Causes of the Reformation

The Reformation was one of the most significant developments of modern history. It ended the dominion of a universal religion in the Western world and helped release forces long dormant in European society. No course in world history can ignore its effects on intellectual life, the status of individuals, and the growth of political institutions. Hence the causes of the Reformation are of vital importance to the entire West.

The readings in this volume have been concerned with interpretations of the past. We are now prepared to deal explicitly with one important aspect of interpretation, the problem of causation in history. Students often believe that an event or movement was the result of a single circumstance. Such interpretations are almost always too simplified to be accurate. The reading for today describes the manner in which one contemporary historian analyzes the causes of the Reformation. The general technique he employs can be used in any historical investigation.

As you read this passage, consider the following questions:

1. What technique does the author suggest for examining causation? Does this technique imply that he agrees with the definition of history given in the first reading in this book, "What Is History?"
2. Many historians use the term "multiple causation." After reading this article, what do you think the term means?
3. What is the difference between immediate and long-range causes?
4. What tentative generalization would you be willing to make about the role of individuals as causative factors in history?

A PREFACE TO HISTORY / by Carl G. Gustavson

Sooner or later in a course dealing with European history, the question "What caused the Reformation?" is almost certain to appear. Confronted with this crisis, some people have been known to profane their bluebooks with the assertion "Martin Luther—he did it," in whatever verbose lengths they are able to contrive. Another popular aphorism that is frequently used is "The Church was corrupt," followed by a similar plethora of words. The old favorite (for certain questions), "The King was weak," is less frequently attempted here, probably because the person who can see how this one applies to the Reformation is already capable of a more intelligent type of answer. . . .

In the heat of conflict, the temptation to ascribe malignant char-
acters and purposes to one's adversaries is often irresistible. This is as true now as in the time of Luther. The political party finds it a highly useful technique to blame all the misfortune of the time upon the other party or its leaders. . . . Even in those cases where there may be a kernel of truth to the charges, these explanations are all vastly oversimplified. . . . No man in a public movement is a free agent or can act entirely according to his own free will. Although he seeks certain objectives and will strive toward them, he must take into consideration other forces or speedily come to an impasse. All the factors in his time condition the way in which he shapes his destinies and help to determine the success of his policies. . . .

Another type of error is committed by persons who overrate one single social force in a situation at the expense of other factors. While this may win temporary political advantage, in the long run serious damage may flow from such a misconception of causation. Prior to the Second World War a group of people became convinced that the United States had entered the First World War primarily because of the activities of the munitions makers; some of these zealots argued that the economic interests of the "merchants of death" were the chief cause of war. This argument, reinforced by isolationist feelings, became so popular that Congress passed laws to prevent our shipment of munitions overseas in case of hostilities. Subsequent events proved that the munitions factor was a relatively inconsequential fragment of the whole picture. Meantime, the focusing of attention on a minor cause, to the exclusion of more potent factors, weakened the American position in time of crisis.

One more instance of an inadequate conception of causation may be mentioned at this time. Very often the immediate cause—whether seen in terms of a person or of an event—receives greater emphasis than it deserves. Recognition of the event (or person) which precipitated the larger sequence of happenings does not in itself explain why the chain of development occurred. Most of us have, as children, placed a set of dominoes on end in such a way that each falling domino would trip the next one. Although the pushing of the first domino was the immediate cause for all of them toppling, the sequence would not have been possible if the set had not first been placed on end. The more remote causes in history establish the particular situation which makes the whole historical sequence possible.

*No single cause ever adequately explains a historical episode.* A
"cause" is a convenient figure of speech for any one of a number of factors which helps to explain why a historical event happened. The analogy of the dominoes is misleading to the extent that we may think of the events as following mechanically upon the original act. The direction that the medley of causes will precipitate events can never be precisely gauged while the event is occurring.

The problem of causation is inextricably connected with the whole question of movement and change in history, and some facility in dealing with it is indispensable for an understanding of the course of events. While studying several such historical episodes as the Reformation, the student should be training himself to see the various factors, the multiple causation, that enter into these situations until he learns to use this approach with present-day problems also. When a more advanced student is confronted with a question of causation, he can frequently hazard a fairly good response, even though he may not yet have learned the accepted explanation. He can do so because he has met somewhat similar instances before and will have a general idea of what the possibilities are. He has a certain fund of wisdom, a certain know-how in selecting pertinent factors, and will know which possibilities are likely, which unlikely, and which totally irrelevant. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an outline of causation in a major historical development, the beginnings of the Reformation, as an example of the type of reasoning which must go into the analysis of any such phenomenon. The same sort of approach should be used in connection with the Puritan Revolution and the French Revolution, as well as with lesser, and more simple, developments.

