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Religious Conflicts in the 16th and 17th Centuries

In the 16th and 17th centuries, religious conflicts flooded over the land. With the occurrence of the Reformation, many new religious groups transpired which lead to the loss of religious unity across Europe. As Catholics converted to Protestantism, or branches thereof, religious tension grew. The Holy Roman Empire craved to once more impose Catholicism across Europe. However, this proved to not be an easy task. Religious groups including Catholics, Protestants, and even Calvinists and Huguenots were all fighting for their beliefs, rights, and protection of their religion. During this time the Thirty Year’s War was seen in the Holy Roman Empire, Sweden, France, and even Danish provinces. Each of these locations was looking for religious rights and a balance of power in Europe. In France, conflicts went down among the royalty which transpired from differences in religious beliefs even with an attempt to settle the disagreement. Then in the Netherlands disagreements about religion and rights with Spain lead to conflicts which reaped the land along with the desire for independence. Throughout European history, wars and conflicts have transpired, largely out of religious contention, and left major effects and new outcomes that caused changes across Europe.

           One of the biggest and longest wars that begun with tension among religious groups was the Thirty Years War, which would take place in four phases. Several events lead up to the start of the war which sparked the beginning of this long-lasting flame. With the signing of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 the law of “Cuius regno, eius religio” which translates from Latin to whose realm, his religion. This states that whoever reigns over a region, chooses the religion. However, only two religions were included in the Peace of Augsburg, Lutheranism, and Catholicism. Therefore, Calvinism, which was rapidly spreading across Europe; especially in the North, was not included in the treaty. This led to the beginning of the first phase, the Bohemian phase, which was at a local scale but would lead to the occurrence of the rest of the phases. In Bohemia, modern-day Czech Republic, Protestants maintained a majority of the populous. However, Bohemia was ruled under a Catholic ruler, which meant that under the Peace of Augsburg Bohemia was a Catholic state, which meant Protestantism was not allowed. Yet, the Peace of Augsburg was not the only treaty which led to issues with the Protestants. In 1609, the Habsburgs granted Protestant and Catholic tolerance within the estates of Bohemia through the signing of the Letter of Majesty. Although, years later during the reign of Ferdinand II as Holy Roman Emperor; in his attempt to restore widespread Catholicism across Europe, he revoked the Letter of Majesty. This caused further conflict with the Protestants which eventually lead to the Defenestration of Prague. The Defenestration of Prague was initiated by the Catholics. The emperor sent messengers to talk to the Protestants about their religion. Still, the Protestants were steadfast in their beliefs and acted against the Catholics. Therefore, when the Catholic messengers arrived the Protestants threw them out of a window 70 feet above ground. After this small act of defiance, Ferdinand II was not happy with the actions of the Protestants which lead to the Battle of White Mountain, where the Bohemians were confronted. This battle proved to be a Catholic victory, and although a local conflict, still helped the Catholics retain leadership in Bohemia. This was the end of the first phase, which leads to the second phase, the Danish phase. This portion of the Thirty Years War took hold in Denmark, which reigned over portions of the Holy Roman Empire. Due to the signing of the Peace of Augsburg in previous years, the ruler got to make the executive decision over the religion. The king of Denmark, unlike Bohemia, was a Lutheran. Therefore, he has not following the typical mold of the Holy Roman Empire, which was to reimpose Catholicism across Europe. With the state of Denmark being Protestant, those who were involved with the ideas of Luther and the Protestant religion were helped. With a Lutheran King in power in the Holy Roman Empire, Denmark took advantage of their newly found religious unity an attempted to invade the Holy Roman Empire. However, this did not play to Denmark or the Protestant advantage. The Holy Roman Empire or the Hapsburgs hired a man by the name of Wallenstein, who was a mercenary. He helped to take back control of the Holy Roman Empire from the Danish. This led to sending Danes back into Denmark and away from the heavily catholic Holy Roman Empire. Next, came the Swedish phase. However, unlike the