Notes on Martin Luther
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Introduction: The state of the church in the late fifteenth century.

The medieval church was by far the most important institution of its time.

It covered the **whole of western Europe** with a network of authority **centred on** the sophisticated administrative machinery of the **Roman Curia.**

The Pope, its titular head, was an elected monarch chosen by a process established in the eleventh century, and its diplomatic service was a model which secular regimes strove to emulate.

Since the twelfth century successive popes had established themselves as the equals of Emperors and the superiors of kings.

The church had evolved in the late Roman Empire by a process of conversion from the top down.

Although popular evangelism had been earnestly pursued, it had usually been based upon a recognised political position, starting with the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

Because of this method of evolution, the church had been readily absorbed by the society which it served.

At first every town had had its bishop, and the remnants of that system still survived in Italy in the fifteenth century, but over most of Europe it had adapted itself to the emergence of feudalism.

Archbishops and bishops were great lords, endowed with lands and expected to provide military service by surrogate.

Parish churches were established and endowed by aristocratic patrons, and monasteries granted large estates by kings and peers.

The whole structure of the church thus became thoroughly integrated with that of secular lordships and monarchies.

As a result there developed a jurisdictional interface between ecclesiastical law and the various temporal codes which controlled land and the revenues derived from it.

The English statute of Mortmain, which forbade the granting of further lands to the church without a royal licence was a typical example.

Because the church was a great landholder at all levels, there were constant skirmishes along this frontier, and when the church resorted to the spiritual sanction of excommunication to get its way, it was generally felt to be abusing its power.

There could also be other causes of friction.

Religious houses occupied many prime sites in German towns, and when the monks and friars declined to perform the civic duties which went with those sites, on the grounds that such duties were not permitted by their vocation, there was widespread resentment.

Because of its ubiquitous presence and high status, the church was constantly embroiled in politics.

It was politics which created the papal schism in 1378, and sustained it until 1417 to the great scandal of honest churchmen.

It was also politics which created the conciliar movement in the fifteenth century, designed to convert the papacy into a constitutional monarchy, a movement which was eventually defeated by the practical demands of the office rather than by any decision of principle.

By the late fifteenth century the Pope was for most practical purposes an Italian prince, and he conducted his policies in a manner appropriate to that status.

It was because of his power in this respect as well as his international ecclesiastical position that the mechanics of papal elections became a focus for political activity, and a field in which the rivalries of major European rulers were worked out.

It is not surprising that many felt that all this was a very long way from the fishermen of Galilee.

The church had gained this position in the first place,

partly by deploying its supernatural pretensions and
partly because it fulfilled a cultural need.

Its claim to control access to the after-life through faith in Jesus Christ was appealing and eventually compelling to the educated elite who counselled kings and princes, and through them to the rulers themselves.

The symbolism of its sacraments carried conviction, and the intercessory role of its priesthood became established.

It was by claiming to wield the keys of the kingdom of heaven that the papacy came to enjoy the authority which it did, and in every parish it was comforting for the layman to know that a similar power resided in his vicar or curate.

The clergy became perilous to cross, and that carried temptations which should not have arisen.

The parson who 'cursed for his tithe' was not a popular figure, but he was thought to be an indispensable one.

At the same time, the church carried the focus for of literacy and of cultural memory.

Based as it was upon the written word of scripture, it placed a unique emphasis upon 'book learning', and at a time when secular society was based upon the practical needs of a military caste, it came to enjoy a monopoly of education.

Education meant knowledge, and knowledge meant power.

Writing works of philosophy or theology became clerical monopolies also, as did the composition of chronicles and histories wherein the collective memory of the society became enshrined.

Clergy became the secretaries and civil servants to kings, and crucial counsellors in all matters of civilian judgement.

They administered kingdoms, and served as Treasurers and Justiciars.

They controlled universities and schools, so that only in parts of Italy did a tradition of secular education survive.

Elsewhere to be learned meant to be destined for ordination.

With such vital cultural and governmental roles to fulfil, and so much wealth deposited into its care, it is not surprising that a career in the church became immensely appealing, or that many were attracted to it who had no spiritual vocation.

Monasteries had a similar appeal to those who sought refuge from the turmoil and hazards of life in the ordered routines of the *opus dei*, which claimed in addition to offer a direct route to heaven.

Women who were repelled by the physical demands of marriage, or who were not sought in marriage, could find a similar refuge in nunneries, where they also might find some chance of earning respect for their personal qualities.

The church was thus enmeshed with lay society at every level and in countless different circumstances.

Its clergy, both regular and secular and of every status, were often worthy enough, and many showed a genuine spirituality.

But the temptations were too numerous, and the artificial constraints of celibacy too tight for many to endure.

There were consequently many bad clergy, who disobeyed the rules, corrupt ecclesiastical institutions and far-fetched pretensions to authority.

The demand for reform was endemic in the church, and had surfaced powerfully in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

It surfaced again in the fifteenth, aided by the chequered history of the papal office, and by an unrelated revival in secular education which produced for the first time an informed **critique, not of its faith but of its pretensions and behaviour.**

At the same time also the gap (which had always potentially existed) between the faith of the elite and that of the population at large began to widen ominously.