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# The History of Christianity: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation

Course Guidebook

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Professor Johnson taught at Yale Divinity School from 1976 to 1982 and at Indiana University from 1982 to 1992 before accepting his current position at Emory. He is the author of 29 books, including *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, which is used widely as a textbook in seminaries and colleges. He won the 2011 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his monograph entitled *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*. He also has published several hundred articles and reviews and has lectured at more than 100 colleges and universities.

Professor Johnson has taught undergraduates, as well as master and doctoral students. He has directed about 20 doctoral dissertations. At Indiana University, he received the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching, was elected a member of the Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching, and won the Brown Derby Teaching Award and the Student Choice Award for Outstanding Faculty. At Emory, he has twice received the On Eagle's Wings Excellence in Teaching Award, and in 2007, he received the Candler School of Theology Outstanding Service Award. In 1997 and 1998, he was a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar, speaking at college campuses across the country.

Professor Johnson is married to Joy Randazzo. They share 7 children, 13 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren. Professor Johnson's other Great Courses are *The Apostle Paul*; *Early Christianity: The Experience of the Divine*; *Great World Religions: Christianity* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition); *Jesus and the Gospels*; *Practical Philosophy: The Greco-Roman Moralists*; *The Story of the Bible*; and *Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. ■

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# The History of Christianity: From the Disciples to the Dawn of the Reformation

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## Scope:

Whatever one may think about Christianity today—and views on the subject are both lively and divided—it is impossible to deny the importance of this religious tradition in history. Beginning as an obscure sect of Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era, over the course of 300 years, Christianity went from being a maligned and persecuted superstition to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Since that unexpected turn of events, it has never ceased being an important player in the shaping of culture and politics, above all, in Europe. Certainly, for the bulk of the period covered by this course, the Christian religion provided the shape of the symbolic world, both for the remnants of the Roman order called Byzantium and for the medieval synthesis that arose after the collapse of the empire in the west.

Given such historical importance, it is the more striking that ignorance both of Christianity's internal development and its cultural impact is so widespread, not only among the religion's detractors but equally among its most avid advocates. In place of solid historical knowledge, a variety of misconceptions flourish. Some of these have to do with the origins of the religion. Others concern its internal development. Still others distort problematic aspects of its history, such as the Crusades and inquisition. A first goal of this course, then, is simply to provide a reliable account of Christianity's first millennium and a half— an account that is superficial to be sure, given that covering 1,500 years in 18 hours requires both selectivity and a willingness to simplify complex realities. Simple attention to the facts as they unfold can have a clarifying effect and dispel some of the myths and misperceptions that somehow find their way into public consciousness.

A second goal of the course is to show how Christianity distinctively is shaped by, and gives shape to, diverse political and cultural worlds. In the final lecture, we will see that the designation of Christianity as an “ever-

adapting religion” is entirely appropriate. Christianity has been, from the start, astonishingly adaptive to its environment. We will consider its story in three stages: (1) We trace the original cultural context within which the religion came to birth (Judaism and Greco-Roman culture), its originating experiences and convictions, and its process of survival and self-definition through centuries of persecution. (2) We then show the consequences of Christianity’s being made the official imperial religion by Constantine and his successors, consequences that were both good and bad and never without a certain amount of ambiguity. Thus, we see how the religion expanded to meet its new cultural role, even as it experienced violent internal conflicts over matters of doctrine and practice. We also see radical versions of Christianity that began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century resurface in the form of monasticism, arguably the most important of all Christian institutions in terms of its historical significance. This part of the course ends with a consideration of the stable Orthodox tradition of the East. (3) Finally, we sketch the process by which popes, monks, and German kings formed a new society in Europe that was called Christendom: We will show its positive cultural accomplishments (cathedrals and universities) and more negative political adventures (Crusades, investiture, inquisition); we will show both the glory of the medieval synthesis and the elements of corruption that called for reform, a call that many heeded even before the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to paying close attention to the way in which Christianity interacts with political and cultural contexts, the course will address what are usually regarded as the more “religious” aspects of Christianity: its experiences and convictions, its beliefs and practices, its mode of worship and its manner of life. All of these have undergone change through the centuries, and the course will provide some awareness of the roles played by monk and mendicant, mystic and inquisitor, crusader and theologian, pope and peasant. And because Christianity is so adaptive to circumstance, so defined by the changing societies within which it has been shaped and which it has helped shape, this course considers at the very end the question of the essence of the religion: Through all this change, does anything remain constant? ■

# The Historical Study of Christianity

## Lecture 1

Christianity began in obscurity as a minor sect of Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era. For the first three centuries of its existence, it offered few signs that it would one day dominate the world. Over a period of two millennia, it has grown, spread, and constantly changed, now appearing in every land and every language. It is the largest and most universal of the world's religions. This course considers the first three stages of this grand story, beginning in this first lecture with a discussion of the importance of applying a historical perspective to Christianity and the limitations we will face as we embark on this endeavor.

### Justifications for Our Study

- Christianity is the world religion that is most explicitly historical in its character. Its central claim is that the divine enters into human history in a specific human person and changes it.
  - Arguably, it is also the world religion that has most affected the course of history itself. It is impossible to consider the historical development of the West without taking Christianity into account.
  - It is, therefore, both natural and necessary to approach this religion in historical terms.
- Contemporary ignorance and credulity with regard to Christianity's past make historical study imperative.
  - Although true historical knowledge is always a fairly rare and restricted commodity, the present age in particular is neither interested in, nor well informed about, the past.
  - The result of this historical amnesia is that the present generation is easy prey to distortions of the past.

- Lack of good historical knowledge is just as widespread among Christians as it is among Christianity's critics.
  - Many Christians assume anachronistically that current forms of piety and worship and even the current shape of their Bible have been in place from the beginning, when in fact, they have gone through complex development over time.
  - The same ignorance explains the fascination with bizarre theories, such as those in *The Da Vinci Code*, which sold millions of copies to readers incapable of detecting the novel's historical errors.
  - In a milder fashion, certain fictions concerning the Christian past have remarkable staying power: that certain gospels preceded those in the New Testament but were suppressed because they advocated a more radical form of religion or that the Christian creed was a late invention of bishops under the direction of the emperor Constantine.
- The study of Christianity's history has, therefore, both a corrective and a creative function. It can correct errors and misconceptions, such as those about the origins and subsequent development of Christianity, through a fuller and more responsible assessment of the evidence.
  - With regard to Christian origins, was Jesus, as some have argued, connected in some way to the Qumran community located at the Dead Sea? The answer is no. Was Paul, as some have argued, an agent of the Sanhedrin who sought to extirpate the Christian movement as an official hit man of the Jewish court? The answer again is no.
  - We could answer the same way with regard to subsequent developments within Christianity. Was medieval Catholicism totally corrupt, with no element of authentic Christianity within it? There is no reason to think so. Was Byzantium all show and no substance? In both cases, the answer is no.

- Historical study can also provide the basis for a reconsideration of the past and a path to the future.
  - How do the tragic missteps leading to the split of Eastern and Western forms of Christianity in the 11<sup>th</sup> century instruct present-day Christians concerning ecumenical relations?
  - How do reforming movements through the ages, especially those found among monks and mendicants, provide insight into the power of intentional communities to change societies?

### **The Nature and Limits of Historical Study**

- What do we really mean when we use the word “history”? History is not simply “the past” or a historian’s description of “what happened in the past.” It is better understood as a constructive activity in the present, carried out by historians.
  - Historians take the pieces of memory from human events and experiences that have been preserved in some form and subject them to critical analysis: Are they first- or second-hand primary sources, or are they secondary sources? What are the provenance, dating, and biases of the sources?
  - On the basis of the pieces thus tested, historians then try to construct a narrative concerning the events to which the sources bear witness. Historical accounts, therefore, always have some “fictional” elements, simply because it is impossible to construct narrative without them.
  - Historical accounts are also, therefore, properly revisionist, both because new information becomes available and because historical perspective constantly changes.
- As a constructive activity carried out in the present with bits of memory from the past, history is also inherently limited in its way of knowing reality.
  - It has to do with human events in time and space, but even defining the character of “events” and their boundaries involves guesswork. We speak blithely of World War II or the Depression,



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**Much that is important in human experience falls outside the range of historiography; only indirectly can we imagine what it must have been like for someone from the forests of Germany in the 8<sup>th</sup> century to enter the marble grandeur of the Hagia Sophia.**

but these are artificial boundaries, drawn—for purposes of analysis—within the constant flux of human experience.

- Further, much that is important in human existence falls outside the range of historiography. The actual human experience of events, for example, can be reached only indirectly and with great difficulty: What was it like for someone coming from the forest of Germany to enter the Hagia Sophia? What did mothers think as they prayed over their dying infants during the great plague?
- Above all, the task of historians is constrained by the availability and state of sources.
  - What was said or done had to be perceived, what was perceived had to be written, what was written had to be preserved, and what was preserved had to be edited, translated, published, and read.

- Interpretation enters into every step of the process: The point of view shapes perception, perception shapes writing, assessment as to value determines preservation, and so on.
- Original sources get lost or destroyed and must be reconstructed from later publications; some of history's most memorable persons and events have slender evidentiary support, and some of history's trivia is massively supported.

### **Limitations in Analyzing Christianity**

- It's important to note that all scholars of Christianity have definite perspectives and limitations. For example, many are not disinterested observers but active participants in this religious tradition.
- Throughout our study, we will presuppose that religion is something real, not just a scholarly construct. People in the real world organize their lives around experiences and convictions concerning ultimate power. We will further presuppose that there is a real religious tradition called Christianity that can be described in all its permutations. Finally, we will accept that social determinants and forces, along with ideas, are real and must be taken into consideration in our study.
- The sources for the study of Christian history in its first 1,500 years are unevenly distributed in terms of period and language.
  - For the earliest period, there is little or no material evidence, and the literary evidence is sparse.
  - In contrast, for the middle and later periods, there is a great deal of material evidence, including cathedrals, shrines, artwork, and literature. The limitation here is that little of this evidence pertains to the lives of ordinary people. Much of the history of Christianity that we will discuss comes to us from literate people with some position in society.

- Our richest literary (and material) evidence comes from within the Roman Empire and uses Greek and Latin. But Christian literature also encompasses Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Georgian, and Slavic literature.
- Our sources are also uneven in terms of their perspective.
  - With some few exceptions, the majority of evidence comes from insider rather than outsider sources.
  - Insider sources themselves must be distinguished in terms of their orthodox (“right-thinking”) and heterodox (“other-thinking”) perspectives; by far, the greatest number of sources comes from orthodox authors.

### Organization of the Course

- The first section of this course, entitled “The Beginnings,” covers the first three centuries of Christianity.
  - After a rapid survey of Greco-Roman and Jewish culture pertinent to the understanding of Christianity, the lectures consider the birth and first expansion of the religion in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.
  - Over the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, Christianity experienced crises from without (persecution) and within (heresy) that forced institutional and intellectual development.
- The second section, entitled “The Imperial Religion,” covers roughly the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.
  - Special attention is given to the cultural and political adjustments consequent on becoming the imperial religion as Christianity expanded into new significance.
  - During these centuries, positive developments in worship and piety were offset by severe and divisive conflicts over doctrine.
  - Of great subsequent importance was the growing cultural divide between the East (centered in Constantinople) and the



West (centered in Rome). Expansion of Christianity into new lands and new languages increased.

- The third section, “The Medieval Church,” covers the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, bringing our survey to the edge of the Reformation.
  - Increasing complexity of relations with emperors and kings was a constant theme of these centuries.
  - The split between the Eastern (Orthodox) version of Christianity and the Western (Catholic) version divided Christianity, just as the threat of Islam grew more powerful.
  - The creativity of Christianity in Europe was marked by the development of monasticism (and its reforms), crusades, cathedrals, and universities.
  - Other aspects of medieval Christianity, including obvious corruption, began to stimulate efforts at reform.
- The final lecture of the course considers Christianity as “the ever-adapting religion,” asking what elements remain constant within all its historical changes.

### Suggested Reading

Johnson, *A History of Christianity*.

Marty, *The Christian World*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Consider the difference between a naive and a critical understanding of history, between thinking of the past as a place one can go to and history as a constructive activity of the present.
2. Why is the historical study of any subject dependent on the availability and character of primary sources?

# The First Cultural Context—Greece and Rome

## Lecture 2

Understanding the cultural contexts in which Christianity was born is of fundamental importance for grasping the history of this religious tradition. Like other religions of the West, Christianity is grounded in the material world and, at every stage, is shaped by cultural circumstances. It is not a timeless form of spirituality that teaches its adherents to liberate themselves from the body or involvement in society. Rather, Christianity was born at a certain time and place and bears within it the imprint of the cultures from which it originated and grew. Further, such cultural conditioning does not apply only at the beginning but throughout Christianity's long history. Christianity is a religion that constantly emerges from, adapts, and reshapes the cultures that it engages.

### Defining “Cultural Context”

- A cultural context can be thought of in terms of a “symbolic world” that expresses and provides meaning for human existence. A symbolic world is not removed from specific social structures and processes but, instead, grounds social realities.
- Specific social structures, dynamics, and practices make sense because of the ideas, images, metaphors, and symbols that give them shape.
  - The many discrete practices of students (e.g., attending class, reading, studying, writing, taking exams) make sense only within a symbolic world called “education.”
  - The disparate activities of American politics (e.g., campaigning, soliciting, caucusing, voting, taking office) make sense only within the symbolic world called “representative democracy.”
  - In similar fashion, ancient Greek civilization was held together by a symbolic world called *paideia*, meaning both Greek culture and the education that shaped people in that culture.

## The Mediterranean World

- The basic coordinates of the world established the boundaries for the first chapter of Christianity's existence.
  - Temporally, this first chapter began with the conquest of the *oikoumene* ("known world") by Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.) and extended to the imperial recognition of Christianity by Constantine the Great (313 C.E.).
  - Geographically, it embraced the lands that encircle the Mediterranean Sea, from Spain in the west, through North Africa in the south, Palestine and Syria in the east, and Gaul in the north. But lands outside and along the fringes of this territory were also significant.
  - Within a two-season climate (dry and rainy), the economy of this world was agriculturally based, with cultivation of olives, figs, grain, and grapes. There was also significant fishing and small-animal husbandry. Not small farms but great estates (*latifundia*) with absentee landlords were the rule.



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Technology of the ancient Mediterranean world was quite advanced, more advanced than at any period in the West until the Industrial Revolution.