stages before this was a continental phase, reaching across various areas of Europe. This poses different from stages before which were on a local scale and conflict only reached the areas of origin. During the Swedish phase, Sweden finally becomes directly involved in the Thirty Years War. Gustavus Adolphus, who was King of Sweden was a Lutheran. Therefore, the state of Sweden was a Protestant country and therefore against the Catholic side of the Holy Roman Empire, which dominated much of Europe in the 16th and early 17th centuries. However, unlike previous leaders which ruled a Protestant reign, Gustavus was military mastermind. He caused the Protestants to win this phase due to his use of mobile artillery. During the Battle of Brietnfield, Adolphus confronted the Catholics. The battle was not playing to Gustavus’s side in the beginning, but due to this use do mobile artillery he was able to win the Battle. Although, mobile artillery was not the power that the Swedes had over the Holy Roman Empire. The Swedish were receiving funding for batter from the French. Even though the French reigned a Catholic country they choose their side with Sweden with other plans in mind. This phase of the war was largely political drawn. Therefore, the French did not have religion completely on the mind, rather they were thinking in a politique mindset. They were making rational decisions over political thought rather than those centered around religion. With this mindset, France was striving for a balance of power in Europe. France was surrounded by land reigned over the Holy Roman Empire. They saw that the Holy Roman Empire was dominating power around Europe and did not want to lose their state to them. Therefore, to gain a balance of power France sided with Sweden to weaken the Holy Roman Empire. Yet, later on, after the death of Gustavus Adolphus, on the battlefield on the Thirty Years War, there was a major decline in Sweden’s active leadership role in the Protestant cause. This was a turning point for the Swedish, the Protestants lost much of their power and the French pulled back militarily and were no longer funding the Swedish. Still, the Thirty Years War was not over yet. The final phase was the French phase. This phase was the largest and bloodiest phase; however, it had the most effects on Europe as a whole. During this phase the roles of the Swedish and French switch. Now, rather than the French funding the Swedish, the Swedish were funding the French at battle. In 1648 the war was ended due to the signing of the Peace of Westphalia. Several changes in Europe resulted in the addition of the Peace of Westphalia. For example, part of the treaty was that a new state system would be implemented across Europe. This new system is remarkably much like the system in which Europe if dominated under today. The state system led to the independence of many states, for example, the Spanish Hapsburgs lost control over the Dutch Netherlands and the Dutch Republic was born in 1581 and was now formally recognized as independent from Spain. Not only did the Danes gained independence under the new state system, but so did the Swedish, they finally gained their state, Sweden. Also, France gained new territories such as most of Alsace, parts of Western Germany, and territories along the French and Germany border. Much of this land gained by the French was previously part of the Holy Roman Empire. This led to the strengthening of power under the French and the weakening of power in the Holy Roman Emperor, this meant that power and authority was also lost among the Hapsburg family, which had reigned over the Holy Roman Empire for years. Along with rising power in France, many German princes were also gaining more power from the Treaty of Westphalia, which actually due to the decline in power of the Holy Roman Empire led them to be more powerful than the Holy Roman Emperor, even with this power Germany would remain weak and divided for 222 years before finally becoming a fully unified state in 1870. Furthermore, with the newly found power in Germany, Prussia would be born which would lead to the rise of the Brandenburg dynasty. With the loss of power in the Holy Roman Empire and the creation of new independent states, the balance of power was achieving its place in Europe. With balance of power achieved England and Holland were able to take lead in trade in Europe, and England also built its navy to become a major naval power. Although, even with many political results from the Treaty of Westphalia and the end of the Thirty Years War. The Peace of Augsburg was reevaluated, and Calvinism was added to the list of religions that could be practiced in the Holy Roman Empire. The Thirty Years War marked an end of religious wars reigning across Europe which largely left the Catholics and Protestants at peace.