Quite obviously the immediate cause for the Reformation is to be found in the activity of Luther between 1517 and 1521, although the selection of a specific event may bring differences of opinion; the most likely choices would be the nailing of the ninety-five theses, the Diet of Worms, or the famous disputation with Eck, in which Luther first clearly crossed the line between Catholicism and heresy. Identifying the initial spark, however, by no means explains the enormous extent of the conflagration which followed.

Luther's ninety-five theses immediately became the best seller of that day. Great crowds gathered to applaud him as he went to the Diet of Worms. If we can decide why he suddenly experienced this popularity, we may also gain some idea of the reason for his success. First of all, anyone who champions a cause and defies authority will attract a crowd of supporters, if only for the sake of the
show. Luther had been denouncing the outrageous methods used in the sale of indulgences, an issue everyone could understand far better than discussions of abstruse theology. He was hitting out at unpopular figures, always a good way to attract a following. The friar of Wittenberg was a German, a son of the people, courageously talking up to pope and emperor, speaking for the common people and expressing what many of them felt.

Could any deeper reasons be at work that produced the quick acclaim for Luther's stand? Could it be that such a sudden blaze was generated because the inflammable materials had already been gathered by others? Had there been any earlier instances of men who preached the same viewpoint as this reformer? (Remember that the mind of the historian inevitably gravitates in the direction of the past, seeking origins, relationships, and comparisons.) If so, this must indicate a general trend of the time in the direction of the reform which the Protestants were to take.

The career of John Hus of Prague is apt to come to mind. His life story bears several marked resemblances to that of Luther, and his proposals were very similar to those of his successors; there was a major difference however—he was burned for his temerity. A whole century before the Lutheran Reformation some of its principles were already widely approved, as witness the obstinate refusal of the Bohemians to give up the reforms of Hus. (Note, also, that Bohemia borders on Saxony, Luther's home district.) Other reformers had also preceded Luther: Peter Waldo, Wyclif, Savonarola, to mention the most prominent. Nor should the criticism of the Church by such writers as Erasmus and Valla be forgotten.... Consequently, the historian may fairly assume that whatever the reasons for the Reformation were, they were operative to a considerable degree long before Luther. The Reformation could, conceivably, have begun in 1415, and it might have been postponed beyond 1520.

One point to note is that the criticism of the Church usually did not carry with it a threat to leave the institution. It was criticized, its officials castigated, its practices and policies assailed in the same spirit in which Americans treat their governmental institutions. The object was reform, not separation, the attacks representing no more a desire to destroy the Church than we expect to abolish Congress. Some people might dislike papal authority in much the same way as some Americans suspect the power of a strong President. When Luther appeared at Worms, he had no expectation of founding a
separate church, and in fact he may have gone to the diet with a lurking hope of converting Charles V to his own viewpoint.

Luther dared to go to Worms. Powerful reasons must have driven him to risk the fate of Hus by making this journey. The assurance that his own prince, the Elector of Saxony, was on his side and the boisterous plaudits of the multitudes undoubtedly emboldened him, but beyond all this was an inner necessity, a personal conviction of a spiritual mission, that forced him to speak his mind. Luther's actions were indubitably born of motives other than personal ambition or opportunism: biographies of the reformer fully document the gradual development of his convictions from the time he became a friar until he stood in full defiance against the existent ecclesiastical authorities. This must be accounted as an instance where spiritual force acted as a primary impulse in history.

Only a rugged, roughhewn, obstinate man could have shouldered his way to success in the circumstances—the looming figure of Luther makes the personal factor important in the causation of the Reformation. Unless the odds are too great, the victory is likely to go to the side inspired by genuine zeal for a cause. Historical movements, however much they are impelled by economic and social factors, after all are carried through by men. Their states of mind are important. Even Luther, however, could have accomplished little more than propagate his ideas if he had not found many others in the same mood. Had Luther alone, or a small circle of disciples only, held Protestant ideas, no social force of sufficient magnitude to create historical events would have existed. When tens of thousands, however, were possessed of the same general outlook, the scene was set for action, and it took only Luther's words and actions to precipitate the formation of a spiritual force of enormous extent and potency. We are dealing with a large-scale example of a social force of a spiritual nature such as was described in the preceding chapter. In time, also, the Reformation stimulated an equally powerful reaction to it in Catholicism, a renewed spiritual vigor on the Catholic side.

The circumstances were ready for the man, and his religious zeal furnished a focal point for the hitherto diffused causes for the Reformation. One may legitimately question if any one single force, albeit as powerful as this one, could in itself have altered the course of history. From our perspective, at least, a number of social forces seem to converge upon the developing events and carry them forward.