- Technology was advanced in architecture (aqueducts, temples, baths), warfare, and seafaring. Cities were large and crowded. Slave labor supplied energy for mining, transportation, farming, and household management.
- Politically, it was a world of empire (Parthian, Hellenistic, Roman), with city-states (*poleis*) exercising greater and lesser autonomy within provinces answerable to central authority.
- Certain aspects of “Mediterranean culture” preceded and persisted through changes of imperial rule.
  - Society was stratified both at the larger level (with a small nobility and a large slave class) and at the level of the household; in both, male dominance prevailed.
  - The practice of patronage (benefaction) served to mitigate differences in status and wealth: Patrons gave benefits to clients and clients responded with honor.
  - Honor and shame were powerful motives for behavior at every level, although the pertinent “court of opinion” could vary.
  - The dominant religious system was polytheism, in which divine power was distributed among personal beings of a higher order who governed diverse aspects of the world. Interestingly, this system mirrored the social world: The gods were the patrons who provided benefits to humans, and humans were obligated to pay honor and glory to the gods.

### The Influence of Greek Civilization

- Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Mediterranean world established the imprint of Greek civilization that endured for centuries—in the East, over the entire 1,500 years covered by this course.
- Alexander’s vision was to extend the civilization of the classical period of Athens to all of the known world so that there would be no

more “Greek and barbarian”—everyone would enjoy the benefits of Greek civilization.

- He established the *polis* as a center of cultural diffusion through such institutions as the *gymnasium*, where the *paideia* of Greece could be learned from the classics.
- He encouraged intermarriage among Greeks and barbarians to break down ethnic and cultural differences.
- He extended the use of the Greek language so that it became the “common language” (*koiné*) for succeeding centuries.
- He encouraged the practice of religious syncretism, by which different polytheistic systems could be regarded as functionally equivalent.
- The ideal that Alexander sought was “cosmopolitanism,” a sense of world citizenship that would derive from always having available the forms of Greek civilization.
- The effect of empire was to distort the very values that Alexander sought to propagate: Hellenism was something other than ancient Athenian culture.
  - The city-state of Athens had citizen participation, which was lost in empire and in huge metropolises.
  - Further, the Attic Greek of Athens was influenced by Semitic languages as it was extended so that the *koiné* of the empire was not exactly the same language as that used by Sophocles and Plato.
  - Athenian culture was intensely local, but making it universal reduced its effect. The most highly mobile members of society felt most acutely that the flip side of cosmopolitanism is social alienation or anomie.

- Developments in Hellenistic religion and philosophy corresponded to new social realities.
  - Although the civic festivals remained central and popular and the Olympic pantheon active, new aspects of religion emerged. Chance (*tyche*) and fate (*heimarmene*) emerged as inexorable forces superior to the gods themselves. Religious associations and mystery cults offered salvation from fate and chance, as well as a place in the world.
  - Philosophy turned from theory to therapy, with a focus on how to live well in an alienating world. Philosophers no longer wrote about the perfect state or the republic. What would be the point in a world run by empire?
  - Philosophical schools, such as those of the Pythagoreans and Epicureans, offered an organized form of life—a community life that provided sound teaching, sound practice, and the opportunity to live in a face-to-face community of moral integrity in the midst of a world that made little sense. Philosophers focused on the cultivation of virtue and the healing of the soul.
  - Stoic philosophers initiated allegorical interpretation of the classic myths to save them for moral instruction. This interpretation would be taken over by Judaism and Christianity.

### The Roman Contribution

- The Roman contribution to the Mediterranean culture was more recent and, for a time, more external and superficial.
- Rome established control over the Mediterranean as a republic and continued its rule as a principate (beginning with Caesar Augustus [27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.]) through a system of provincial governorships and prefects.
- During the time of Christianity's nascence, the empire was self-consciously Greek in its cultural outlook.

- Its literature and philosophy imitated Greek models, and Greek tutors were highly valued.
- The Roman deities were merged syncretistically with the Greek; Zeus's equivalent, for example, was Jupiter.
- Practices of sexuality, particularly male bisexuality, were taken over from Greece, although with different social valences.
- Safe provinces, such as Asia Minor, were governed by the Senate, while dangerous provinces, such as Palestine, were ruled by Rome through military prefects.
  - The conquest of territory and the securing of safe boundaries (as against the Parthians) was a constant Roman concern.
  - A byproduct of conquest was slavery, which grew enormously under the Romans and led to revolts, such as that of Spartacus that took place in 73–71 B.C.E. That revolt had a tremendous impact on the Roman psyche because it seemed to threaten the very structure of society. As a consequence, another byproduct of military rule and expansion was a willingness to violently suppress local uprisings by the populace.
  - Military colonies (peopled by veterans) and military encampments helped secure internal order.
  - Heavy taxation of the provinces enriched the city of Rome and helped pacify its huge population.
- Roman rule did not please everyone, as witnessed by the revolts among the Jews in 67–135 C.E., but the Romans' efficient imperial order had positive benefits for a new cult.
  - The system of roads that were meant for military and commercial use enabled travel and communication through personal contact and letters.

- The *Pax Romana* (“Roman Peace”) eliminated bandits by land and pirates by sea, making transportation safe and predictable.
- The extension of citizenship in the city of Rome to members of the provinces increased commitment to Rome and extended the privileges of law more widely.
- Within decades of its emergence, the Christian religion was more Gentile than Jewish in its population, which meant that, from its earliest period, it bore the traces of Mediterranean culture, Greek civilization, and Roman rule in its DNA.

### Suggested Reading

Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*.

Malina, *The New Testament World*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do the tools of cultural dissemination adopted by Alexander illustrate the point that a “symbolic world” involves social structures, as well as ideas and images?
2. What impact did the fact of empire have on Greek and Roman culture?



# The First Cultural Context—Judaism

## Lecture 3

In the last lecture, we saw how important Greek and Roman culture was for understanding earliest Christianity, not merely as a static setting but as a set of living influences. In this lecture, we'll examine the most important and problematic cultural context for early Christianity, namely Judaism, the “symbolic world of Torah.” As we'll see, the importance of this context is both straightforward and problematic—straightforward in that the Christian movement began as a sect within 1<sup>st</sup>-century Judaism and attempted to engage the Jewish Scriptures and problematic in that the Christian claim that Jesus was the risen Lord appeared as heretical within Judaism.

### The Jewish Cultural Context

- The importance of the Jewish context is both obvious and straightforward: The Christian movement began as a sect within 1<sup>st</sup>-century Judaism.
  - Jesus was a Jew and his first followers, including Paul, were Jews who called Jesus their Messiah (“anointed one”); their allegiance, furthermore, was to Judaism.
  - The first efforts to interpret the significance of Jesus and his Resurrection engaged the Jewish Scriptures (Torah).
  - So intense and sustained was this engagement that the writings of the New Testament, although composed in Greek and using many forms of Greco-Roman rhetoric, can legitimately be called Jewish literature.
  - Within 150 years, these writings would be joined to those of the Jewish Scriptures to form the Christian Bible.
- The problematic character of the Jewish cultural context is less obvious but equally significant for the future of Christianity.

- As we will see in the next lecture, Jesus was not a messiah according to standard Jewish expectations; indeed, he overturned those expectations.
- Moreover, the claims made for Jesus by Christians—above all, the claim that he was the risen Lord—appear as heretical within Judaism.
- The interpretation of Torah from the perspective of belief in Jesus exacerbated the strains with Judaism.
- From the beginning, the inclusion of Gentiles with Greco-Roman perceptions placed additional strain on the relationship with Judaism.

### The Diversity of Judaism

- Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was not the religion of ancient Israel as it is depicted in the writings of the Old Testament but was a changing, complex, diverse, and vibrant religion within Greco-Roman culture that drew considerable attention both from outsiders and new members.
- Both to Gentiles and to themselves, Jews appeared as singular among Mediterranean peoples, a “second race,” because they shared the symbolic world of Torah.
  - Torah refers, first of all, to a set of texts (the five books of Moses, then the rest of Scripture), then to the story of a people contained in those texts, the commandments to which that nation was obligated, and the wisdom that suffuses those commandments.
  - Jews were bound by certain convictions and practices that set them apart. In contrast to Gentile polytheists, they were strict monotheists and considered themselves a chosen people joined in a covenant of loyalty with the one God of Israel.

- The covenant was expressed by observance of the commandments, which established Jews in righteousness with God and their neighbors. Obligatory were not only the Ten Commandments but also the social legislation of the Law.
- Equally important were ritual commands concerning the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, endogamy (marriage within a specific group), and dietary and purity regulations.
- Despite these unifying elements, several factors contributed to the differentiation and even division of Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.
  - The first of these factors was geography. Although many Jews lived in Palestine, at least twice as many had lived for as long as 600 years in the Diaspora (“the scattering”), in countries from Babylon to Rome.
  - Jews were further set apart by their language. Most Jews in Palestine spoke Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew)—although some spoke Greek—and read their Bible in Hebrew. In the Diaspora, Greek was spoken and read exclusively—the Bible had been translated into Greek already by 250 B.C.E.
  - Further, the dominant cultural forms in Palestine were those shaped by Torah; in the Diaspora, Jews lived within the dominant Greco-Roman culture. In addition to reading Torah in the synagogue, they could go to the *gymnasium* and read Homer in Greek.
  - A final factor was ideology. Especially in Palestine, Jews sharply disagreed on how to engage the “foreign” incursions of Greek culture and Roman rule. For Jews in the Diaspora, life within a pluralistic culture had tensions but was, overall, more positive than not, because religious symbols were not tied to social forms.

### Assimilation and Separation in the Diaspora

- Jews in the Diaspora experienced the same tension between the desire to assimilate and the desire to separate that similar minority groups often do.
  - Assimilation was expressed by adoption of the majority language, the change of names, and participation in shared cultural pursuits (as at the *gymnasium*); thus, in Alexandria, Jews read the Bible in Greek and interpreted it allegorically, as Greek philosophers did Homer.
  - Separation was expressed by the maintenance of “holiness” (difference) in assembly (the synagogue), in worship (the Sabbath), and in ancestral identity markers (circumcision).
- Gentiles, in turn, responded ambivalently to the presence of Jewish communities in their midst.
  - Many Gentiles were attracted to Judaism because of its antiquity, moral teaching, and bloodless worship; some became converts (proselytes), and others were “God-fearers” who frequented synagogues but resisted full initiation.
  - Other Gentiles engaged in anti-Semitic attacks, accusing Jews of a variety of crimes, including “atheism.” These crimes can be summed up by the terms *amixia* (“failure to mingle”) or *misanthropia* (“hatred of humans”).
- Jews in the Diaspora responded to attacks by developing a wide-ranging apologetic literature based on the Septuagint (the Greek Bible), using a variety of genres (history, poetry, moral instruction) to demonstrate that Jews were *philanthropic* (“lovers of humanity”).
  - One of the most famous of these writers was Philo of Alexandria, whose allegorical interpretations of Scripture were influential on later Christians.
  - Many of the apologetic arguments used by Diaspora Jews would be employed by Christians when they later faced similar attacks.

## Jews in Palestine

- Because of a different set of circumstances, Jews in Palestine experienced greater tensions with Gentiles, as well as greater and sharper divisions among themselves.
- The dominant cultural and political forces of Greece and Rome were experienced as an “irresistible force” from the outside against the “immovable object” that had been post-Exilic Judaism in Palestine.
  - The reform of Judaism after the Exile had connected religious devotion to the Lord with specific social and political institutions: king, land, Torah as law of the land, and temple. Religious observance, then, was intimately connected to specific social institutions.
  - Thus, the pressure of Greek language, culture, and religion could be regarded as a fundamental threat, and Roman rule (abetted by taxation and military presence) could be regarded as oppressive.
- The same tensions of assimilation and separation were, therefore, more fraught because they involved material realities rather than simply ideas.
  - Some Jews, especially those among the aristocrats, were comfortable with Hellenization and advocated a policy of accommodation.
  - Others, such as the Maccabees and their descendants, identified loyalty to Torah (and God) with Jewish possession of social and political institutions. To be a Jew meant having a Jewish king. To be a Jew meant having a safe and holy temple. To be a Jew meant having Torah as the law of the land, not simply something that is read in the synagogue. These Jews resisted “outsider” influence.
  - As philosophical schools, the “sects” described by the Jewish historian Josephus, represented distinct political and religious positions. For example, the Essenes and Zealots were militantly

opposed to foreigners and those who accommodated them. The Sadducees identified themselves with the Temple and the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court) but preserved them through cooperation with foreigners.

- The sect that represented the future of Judaism, the Pharisees, remained politically neutral and centered their community commitment on the observance of Torah, reinterpreted through scribal technique (*midrash*).
- Jews within Palestine expressed resistance to Greek culture and Roman rule in a variety of ways.
  - The active aggressive stance was found among those, such as the Zealots, who battled for Jewish liberation through the Jewish War (67–70 C.E.) and the Bar Kochba revolt (132–135 C.E.).
  - The passive resistance stance was found among those, such as the Maccabean mother and sons, who suffered martyrdom in witness to Torah rather than abandon the Law.
  - The stance of imaginative resistance was found among writers of apocalyptic literature, whose highly symbolic and dualistic reading of history imagined the reversal of fortunes brought about by God. Within this literature, we find the development of two fundamental convictions that would influence Christianity: a belief in the resurrection of the dead and a belief in the coming of a messiah.
  - The stance of physical withdrawal was found among the Essenes at the Dead Sea (Qumran), who created an alternative life based on a distinctive interpretation of the Law and saw themselves as the fulfillment of Torah’s prophecies.
  - The stance of ritual resistance was found among the Pharisees, whose practice of purity laws made it possible to live among those different from them and whose highly flexible *midrashic*



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**The Essenes at Qumran near the Dead Sea adopted a stance of physical and ritual withdrawal; their interpretation of themselves as the fulfillment of Torah's prophecies mirrored later Christians' interpretations of themselves in relation to Torah.**

interpretation of the commandments made the sect capable of surviving the destruction of the Temple.

### **The Pharisees and the Christians**

- After the destruction of the Temple at the end of the Jewish War, two groups of Jews emerged as rivals for the heritage of Israel: the Pharisees, whose dedication to Torah would develop into classical Talmudic Judaism, and the Christians, whose central symbol of a crucified and raised Messiah was even more adaptable to new circumstances. Both found their future as intentional communities, or associations, within the empire.
- In the next lecture, we'll learn about the Jesus movement and the birth of Christianity and see how this new "thing" in the Mediterranean world created profound tensions within the symbolic world of Judaism.

## Suggested Reading

Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*.

Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In what ways was the Judaism of the 1<sup>st</sup> century different from the religion of ancient Israel?
2. How did the powerful influences of Greek and Roman culture help shape the Judaism within which Christianity emerged?



# The Jesus Movement and the Birth of Christianity

## Lecture 4

Having sketched the cultural matrix within which Christianity was formed—the complex civilizations of Greece and Rome, built on Mediterranean culture and further complicated by empire, and the equally complex symbolic world of Judaism—we now turn to the Jesus movement and the birth of Christianity. The metaphor of birth is particularly appropriate in the case of Christianity because it entered history at a specific time and place and with a definite parentage. Like an infant, Christianity entered the world bearing the genes of Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, but it combined those elements in a new and distinctive fashion, so that it was not simply a version of what had preceded it but something truly new in the world.

