Introduction

Between 1350 and 1650 the church in Western Europe experienced significant administrative, moral, and doctrinal reform that brought major changes to the church. These reforms were accompanied by conflict between those committed to the beliefs and practices of the medieval church and those persuaded that major doctrinal and moral reform was necessary. Conflict also arose between those committed to different approaches to reform and to different theologies.

This Reformation resulted in a lasting schism in the church in Western Europe that had essentially remained unified for more than one thousand years. The existence of more than one Christian church was difficult to accept after a millennium of religious unity, and only reluctantly was it acknowledged when it became increasingly clear that neither dialogue nor suppression could restore the church's unity. Religious divisions – together with political, social, and economic factors – led to military conflict that plagued Europe between 1550 and 1648.

The first section of this atlas surveys the pre-Reformation period: the setting in which the events took place, late medieval society, the role of the church in that society, and the various reform movements of the late Middle Ages. Although the late medieval church met the religious needs of society more adequately than many historians have been willing to concede, people were sufficiently alienated from the church to support the Protestant Reformation.

The second section of this book examines the outbreak of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Martin Luther was of course the primary protagonist in the events that resulted in this lasting schism in the church, believing that the teachings of the church had been distorted during the Middle Ages and needed to be brought back into line with Scripture. There soon appeared a number of different reform movements and a great expansion of the Reformation churches. Lutheranism spread through much of Germany and Scandinavia, and new urban movements appeared in Switzerland and Germany. Radical reform movements sprang up throughout Europe, led by people who rejected the 'Magisterial Reformers' who worked with the magistrates or rulers. In Geneva, John Calvin led a reform movement that was soon imitated in much of Europe. Henry VIII initiated a Reformation in England for reasons that had little to do with church reform, but the English church also experienced a Protestant Reformation which reached fruition in the reign of Henry's daughter, Elizabeth. A Protestant Reformation was also firmly established in Scotland.

The Roman Catholic Church was stimulated to reform itself – and also to respond to the rapid growth of Protestantism – movements which are covered in section three. When attempts to heal the breach between the Church of Rome and the growing Protestant movement failed, the papacy called the reforming Council of Trent, which defined the theology of the medieval church in opposition to Protestantism and encouraged moral and spiritual reform within the Roman Catholic Church. The discovery of the Americas led to a new interest in spreading the gospel abroad. The Society of Jesus – the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius Loyola – took the lead within the Catholic Church and sent missionaries to the Americas, India, China, and Japan. Protestants attempted to bring the gospel to Native Americans in the English colonies.

One result of the competing reform movements was theological and military conflict, dealt with in the final section of this atlas. In addition to theological conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists engaged in ferocious debates, and there were also deep divisions within both Lutheranism and Calvinism, while all parties were critical of the Anabaptists and persecuted them. For their part, Anabaptists were divided among themselves and on occasion resorted to violence in pursuing their objectives.

During the second century of the Reformation era, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and England were all convulsed by religious wars. When neither side was able to overcome the other, they had eventually to agree to compromise settlements, dividing the respective areas between the competing confessions. Only the English Civil War, fought between Protestants, had a different result. The Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War, is a clear concluding point for the Reformation era on the European continent; in England it comes ten years later, as the Civil War was followed by the restoration of the Stuart dynasty in 1660.