In 1517, 500 years ago this month, Martin Luther nailed his “95 Theses” to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Six years later, the Catholic Church excommunicated Luther and, by 1526, he began organizing a new church. This was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

From its beginning, the Reformation was both religious and political. Where Reformers had political backing, it succeeded. Where Catholicism had political backing, it failed. Many German dukes and princes supported Luther, while other dukes and the Holy Roman emperor, who was nominally superior to them, stayed with Catholicism.

In England, King Henry VIII remained without a male heir. When the pope refused to annul his marriage, Henry had himself appointed the head of the Church of England in 1534. Henry was not a Reformer, and English churchgoers experienced little change in their weekly worship. Henry’s move was really a political rejection of the pope’s authority over England, and his actions emphasized the English refusal to be governed by Europe.

That was just as well, for back on the continent, matters deteriorated. New Protestant champions, John Calvin and his fellow Reformers, gained ground in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, the conflict between Luther’s church and Catholicism grew worse and had to be settled by the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which stated that the duke of a region could determine its religion, Lutheran or Catholic. Calvinism was not an option.

Conflict continued, nonetheless. The Calvinist Dutch Republic fought for independence from Catholic Spain in the Eighty Years War. In Germany, the Thirty Years War began as a fight between Lutherans and Catholics. By the time these conflicts were settled by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, millions of Europeans had died through war, famine and disease.

The Westphalia treaty finally included Calvinists as well as Lutherans and Catholics.

The religious wars on the continent had little direct impact on the British Isles. England experienced neither the frequent battles nor the widespread deaths, although it occasionally sent troops to support one side or the other.

The English and, ultimately, British religious conflicts took a complete different shape. Henry’s son, King Edward VI, brought in Protestant reforms after 1547. Drawing mostly from Calvinist ideas, these included the rejection of images (stained glass and statues) and worship reforms carried out through the Book of Common Prayer. Lutheranism never got a foothold in Britain.

When Queen Mary came to the throne in 1558, she reversed these religious changes, working to make England once again subordinate to the papacy. Ultimately, this resulted in heresy trials and executions.

Her successor, Queen Elizabeth I, established a set of religious compromises that provided the foundation for the Anglican Church, combining a largely Calvinist-Protestant foundation with Catholic elements.

The political struggle between the Anglican Parliament and the sometimes-Catholic monarchy in the 1600s was, ultimately, drawn along religious lines, with Anglicans and (Calvinist) Puritans supporting the parliament and Catholics supporting the royals.

The ensuing English Civil War lasted from 1643 to 1651 and established England under the rule of parliament, even though it also brought back the monarchy. Conflicts in Ireland and Scotland took longer to settle. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia essentially went unnoticed in the British Isles.

Britain took another half-century to work out a stable solution to the Protestant-Catholic divide, but problems continued. Many Puritan members of the Anglican Church came to the Americas to escape religious discrimination. Ireland remained unsettled, divided by both religion and politics until the southern part gained independence in 1922. Conflict continued in the north until recent times.

What does the Reformation reveal about Brexit, the current plan of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union?

As with Henry VIII, large parts of England want to divorce the country from Europe, to rid itself of European control over Britain. This time, it is solely political, not religious at all. Immigration control constitutes one of several disputes.

The claim is that what happens in Europe is largely irrelevant in Britain. If it were not for the laws of the European Union, there would be little need for a deep connection to Europe.

That claim is, of course, widely and hotly disputed. Both Scotland and London voted against Brexit by a wide margin, seeing their futures irrevocably tied to Europe.

But, the myth of an England free from continental authority, promoted by Henry VIII during the Reformation, heats in many English breasts. And, they can point to 150 years of separate courses of the Protestant Reformation, one on the continent and one in the British Isles, as providing historical backing for separation. Is that historical example still valid in modern times? We will see.

Note: The University of Wyoming Department of Religious Studies will host a mini-conference, “Protestant Reformation: 500 Years and Counting,” Sunday and Monday, Oct. 15-16. Phillip Cary, a professor of philosophy at Eastern University, will give a public lecture Monday at 4:10 p.m. He will discuss “How Luther Became Protestant” in Room 138 of the Berry Biodiversity Conservation Center. For more information, visit www.uwyo.edu/relstds/guest-speakers/.

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