### The “Founding” of Christianity and the Life of Jesus

- Christianity was not “founded” by Jesus in the obvious or straightforward sense that other great religions have founders. This point can be made by comparing Jesus to Muhammad as the founder of Islam or the Buddha as the founder of Buddhism.
  - In the case of Muhammad, the prophet received revelations throughout his life that were gathered into the Qur’ān and provided a body of social teachings on which an Islamic society could be (and was) based. In contrast, Jesus’s teachings tended to be aphoristic and parabolic and were far from systematic.
  - In the case of Prince Siddhartha, the experience of enlightenment led to the Four Noble Truths, by which others could also experience *nirvana* and attain the Buddha-state. Jesus’s inner experience is not communicated by the Gospels, and Christians do not claim to share his distinctive experience of the divine.
  - Jesus’s itinerant ministry in rural Palestine lasted from only one to three years, reached a limited number of people, and ended

in apparent failure, with the abandonment of his followers and his execution by Roman authorities.

- Nevertheless, responsible historical inquiry can yield important statements concerning Jesus as a person of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Mediterranean world. Such an inquiry involves using all available sources (insider and outsider), testing the sources for bias, determining lines of convergence among sources, and resisting the urge to speculate beyond what the evidence allows.
- Although historians cannot establish a full narrative concerning Jesus independent of the Gospels, they can state with greater and lesser degrees of probability important facts about him.
  - With the highest degree of probability, Jesus was a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestinian Jew who was executed by the Romans around the year 30 C.E. and in whose name, shortly thereafter, a movement arose and spread across the Mediterranean, generating writings in a variety of literary genres.
  - With a very high degree of probability, patterns of his activity can be determined: He spoke of God's rule, taught in parables, worked wonders, interpreted Torah, associated with marginal elements of his society, and chose 12 followers as disciples.
  - With a high degree of probability, it can be stated that Jesus was baptized by John, that he performed a prophetic gesture in the Temple, and that he was opposed by elements of the Jewish leadership.
- Although these statements are significant, they fall short of providing a narrative or supplying the self-understanding and aims of Jesus beyond what is provided by the Gospels—whose bias of faith is intractable.

### The Resurrection of Jesus

- According to the earliest Christian writings, Christianity did not begin with what Jesus said and did before his death. It began with

experiences of Jesus after his death by his followers in a new mode of existence: As resurrected from the dead and exalted to God's presence, Jesus is "Lord" and "Christ."

- Paul's letters provide evidence for the claims made by the first believers, which are all the more startling because they were at odds with believers' empirical circumstances.
  - First, believers claimed to have been saved; this salvation is not, in the New Testament, a future or a hoped-for state but a present reality.
  - Further, they claimed to be saved from negative conditions, such as slavery, law, sin, and death itself.
  - They believed they had been established in conditions of right-relatedness to God and other humans that could be described in terms of peace, joy, righteousness, and freedom.
  - They claimed new capacities of speech and action, both external (the working of powerful deeds) and internal (in moral dispositions).
  - At root, they claimed an experience of ultimate power that came from another and that transformed them. The symbol in the New Testament for this power is the Holy Spirit. The term "spirit" here refers to the medium of this power, which touches humans in their human capacities of knowing and willing. The term "holy" refers to the fact that the power comes from God, the Holy One.
- The source for the earliest believers' claim to empowerment—to being in possession of the Holy Spirit—was the conviction that Christ himself had been empowered by the very power of God. This is the Resurrection (exaltation) of Jesus. This combination—that Jesus had been raised and that believers possessed the Holy Spirit—was the fundamental conviction and experience of the earliest believers and the birth of the Christian religion.

- The early believers' claim was not that Jesus avoided death, or lived on in some fashion in the memory of followers, or was resuscitated for a time. None of these equals "the good news."
- The gospel message ("the good news") is that after his death, Jesus entered fully into the power and presence of God, that he was exalted—enthroned—to a full share in God's own life. He is, therefore, "Lord," sharing the designation of Israel's God (*Kyrios*).
- The Resurrection of Jesus is not an event of the past but a condition of the present, not something that happened only to Jesus but also to his followers, not a weakened form of presence but a more powerful form of presence of Jesus among his followers through "the power of the Holy Spirit."
- Because of this experience, believers saw themselves "in Christ." They saw themselves not only as a "new covenant" within Judaism but as a "new creation" and a "new humanity." Jesus was not simply a messiah for Jews but was the "image of God" for all humans.
- This claim to the experience of divine power in an immediate and transforming fashion marked the first Christians and accounted—much more than their moral teaching or manner of life—for their appeal to others.
  - That a human being had joined the divine realm as a "son of God" and was a lord and benefactor to humans would not have seemed strange to Gentiles.
  - To Jews, the claim that Jesus was a messiah was not theoretically a problem, but the claim that he was Lord made his followers appear as polytheists and, therefore, as heretics.

## The Manner of Jesus's Death

- If the Resurrection of Jesus was the good news, his death seemed problematic to both Gentiles and Jews, appearing to disqualify him as a source of divine life for others.
- In 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, Paul acknowledges that the “message of the cross,” which was for Christians the “power of salvation,” appeared to Greeks as foolishness and to Jews as a stumbling block.
- In antiquity, the manner of death was proof of the quality of a life, and Jesus’s violent death by legal execution disqualified him as a source of divine life for both sides of the cultural world.
  - Paul says that the “Greeks seek wisdom,” meaning that a great soldier or sage could join the gods—but crucifixion, the most shameful of all deaths and one used mainly for slaves, could appear only “foolish.”
  - Paul further says that “Jews seek signs,” meaning signs that Jesus was a genuine messiah for the Jews, but Jesus did nothing to make things better for the Jews; he did not restore the kingdom, the Temple, or the Law. In Jewish terms, he was a failed messiah.
  - The manner of Jesus’s life was that of a sinner; worse, his manner of death was one cursed by God, for “cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut. 21:23).



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**Crucifixion was the most shameful of all deaths, used mainly for slaves and rebels against the Roman order; the fact that Jesus died in this manner disqualified him as a source of divine life for both Greeks and Jews.**

- The problem was not only for outsiders; those who came to believe in Jesus were also “Greeks and Jews,” bringing their cultural perceptions with them.
  - The earliest Christians experienced what sociologists call “cognitive dissonance”: the apparent contradiction between their symbolic world and their experience. Such dissonance must be resolved through denial of the convictions, denial of the experience, or reinterpretation of the convictions in light of experience.
  - Within the symbolic world of the early Christians, Jesus ought not to have been the source of life because of the manner of his death. But their experience of the Holy Spirit’s power in their lives—a power that manifested itself in new capacities and that they saw as deriving from Jesus—made them call him both “Lord” and “Christ.”
  - To maintain both their experience and their symbolic world, the early Christians had to reinterpret their symbols in light of experience.
  - In order to get on with their own story, then, they had to come to grips with Jesus’s story, especially his death; thus, the process of reinterpretation that began at once led to the construction of the Passion accounts—the story of Jesus’s suffering—as the first part of the Jesus story to reach set form.

### **A Complex and Tense Religion**

- From the time of its birth and earliest growth, Christianity was a complex and tension-filled religion.
- Sociologically, it was underdetermined and parasitic: Beginning as a sect of Judaism, it was expelled from the synagogue and became a Gentile association (an intentional community) without obvious boundaries.

- Culturally, it was mixed, with a symbolic world shaped by a Judaism that was already Hellenized and with steady success among Gentiles rather than Jews.
- Religiously, it made claims to an experience of ultimate power through the Holy Spirit that were cosmic but disproportionate to the actual situation of believers in the world.
- Conceptually, the founding figure of Jesus presented a set of major challenges to understanding: Was he cursed or the source of blessing? If he was Lord, then what does that mean for monotheism?
- Many of the subsequent issues faced by Christians would involve the same tensions that marked the entry of the religion into the world and its first expansion.

### Suggested Reading

Johnson, *The Real Jesus*.

———, *The Writings of the New Testament*, especially pp. 83–136.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways in which the “founder” of Christianity differs from the founders of Buddhism and Islam.
2. How does the concept of cognitive dissonance help explain the necessity of Christians to reinterpret their symbolic world?

# Paul and Christianity's First Expansion

## Lecture 5

In the last lecture, we saw that the experience of power, even if from an unlikely source, was the distinctive claim made by the first believers. This power was not political, economic, or military but religious. The first believers claimed that they were touched by God through the Resurrection of Jesus. The persuasiveness of this claim to themselves and others must be the key to understanding how a failed messianic movement made its presence felt across the Mediterranean world within decades and with no other visible means of support. In this lecture, we'll look at the rapid and mostly spontaneous spread of Christianity across the western empire from 30 to 70 C.E.

### The Acts of the Apostles

- The Acts of the Apostles was written circa 85 C.E. as the second volume of the Gospel of Luke, but it describes events from 30 to 62. It is the indispensable if also limited narrative account of the first expansion of Christianity.
- Despite its obvious bias (it sees the movement as directed by God's Holy Spirit), Acts is, by the standards of ancient historiography, reasonably reliable, given that it traces the stages of Christianity's expansion from Jerusalem to Rome.
  - As archaeology and other ancient literature confirm, Acts gets its world right in considerable detail, including dates, local leaders, and political processes.
  - Where it is possible to check Acts against other information, such as Paul's letters—which to some extent overlap Acts 16–20—Acts gets the basic facts about the movement right, as well.
- The limits of Acts as a historical source are also real, requiring a careful and critical use of its narrative.



- It is selective, focusing primarily on two leaders (Peter and Paul), on the westward rather than eastward expansion, and on cities rather than rural areas.
- It does not have good sources in some instances. The first eight chapters concerning the founding of the community in Jerusalem contain little actual fact; as a good Hellenistic historian, Luke fills the lacunae with impressive speeches and summaries.
- It has definite biases. Acts emphasizes unity among Christian leaders, for example, as well as continuity between Israel and the church.
- As an apologetic narrative that covers more than 30 years in 28 chapters (many of them consisting of speeches), Acts necessarily smoothes over a much rougher course of events.
- Supported by other early writings (such as the letters of Paul), Acts is a reliable source for certain aspects of Christianity's first expansion.
  - The expansion was amazingly rapid, its speed matched only by the spread of Islam, which had the advantage of arms and diplomacy. Within 10 years of the death of Jesus, there were Christian communities throughout Palestine and Syria; in 20 years, across Asia Minor and into Greece; and in 25 years, in Rome.
  - It spread through preaching in public but even more through personal contacts, such as the conversion of households and those Gentiles (called God-fearers) who frequented synagogues.
  - The expansion of Christianity was carried out in conditions of duress. The movement spread not necessarily because people accepted it but at least in part because of harassment

and even persecution, forcing early believers into frequent and difficult travel.

- Christianity had to accomplish five transitions without a long period of stabilization and without strong institutional or textual controls: (1) sociological, from a rural itinerant movement to an urban household association; (2) geographical, from Palestine to the Diaspora; (3) linguistic, from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek; (4) cultural, from dominant Jewish institutions to dominant Gentile culture; and (5) demographic, from Jewish majority to Gentile majority.
- The diversity found in the writings of the New Testament, in terms of genre, perspective, and argumentation, are rooted at least in part in the diversity of experience and circumstance of the earliest Christian communities.

### The Life of Paul

- During the roughly 40-year period of 30–70 C.E., three developments in Christianity occurred simultaneously.
  - Communities (churches = *ekklesiai*) were founded and nurtured in cities from Jerusalem to Rome; these communities had shared rituals, such as baptism and meals, as well as practices of preaching, prayer, and teaching.
  - In such social settings, oral traditions concerning Jesus were handed on in anecdotal fashion to legitimate and guide the practices of the community.
  - Leaders of churches, such as Paul, James, and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, wrote letters to communities that were read aloud in the assembly.
- Paul's life is sketched both in Acts, where he dominates chapters 9–28, and in more fragmentary form in his letters.

- Convinced by his Pharisaic convictions that Jesus was cursed by God because of his death (Gal. 3:13), Paul sought to extirpate the movement.

- He had, in his words, an encounter with Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8; Gal. 1:15–16; see Acts 9:1–9) that made him an apostle to the Gentiles.



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**Christ appeared to Paul as to “one untimely born”; Paul interpreted that experience as his commissioning to be an apostle to the Gentiles.**

- Paul is important as a missionary of the movement, as a leader in the conversion of Gentiles, and as the first and arguably most important interpreter of the story of Jesus.
- Scholars debate how many letters were written by Paul during his lifetime and how many after his death by followers, but the letters are nonetheless of unparalleled importance for what they tell us about early Christianity in the cities of the empire.
  - Paul’s letters are not systematic but occasional, not personal but official, not mere rants but rhetorically crafted arguments meant to persuade.
  - He was a firsthand witness to the convictions and claims—and troubles—found among believers 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus.

- Paul is the source for the earliest religious claims concerning the Holy Spirit, Jesus as Lord, and the church as the body of Christ.
- He is the earliest recorder of such Christian practices as baptism, the Lord's Supper, healing, speaking in tongues, and prophecy.
- His letters show the diverse forms of authority and structure the early communities developed, from the authority of the apostle himself to the local boards of elders.
- In his responses to various crises in his communities, Paul illustrates the need for translation and interpretation of fundamental experiences and convictions in solving human conflicts and errors.

### Paul's Letters

- Paul's letters open a window to a variety of serious tensions that challenged the first urban Christians and continued to haunt this religion through the centuries.
- The issue of authority was fundamental: Jesus is Lord of all, but how is his reign exercised? Paul was sent as a delegate (*apostolos*) by God and the risen Christ, but his claims to authority were not self-validating or universally recognized. What was the relationship between the itinerant authority of the apostle and the local authorities placed in the church?
- Becoming "God's assembly" through conversion—this is an intentional not a national or biologically based community—demands "holiness," but how is "difference" to be expressed? What manner of life distinguishes the "saints" from the "world"?
  - Distinctions from Gentiles were fairly easy, given that idolatry and the vice characteristically associated with idolatry were easy to detect and prohibit.

- Distinctions from Jews were harder, because they shared the same symbolic world of Torah. Should believers, then, be circumcised, or observe the Sabbath, or practice purity regulations?
- The assembly that meets “in Christ” has egalitarian ideals: There is not Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:28), but meeting in the stratified location of the household (*oikos*) meant complications for those ideals.
  - Did the Jew have an advantage over the Gentile? Why or why not? What did that mean for common table fellowship?
  - Did males continue to have supremacy in all matters or only those in the household? Did the Spirit represent a liberation for females?
  - If all are “brothers and sisters” within the worship assembly, why did that not change the social status of master and slave when the worship ended?
  - The rich should not be honored if poverty is the ideal, but rich members of the community served as benefactors. Should they not be leaders, as well?

