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History 150-50: Historical Inquiry I: The Early History of Faith

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Individualism and Spiritual Individuality

The origin of individualism and spiritual individuality has widely been disputed. Did it start during the Renaissance or much earlier? Individualism is the opposite of conformity. It is the belief in diversity and self-reliance, and it emphasizes independent thoughts and actions. Individualism can be found in many philosophical and political movements. Applying these concepts to religion, spiritual individuality is about the religious beliefs of people as individuals, rather than as a collective whole. Throughout history, many people stepped out and exercised this spiritual individuality, but when had these thoughts truly started?

Looking through history, many figures can be seen who stepped out of the religious norm. Akhenaten was one key figure who challenged his culture’s religious beliefs. He denounced all the Egyptian gods in favor of his one god, Aten. However, after Akhenaten died, he was subjected to *damnatio memoriae*, and his god Aten was rejected. Akhenaten stepped out and practiced spiritual individuality; although, he did not start the cultural movement of mass individualism, as he had gone against such long standing traditions.

Socrates was also a key member who practiced spiritual individuality. Socrates was charged with denying the state’s gods, introducing new and contradictory ideas, and corrupting the youth. Supposedly, he created his own religion, theology, and rejected the gods of the culture around him; he was often viewed as an atheist.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite his imprisonment and execution, Socrates was a key figure who exemplified spiritual individuality.

Jan Hus, who lived just before Martin Luther, was inspired by John Wycliffe, another predecessor to the Reformation. Hus challenged the power of the pope and called out the corruption in the papacy and clergy. Hus believed that Christ was the sole head of the church, and he believed in the huge importance of Scripture.[[2]](#footnote-2) While Hus had gained many followers, called Hussites, his spiritual individuality did not spread, as he was quickly deemed a heretic and burned at the stake.

Just before the Reformation, Joan of Arc exercised strong spiritual individualism. She claimed she had heard a voice from God since she was thirteen years old. Through this voice she heard, Joan went on to save King Charles VII and to get him crowned in Reims.[[3]](#footnote-3) Joan spoke out and challenged gender roles. However, her individualism did not take hold in her society. Her beliefs were highly unpopular; how could a peasant girl be completely responsible for the King’s throne?

Domenico Scandella, most commonly known as Menocchio, was a miller who was imprisoned and questioned by the inquisitors for his individualistic beliefs. His most well-known belief was his cheese and worm theory about how God and the angels were created. The universe was the moldy cheese, and the angels and God just appeared, similar to how worms appear in moldy cheese. The inquisitors deemed Menocchio a heretic and had him executed.[[4]](#footnote-4) Menocchio’s ideas were outlandish compared to the popular beliefs in the church; he was definitely a spiritual individualist, but society did not see his ideas as something to continue pursuing.

All these well-known figures stepped out and practiced spiritual individualism; however, none of them were able to spark a mass individualism movement. Some were silenced because of contradictory and unpopular beliefs; no one had expressed such views before, and they were “too new” to be looked on with any seriousness. Others were silenced by way of execution. The Church did not want contradictory beliefs to be spread, so they quickly put an end to the root of their problems. As none of these people started the individualism movement, who did?

In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the Wittenberg door, pointing out 95 aspects concerning the Church that needed reform. His main contentions were sola scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fide: scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. He rejected the power of indulgences and emphasized the grace of God over the good works of man.[[5]](#footnote-5) Luther had many similar ideas to the aforementioned figures, but he was able to spark the beginning of the Reformation. All the figures previously mentioned were quickly cut down before they could spark a revolution. However, Luther was under the protection of the Duke of Saxony, so he was able to continue his teachings and writings long enough to start a revolution.

Many other key reformers became well-known after Martin Luther. Huldrych Zwingli lived in Switzerland, and was head of the Swiss Reformation in 1522. He also founded the Swiss Reformed Church. Furthermore, he wrote 67 theses in 1523 rejecting many of the church’s old beliefs, including purgatory, mass, and priestly mediation. Zwingli also started the approach of preaching from the books of the Bible. His reforms were widely accepted, and many seminaries were put in place to teach the reformed pastors.[[6]](#footnote-6) Zwingli set about spiritual individuality in Switzerland, while Luther was in Germany.

Also during Martin Luther’s time, John Calvin became a key figure. Not only did Calvin play a major role in the French Protestant Reformation, but he also spent a plethora of time in Geneva. His main contention was salvation by grace, just as Luther believed. However, Calvin founded Calvinism, a Protestant sect, where he taught no singing, dancing, gambling, or swearing.[[7]](#footnote-7) Calvinists also had an acronym for their beliefs: T.U.L.I.P., which stood for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Looking at Luther’s Protestant Reformation, Calvin was able to create his own Protestant sect, individualizing himself from the Catholic Church.

In 1531, King Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church, essentially forming the Anglican Church. After a dispute with the Catholic Church, Henry VIII declared himself the sole supreme ruler of both England and the Church of England.[[8]](#footnote-8) Henry VIII, despite his reasons for separating from the Church, practiced spiritual individuality in his creation of his own church.

Many figures throughout history displayed individualism, from Akhenaten in ancient Egypt to King Henry VIII in the 16th century. Spiritual individuality has existed since the beginning of time. People have always stepped out and formed and expressed their own thoughts. However, for the longest time, these people were looked down upon by society, until Martin Luther. Luther was able to spark the start of a mass spiritual individuality movement.

1. Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 125-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew Spinka, *John Hus’ Concept of the Church* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), 3-7, 31-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Régine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc* (Maryland: Scarborough House, 1994), 30-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carlo Ginzburg, trans. John & Anne C. Tedeschi, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas M. Lindsay, *Luther and the German Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 53-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Oskar Farner, trans. D.G. Sear, *Zwingli the Reformer: His Life and Work* (United States of America: Philosophical Library, 1968), 31-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1979), 13-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 220-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)