563) “saved the Catholic Church” (143).

“[T]he main factor in the resistance and recovery of Catholicism, in what may be called ‘the counter offensive,’ was the rise of that body known today as the Jesuits” (144). Why, Belloc asks, were the Jesuits so long in appearing on the scene? They “developed incidentally, from step to step” (145). They were a society, not an Order, and military in character. Fighting Islam was their original goal, but they battled for the Faith in Europe with great success. Their “personal rectitude and learning” were key (147). “If today, a man may hear Mass in Warsaw or hope that the classics shall survive our modern decay, he owes it to the Society of Jesus” (148).

Chapter 8: The Draw: 1572 - 1600 - 1648

France Civil war continued. In 1574, Henry III came to the throne, and in 1576 the Edict of Loches was promulgated. This edict gave the Protestants various rights and, as a reaction, led the Catholics to create the League, an alliance “for the maintenance of religious and national unity” (151). It was after the League brought forth their own nominee for the Crown that Henry of Navarre, the legitimate but Protestant heir, invaded France. When the dust settled and the murders ceased, Henry of Navarre was left standing. He renounced Protestantism and became Henry IV of France. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes was issued. “It set up a State within a State” (154). It gave the Protestants their own towns, law courts, government. “On this account, France was, from that time onwards, divided....and that is why, as a further consequence, Catholic culture has everywhere been permanently weakened” (150).

England As Cecil continued his campaign against the Faith, the practice of Catholicism faded from the memory of the English. Cecil did not aim to establish Calvinism; he aimed to “*prevent* a return to the old traditional society” (156). This was why Mary Queen of Scots had to be removed. She was Catholic, but her son James was Cecil’s man. Cecil attempted to get Mary implicated in plot against the life of Elizabeth. Mary was condemned to death based on the copy of an implicating letter the original of which was never produced. After this, Philip of Spain sent his Armada against England. Belloc comments, “Had the army in the succor of the English Catholics landed, there would have followed a great national rising in defense of the Faith” (159). But, in 1588, the Spanish Armada was defeated. Cecil died and his son Robert Cecil succeeded him. Elizabeth died and James Stuart succeeded her. “What clinched the business for good was the Gunpowder Plot. It was ostensibly a Catholic plot to destroy King and Parliament” (160). When the plot was exposed by the younger Cecil, it turned English sentiment against Catholicism and only in Ireland was the old Faith maintained.

The Netherlands For a short while, the Catholic South and the Protestant North united under what is called the Pacification of Ghent for the purpose of dealing with the underpaid and troublesome Spanish soldiery. The new Governor of the Netherlands was named Parma, a man “capable of grasping the complexity of a situation” and of “us[ing] the Catholic feeling in favor of his king” (163). “He recovered control of the troops; he reduced

city after city; he brought security, and the Netherlands began to recover” (163). But, in 1581, the Northern Provinces declared Philip II of Spain deposed; Spain dispersed her power, lost her Armada, and ordered Parma southward; England and France, in 1596, recognized the North as an independent country. What today we call Holland was formed and began suppressing the Faith. The South, which encompasses what today we call Belgium, remained Catholic. “The strategic model of the Reformation, the struggle in the Netherlands, was accomplished” (165).

The German Valley and Its Failure While the opening of the seventeenth century saw the crisis settling down elsewhere, in Germany it reopened. The individual German princes had power enough to defy the emperor. In 1618, Emperor Ferdinand II decided to reestablish his authority over the Empire. The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) began. At this time, there was in France a rising nationalism and a shrewd statesman-cardinal. This man would not see a strong Germany on France’s border. “Richelieu, therefore, supported the Protestant cause against the Emperor, and when that cause was in danger of defeat, he called in the best general of the day, Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden” who “checked Imperial power” (169). The war ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. The peace “left the Germans divided very much as they are now, into Catholic and Protestant” (169).

Chapter Nine: The Result

Belloc restates the “known factors” (170) of the Reformation: hatred of the Faith, corruption of the Church, the power of the Princes, the attraction of loot. Then Belloc gives us a quick rundown of the time line from the Period of Debate in which Henry VIII breaks with the Church all the way until the Peace of Westphalia.

The results of the Reformation “were twofold: its effect upon the character, and the consequent effect upon external life” (175). The isolation of the soul, caused by the Reformation, lead to competition, usury, Industrial Capitalism, and the “economic leadership” (176) of the Protestant countries. At this point, we note that the Renaissance was not advanced, but rather delayed and restricted, by the Reformation. Another “consequence of the isolation of the soul was subjectivism in philosophy” (177). This led to “philosophic anarchy,” (178) nationalism, and a confusion between Faith and emotion. The Catholic culture, which was salvaged but wounded, is now, Belloc says, “growing in strength” (179). Catholicism has taken the offensive.