### **The Vibrancy of the Early Christian Movement**

- Paul’s letters also bear witness to the vibrancy and energy of the nascent Christian movement as it exploded across the empire.
- If early Christianity were simply the “Jesus movement” as a sect within Judaism, many of these issues would not have been raised; Jesus would simply have been another prophet or teacher. It was the power of the religious experience of the Resurrection that generated these great tensions.
- Paul’s vision of the church as a “new creation” in which members are a “new humanity” in the “body of Christ” is a utopian conception

of community that had great appeal, but it also had the capacity to disrupt the order of society.

- Already in Paul's letters, it is possible to see how Christianity forced open accustomed cultural values and began to reshape them—not all at once, never completely, and not always successfully, but it is difficult to account for Christianity's appeal through the centuries without recognizing this power for social change as one of its elements.

### Suggested Reading

Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic Historiography*.

Meeks and Fitzgerald, *The Writings of Saint Paul*.

Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How is the diversity of earliest Christianity—reflected in the writings of the New Testament—grounded in the conditions of its first expansion?
2. Discuss the proposition that Paul is the real “founder” of Christianity. Does this accurately capture his role?

# The Diversity of Early Christianity

## Lecture 6

In the last lecture, we discussed the important role played by the apostle Paul in the explosive expansion of Christianity across the Roman Empire in the middle decades of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Because his letters occupy such an important part of the New Testament and because he is the great hero of the Book of Acts, it is tempting to elevate Paul's historical importance to the level of his canonical (or literary) prominence. But it is an important function of historical study to correct simplistic and distorted views of the past. In this lecture, we will look at other manifestations of earliest Christianity witnessed by the New Testament.

### Popular Perceptions of Early Christianity

- Popular perceptions of Christianity's first decades tend to be simplistic and distorting.
  - Consider, for example, the view that Jesus was the real "founder of Christianity" and that Paul distorted the Jesus movement because of his own sick personality or, more benignly, the view that Paul is the real "inventor of the Christ cult." Both distort by oversimplifying: There were many more players than just these two. Indeed, the Book of Acts itself places Paul in the midst of a larger and more complex movement involving many people.
  - Similarly distorted is the view that the first decades of Christianity generated a wild diversity of writings but that all the interesting versions were eliminated at the Council of Nicaea. Once more, the view distorts by oversimplifying. There were other gospel accounts in addition to the four canonical Gospels, but none was earlier, and most were far from being more interesting.
- A more adequate historical account is almost always one that respects complexity.

- Thus, the writings we have in the New Testament are, so far as we can tell, the earliest evidence for Christianity. Efforts to discover earlier “sources” within them, or to appeal to compositions from Nag Hammadi, or to cite fragmentary gospels as evidence for major movements are not convincing.
- At the same time, many historians neglect the evidence of diversity provided by the canonical writings themselves. In addition to the 13 letters attributed to Paul are letters from James, John, Jude, Peter, and the anonymous author of Letter to the Hebrews; the four Gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and the visionary composition called the book of Revelation, ascribed to John the Seer.
- These writings (all composed before 100) predate any archaeological evidence for Christianity and amply testify to the diversity of experience, conviction, and perspective in the earliest decades of the religion.
- The importance of these other canonical writings, simply as historical sources, can scarcely be overstated. By their sheer existence as literature, they make clear that earliest Christianity was not represented only by Paul but by a variety of other leaders working in diverse communities. They also contribute additional evidence concerning the earliest movement beyond that offered by Acts and the letters of Paul.
  - In terms of geographical expansion, these writings speak of Jewish-Christian communities through the Diaspora (James); Gentile communities in Pontus and Cappadocia, as well as Asia and Phrygia (1 Peter); churches in Galilee, as well as in Judaea and Samaria (Mark, Matthew); and specific communities of Asia Minor in addition to Ephesus (Revelation).
  - In terms of social circumstances, they show that Jewish/Christian interactions were more complex than suggested by Paul alone (see Matthew, Luke, John, James, and 1 Peter), that questions of property and poverty occupied other churches



than Paul's (Hebrews and James), and that oppression and persecution occurred in other communities than Paul's (Hebrews, 1 Peter, Revelation).

- In terms of political posture, they reveal a spectrum of attitudes toward the Roman Empire, from positive accommodation (1 Peter) to passive resistance (Revelation).
- In terms of religious inspiration, the narratives of the Gospels, the poetry of Revelation, the powerful rhetoric of Hebrews, and the prophetic voice of James alert the historian to the fact that the earliest decades of Christianity had more vibrant and creative minds than only Paul's.



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**The canonical writings reveal a range of attitudes about the Roman Empire, from positive accommodation and praise in 1 Peter to passive resistance to imperial oppression in Revelation.**

### The Gospel Narratives

- Pride of place in the New Testament collection is undoubtedly held by the four Gospels, not so much because they are historically accurate in their accounts of Jesus as because they represent irreplaceable witnesses and interpretations of the church's faith in Jesus, for both ancient and present-day Christians.
- The Gospel narratives appeared some 40 to 50 years after the death of Jesus and represent crystallizations of earlier traditions handed down in assemblies.

- The memories of Jesus's statements and deeds were, in all likelihood, transmitted orally in specific social contexts (worship, teaching) in the form of individual units, called "pericopes."
- Stages of composition probably preceded the writing of full narratives. The Passion account (from Jesus's arrest to his burial) probably reached set form first.
- It is possible that a collection of Jesus's sayings was also gathered. Scholars hypothesize a source, called Q, whose material is found in Matthew and Luke.
- The best explanation for the appearance of written narratives after generations of oral tradition is a convergence of historical factors around the year 70.
  - The death of eyewitnesses (often by martyrdom), such as Peter, James, and John, meant that the oral tradition lost important controls.
  - The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the Jewish War against Rome meant the loss of the Jerusalem community, as well as the symbolic center for the movement in Jesus's homeland.
  - The rapid increase of Gentile conversions meant that Greco-Roman more than Jewish perceptions would be at work among believers.
  - The threat was that the meaning of Jesus's words, actions, and story could be lost with the loss of the Palestinian Jewish context. Writing them in the form of a narrative served to stabilize the tradition.
- Despite obvious literary similarities to other ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish narratives, the Gospels share certain distinctive characteristics. Most important is the nature of memory found in them. The Resurrection is not simply an event at the end of the

story but an all-pervasive perspective on the entire story: The one remembered is believed to be powerfully alive among those who are remembering.

- Because of the long process of memory and compilation, the Gospels have an unusual layered quality.
  - The most available level is that of the evangelist's literary work, in which earlier traditions are organized and shaped into a narrative providing a portrait of Jesus.
  - Next most available are the signs of oral tradition that still cling to many parts of the Gospel narratives.
  - Least accessible are the actual words and deeds of Jesus as they were spoken or performed in Palestine some 40 years before these accounts were written by those believing in his Resurrection and exaltation as Lord.
- The four canonical Gospels share a relative degree of interdependence and a relative degree of independence.
  - The three Gospels called "Synoptic" (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) have a demonstrable literary interdependence. Similarities in language, material, and sequence require that such literary dependence take place at the level of written compositions: One was written first, and the others used it in their composition.
  - The majority of critical scholars conclude that Mark wrote first and that Matthew and Luke used his Gospel as a source independently. Matthew and Luke also share material not found in Mark (often attributed to Q); finally, both Matthew and Luke have material unique to each.
  - In one sense, Matthew and Luke can be regarded as expanded (and, by their light, improved) versions of Mark's Gospel.

- The Gospel of John (the “Fourth Gospel”) makes use of material found also in the Synoptics but shapes the entire narrative so distinctively that no literary dependence on those Gospels is suspected.

### The Gospel Portraits of Jesus

- As interpretations of Jesus, the four Gospels offer distinct portraits; as witnesses, they converge on the character of the human Jesus.
- Each Gospel portrays Jesus and his disciples in accordance with the evangelist’s social context, use of Torah, and literary goals.
  - In Mark, Jesus is the powerful son of God, whose proclamation of God’s rule is demonstrated by convincing deeds, yet as son of man, he is powerless before his enemies. Jesus is himself the “mystery of the kingdom” and the “parable,” and his disciples fail either to understand him or, worse, show loyalty to him. The drama of discipleship is central.
  - Matthew uses Mark’s basic plot and opens it to a conversation with formative Judaism—shaped by the ideals of the Pharisees and the techniques of the scribes—with which Matthew’s community was in conflict. Jesus appears as the fulfillment, the teacher, and indeed, the personification of Torah. Corresponding to the image of Jesus as teacher, the disciples, though no less faithless than those in Mark, understand the teachings they are to pass on.
  - Luke also uses Mark but extends his story to another complete volume (the Acts of the Apostles). Jesus is God’s prophet who reverses societal norms, heals, and associates with the marginal. In the sequel, his disciples live out his ideal as his successor-prophets.
  - John portrays Jesus as the man from heaven who, as the light, intersects the darkness of the world and calls it to conversion. His disciples are to continue his witness to the truth of God and will experience the same hatred from the world as Jesus did.

- Despite such divergence in interpretation, the four Gospels converge in their understanding of the character of Jesus and of discipleship.
  - They agree that Jesus is defined by an absolute obedience to God rather than by career, popularity, possessions, pleasure, or power: “not my will but your will be done.”
  - They agree further that this radical obedience is expressed through dispositions of self-giving to others: He “gives his life for others” and is “the servant of others.”
  - They agree that discipleship is a matter of “following” Jesus and exhibiting the same character of radical obedience and self-emptying love.

### **The Gospels as Fundamental Norm**

- The Jesus shaped by the canonical Gospels has served as a fundamental norm for subsequent Christians—all the more powerful because it is cast in the form of story.
- The realistic narratives enmesh Jesus in the world of materiality, time, history, and the goodness of human bodies; the Gospels stand against all efforts to make Christianity a timeless, bodiless, anti-institutional religion.
- The Gospels also provide a Jesus who can surprise, shock, and challenge comfortable religious accommodation: Christian reform movements have consistently appealed not to the “historical Jesus” but to the human Jesus of the Gospels who shaped subsequent history as the “historic Christ.”

### **Suggested Reading**

Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*.

Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*.

Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How does taking into account the full range of New Testament writings expand the understanding of Christian origins?
2. Discuss the distinctive character of the Gospels, especially with respect to the complexity of their composition and the nature of memory found in them.

# The Unpopular Cult—Persecution

## Lecture 7

To this point in the course, the lectures have described the contexts of Christianity within Mediterranean culture, Greek civilization, and Roman rule; its birth within the symbolic world of Torah; its first rapid expansion; and the composition of its earliest literature. But it is premature to speak of “Christianity” in these earlier stages as though it were a fully defined and distinct entity; the process of its formation continued into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and only then achieved greater clarity. The next six lectures trace the history of this continuing formation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, beginning in this lecture with a discussion of persecution.

### Antecedents of Christian Persecution

- The antecedents to the persecution of Christians reveal the social, political, and religious issues involved.
- The Roman Empire, like the Greek Empire before it, was concerned above all with the good order on which the stability and prosperity of the city-state and the empire (*oikoumene*) depended.
  - The worship of the gods was an inherent and necessary part of such world maintenance; the participation of all in the “city of gods and men” was a fundamental premise of ancient politics. Plutarch despised the Epicurean philosophy primarily because its denial of the gods was attached to a withdrawal from political involvement. It thus represented a challenge to good order and a threat to society.
  - Although the Roman Empire was generally receptive to new religions, especially when, like Judaism, they were ancient traditions of a conquered nation, participation in the empire’s benefits required the recognition of the empire’s gods. Cults regarded as subversive were dangerous.

- Even when a cult enjoyed imperial recognition or official favor, it could be the target of local resentment and harassment. Ancient people were no less prone than we are to fear and resent that which is strange.
- Two examples preceding Christianity show such premises at work and help explain the subsequent experience of Christ-believers when they became sufficiently numerous to be noticed by outsiders.
  - Although Judaism was granted imperial recognition as a national religion—and reciprocated by offering sacrifices and prayers for the emperor—there are instances of its being persecuted.
  - For example, the Maccabean books show that resistance to syncretism under Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Palestine led to executions, most famously that of the aged Eleazar and of the seven Maccabean brothers with their mother. Philo tells us of anti-Semitism in Alexandria that expressed itself in local riots against the Jews, requiring an appeal to the emperor for assistance.
  - Even among non-Jews, philosophers who challenged traditional beliefs or who withdrew from religious practices, such as the Epicureans, were suspected of subversion. Individual philosophers who challenged social mores or popular religious tenets were sometimes put to death (Socrates and Zeno) or exiled (Dio of Prusa, Epictetus, Seneca) as “enemies of the Roman order.”

### Early Christian Vulnerabilities

- In its first centuries of its existence, Christianity was particularly vulnerable to attack from both Jews and Gentiles. It was sociologically underdetermined and ideologically oppositional.
  - As an intentional community, the Christian cult drew from both Jews and Greeks but had no secure place in the world. It did not meet in established temples or synagogues but in households.



- Its understanding of “holiness” demanded an opposition against paganism (with its idolatry) and Judaism (with its Law).
- Insofar as it succeeded in expressing egalitarian ideals, it was inherently threatening to the stratified world of ancient patronage.
- The earliest evidence of opposition comes not from the side of the Roman Empire but from the side of the Jews.
  - The question of the involvement of Jewish leaders in the death of Jesus is difficult and contentious. Certainly, he was executed under Roman order, but it is likely that some degree of cooperation if not instigation can legitimately be ascribed to some Jewish leaders. With the exception of the Gospel of Luke, however, the Gospels certainly tend to exaggerate the complicity of the Jewish population in the death of Jesus.
  - Nevertheless, the evidence of the New Testament (especially Acts and Paul’s letters) supports the fact that in the first decades, Jews harassed and sought to subvert the Christian movement. In fact, Paul attests that he was a persecutor of the church before his conversion and that after becoming an apostle was persecuted by his fellow Jews.
  - For the Jews, the problematic claim was not that “Jesus is Messiah,” for such a confession (right or wrong) was compatible with Jewish identity. The troubling claim was that “Jesus is Lord,” that is, as the son of God, he shared fully in the life and power of the divine. This claim offended Torah observers who interpreted the manner of Jesus’s death as an indication that he was cursed by God and who believed that declaring Jesus as Lord was the equivalent to polytheism.
  - The sources speak of two forms of harassment: stoning (attested by Paul and Acts) and excommunication from the synagogue (attested by Acts and the Fourth Gospel).

- Christians put Roman rulers and administrators in a difficult situation.
  - So long as Christianity flew under the flag of Judaism (as a “sect” of Judaism), it would enjoy the same privileges accorded that ancestral tradition, but when relations with Jews were severed, as they were by the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, the subversive elements in Christianity could not be ignored.
  - Unlike Jews, Christians had no temple where sacrifices could be offered for the emperor, thus smoothing relations. In fact, Christians were aggressive in their attacks on Gentile idolatry: The gods of the nations were idols and demons. Aggressiveness was shown, as well, by intense proselytism.
  - The separateness of the cult, above all its refusal to participate in the “city of gods and men,” marked its members for the same attacks that had been made on Epicureans (and Jews): They were atheists and were guilty of misanthropy.
  - The earliest Roman sources concerning Christians (Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger) considered them superstitious and were impressed by their stubbornness.