           Even though the Thirty Years War ended religious conflict fundamentally in Europe, religious conflicts arose before that time. Years before the Thirty Years war religious struggles wreaked havoc across France. There were several causes of this uprising. First off, this war was often nicknamed the war of 3 Henrys which played out from 1574 through 1589. The Henrys that played roles in this conflict were Henry III, Henry IV (also known as Henry of Navarre), and Henry of Guise. Henry III was the son of Catherine de Medici and Henry II. Catherine de Medici at age 14 married the French King, Henry II. They had 6 children; however, only 4 survived into adulthood. When Henry passed away, none of his sons were old enough to take control of the throne, therefore, Catherine took control politically even with the little experience she had. Religious conflict was scattered across Europe, including France, therefore, Catherine wanted to save France under her power. This led to her marrying her daughter off to Henry of Navarre, part of the Bourbon dynasty. This took place after conflict between the other two Henrys, Henry III and Henry of Guise. Henry III was in control of France for a short while until Henry of Guise who was heavily Catholic got at each other’s throats, which lead to them assassinating each other while trying to control. This left only Henry of Navarre, who married Margot de Medici, Catherine’s daughter. This was Catherine’s attempt at reconciling Catholics and Huguenots. She planned to have her Catholic daughter marry Henry of Navarre who was Protestant. This marriage did not, however, bring peace, but further conflict. The night before the wedding a massacre broke out. This massacre was coined the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, due to the predicament that it occurred on St. Bartholomew’s Day. This massacre left 3,00- killed due to Catholics killing Protestants. However, little did many know that this massacre was encouraged by Catherine de Medici. Even with the massacre Henry IV still became king of France. During his reign many Catholics were against the fact that he remained Protestant, therefore he converted to Catholicism to attempt to bring unity among the citizens of France. Later on, however, he also tried to bring further reconcile by enacting the Edict of Nantes. The Edict of Nantes gave religious freedom to protestants in fortified towns, where they were able to publicly worship. However, due to religious upheaval and staunchly Catholic citizens being in highly urbanized areas such as Paris, Protestants were not able to practice in these locations. This shows how Henry IV, although converted to Catholicism, never actually fully converted and still supported his side. Therefore, many believed he never fully converted which lead to his assassination. This war lead to many outcomes and changes in European history. With this war, the Valois Dynasty fell with the marriage of Margot and Henry IV, which brought the first generation of the Bourbon Dynasty. Also, with the formation of the Edict of Nantes religious persecution was minimalized and brought to peace to a small extent. Not only that, but much of the French nobility attempted to show independence by becoming Huguenots which opposed lords. Lastly, this war lead into the Age of Scientific Revolution in which France became a power and the fields of sciences such as anatomy, astronomy, and more were explored in deeper detail.

           While religious wars were taking hold in France, they were also in the Netherlands while competing with Spain. With Charles V finally retiring from being Holy Roman Emperor he divided his power between his brother and his son, Phillip II. Phillip II received control over Spain and parts of the Netherlands. Phillip II was staunchly Catholic and was strongly imposed to reimpose Catholicism on Europe, including the Netherlands which was namely Calvinist. This divide among the populous and its leader lead to religious upheaval in the Netherlands. Along with this, Phillip wanted Spain to rule and maintain dominance across Europe. During the reign of Philip II, many battles occurred. In 1516 the Battle of Lepanto was a huge victory for Phillip due to his overthrow and victory against the Turks in the Mediterranean. Not only that but, in 1588 Phillips Spanish Armada attacked England which helped lead to Spain continually growing power. Power from Spain was also gained by the control of colonies in the New World. Even with all this power, Spain was not able to keep religious unity across its empire. In 1566 outbreaks broke out in the Netherlands due to Calvinists not wanting to have Catholicism imposed on them. Later on, after the death of Phillip II, Spain and the Netherlands finally settled the religious disputes by bringing a twelve-year truce. Then later on in 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years War, the Netherlands finally gained its independence from Spain.

           Throughout European history, it is evident that religion was a major part of the lives of people. This passion of religion was deeply rooted in both political minds and also in the beliefs of the populous. As time went on religious disturbances spotted the land, these conflicts ended empires and dynasties, brought thousands of deaths, lead to the creations of treaties in which attempted for religions to coexist, and even the independence and creations of new states. It is clear to say that religion and the conflicts that occurred from the ideas thereof helped to shape Europe to what it is now. These disputed brought changes and new ways of life to Europe which lasted for decades to follow.