



## What's at Stake with the Protestant Reformation

A cartoon of Pope Pious VI being burned at the stake, after he rejected the measures of the French Revolution that confiscated property that the French government had earlier given the Roman Catholic Church.

### **Understanding of the Christian Message**

Martin Luther objected to the sale of indulgences. He argued that they falsified the Christian message of salvation (saying that repentance was what was needed to get to heaven, not indulgences); and that if the Pope really had the power to take people out of purgatory and into heaven, why didn't he do this for everybody out of love, instead of waiting until he was paid? In doing so, he rejected the testimony of Catholic theologians and Popes, insisting that his opponents needed to use reason and arguments based on the Bible.

### **Freedom of Religion, Eventually**

While it is true that few Reformers (only the Baptists, a small minority) argued for religious freedom in the modern sense, it is also true that these Reformers were literally fighting for their lives, and that this fight forced the Catholic forces to sign treaties in 1555 & 1648 that allowed the Protestants (Lutherans & Calvinists) freedom from persecution. With the wars of religion receding over time, the ideas of the Baptists (of opposing all government interference in religion) became more and more widespread, even among non Christians.

### **Protestantism Comes to America**

English Puritans came to the American colonies in the 1600s and helped establish the first colleges in America. The Puritans were predominantly Calvinists, who endured persecution by Roman Catholic and Anglican monarchs in England, and so they came to America with the intention of setting up new homes where they would not be so persecuted. In doing this, the Puritans established a political culture that insisted on government by the consent of the governed.

### **Big Picture: People can Shape their Institutions**

As bizarre as this sounds to us children of the modern era, people up until this time typically did not think of changing or reforming social institutions such as slavery, government establishment of religion, the presence of an aristocracy, or implementing popular participation in government. Traditional societal structures were simply accepted as being "the way things were." The Protestant Reformation was the first radical change in social institutions, that paved the way for people to think about how they wanted to arrange other aspects of their society.