THE THIRTY YEARS WAR:
THE DISENGAGEMENT OF RELIGION FROM GOVERNMENT

PRESENTED BY JONATHAN ESTERMAN
NOVEMBER 2011
Introduction

The Thirty Years War was the last truly religious war: neighboring countries fought at-arms in the name of Catholicism or Protestantism, smearing the other. The result? A departure from religion as the primary decision-making force in Europe. This departure continued through the years, to present day, where most of Europe is in great need of the Gospel. The decrease in Catholicism and Protestantism began about 1625, close to the Thirty Years War, and continued. While the decrease is witnessed more impressively after 1675, it is to note that the Thirty Years War had a “final straw” that led to the decrease.¹

The United States faces a similar plight today. The Cold War, America’s fight against the “godless” Communists, concluded with a generation disenchanted with religion, Christianity in particular, which has led to today’s new atheists, and stances for divorce, abortion, and homosexual marriage, all under the new age concept of tolerance, but with the requisite of intolerance against those that are not part of the “tolerance foundation.” At this, Christianity finds itself in a deep trouble in America, as more youth adopt tolerance and new age viewpoints, condemning the Christian church and its doctrine for being unaccepting of the modern lifestyle.

Could America have avoided this scenario? Could the Christian West have stood tall, and claimed its nation back from the “prayer police?” As history is coined to continually repeat itself, and realization that America is not different or separated from Europe, it would do American Christians well to cast their gaze to the decrepit and bare steeples across the European countryside.

Many historians have accused the Thirty Years War as the tipping point toward secularism in government, which then in turn led to a secular civilization and culture.\(^2\)

What was the Thirty Years War? What were the political and religious tensions that brought people to the brink of slaughter in the name of G-d? How did the Thirty Years War impact the European landscape overall? What were the religious implications from the resolution of this war? Is the Thirty Years War truly at fault for the decline of Catholicism and Christianity in Europe? What should American Christians look to as tolerance is more heavily promoted, and atheism re-dawns on the democratic public?

**What Was the Thirty Years War?**

Many historians have limited their definition of the Thirty Years war to take place between 1618 and 1648, based off the German perception of religion being the primary matter of engagement and battle. In 1938, however, C. V. Wedgwood wrote with a European viewpoint in concern, placing religion on the back burner and the Franco-Hasburg political turmoil as the primary means of war. This viewpoint of the structure of European politics changes the turmoil of official war in 1618 to a more humble beginning of political unrest in the 1530s. And while the official end of the war with the peace at Westphalia dates 1648, there is much conjecture that the disagreements have dated pamphlets as far as 1667.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, there were religious tensions set to frustrate the political turmoil, and bring manipulated peace to an all-scale war that would devastate and decimate the German country. It

\(^2\) Ibid.
is reported that the estimated population of Germany at the end of the war was 4 million, from the initial population of 15 million.\(^4\)

The Thirty Years War did, while argued, have clear religious overtones. Prior to outbreak, Catholics and Protestants were at-arms with each other. Dependent on the current leader, one of the two experienced persecution and torture. Freedom to choose religion belonged only to the rulers, not to the commonwealth.\(^5\) An attempted uprising of the Protestants against the Catholic league occurred in 1608, with the formation of the Evangelical Union. The EU had little chance of stance against the Papacy, however, and found defeat in their attempted rebellion by 1626.\(^6\) By the end of the war, it was essentially a power struggle rather than a fight for religion. It ended with the Peace of Westphalia, but not necessarily in a way that appeased all proponents.\(^7\) It seemed to have started with Protestant attacks against the Catholic league, in an attempt to break free from the papacy oversight and cardinal rule, and ended with distaste for religion being a motivating factor in civil and governmental decisions.\(^8\)

**Peace of Westphalia**

Perhaps the most devastating impact that the Thirty Years War had on Catholicism and Christianity in Western Europe was not the battle itself, but the peace treaty. Discouraged by Catholics, yet favored by Protestants, this peace treaty gave the Protestants the ability to live freely without persecution. Determined to be more of an introduction to the secularization of

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\(^5\) González, 177.

\(^6\) Ibid., 178-179.

\(^7\) Ibid., 182.

\(^8\) Ibid., 184.
politics, forced by French cannon, and destruction of international law, the peace of Westphalia marked the inception of religious freedom and tolerance for the commonwealth, and the discouragement of leadership to utilize religious beliefs as a governing influence.\(^9\)

It seemed that the peace of Westphalia accomplished its intended goal: it terminated the war in which ravaged Germany more brutally than World War II. While Germany, as earlier mentioned, lost over 10 million citizens, Bavaria, the least destroyed country, dwindled from 3 million to 800,000. Villages disappeared. Travel for days could occur before stumbling on a peasant.\(^10\)

Those who sought peace were many, but the initiators of the peace of Westphalia saw a necessary peace beyond that of brutality: between German Catholics and German Protestants. Two prior wars had caused great rift between these two parties, with religious pacts at the Treaty of Passau in 1552 and the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555. How then could peacemakers ensure this to be the final debacle?\(^11\)

A major issue at hand with the peace treaty was a change in concept of medieval treatment of government: from what used to be the Christian State protecting the Christian Church to a secular establishment of separation of the state and church, which America modeled itself after.\(^12\)

Essentially, the peace of Westphalia guaranteed freedom and protection of belief to Protestants. They were now permitted to worship in private, emigrate as they desired, and conduct normal business affairs without persecution, regardless of religious ruler. Much of the Catholic Church


\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid., 591-592.

\(^12\) Ibid., 593.
property was handed to the Protestants in a determination of fairness, and any power that the Catholic church held against the Protestants was destroyed by this treaty. In essence, the peace of Westphalia permanently divided Christianity, instead of the war’s attempt to reunite it.\textsuperscript{13}

**Conclusion**

The Thirty Years War is commonly blamed for the start of the fall of Catholicism and Protestantism in Western Europe. The war began with religious overtones (backed by insidious political intentions of the Fraco-Hapsburg dispute), and ended with a treaty that gave Protestants freedom, and Catholics less power. So what was it that caused the start of the decline of Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe?

Two particulars can be pulled from the war and peace treaty, that can be associated with the rise of secularism. First, and foremost, the concept that the war was a religious war, one of three waged by Germany. It was not the first time blood was spilled in the name of G-d, nor would it be the last. Survivors of this war, however few they were, seemed to make a unified stance that religious freedom is the best chance for peace (the second impact), instead of government enforcement of church policy, which was often manipulated to back a maniacal leader’s intention to inflict personal taste in their constituents.

This war led to World War I and World War II, for certain. The Cold War was borne out of World War II, most likely the most religious war for America to have ever engaged in. Will America turn more secular? There is no doubt to it. After all, Scripture foretells it.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 596-597.
Bibliography