We have seen gunpowder and the better ocean-going vessels
make possible the expansion of the European into other parts of the world. The printing press, another technological advance, served as a tool of incalculable importance in the Reformation. Someone might argue very plausibly that no Reformation could have occurred had it not been for the invention of the printing press. Without this method of spreading ideas, the Lutheran doctrines could not have been disseminated so rapidly, and, if support had not quickly manifested itself, the emperor and Church might have succeeded in suppressing the movement. The press also aided the reformers by undermining the claim of the Church to pose as the custodian of final truth, since it was now becoming possible for more persons to acquire a copy of the Bible.

Social forces emerging from economic motives, powerful as they were, must have exercised an important influence on these events. The kind of merchant that we encountered in Florence or in sixteenth-century England, and who was also active in Germany, would deplore the constant flow of money to Rome. Most people, indeed, would feel indignation at this continual drain on the national wealth, and any rebel against papal authority would find useful ammunition here. The incessant sniping at the wealth of the bishops and the monasteries was partly due to the unfortunate contrast with the early ideal of the Church, but the criticisms were also likely to remind people that their contributions were not always usefully applied. Especially would the growing middle class deplore the drag on productivity caused by the clerical possession of land, the numerous church festivals, and the presumed idleness of the monks. With their ideals of thrift and industry, the middle class found many church habits irritating. Luther appealed to these feelings, with violent and exaggerated words, in his Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: “What has brought us Germans to such a pass that we have to suffer this robbery and this destruction of our property by the pope? . . . Do we still wonder why princes, cities, foundations, convents, and people grow poor? We should rather wonder that we have anything left to eat.”

We know that the nobles were always eager to expand their holdings. They had long eyed the lands of the Church, and the Reformation, with its expropriation of clerical wealth, offered the awaited opportunity. Many of England’s noble families had their origin in grants of this kind, and these were likely to remain Protestant, since any reversion to the old order would jeopardize their new acqui-
sitions. The princes of Germany likewise benefitted in this fashion, and the Crown in England and the Scandinavian countries added to its wealth at the expense of the Church.

After this brief survey of the impact of social forces studied earlier, let us see what other factors were influential in the situation. For instance, the thought must occur to one that the incipient restlessness should have been crushed by the imperial regime. Why did Luther "get away with it" when others before him had failed? The truth is that Charles V was in a dilemma. New on the throne, he was uncertain of his support and would hesitate before alienating his German subjects. Luther's own prince, the Elector of Saxony, was friendly to the reformers and possessed the force and prestige to raise a rebellion. The loud acclaim of the friar must have alarmed Charles and dissuaded him from a highly unpopular move. He undoubtedly underestimated the potentialities of the movement, the more so since he had grave political problems to grapple with elsewhere. The Ottoman Turks were approaching the far-flung borders of his realm, and Charles needed German unity in order to meet this threat. All in all, "the king was weak," not so much because of his own personality as in his inheritance of an enfeebled government from his predecessors.

The Crown was one of the institutions which should have suppressed the rebellion. The other was the Church itself. After many centuries as the universal Church of Western Europe, it had undergone both a loss of positive vitality and a diminishing strength in comparison with new emerging forces. It had failed to suppress the Hussite heretics. The internecine struggle between two organs of the Church, the papacy and the council, in the conciliar movement might be seen as a portent of disruption. Perhaps most significant of all, the Renaissance was having a debilitating spiritual effect upon the papacy; popes who were using spiritual resources for temporal ends were blunting their own swords. Having centralized the Church, they failed to live up to their responsibilities. By making the papacy synonymous with the Church, they drew upon the Church itself a shower of invective. The fact that many believed the Church to be corrupt shook the all-important allegiance of the great masses of the people.

The Church no longer possessed as much power, proportionately, either. New forces were rising which had long challenged the Church and which now overwhelmed it. One of these was the national state.
Even at the height of the Middle Ages potent secular authorities had challenged the papacy. A king might possess the men and swords, the brute force, which could humiliate a pope, as Philip IV’s men did Boniface VIII.

Inasmuch as the Church itself could not muster a physical force to resist the state, the king’s chief anxiety in such a conflict concerned the question whether his men would follow him against the Bishop of Western Christendom. As long as men were, in the last analysis, more loyal to the Church than to the Crown, the universal Church retained its power. The medieval sovereigns who defied the papacy were not attempting to rebel against the Church for the purpose of setting up a separate one. They continued to work within the framework of the older institutions.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, national kings continued to add to their power, and in France, England, and Spain these rulers arrogated to themselves increasing control over the national churches. Seen in the light of later events, the rivalry of nations during the Avignon period, the schism, and the conciliar movement betoken a growing national feeling which would burst asunder the ancient bonds. The Catholic Church was faced with its perennial problem, how to keep its international character although threatened by national feelings and provincial attachments. The Church, after all, was essentially an institution of the southland. From thence it had come, there it had matured and built up its customs and symbols. At one time, the cultural inferiority of the north caused these peoples to accept southern leadership as natural; as the northern peoples developed, however, the subservience to the south began to rankle.

