The Positive and Negative Effects of Religion During the
Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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The undeniable power, force, and influence of religion stand out throughout history. However, according to J. Michael Allen and James B. Allen in *World History from 1500*, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, religion was exceptionally important, because it had a great influence on everything from government to social order and family relationships (16). Hundreds of years may separate these two time periods and the modern world, but the same positive effects of religion such as unity, security, and a social order are still basic ideals in today’s world. This is also true for the negative effects such as the conflicts that result in war and bloodshed, the separation of social classes, and the corruption throughout the church, especially the recent sex scandal in the Catholic church. In order to appreciate the impacts of religion during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the positive and negative effects of this era must be understood [vague, imprecise].

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, religion gave people a sense of belonging. Belonging to a church was important during this time because it gave people a sense of security and support. This was important because it made it much easier to deal with everyday problems and issues. For instance, diseases and death were extremely common during this time period, because of the lack of medicine and technology. So, religion played an extremely important role in giving people a “guiding light” to pray for support, health, and help. People also had a sense of spiritual protection in everyday life and also in the afterlife. With a sense of protection, they lived a life with less fear of death and more of a sense of hope. This sense of belonging to a higher power was exemplified in the life and contributions of Joan of Arc in the movie version of her story.
With this sense of security and belonging felt throughout the community, people felt united, especially as Joan was able to mobilize them to fight “For God and for France.” They shared common interests and common goals in living a religious lifestyle as dictated by their religion whenever possible. In fact, one of Christopher Columbus’s motives for sailing westward to India was to “open up opportunities to take the Christian gospel to the heathen” (Allen & Allen 23). Religion also brought a new structure to households. Elders were not only parents, but they also became teachers and role models for their children (12). This became obvious in the movie Joan of Arc, where the majority of dinner conversations related to their religious beliefs, as it was important to pass on the importance and need for religion to the future generations. Unity was a very powerful tool during this time period because power came in numbers. This was obvious when Joan gathered the community and convinced the people to defend their beliefs and fight back against the English. Since the people were united in their faith, it was much easier to defend their territories and beliefs. Thus, religion had tremendous positive effects.

On the other hand, this new feeling of expansion, security, hope, and unity were the constant conflicts of opposing beliefs and struggles. For instance, although there were many Christians with the same beliefs, there were also many that did not accept the Catholic practices of that time, especially the inquisition that led to burning Joan of Arc at stake and indulgences. One of such people was Martin Luther who was determined to reform the Catholic Church. The Reformation protests caused people to live in fear of being outcast from society or prosecuted. Martin Luther, who championed Protestantism, lived a secretive life in fear of persecution (Allen & Allen 4-6), and even Galileo, the scientist, “was condemned by the church and forced to recant his views” (99).
Another negative effect was the exploitation of the natives of the new world. There were also many different civilizations during this time period with distinctly different religious beliefs that the explorers wanted to convert to Christianity. Bloodshed often occurred when these conflicts climaxed. This can be seen throughout the class film Conquistadors, in which Hernando Cortes and other Spanish conquistadors conquered the people of the new world mercilessly. This bloodshed was man’s greatest inhumanity to fellow human beings. “Like Cortes, Pizarro then captured the Inca ruler and slaughtered many of his people” (Allen & Allen 26). This need to enforce new beliefs onto new people and their established territories also had severe consequences.

There were also numerous religious wars in the West during this time period, however, “the most disastrous of all the religious wars of this period was the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), which grew from religious and political struggles within the empire and the surrounding states”(Allen & Allen 15). It was apparent that something was going to have to be done in order to bring people together under one reign. When wars were fought in the name of religion, the effects could be both negative and positive.

In spite of the negative effects of the war, during this era, religion also brought about an economical and social order to the community. With the church at the center of each community and empire, a new form of power and control was gained. With the establishments of churches, new positions within the church and outside the church were needed. People now dedicated their lifestyles to the church in the form of priests, monks, and other religious orders. This created an internal order. Weekly donations and indulgences were made to the church and people were extremely dedicated to the church, thus allowing the church to gain power and control over them (12). This circulation of
money also created an economical order that helped them to gain more and establish their trades better. It was a trade cycle that included the church and the people.

Unfortunately, this new power gained by the church would ultimately be the fatal blow to most communities and empires of this time period. The enormous power and control of the church created corruption in all aspects of religion and politics. The church now had almost complete control of government, in fact, in most cases they were seen as one, united body. Political decisions were almost solely based on the expansion and improvement of the church as shown in the movie, *Joan of Arc*, in which King Charles VII only made important decisions based on the advice of his top religious officials and also in *Mary Queen of Scots*, where Mary’s choices and even her execution were the results of Catholic and Protestant conflicts.

Another negative effect of religion was uneven distribution of wealth and the corruption in the church. It is in this era that the saying “the rich only get richer, and the poor only get poorer” applied to “local parish priests [who] were often in abject poverty. . . . Clerical vows of celibacy were broken often; drunkenness, gambling, and other unacceptable behavior were not uncommon” (Allen & Allen 2-3). The enormous amount of money that the church possessed was mismanaged by the Pope and a few Bishops, leaving little money for the working class and the poor. For instance, in *Joan of Arc*, this was most obvious as the people of France were left with little to nothing, and without support from the King Charles VII, because they did not have money to donate to the church. This left a sense of abandonment and separation from the church on the people. This suffering would cause many assassinations of political and religious leaders and
revolutions in the years to come, and would prove evident that the church and state must be separated.

Finally, with an understanding of the positive and negative effects of religion during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it is easier to realize why religion stands out throughout all history as an undeniable power and force. It is also now possible to see how religion has had a great influence on everything from government to social order and family relationships. Even the current sex scandal in the Catholic Church and different types of religious conflicts can be traced to this period, giving people the background of such problems.
Works Cited


Rubric Application

GRAMMAR: 1.5
LOGIC: 2.5
RHETORIC: 2.5
Total = 6.5

Explanation

This paper straddles the fence between “Fairly Competent” and “Very Competent” on the Write REASON Rubric Progression Grid. It exhibits the basic type of competency we expect to see from our students at the college level, but it isn’t indicative of a high level of sophistication or excellence in writing and critical thinking.

[Sentences and paragraphs in need of significant revision are highlighted in the text above.]

Grammar: This paper is mostly competent, but exhibits “occasional but isolated errors” (slips in grammar and punctuation that should have been refined out in the revising process).

Logic: This paper is orderly, has a clear argument, and proceeds in a fashion the reader can follow. Claims are justified by appeals to evidence and sources, but many points and assumptions need clarification, a wider context, and more nuanced discussion to be truly compelling as arguments.

Rhetoric: At the sentence level, this paper has occasional stylistic awkwardness and lack of clarity. Most sources are handled competently, but there is an occasional reference which isn’t clear (in itself or its context). The thesis statement and entire conclusion need refinement and specification to make the presentation of this paper’s argument more concise and compelling.