### Historical Facts of Persecution

- Constructing an adequate historical account of persecution from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries is difficult. The precise events are uncertain, and there are large gaps in the evidence.
  - For the most part, evidence comes from Christian sources, which understandably tend to maximize state opposition and oppression. Thus, in Christian lore, Marcus Aurelius is a notorious persecutor, but there is little evidence of this persecuting activity under him.
  - It is difficult to distinguish the occurrence of local riots (as in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*) or even regional repression (as in Pliny the Younger) from systematic state persecution, or temporary spasms of persecution from sustained efforts.

- The numbers of Christians killed over these centuries is particularly difficult to assess, although to be sure, the effect of persecution should not be measured only by numbers of fatalities.
- It seems clear, moreover, that Christians enjoyed periods of peace that sometimes lasted for decades.
- Overall, however, a consistent pattern appears to emerge: When Christians were persecuted by state authority, it was as a corollary of some larger political concern for the security of the imperial order.
- The best known (or suspected) persecutions can be summarized according to century.
  - In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Nero killed Christians in 64 as a way of deflecting blame for the fire in Rome from himself. According to Tacitus, Nero “inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations... [and] hatred of mankind.” A persecution under Domitian (89–96) is postulated as the backdrop to the oppression and murder depicted in the book of Revelation.
  - In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, a regional repression under Trajan (109–111) in Asia Minor is known from the letter of Pliny, as well as from the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Under Marcus Aurelius (162–177), a persecution in Lyons can be documented and may have been more widespread.



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**In the 1<sup>st</sup>-century persecution under the emperor Nero, it was said that Christians were mocked, attacked by dogs, crucified, and burned.**

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> century saw more violent outbursts of persecution under Septimius Severus (202–210), Maximinus (235), Decius (250–251), and Valerian (253–258). These were especially virulent in North Africa. In contrast to such spasms were lengthy periods of peace.
- The most systematic and sustained persecution was the last, under Diocletian and Galerius (302–311), which led right up to the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 312, finally granting religious toleration to Christians.

### Effects of Persecution

- Although the exact facts about the centuries of persecution are difficult to ascertain, the effect on Christianity is clear.
- Under conditions of uncertainty and duress, Christianity continued to grow, partly by means of conversion and partly by means of childbirth—the refusal to practice abortion or infant exposure led to larger families.
- Persecution generated two responses from within Christianity: the celebration of martyrdom as perfect discipleship and the writing of apologetic literature in defense of the movement.
- The long-term effect on the Christian psyche was real: Like an abused child for whom early trauma continues to define later behavior, Christians tended through the ages to bear a sense of aggrievement and to become abusive toward others in turn when they came into power. We will see how imperial Christianity turned the state instruments of persecution on Jews, pagans, and those considered to be heretical in their Christian teaching.

### Suggested Reading

Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the several ways in which political rule and religious freedom could come into conflict in antiquity.
2. How is the persecution of Christianity in particular made more intelligible by the peculiar character of this new cult?

# Forms of Witness—Martyrdom and Apologetic

## Lecture 8

In the last lecture, we discussed the persecutions experienced by Christians at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles in the first 280 years of the religion's existence. The oppression of believers included social ostracism, the expropriation of property, economic marginalization, exile, and death. This lecture takes up the forms of witness that evolved in response to persecution: the tradition of martyrdom and the writing of apologetic literature. Each in its way was of extraordinary importance in shaping the Christian vision of the world in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and even beyond.

### A Context of Tribulation

- From the perspective of Christianity's eventual triumph, it is difficult to imagine just how problematic, even dangerous, conditions of life were for Christians in the first 280 years of the religion's existence.
- As an intentional community that drew members from both Jews and Gentiles, it was also at odds with both Jews and Gentiles, while enjoying no natural institutional source of support.
  - Christians withdrew from participation in the cultic life (festivals, processions, meals) that was regarded as essential for citizenship in the "city of gods and men." They thereby marked themselves as aliens to the larger culture that demanded complete participation in such civic religion.
  - After the Jewish War of 67–70, in which Christians refused to participate, and after the *Birkat Ha-minim*, which excluded Christians from the synagogue, the Christian community no longer enjoyed the protective umbrella of Judaism.
  - It lacked legitimacy, approval, or any status. In the eyes of the philosopher Celsus, who wrote a devastating attack on

Christians in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it was a religion of women and slaves.

- As we have already seen, although formal state persecutions were sporadic and interspersed with relatively long periods of neglect, they were direct attempts to suppress the movement by violence and even death.
  - The very uncertainty of the breakout of persecution was a contributing factor to the tension felt by Christians during these centuries. It could happen suddenly and without warning.
  - The actual number of Christians killed is not the whole story; the oppression of believers included the expropriation of property, economic marginalization, exile, and social ostracism.
- Two responses to this context of tribulation characterize the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries: martyrdom and apologetic. Both had roots in Judaism, and each developed in distinctive ways during these centuries when Christians endured repression.

### **The Tradition of Martyrdom**

- The term “martyr” (*martyr*) means “witness,” and the ideal of witnessing to one’s convictions even to the point of death arose within Judaism; for Christ-believers, martyrdom found its perfect realization in the innocent suffering and death of Jesus.
- In the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., the Maccabees resisted efforts by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes to impose syncretistic worship, symbolized by the eating of pork forbidden by Torah.
  - The elderly Eleazar and seven sons with their mother publicly refused to submit, even when threatened by death, and were executed one after the other.
  - Their witness to Torah was also a witness to the fidelity of God and to faith in a future resurrection: God will reward those who honor him. The fourth son cries out before his execution, “It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the God-given hope

of being restored to life by him; but for you there will be no resurrection to life” (2 Macc. 7:14).

- The Gospel of John and the book of Revelation depict Jesus as a witness to God in the face of death.
  - In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Pontius Pilate, “For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). And before his death, he tells his followers, “You must bear witness as well, for you have been with me from the beginning” (15:27).
  - The book of Revelation, in turn, calls Jesus the faithful witness in the shedding of his blood (1:5, 3:4), and his followers are also witnesses (19:10).
- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, martyrdom came to be regarded by many believers as the perfect form of discipleship. They saw themselves conforming completely to the pattern of suffering for others in witness to God’s truth that was established by Jesus.
  - Already Paul had spoken of believers “bearing in their body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10), and if they are thus totally conformed to Christ in his death, they can hope to share in his Resurrection (Phil. 3:11).
  - Those who “confess Christ” in the face of persecution, torture, and the threat of death but fall short of actual death were accorded second rank of honor as witnesses and came to be called “confessors.”

### Notable and Anonymous Martyrs

- The tradition of martyrdom in Christianity began with the apostles, especially Stephen, who was, according to Acts, put to death by stoning by the Jewish court, and Peter and Paul, who were killed in the persecution in Rome under Nero. The tradition continued in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries among both notable and anonymous believers.





**During the reign of the emperor Trajan, Ignatius told the Romans: “I will not only be called a Christian but found to be one,” meaning, in his death.**

- Three highly visible Christian leaders bore witness in a way that glorified martyrdom.
  - Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was arrested circa 107 and was carried to Rome as a captive for execution; in seven letters to churches in Asia Minor, he exalts in the death he faces under the emperor Trajan. He begs the Roman Christians not to intervene when he arrives, seeing martyrdom as the completion of his discipleship.
  - Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, collected the letters of Ignatius, and himself wrote a letter of exhortation to the Philippians. His execution in 155–156 was celebrated by *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which explicitly connects his witness to that of Jesus.
  - The Christian philosopher Justin was condemned as a Christian and suffered martyrdom under the emperor Marcus Aurelius

circa 165; his trial before the Roman prefect was recorded and is extant. When the prefect orders him a final time to offer sacrifice to the gods, Justin refuses, saying, “Through prayer we can be saved on account of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

- Evidence also exists for the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of relatively unknown Christians.
  - A letter from the churches of Vienne and Lyons attests—shortly after the event—to the suffering and death of a considerable number of Christians in Gaul under Marcus Aurelius in 178.
  - Later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* likewise provides evidence of North African martyrs.
  - The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* is an account, close to the events, of the imprisonment and death of Christians in North Africa in 203.
- The most passionate statement concerning the ideal of martyrdom is found in Origen of Alexandria’s *Exhortation to Martyrdom* in 235: The death of the martyr is the closest possible conformity to the witness of Christ. Origen speaks of the inducements to turn away from the pain of suffering and says, “if turning from all of these we give ourselves entirely to God ... with a view to sharing union with his only begotten son and those who have a share in him, then we can say that we have filled up the measure of bearing witness” (3.11).

### Apologetic Literature

- A second response to persecution is the composition of apologetic literature. Such literature also had its roots in Judaism and in the New Testament.
- Apologetic literature arose among Diaspora Jews, such as Philo and Josephus, who responded to anti-Semitic charges of misanthropy with histories and philosophical treatises that demonstrated that the Jewish Law and manner of life were actually philanthropic.

- Although supposedly directed to outsiders, such apologetic literature played an important role in shaping Jewish identity, by portraying the tradition in terms understandable to the wider world.
- In the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles has many of the elements of apologetic literature: “The way” is portrayed as benevolent and nonthreatening to the social order. Luke tries to show that the Christian movement is continuous with Israel and is philanthropic in character.
- The Christian literature termed “apologetic” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries shared certain features.
  - The device of addressing the emperor was probably fictional, though it is possible that a reading by authorities might occur.
  - A consistent feature—one not likely to endear the movement to Gentiles—was an attack on idolatry, that is, the religious practices of the larger world.
  - Positively, a case would be made for the legal innocence of Christians and the injustice of persecuting them.

### **The Emergence of Intellectual Self-Consciousness**

- By casting convictions in language intelligible to the wider world, apologetic literature contributed to the development of a sense within Christianity of having a place in that wider world and created a reasoned case for the religious movement.
- An anonymous composition from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century called the Letter to Diognetus emphasizes the idea that Christians are like their neighbors in every respect but bring benefit by being the “soul of the world.”
- Before his martyrdom in 165, Justin wrote a first apology addressed to Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, a second apology addressed to the Roman Senate, and a *Dialogue with Trypho*, defending Christian claims to a Jewish interlocutor. Justin

portrayed Christianity as the best of philosophies, summing up the best desires of Gentile and Jewish wisdom.

- The brilliant Carthaginian convert Tertullian was trained in law, and his *Apology* of 197, written in Latin, appeals for the legal toleration of Christianity. Tertullian argues that Christians are highly moral and benefactors to society, even as he attacked the religious mores of Gentiles.
- The lengthiest and most intellectually sophisticated apology was written by Origen of Alexandria at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. In the eight books of *Against Celsus*, he responds vigorously to the attacks made on Christianity by the Greek philosopher. In his extensive argument against Celsus, Origen demonstrated an intellectual capacity and learning equal to his interlocutor.
- With the apologists of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, Christianity took the first steps toward intellectual self-consciousness and toward claiming a place within Greco-Roman culture—on its own terms.

### Suggested Reading

Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*.

Moss, *The Other Christs*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What does the willingness to be martyred say about the early Christian convictions concerning union with Christ and the resurrection of life?
2. Discuss how the writing of apologetic literature—the practice of “seeing ourselves as others see us”—has an effect on both self-presentation and self-understanding within communities.

# Extreme Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries

## Lecture 9

Some Christians in the age of persecution willingly accepted martyrdom as a witness to Christ and their hope in the resurrection from the dead. Others composed apologetic literature, seeking a place in the intellectual world of the empire. But there were other manifestations of the Christian religion in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, even those that can be considered extreme. The deeply experiential character of this religion manifested itself especially in phenomena that, at the same time, resembled aspects of Greco-Roman religion and appeared to threaten good order within Christianity. None of these manifestations truly represented Christianity's future, but none of them was ever totally suppressed, and each recurred in different forms through the centuries.

### The Visible Working of Divine Power

- One manifestation of Christianity in this period was a distinctive religious sensibility that extended and amplified an element found in the New Testament Gospels and Acts: an emphasis on wonder-working and the working of divine power in visible ways. This was expressed in a variety of new gospel narratives and acts of apostles.
- The infancy gospels of James and Thomas focus exclusively on the birth and childhood of Jesus. They place an emphasis on wonder-working and the physical purity of the body.



The infancy gospel of James depicts the birth of Jesus as miraculous, almost as if the less human Jesus is, the more divine we can assume him to be.

- In the infancy gospel of James, the perpetual virginity of Mary is ensured by the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus. When Jesus is born, time stops and all creation grows silent; he appears first as a shining light and only slowly takes the form of an infant.
- In the infancy gospel of Thomas, the child Jesus is the source of both cure and blessing to his family and neighbors, so overwhelming are his acts; Jesus is portrayed as captive to his own extraordinary powers, only slowly learning how to turn them to good.
- The Acts of Paul, Andrew, John, Peter, and Thomas (all composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) continue the literary tradition of the canonical Acts of the Apostles but focus almost exclusively on the apostles as wonder-workers who triumph over all, even in their death as martyrs.
- Although naive in some ways—they are filled with animal tales, nature wonders, and strange deeds—these narratives convey a sense of Christianity as a movement that exercises supernatural power and poses a radical threat to conventional mores.
  - The order of the household is threatened by a version of the “good news” that demands of its hearers—especially women—virginity and singleness. The apostles are itinerant wonder-workers who find their way into households and “seduce” wives by their preaching, convincing them to commit to a celibate life; the elevation of virgins and widows means women are not defined by biological or domestic roles.
  - Women in these accounts are definitely not “submissive to their husbands” but either leave them or assume leadership roles in the assembly; most impressively, Paul’s follower Thecla cuts her long hair, dresses as a man, baptizes herself, and undertakes a career in preaching.

- The order of the empire is equally threatened by an aggressive assertion of God’s sovereignty. These stories show emperors and kings alike unable, despite violent efforts, to stop a movement that subverts their authority. Even when they put an apostle to death, power continues to emanate from the body.
- There is nothing theoretical in this stream of Christianity: It is entirely embodied, with a stress on actual and present power at work in the bodies of believers. Not unlike the acts of the martyrs, it sees the human body as the arena for the display of divine power in the world.