In the northern countries, a sense of nationalism was a strong factor in the break with Rome. In Germany, where other national aspirations went unsatisfied, this was particularly true. The Reformation passed into effect in Sweden coincident with the overthrow of Danish rule. The English struggle against Spain would tend to associate the state church with national existence in that country. The native language was substituted for Latin in the churches of these regions. In nearly all instances, the advent of the Reformation brought added power and wealth to the kings or territorial princes. The institutional factor is a powerful one in the causation of the Reformation; one institution, the Church, was losing ground to another institution, the national monarchy, and the spiritual crisis
precipitated by Luther offered the territorial princes of Germany and the kings of northern Europe a splendid opportunity to establish state control over the Church.

The foregoing outline, which by no means exhausts the possibilities of causation in the Reformation, does provide a check list of factors likely to be important in such a phenomenon. When a student is faced with a problem of this nature, a few general questions are of great assistance in analyzing the situation. When these are “tried on for size,” some will immediately suggest causes, while others may have little relevance. The following nine should prove helpful:

1. What was the immediate cause for the event?
2. Had there been a background of agitation for the principles victorious during this episode?
3. Were personalities involved on either side whose strengths or weaknesses may have helped to determine the outcome of the struggle?
4. Were any new and potent ideas stimulating the loyalty of a considerable number of people?
5. How did the economic groups line up on the issue?
6. Were religious forces active?
7. Did any new technological developments influence the situation?
8. Can the events be partially explained by weakened or strengthened institutions?
9. Was the physical environment itself a factor in the situation?

It will be noticed that questions four through eight relate to various social forces already enumerated. A systematic analysis of a problem of causation with the aid of these questions will ensure that all the major historical factors have been taken into consideration.

The factors in the above list obviously do not carry equal weight in the causation of the Reformation. Nor will they do so when applied to other historical events. Attempting to assess their proportionate importance, in any given case, is an excellent exercise in reasoning for the beginning student. Some individuals, reading the textual account of the theology, are apt to regard this as unimportant and will assert that the real reasons lie in the social and economic sphere. Others, of a more religious nature, are likely to take the religious ideas seriously, and in so doing probably better appreciate the motives by which the reformers believed themselves guided. Some will feel that the personality of the leading reformers bulk large in the outcome: others regard them as the puppets of more impersonal forces. Geographical influences will receive greater emphasis from some than from others. Unfortunately, no method exists for measuring these causes or for attaining a final verifiable evaluation. One possible empirical test which may help to weigh the respective merits of each
cause is to imagine the Reformation with that specific factor omitted; would its absence have changed the course of events? It is in the interpretation of history that perplexity begins, but also much of the fascination.

Some perspicacious individuals may decide the proportionate values of the factors vary with the country. Certain reasons may not apply at all in England or the Netherlands. Then, too, how account for Italy and Spain, where the Reformation made little headway? Were the factors listed above too weak in these countries, or did still other considerations enter the picture in these regions? The same causes may have different effects in different circumstances. In certain states with relatively strong central governments, such as England, Sweden, and Denmark, the Crown itself took the lead in severing relations with Rome, while in others, France, Spain, and Austria, the ruling dynasties opposed the religious changes. Ideas of the Renaissance undoubtedly helped to stimulate Protestant ideas in Germany, yet the Renaissance equally surely was a factor militating against the success of the Reformation in France.

One warning needs to be added. The foregoing represents an attempt to provide a systematic approach to causation for the beginner. Reasoning, however, cannot be effective without the facts. A student is using facts from a textbook, class notes, and whatever other reading is provided. The historian, while using a basically similar approach, cannot be satisfied until he finds genuine evidence upon which to base his conclusions. There is only one way to achieve this; go to the evidence itself, which is made up of the records of that age. A reading of a few of Luther's pamphlets is apt to be revealing. The historian will want to read the opinions of many people who were contemporaries of Luther and Calvin. He will examine the declarations from the Roman Catholic side of the controversy. Other factors must be investigated. If he carefully examines the record in a spirit of humility, prepared to recognize tenacious reality rather than what he wishes to find, he is then prepared to formulate a worthwhile interpretation of the events.