The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century continues to influence life in North America in the early twenty-first century. What started with one man, Martin Luther, and his objections to religious misunderstandings and abuses quickly became a movement that escaped his control in central Europe, dividing not only evangelicals from defenders of the Roman Church but also evangelicals among themselves. The European religio-political conflicts from the 1520s through the 1640s tore apart a continent, prompting ideological and institutional changes that, taken together, forged the modern Western world. The Reformation unintentionally made Western Christianity into an enduring problem, the solutions to which have circumscribed religion and unintentionally led to the secularization of Western society.

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