### **The Montanist Movement**

- A second manifestation of radical Christianity was a movement that emphasized personal experience of the Holy Spirit. This was the “New Prophecy” or Montanist movement, named for its founder, Montanus.
- Beginning either in 156/7 or 172, the movement claimed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (the “Paraclete” of John’s Gospel) on Montanus and two female companions, Prisca and Maximilla in Phrygia. Members of the movement were “pneumatics” (spiritual people) and outsiders were “psychics” (merely natural people).
  - Forms of ecstatic behavior were attested in Phrygia before the time of Christianity. For example, *The Golden Ass*, written by Apuleius, describes the eunuch priests of the mother goddess Cybele in the ecstatic throes of self-mutilation and ecstasy. As Paul’s Letter to the Galatians suggests, Phrygia was a territory given to radical behavior: His converts in that area also sought to cut off their foreskins as a sign of religious enthusiasm.
  - The impulse toward ecstatic utterance also extended a theme of earliest Christianity: In addition to Jesus’s promise of the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel (ch. 16), see the portrayal of the church prophesying and speaking in tongues in Acts 2, as well as Paul’s discussion of tongues and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

- As in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the prophetic power of celibate women provides a radical alternative to the domestic roles society imposed on them; thus, the New Prophecy implicitly challenged conventional society.
- The Montanist movement was strongly ascetical; it forbade second marriages, imposed strict rules for fasting, and advocated the willing acceptance of martyrdom rather than flight in times of persecution.
  - It was sufficiently popular to have converted the intellectual Tertullian in North Africa in the year 206; his last writings are marked by Montanist tendencies.
  - The prediction that the “New Jerusalem” would appear in the village of Pepuza probably hastened, by its nonrealization, the fading of the movement.
  - It was condemned by Asian synods before the year 200 and by the bishop of Rome Zephyrinus (d. 217).
- Later prophetic figures in Christianity, both male and female, would make appeals to a new age of the Holy Spirit (see Joachim of Fiore) or to visions (see the female medieval mystics), but ecstatic speech tended always to be suspect as a manifestation of unreliable “enthusiasm.”

### Dualistic Visions of Christian Existence

- The third manifestation of radical Christianity came through a number of powerful teachers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century who advocated strongly dualistic visions of Christian existence that posed a challenge both to societal conventions and the very order of creation. The geographical distribution of these teachers and their followers suggests the popularity of this dualistic ideology among many followers of Christ.
- A teacher known only as Tatian came from Assyria to Rome around 150 to become a disciple of Justin. He wrote a deeply learned but



hostile “apology” called *Against the Greeks*, then returned to the East, where he died around 173. He is often named as the founder of an ascetic group called the Encratites (the term means “self-controlled”), who considered sexual abstinence to be essential to the Christian profession.

- Another teacher, Marcion, came to Rome in 140 from Pontus in Asia Minor. He proclaimed a Christianity that was based on an absolute division between matter and spirit: Physical reality is evil, and only spirit is good.
  - Marcion taught that the creator God of the Old Testament is a god of wrath, who by his creation, entrapped humans in material reality; Jesus represents an alien god of the spirit who liberates humans from the body.
  - Among the New Testament writings, Marcion considered only 10 letters of Paul to contain the true gospel; other writings were contaminated by the “Jewishness” sponsored by the creator God who had revealed the Law. Further, for Marcion, only an edited version of “Paul’s Gospel” (the Gospel of Luke) portrays Jesus truly. Marcionism was profoundly and essentially anti-Semitic in character.
  - Marcion founded a number of churches that were remarkably successful, especially in the East. His communities were strongly ascetical in their behavior: Virginity and fasting were essential to the freedom of the spirit.
- The discovery of a collection of Coptic compositions at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945 confirmed the reports of ancient ecclesiastical writers concerning such teachers as Valentinus (in Rome, c. 135) and Basilides (in Egypt, c. 135), who sponsored a strongly dualistic and individualistic version of Christianity that has come to be called Gnosticism. This term covers a spectrum of variations, but certain characteristics are held in common.
  - The soul is a fragment of the divine that has tragically been separated from its source and trapped in the darkness of

the body, where it forgets its origins and destiny and falls into ignorance.

- Jesus is the revealer who comes from the light and announces to the soul its origin and identity. “Saving knowledge” (*gnosis*) is a form of self-realization: where one is from, who one truly is, and where one is destined to return.
- The way back to the light is through a liberation from the body and its physical entanglements, especially through sexual abstinence and fasting; marriage and children simply perpetuate the tragedy of somatic existence.
- The Gnostics divided humans into three categories: the hylic (lost in materiality), the pneumatic (self-aware), and the psychic (who can choose either way).
  - The “spiritual people” saw themselves as superior to the members of the “catholic” community, who were hylic because of their enmeshment in matter. Gnosticism privileged the destiny of the individual over the survival of the community.
  - The literature also reveals hostility toward the institutions of the “great church” and the “apostolic men” who cultivate a community that is lost in ignorance and materiality.
  - Those drawn to Gnosticism tended to find their way into Manichaeism—founded by the Persian Mani (216–276)—which had both Christian and non-Christian forms, but versions of Gnosticism also endured into the medieval period, as among the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Albigensians.
- It is difficult to determine how many were attracted to these rigorous forms of Christianity. In some parts of the empire, Marcionites seem to have formed a majority. They were popular enough to generate a vigorous response from the “orthodox.”

## The Importance of Radical Phenomena

- Such radical phenomena are of great importance for assessing the character of Christianity as it grew within the Roman Empire.
- They continued the original diversity of Christianity in even more dramatic ways; Christianity was certainly not yet just “one thing.”
- They continued to insist on a key element in earliest Christianity, namely, religious experience of various kinds.
- They continued to challenge the unity of the church, which would eventually expel some manifestations (such as Gnosticism) and domesticate others (such as miracle-working and martyrdom).

## Suggested Reading

Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*.

King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

## Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways in which forms of “extreme Christianity” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries can claim precedent in the diversity of religious experiences in earliest Christianity.
2. Why would the place of women in these forms of Christianity pose a threat to the Greco-Roman social order?

# The Shaping of Orthodoxy

## Lecture 10

**W**e have surveyed some of the variety to be found in 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christianity: prophetic utterances and promises in Montanism; wonder-working in the apocryphal acts, mystical ascent in Gnosticism. But when does diversity become deviance? When are more definite boundaries required? In the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, at least partly in response to extreme impulses, Christianity took on a clearer shape. This period represents the most important stage of self-definition for Christianity, when it emerged fully and identifiably as a new religion.

### Challenges for Emerging Christianity

- A religious movement that began with scattered, diverse, small household groups, held together by certain convictions, practices, and experiences, faced increasing challenges from multiple directions as it grew in size and extent.
  - From the side of Greco-Roman culture: What elements of the dominant society could Christians affirm, and which ones must they oppose?
  - From the side of Judaism: In what sense could Christians lay claim to the heritage of Israel?
- But the strongest challenges came from within. As we have seen, many versions of Christianity made claims to the experience of power that had always been a distinguishing feature of the movement, but they expressed these claims in sometimes extreme ways; in the eyes of many, diversity threatened to become deviance and division.
- In the face of ever-increasing growth and expansion, the challenge was to secure a framework of the religion that would not only survive but also thrive and adapt to changing circumstances.

Christianity had to figure out how to be a world religion, not just a quirky movement.

### Responses to the Challenges

- Coherent responses to each challenge characterized the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and justified the designation of “the century of Christian self-definition.”
- As we saw in Lecture 8, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century apologists drew the basic line with regard to Greco-Roman culture, accepting its rhetoric and its philosophy (especially that of Plato), which was universally regarded as the philosophy most compatible with biblical perspectives, but utterly rejecting all pagan religion. The apologists adopted a variety of strategies with regard to pagan religion: It was fictional, fraudulent, confused, or even the work of demons who seduced and deceived humans.
  - What about the boundary with Judaism? Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 135) reports a fictive conversation between the Jewish and Christian philosophers. The argument centers on which version of Scripture is accurate and authoritative: the Hebrew or the Greek Septuagint.
  - Connected to that argument is a dispute over Christ’s fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Trypho insists that the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 that Christians applied to Jesus was wrongly translated: The Hebrew did not have “a virgin [*parthenos*] shall conceive” but “a young woman [*almah*] shall conceive.” Justin responds to the charge that Jesus did not fulfill messianic prophecies: In his First Coming, he fulfilled the prophecies concerning his suffering, but the prophecies about the Messiah’s triumph will be fulfilled in Jesus’s Second Coming.
  - The relative civility of Justin is lost entirely in Tertullian’s early-3<sup>rd</sup>-century polemic *Against the Jews*, which is completely supersessionist in character: Because they rejected the son of God, Jews have lost their status as God’s people; they have been replaced by the “new race” of the Christians.

- The most vigorous intellectual and political effort, however, was expended against those called “heretics” by church leaders, who engaged in a “circling of the wagons” around the central elements of the Christian religion. Some of these leaders were bishops; some were not. It is important at this point to recognize that the battle was intellectual and fought with the instruments of rhetoric rather than of formal exclusion.

### Tertullian and Irenaeus

- Although there were elements of anti-heretical polemic found already in Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr, two figures of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century exemplify the effort to establish “orthodoxy” (right teaching) as the measure for Christian membership: Tertullian and Irenaeus.
- In North Africa, Tertullian (c. 160–225) brought his impressive intellectual energy and persuasive power to the defense of the religion to which he converted.
  - Tertullian was born a pagan and was well educated in Latin rhetoric and literature. He converted around 197 and may have been ordained a priest. He eventually joined the Montanist sect, which appealed to him because of its asceticism; some of his late moral treatises exhibit its tendencies.
  - His *Apology* (addressed to the “rulers of the Roman Empire”) is noteworthy for his plea on behalf of Christianity’s legal recognition, based in its fundamentally philanthropic character. He calls for freedom of religious expression and toleration—but only for Christians!
  - In other writings, Tertullian turned his rhetorical ability to combating theological error. He argued vigorously against a number of “heretics,” including Marcion and Valentinus. In his response to Praxeas, Tertullian formulated an understanding of the Trinity.

- Tertullian’s writing established a technical theological lexicon for later writers.
- In Gaul, Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) was of even greater significance as a shaper of an orthodox tradition based in tradition and reason.
  - Probably born in Smyrna, as a young boy, Irenaeus had met the martyr Polycarp. He became a presbyter in Lyons, an important Roman city in Gaul. After the martyrdom of Pothinus (c. 178), in the persecution under Marcus Aurelius, he became bishop of Lyons.
  - Irenaeus was a conciliatory voice in relations with the Montanists and, later, with the Quartodecimans of Asia Minor. He resisted the effort to excommunicate them.
  - He wrote an apologetic work (*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*), but his masterpiece was *Adversus omnes haereses* (*Against All Heresies*), written in Greek in five books.
- Despite differences in location, language, and temperament, Tertullian and Irenaeus—and many others—shared the conviction that there was a “truth” to Christianity that was not a matter of personal or individual experience but a matter of communal teaching (orthodoxy) and moral behavior (orthopraxy). For them, Christianity was inherently social and institutional in character.

### A Threefold Definition of Christianity

- In Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, we can see the basic instruments that were deployed in the effort to define Christianity in terms of orthodoxy.
- Irenaeus himself conceived of Christianity in terms of Greco-Roman philosophy and perceived and described other versions of Christianity in the same terms. Thus, he describes “heresies” (“parties”) in terms of philosophical schools, divided by doctrinal differences.

- Following the custom of ancient rhetoric, he mocks the illogicality and inconsistency of opponents' ideas. He uses noble metaphors for traditional teaching and ludicrous metaphors for his opponents.
- Positively, he provides what he regards as a better reading of the texts and traditions he thinks others are misreading. Thus, Paul's language about "flesh" versus "spirit" in his Letter to the Galatians is not cosmological—pointing to an internal split between body and soul—but ethical—pointing to ways of conducting one's life.
- It is, above all, Irenaeus's strategy of self-definition that makes his work of such enduring value. He argues for a threefold approach to tradition: the canon of Scripture, the rule of faith, and the authority of bishops.
- Because of the proliferation of literature—much of it claiming to be "revealed"—it was necessary to establish the canon ("rule/measure") of compositions that could be used to define Christian teaching and practice. In his rebuttal of the Gnostics, Irenaeus named his sources from the Old and New Testaments, indicating which were truly authoritative and which were to be rejected.
- Irenaeus also drew on a developing tradition of a rule of faith (or creed) to provide a doctrinal framework for Christian identity.
  - Elements of a creed are found already in Judaism ("Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One God") and in the New Testament, where Paul tells the Corinthians, "... for us there is One God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we are; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom everything was made and through whom we are" (1 Cor. 8:4–6). Inherent even in the basic claim "Jesus is Lord" is a statement of belief.
  - Irenaeus's rule of faith is similar to the so-called Apostles' Creed, which presents an epitome of scriptural witness; as



such, it also provides a guide to reading the canonical Gospels: This is the truth that readers are to find in those complex texts.

- In addition to canon and creed, Irenaeus asserts the historical priority of an “apostolic succession” of bishops, whom, he argues, read only these books and believed these things from the time of Jesus until the present.
  - The notion of the bishops as the successors of the apostles is found already in Clement of Rome, but Irenaeus argues it more fully, with specific attention to the bishops of Rome from the time of Peter down to the present bishop.
  - This institutional argument directly opposes the Gnostic position concerning secret teachings, secret teachers, and secret books.
- The principle of episcopal leadership is displayed in the so-called Quartodecimans (Easter) controversy in which Irenaeus was involved. It is narrated by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1: 502–513).
  - Bishops of Asia celebrated Easter on 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan, the date of the Jewish Passover; bishops in the West, however, celebrated it on the Sunday after Passover.
  - The difference in practice generated a series of regional councils seeking resolution; these councils agreed with the Western (Roman) position. When the Asian bishops persisted in their practice, which they traced back to the apostle John, Pope Victor I of Rome tried to excommunicate the Asian churches.
  - Irenaeus and others argued that agreement in faith was compatible with diversity in liturgical practice. They advocated maintaining difference in liturgical practice as long as the understanding of Easter was the same, which it was.
  - Like other contentious issues, this one would persist as an irritant and be resolved only by ecumenical councils in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Definitive Emergence of Christianity

- The start of the “history of Christianity” in the proper sense is the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was then that “Christianity” clearly and definitively emerged from paganism and Judaism as a “third race” (Letter to Diognetus), with a firmer sense of “catholic” identity.
- Both the process and product of this emergence would have tremendous consequences for subsequent history.
  - Christianity is not, first of all, a matter of private experience but of public and communal identity.
  - Christianity is emphatically material, with a positive view of body, time, and institution.
  - When facing future challenges to identity, the strategy of Irenaeus would be followed: Bishops would meet in councils and, on the basis of the canonical texts, interpret the meaning of the creed.

### Suggested Reading

Dunn, *Tertullian*.

Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss this proposition: The battle for orthodoxy in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries involved conflicting views of salvation. Was the point the liberation of individuals, or was it the building of a certain kind of community?
2. What does it mean to call Irenaeus’s focus on creed, canon, and apostolic authority a “strategy for self-definition”?

# Institutional Development before Constantine

## Lecture 11

History is not merely a matter of great men and the struggle of big ideas. It involves social structures and social dynamics. We have already seen that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries were when Christianity became a more definite and visible institution. In this lecture, we'll focus on the development of such social structures and dynamics during the same period. In particular, we'll take a closer look at three dimensions of Christianity's institutional development: its growth in space and numbers, its elaboration of worship and leadership, and its hierarchical structure.

