

court of justice, of which the emperor was the highest judge. Another development was the **Reichsregiment** – the Imperial political council – over which the emperor was president. Most of these institutions failed to effect real political reform, however. Despite the appearance of such national common bodies the political problem of pre-Reformation Germany was not fragmentation so much as the need and widespread expectation that each minor authority be consulted on each and every single issue. This is what Mullett wrote about it (p.12): “Germany was not an authoritarian political organisation but one bound by law, custom, respect for rights. Thus, when it came to a

common tax, people might pay it or not as they felt inclined. In the sixteenth-century, this lack of coercive authority was crucial in allowing the Lutheran Reformation to take hold.” Keep this quote in mind. I’ve mentioned the emperor a couple times now, let’s look that and some of those authorities.



The role of the emperor

The most important years of Luther’s life were under two emperors, Maximilian I (left) and his grandson Charles V (right) and, despite what I wrote earlier, the position of emperor was still considerable important, but we have to make a distinction between what the



position meant *in theory* and *in reality*.

In theory ...

The emperor was Europe’s pre-eminent ruler. He was the leader of all European and Christian authorities. Moreover, he was “holy” and, thus, had special obligations for both the protection and care of Christendom and the church from all threats – internal and external. Again, in theory, the emperor also shared the highest spiritual responsibilities with the pope.

In reality, however ...

The picture was much different. First, he could not expect to exercise any political authority outside the empire, save on any dynastic lands he may control, unless he could enforce his will through military means or *via* marriage or peace treaties. Second, the popes were hardly likely to welcome a co-supreme authority over the church. But, let’s return to theory for a moment. The emperor was increasingly (and one might say, unreasonably) expected to lead Germany itself back to a pre-eminent position among the nations of Europe which it should hold as the inheritor of the “Roman” Empire. The emperor was thought to embody German nationalism too, and was expected therefore to safeguard German self-respect in the face of ever-continuing French success and consolidation. So, the emperor was to:

- combat Italian influences in the Germanic church
- fix the church (i.e., correct all the abuses, etc.)
- protect Germany from all threats foreign and domestic
- and, make Germany the first nation of Europe (as Germans thought it should be and dreamed it once had been)

In practice, when Maximilian or, more so Charles (both Burgundians) tried to perform these tasks they found they simply could not achieve much, often running into a wall of opposition from the very people who expected leadership out of them – the electors, princes, minor rulers and imperial free cities. In many ways, therefore, Luther stepped into the socio-political breach that existed between the theory and the reality of the emperor’s position. If the emperor, who wasn’t German, could not embody German nationalism from his lofty position then perhaps Luther could at the



Topic 3: The German Catholic Church



Overview – In this next section we will examine the religious and secular powers of the bishops; the parish clergy; anticlericalism, and popular piety; as well as the influence of humanism

As outlined in previous topics it is clear that at the start of the sixteenth century the German political and economic situations were unstable at best. This instability had a knock on effect over society, causing class and demographic tensions. In theory the church was supposed to be a unifying factor; the one place where all men were equal in the sight of God. However, like any other institution, the church too was hierarchical, politicized, and in many ways failing to meet the expectations of the laity in very trying times.

Overview of the church's hierarchy and power

It was noted earlier that the church exercised considerable economic, political and social power over the masses (and the rulers). It was noted that three of the electors were churchmen, but that there were also fifty other ecclesiastical princes and no less than seventy other bishops. The church was a supranational institution, of course, but it served as the temporal power in many parts of Germany, especially in the central Rhineland where some states were directly ruled by bishops (in the same way as princes ruled other lands or the pope ruled at Rome). It bears repeating that at any given time in the pre-Reformation period between a quarter and a third of Germany was directly ruled by the higher clergy. Like the popes of the period these prince-bishops were selected out of the local aristocratic families (rising all the inherent local class issues) and, again like the popes they shared the more secular concerns of their own families – dynastic needs, expansion of familial holdings, humiliation of rivals – and held these as rather more important than the concerns of their spiritual callings. We should not really see this as controversial, however; there was tremendous social pressure on higher clergymen to take just this kind of position. Questions would have been raised if a successful man did not see to the needs and success of his family! This point cannot be stressed enough that the church's land holdings were huge and thereby many of its prelates, archbishops, bishops, abbots, abbesses, deans as well as the heads of the Teutonic Order and the Order of St John were political leaders of states and senior clergymen (secular and spiritual leaders). Many prince-prelates employed subsidiary bishops to carry out religious functions while they devoted themselves to government. At a lower level, priests, drawing income from church livings carried out educational, charitable, administrative and academic functions as well.

In the pre-Reformation period and for some time afterward the church largely regulated European society. At the national level cardinals and papal legates (diplomats or envoys) acted as the points of contact between the international and national churches while archbishops and bishops acted as the points of contact between central government (or the princely court) and the localities. At the parish or local level the priest was the dominant figure in the community – either performing alone (in rural areas) or acting in association with one or two elite families (in the towns) in terms of social, political or cultural influence. On the outside of this structure were the monasteries, convents and friaries, each with a particular role to play. At the top of the structure in ways ascribed, achieved or merely assumed, sat the pope, the cardinals, councils, and university masters. In many ways the religious, social, political and economic ideas of the church were the ideas practised by and/or enforced upon the masses. The masses were on the whole generally happy with the structures and practices, rituals and ceremonies but, the higher up the social scale one goes the less contentment one seemed to find. It was an impotent discontent, however; as yet there were no widely known legitimate alternative available.

The mission of the church was pastoral care – that is, the ministering to, preaching to, and teaching of the laity in the ways of Christianity. This is sometimes called “cure of souls” – clergy were to shepherd souls to salvation. This mission was organized in a diocesan structure across the continent, each diocese under a bishop. And, like any temporal lord these bishops also had a great many responsibilities placed on their shoulders and needed dependable financial underpinning. Thus they were also major landowning magnates with large estates to oversee. Indeed, a bishop in some parts of Europe was more powerful than the local prince. All of this required a massive personal staff.