### Growth in Territory and Numbers

- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, abundant evidence attests to the expansion of Christianity in terms of territory and numbers.
- On the evidence of the extant literature, we know that Christianity extended itself well beyond the places documented in the New Testament.
  - In Palestine, churches were located both in Galilee and Samaria; after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, Christian bishops were found in that city, as well.
  - In Syria, Christians moved eastward from Antioch toward Edessa (Osroëne). In the 1930s, an international archaeological team excavated in a Christian house church built before 250 at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River. Christians also appear east of the Tigris River in Adiabene. Some Syrian Christians made their way to Persia.
  - More territories in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey)—from the start, an area particularly populous with Christians—added such cities as Nicaea and Byzantium to their numbers.



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**Excavations at Dura-Europos were first carried out in the 1930s; a house church found there had been destroyed by the Parthians in the year 250.**

- In Egypt, communities appeared in the metropolis of Alexandria and in the upper Nile. Christianity also appeared in this period in the kingdom of Ethiopia. In North Africa, Carthage and its surrounding areas had a large number of local churches.
- In Europe, Christian communities were found throughout Greece, Italy, Sicily, and Spain. There were churches on the Mediterranean islands of Crete and Cyprus. Christians were also attested throughout Gaul, even on the island of Britain.
- Such expansion across geographical space was accompanied by the production of Christian literature in new languages besides Greek and Latin; compositions in Syriac, Coptic, and Persian appeared in this period.
- It is certain that Christianity also grew in numbers, but the data available from antiquity make the determination of numbers mostly a matter of estimate.

- Despite the literary portrayal in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, there is no real historical evidence of mass conversions based on public preaching or wonder-working.
- Growth in numbers more likely came about through a process of social networking. Studies have shown that contemporary cults tend to find converts among those who have family members or friends already in the cult, and that paradigm seems applicable to the nascent Christian movements, as well.
- A further factor was simple childbirth. Christians had solid families, and unlike their pagan neighbors, strictly forbade abortion and child exposure; thus, they were successful in multiplying in the most obvious fashion available.
- Based on an estimated total population in the Roman Empire of 60 million and a baseline starting population of Christians in the year 40 of about 1,000, by 300, the Christian population was probably more than 6 million.
- There are indications, as well, that Christians were finding their way into higher social ranks.
  - In the years 177–180, the philosopher Celsus, in his attack on Christianity called *The True Word*, called the movement one of wool workers, cobblers, laborers, slaves, and women.
  - But in the year 270, Porphyry, another philosophical critic of Christianity, spoke of noblewomen in the Christian religion, and by 300, we see Christians counted among magistrates, provincial governors, and chamberlains in the imperial court.

### **Growth in Administration**

- A consequence of this expansion and growth in numbers was the pressing need for greater organization.
  - A more explicit and elaborate authority structure at the local level was needed to coordinate tasks and administration. Organizing the assembly (its meeting place and times),

establishing the order of worship, providing hospitality to delegates from other assemblies, and carrying out other tasks required process and oversight.

- There was equally a need to conduct communications between and among churches in order to ensure a “catholic” (= “universal”) identity that spanned multiple languages and territories, as letters were sent and received, delegates and missionaries were commissioned and supplied, synods and councils were called and attended, and fellowship was expressed by the sharing of resources.
- Administrative offices at the local level became at once more complex, more centralized, and more infused with religious significance.
  - In the New Testament, the leadership of local communities appears to be both simple and secular, resembling the basic structure of Greco-Roman associations and synagogues. The New Testament assigns no special religious symbolism to such administration in the local assembly.
  - A board of elders had a “superintendent” or “supervisor” (*episkopos* = “bishop”) at its head and lesser functionaries (deacons/deaconesses) to do practical chores.
  - Paul’s letters indicate that such local leadership was responsible for providing instruction and hospitality, settling disputes, and administering community welfare, particularly the care of orphans and widows.
- The letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107) indicate that by the early part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, at least the communities of Syria and Asia had developed a more complex organization with a more elaborate rationalization.
  - The role of the bishop was now monarchical, and the single authority of the bishop was compared to the singleness of

God. The bishop was the source of unity: There was no true Eucharist apart from the bishop.

- The elders (“priests”) and deacons were lower orders aligned with the bishops and clearly subordinate. Here, we find the start of a “clerical order” in the proper sense.
- A series of compositions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries known as *Church Orders* devote themselves to the regulation of the common life and show how the roles of the clergy were steadily more developed.
  - The *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, comes from Syria at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> or start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. More complex is the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus, coming from Rome sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. More complex still is the *Didascalica Apostolorum*, originating in Syria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Finally, the eight books of the *Apostolic Constitutions* from the 4<sup>th</sup> century contain elements of the earlier books.
  - The authority of the bishop increasingly appeared as supreme within the church, and the bishop was at the center of every activity, especially worship. We can begin to see the language of the Old Testament with respect to sacrifices and high priests now being applied to these Christian leaders and their liturgical activities.
  - Below the bishop, we find a variety of “lower” clerical orders: acolytes, exorcists, lectors, deacons, deaconesses, priests, and widows. The clergy was responsible for community activities, and its members were sharply contrasted to the laity.
  - Because our sources take the form of regulations rather than reports of real life, we are left in the dark about many things we would like to know about the ordinary life of Christians in this time. What were those who were not bishops and clergy doing? The sources suggest a vibrant religious life in which the

activities of worship and prayer were balanced by a genuine care for the poor and needy within the community.

- Local administrative structures were required at least in part because Christians were increasingly in a position to dispose of property, a clear sign that persecution was sporadic rather than steady over these centuries.
  - After 180, we find the first examples of unmistakable Christian art in the form of biblical themes on sarcophagi; such sculpting and accompanying inscriptions indicate a certain degree of wealth. Many sarcophagi were discovered by archaeologists in the catacombs, the underground chambers that served as places of burial and were sometimes used by Christians, especially in Rome, for places of worship.
  - By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, communities began to meet in houses that were intended to be “churches” from the start, rather than meeting in ordinary households. An example is the house-church at Dura-Europos, destroyed around 250 C.E., with its separate baptistery and frescoes.
  - An example of the administration of property can be found in Callixtus of Rome: As a deacon, he was put in charge of funds for the support of widows, but he lost the funds and had to flee. Later, presumably having been restored to trust, he was put in charge of the burial chambers along the Appian Way and, still later, became the bishop of Rome (217–222).

### Regional Spheres of Influence

- The institutional expansion of Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries included the development of regional spheres of influence.
- The term “diocese” for the geographical region administered by a bishop (with the help of his clergy) derives—as does the term *episkopos* (“bishop”)—from Greek political usage: The term was used for economic administration over a geographical area in Hellenistic Egypt.



- The bishops of dioceses, in turn, were increasingly coordinated in their efforts by the bishops of major metropolitan sees—also important imperial cities—that were called patriarchates: Alexandria, Antioch, Rome.
- As the imperial city *par excellence*, the church in Rome asserted and exercised the most influence on other regions.
  - Rome’s authority was far from absolute. As we have already seen, the bishops of Asia resisted the efforts of Victor I of Rome to impose his ruling in the Easter controversy in about 190.
  - Yet the symbolic and moral authority of the Roman church was real and not only based on the fact of being the imperial capital. Writers at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century made much of the fact that Rome was doubly blessed in its apostolic founding: Both Peter and Paul were martyred there. Irenaeus, for example, bishop of Lyons in far-off Gaul, made his point about apostolic succession through the bishops of Rome.
- In the next century, these centers of regional ecclesial authority would begin to express themselves through theological and political rivalries. With the founding of Constantinople, a real rival to Roman primacy would assert itself.
- In terms of sheer numbers, visibility, social standing, and ideological and institutional development, the Christian religion was, by the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, no longer an insignificant sect to be dismissed by authorities; it had become a force to be reckoned with by the empire.

### Suggested Reading

Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, pp. 234–254.

MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*.

Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Institutionalization within Christianity has sometimes been viewed as a “fall from grace” or a compromise with the ideal; in sociological terms, how realistic is such an assessment?
2. Consider the significance of moral practices—the rejection of divorce, abortion, and infant exposure—for the growth of Christianity.

# The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy

## Lecture 12

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, four distinct “ways of being religious” that had already characterized Greco-Roman culture emerged with greater clarity within Christianity. These were: the way of participation in divine benefits, the way of stabilizing the world, the way of transcending the world, and the way of moral transformation. If we define religion as “a way of life organized around experiences and convictions concerning ultimate power,” we can see that these variations have to do with distinct perceptions of that power and its purpose. This lecture traces the development in particular of the way of moral transformation from the New Testament to the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

### Four “Ways of Being Religious”

- The “way of participation in divine benefits” was by far the dominant way of being religious among pagans.
  - It was exemplified by the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century rhetorician Aelius Aristides, who was chronically ill and spent his life in devotion to the healing god, Asclepius.
  - In 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Christianity, this mode is found in those manifestations that emphasize the presence of divine power in the empirical realm: the display of the divine in signs and wonders, healings, prophecies, and even martyrdom.
- The “way of stabilizing the world” supports the first way of being religious by providing the means for festivals, feasts, and all other practices. It includes such figures as the Greco-Roman priest of Apollo and the philosopher Plutarch, who insisted on the link between authentic religion and true civilization, the “city of gods and men.” We find this type of religious sensibility among the bishops, such as Irenaeus, who patrolled the boundaries of orthodoxy.

- The “way of transcending the world” is found in the dualistic spiritual literature of the Greek and Roman world, culminating in the revelatory literature associated with the god Hermes. It appears among Christians in forms of dualism, such as Marcionism and Gnosticism, which emphasized individual enlightenment and despised material expressions of religion.
- The “way of moral transformation” was exemplified by such Greco-Roman moralists as Epictetus. He did not despise the manifestations of divine power in the external world, but he was most interested in how the divine power transformed the dispositions and behavior of individuals and societies. This way draws a sharp connection between right thinking and right acting.



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### Moral Instruction in the New Testament

- The emphasis on moral instruction continues one of the elements found in the literature of the New Testament.
- While “participation in benefits” dominates the narratives of the Gospels and Acts and while the same religious sensibility is found among those addressed by Paul in his letters, three New Testament authors share the outlook of “religion as moral transformation.”
  - Paul himself has powerful religious experiences (visions, speaking in tongues) and recognizes and approves such experiences among his readers, but he is most interested in molding his readers into a community of character. He thereby reveals the disposition of a Greco-Roman moralist: Believers

**One way of being religious in the Greco-Roman world was that of transcending or escaping the world—found in the revelatory literature associated with the god Hermes.**

are to be “renewed in mind” and “think the way Christ thought” to direct their behavior.

- In similar fashion, the anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews seeks to deepen the readers’ commitment to faith by showing how it must pass through suffering and a manner of life that imitates that of Jesus. Like Jesus, they are to “learn obedience from the things they suffer”; the experience of obedience is “enduring for the sake of an education.”
- The Letter of James stresses the need for having “the deeds of faith” rather than merely belief, calling faith without deeds the same as a dead body. James spells out the idea that “friendship with God” demands a new way of using possessions, of speaking, and of living as a community of cooperation rather than competition.
- Even within the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, words of moral instruction are placed in the mouth of Jesus—above all, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) or Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6): The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus demands a change of moral outlook and behavior.
- We find early-2<sup>nd</sup>-century writers continuing this emphasis on moral instruction in the letters they address to communities.
  - The First Letter of Clement, written from Rome by an elder around 95 C.E., addresses the Christian community in Corinth, where rivalry and factionalism were rampant. It uses classic Greco-Roman philosophical themes concerning harmony as an antidote to the envy that the author perceives as the root of disorder in the church.
  - We have already met Polycarp of Smyrna as a martyr. As bishop, he wrote a Letter to the Philippians (in Macedonia) around 130 C.E. This composition likewise focuses completely on moral instruction, drawing heavily on the letters of Paul, including the Pastoral Letters.

### Justin Martyr

- Both the symbolic and the real birth of Christian philosophy in the proper sense are represented by Justin Martyr (c. 100–165).
- Born as a pagan in Samaria, Justin passed through a series of philosophical schools, seeking the perfect one. He thought he found it in Platonism but then was converted to Christianity.
- In Antioch, he met and engaged in a lengthy controversy with a Jew named Trypho shortly after the final devastation of Jerusalem following the Bar Kochba revolt (135 C.E.). He later opened a Christian school in Rome, where Tatian (the apologist and leader of the Encratites) was one of his students.
- Denounced as a Christian by the Cynic philosopher Crescens, Justin refused to offer sacrifice to the gods and was beheaded.
- Justin's works reveal a lively intellectual engagement with the larger world.
  - The *Dialogue with Trypho* reports the last sustained debate between a Christian and Jew concerning their respective claims that is carried out with at least the appearance of civility and equality. The tone is that of competing philosophers, as Trypho and Justin debate whether Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies and which version of Scripture (the Hebrew or the Greek) was better.
  - In his *First Apology*, Justin defends Christians against the charges made against them but goes further in a sweeping assessment of pagan religion (negative) and pagan philosophy (positive), especially Platonism, representing Christianity as the endpoint of the human quest for wisdom.

### Clement of Alexandria

- Clement of Alexandria (150–c. 215) took significant steps beyond Justin in establishing a genuinely philosophical form of Christianity.

- Little is known of Clement’s life. Born in Athens, he became a student of the Platonic philosopher Pantaenus in Alexandria. In the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, he became head of the Christian catechetical school in that city. The only other biographical fact we know about Clement is that he fled from persecution in 202.
- Clement forged a “thinking person’s” version of Christianity. He sought a middle way between the extreme elitism of Gnosticism and the ignorance of simple believers. He thought in terms of a “Christian Gnosticism” that was orthodox and connected to the larger tradition. He affirmed the lines of the developing rule of faith and despised the compositions of Valentinus and Basilides.
- Clement’s project took the form of a three-stage presentation using the forms of ancient Greek rhetoric and philosophy.
  - The *Protrepticus* (“Exhortation”) is a classic call to conversion, such as was issued by Greco-Roman philosophers. We see an example in Lucian of Samosata’s *Nigrinus*, which castigates false philosophers and calls for adherence to the teaching of Nigrinus. Clement similarly attacks pagan errors—especially in religious matters—and argues for the truth of Christianity.
  - The *Paidogogos* (“Instructor”) in Greek education was the one who taught young children their morals and manners. Clement’s book by this title offers an extensive catalogue of Christian moral behavior.
  - Clement’s most ambitious work, the *Didaskalos* (“Teacher”), was never completed; however, the compilation of notes for that work, the *Stromateis* (“Fragments”), itself constitutes a major and deeply learned statement on Christianity’s use of Scripture and its relationship to philosophy.
- Clement’s work represents a much more ambitious and systematic effort than Justin’s not only to render Christianity as reasonable but to make it a serious contender in ancient philosophical discourse.

## Origen of Alexandria

- With Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254), the place of a philosophical Christianity was firmly secured.
- An indication of the changing face of Christianity is the fact that Origen was born of Christian parents and raised from childhood in the faith.
  - His father was martyred in the persecution of 202. When Clement fled the city, Origen took over (at the age of 17!) as head of the Alexandrian catechetical school.
  - He traveled to Rome and Arabia, settled for a time in Palestine, returned to Alexandria, and finally settled in Caesarea. As a priest, he preached regularly on the Scriptures.
  - We saw earlier that he wrote fervently on the ideal of martyrdom. In the persecution of Decius (250), Origen was imprisoned and tortured but steadfastly professed the faith. He died soon after, not technically a martyr but certainly a confessor of the faith.
- Origen was a prodigy of scholarship; although only a small portion of his work has survived, it was vast.
  - As a biblical scholar, he produced a six-column version of the Old Testament in Hebrew, a transliteration, the Septuagint, and three other Jewish Greek translations, complete with critical apparatus. He also wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible and countless homilies.
  - He was Christianity's first systematic theologian, attempting to align the truths of the faith with a wider understanding of reality established by reason. In his *First Principles*, Origen placed the Christian faith within a wide-ranging and ambitious vision—basically Platonic—of the derivation of all being from God and the eventual restoration of all creatures in God (*apokatastasis*).



- Although Origen was careful to observe traditional teaching, his bold vision, pushed to an extreme by later disciples, led to the eventual condemnation of “Origenism.”
- Origen wrote a massive apologetic work, *Against Celsus*, that demonstrated not only his loyalty to the faith but his enormous learning and sophistication as a thinker. Celsus was a philosopher and author of the *True Word* (178), an attack on Christianity as ignorant, superstitious, and impious. Origen’s response is a masterpiece of apologetic, securely locating Christianity within the world of ancient learning.

### The Future of Christian Philosophy

- The development of this strand of philosophically colored Christianity was of considerable importance for the future.
- The ancient philosophical conviction that right morals derived from right opinion (“orthodoxy”) reinforced the emphasis on doctrine within the Christian tradition.
- Equally, the heritage of philosophy as a “way of being religious as moral transformation” found expression in later forms of monasticism.

### Suggested Reading

Daniélou (Mitchell, trans.), *Origen*.

Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the analysis of Greco-Roman and Christian religion in terms of “ways of being religious.” What are the benefits and deficits of such an analysis?
2. Consider the distinctive insistence in religion on linking “right thinking” and “right behavior.”

# Imperial Politics and Religion

## Lecture 13

In the first part of the course, we saw how Christianity, beginning as an inauspicious sect of Judaism, grew—despite hostility and persecution—into a significant player in the larger world, with strong internal organization, an empire-wide system of communication, and an increasing confidence in both its moral and intellectual superiority. We now take a major turn in the course, just as Christianity took a major turn in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. From this point forward, it will be difficult to disentangle Christianity as a religious phenomenon from its role in the political order. In this lecture, we will see how the persecuted Christian cult became the established religion of the Roman Empire.

### The Transition of Christianity

- The transition of Christianity from a persecuted cult to an established religion is represented by the emperor under whom the last great persecution was carried out, Diocletian (284–305), and the emperor under whom toleration and much more occurred, Constantine I (306–337). But history is not merely a matter of great men, however important; beneath their actions, powerful social forces were at work.
- The Roman Empire's transition from pagan to Christian was more gradual—and more complex—than is sometimes thought. We have seen how Christianity grew in numbers, organization, and intellectual self-confidence in the preceding centuries. The consequences of Constantine's decision to establish Christianity as the imperial religion were, however, for both empire and church, undoubtedly decisive. Nothing was ever again the same for either.
  - The empire, which had already left behind its republican roots with the first Caesars and become increasingly autocratic, found itself patron of a religion with subversion in its genes. It is not clear whether the emperors had any idea how resistant to imperial rule Christianity could be.

- The church, which had flourished as a religious movement during centuries of oppression and persecution—flourished, moreover, as a religion committed to peace, nonviolence, and other countercultural values—found itself the pillar and support of the world’s mightiest military and political power. It never did completely resolve the internal tensions its new status created.

### Diocletian’s Reforms

- In some respects, Diocletian was as important as Constantine for the shaping of imperial Christianity because he gave a new shape to imperial politics. It is against the backdrop of Diocletian’s reforms, as well as his persecution, that we can best understand the significance of Constantine’s initiative.
- After a “golden age” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century—the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian in particular seemed a high watermark for enlightened imperial rule—the empire suffered severe internal and external threats throughout the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, especially from 235 to 285, when it was in almost a condition of anarchy.
  - The Sassanid Empire (224–651) brought Persian/Parthian power to a threatening position in the east, reaching as far west as Antioch in the 250s.
  - Germanic peoples on the Danube and the Rhine had begun the “invasions”—more properly, migration—that exercised increasing pressure on the empire in the west.
  - The empire was in a bad financial state. Rome had always depended on conquest for the acquisition of new wealth; with the face of victory turning away from the empire, such easy wealth was less available. The economic situation was made worse by famine, plague, and monetary inflation.
  - From within, there was political unrest, with imperial pretenders contending for power. Since the time of Augustus, the usual way to become an emperor was through acclamation

by Roman troops; the temptation to military leaders with ambition was constant.

- Diocletian was an exceptionally intelligent and strong leader who literally saved the Roman Empire by centralizing authority and instituting rigid control, especially of prices, throughout the empire.
  - He established a hierarchical administrative structure with a complex bureaucracy, including a division of responsibility among an Augustus and a Caesar in both the east and west—so that the empire was administered by a tetrarchy—together with a plan for succession.
  - He increased the size of military forces, making increased use of mercenaries for the defense of the empire—a practice that broke with the tradition of a citizen army but secured the borders and the Roman peace once more, at least temporarily.
  - He established rigid price controls and increased taxes throughout the empire. “Police control” of the populace—formerly a fear of those who were “enemies of the Roman order,” such as philosophers and Christians—became a factor in the lives of others.
  - With all this came the further exaltation of the supreme leader; the cult of the emperor and the imperial family was the essential religious glue of society.
- Through his reforms, Diocletian laid the groundwork for the late Roman Empire that, in all but one important way, would continue as the Byzantine Empire until its final collapse in 1453.

### **The Persecution under Diocletian**

- The last great persecution of Christianity was also the most vicious, and it was entirely consistent with Diocletian’s policy, for he sought by persecution to make traditional Greco-Roman religion secure and uniform throughout the empire. Christianity had become too large a counterforce to the state religion to simply ignore or endure.

- In March 297, Diocletian issued a decree against the Manichaeans (a Gnostic religion that combined Zoroastrian and Christian elements) as a new religion that broke the tradition of the Roman nation: “It is criminal to throw doubts on what has been established from ancient times.”
- Between February 303 and March 304, Diocletian issued four decrees against Christians, first attacking worship and banning books and culminating with the demand that all inhabitants of the empire must offer sacrifice to the gods on pain of deportation or death. Historical evidence suggests that these edicts were vigorously pursued and that many Christians lost property, position, and life itself during the persecution.
- Diocletian resigned the position of Augustus in 305, and his successors, Galerius and Maximinus Daia, waged a more ferocious persecution until the spring of 313. It was not uniformly imposed, but the pressure was continuous for a period of more than 10 years.

### The Reign of Constantine

- In most respects, Constantine adhered to the same premise as Diocletian concerning imperial rule and religion.
- First, he sought to establish a unified rule by making himself the sole Augustus. At one point at the beginning of 310, the empire had seven rival



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**The real privileging of Christianity by the emperor Constantine became apparent with the practice of donating formerly pagan temples for use in Christian worship.**

“emperors,” but Constantine worked ruthlessly to eliminate rivals and make himself sole ruler.

- Constantine was born a pagan and only received Christian baptism on his deathbed, but from the beginning, he clearly favored Christianity as the new “glue” of the empire. Eusebius spoke of Constantine’s father, Constantius, as a believer in the one God but stopped short of calling him a Christian. It is possible that Constantine was drawn to the religion through the influence of his mother.
  - The ecclesiastical historian Eusebius reported the legend of Constantine’s dream before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (“*in hoc signo vinces*”) in 312 and the placing of the Christian *chi rho* (the first letters of “Christ” in Greek) on his soldier’s shields.
  - After his defeat of Maxentius, Constantine and Licinius issued a decree of freedom of worship for the Christians in June 313, referring to an earlier mutual agreement at Milan in 312. Hence, this decree of toleration is called the Edict of Milan.
- Constantine immediately used his supreme authority to become the protector and benefactor of the formerly persecuted religion.
  - He proclaimed release from exile of those who had been persecuted and the restoration of property to confessors, while property taken from churches was to be restored by money from the imperial treasury.
  - He issued benefits to African clergy of “the very Holy Catholic Church,” including exemption from taxation and performance of public service.
  - Beginning in 313, Christian symbols appeared on imperial coins; pagan symbols disappeared by 323.
  - The state recognized the decisions made by church officials as valid for the Christian community.

- The church could legally inherit and bequeath property.
- Constantine began the practice of donating pagan temples as Christian sanctuaries and the building of splendid new basilicas for the exclusive purpose of Christian worship.
- The population of the empire was statistically by no means yet “Christian,” and as we shall see, “paganism” did not immediately disappear, but the actions of Constantine decisively placed the imperial power behind the church, with the expectation that the church would also support a “Christian” imperial power.

### **The Founding of Constantinople**

- Constantine’s boldest and most important political (and religious) innovation was the founding of a “New Rome” in 330, which he named after himself: Constantinople.
- Politically, Constantine recognized, as Diocletian had, the need to establish firm control over both the West and East, especially given that the West was under increased barbarian threat and the East faced the hostile Sassanid Empire.
- He chose to make a new capital for the East at an ancient Greek city (Byzantium) founded in 667 B.C.E., then destroyed and rebuilt by the Romans in 198 C.E.
  - The location was ideal for purposes of security. Located on a peninsula extending into the Sea of Marmara at the Bosphorus Strait, with the Golden Horn to its northeast, the city was supremely defensible. It repelled all invaders for more than 1,000 years, until the Muslims finally conquered it in 1453.
  - It occupied the join between Europe and Asia, with easy access by water for trade and the movement of troops. Constantinople formed the capstone of the prosperous economy and the predominantly Christian population of Asia Minor.

- Symbolically, Constantinople was a New Rome that was also a Christian Rome from the beginning: Materials from pagan temples were used in its construction, and pagan idols were melted to provide gold for ornamentation.
- In the future, Constantinople would become a genuine rival to the old Rome, thriving especially when the old capital was weak and challenging the old Rome for primacy in every respect.
  - If the first Rome was important because it was the seat of empire, then the new Rome must be at least equally important for the same reason.
  - But if the old Rome based its religious importance on being the city of Peter and Paul, then Constantinople should be secondary.
  - The seeds of considerable later religious distress were sown by Constantine's political decision.

### Suggested Reading

Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ancient premise, which obtained until the historical "yesterday," that unity of religious observance is the basis for political unity and stability.
2. Imagine two things: (1) what Christianity might have become had Constantine not sponsored it and (2) what the empire would have become had Christianity remain encysted within it.



# Constantine and the Established Church

## Lecture 14

In the previous lecture, we traced the steps by which the Roman Empire turned from a persecutor of the Christian religion to its protector and patron. The personal religious convictions of the imperial patron, Constantine, were never entirely clear, yet he seemed genuinely devoted to the cause of Christianity. As head of state, he showed significant patronage to the Christian religion and referred to himself as the “servant of God,” but he never exercised the same direct control of Christianity that the Roman emperors had over worship in the empire. As we will see in this lecture, the efforts of Constantine’s successors to impose Christianity on the populace further indicate that the transition was neither natural nor easy.

### Constantine’s Sponsorship of Christianity

- Constantine’s personal religious outlook seemed to combine elements of superstition and syncretism. He was baptized as a Christian only at the last possible moment, on his deathbed. Further, the morality of his politics left much to be desired: He was as ruthless, indeed murderous, in pursuit of his ambitions as any other despot. Yet he seemed genuinely devoted to the cause of the Christian religion.
- More significant, though, than his personal dispositions are the political actions Constantine took to secure the social and political peace of the empire through sponsorship of the once-despised “superstition.”
  - According to Eusebius, his biographer, Constantine wanted all to forsake “the temples of deceit” and enter “the radiant house of truth,” but he continued a policy of religious freedom for all, including freedom of public observance. He maintained the title of Pontifex Maximus and continued to issue some coins with polytheistic images.

- With respect to Jews, the policy of earlier emperors had been to allow freedom of association among them but to forbid proselytism, or the conversion of Gentiles. Constantine maintained this position, but he forbade conversions to Judaism even more stringently.
- As head of state, Constantine's greatest innovation was the significant patronage he showed to the Christian religion.
  - The privileges of the old state religion began to be transferred: In 313, Christian clergy were granted exemption from military service and other public obligations.
  - In 321, Sunday was made a public holiday, and Christian images increasingly appeared on coins, military shields, and banners. Constantine also paid for the copying and production of 50 manuscripts of the Bible.
  - Pagan temples (such as the Pantheon in Rome) were made into Christian churches, and new basilicas (such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem) were constructed at imperial command and expense.
  - For members of the state apparatus, it became advantageous to make a public commitment to Christianity as a factor in career advancement.
- Constantine referred to himself humbly as the "servant of God," but he exhibited oversight of the church in the manner of the pagan emperors, terming himself "bishop of external affairs." His was a difficult balancing act; as Pontifex Maximus, such emperors as Augustus had exercised direct control over every aspect of Roman religion, but Constantine did not have nearly that same control with respect to Christianity.

### Conversion in the Empire

- The imperial favor of Constantine did not mean that the empire became immediately or totally Christian. Many places and many

individuals kept older ideals and practices alive. Rural areas were particularly slow to convert to Christianity, but intellectuals did not capitulate easily either.

- The famous rhetorician Libanius (314–394), a highly sophisticated and learned scholar, continued to defend traditional ways, even as he included Christians among his students. Among his orations is a *Lamentation* written in response to the destruction of pagan temples by Theodosius. Libanius also composed a magnificent eulogy for the emperor Julian, who had been one of his students.
- As late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine wrote *The City of God* (416–422) against pagan critics who claimed that the fall of the city of Rome was due to the abandonment of the pagan gods.
- The efforts of Constantine’s successors to impose Christianity on the populace further indicate that the transition was neither natural nor easy.
  - In 341, Constantius prohibited all pagan sacrifice, an indirect confirmation that the practice must have persisted.
  - In 346, Constantius and Constans (337–350) issued an edict forbidding sacrifices and closed temples.
  - A Sicilian senator, Julius Firmicus Maternus, wrote a book called *On the Error of Profane Religions* (346), arguing for the forceful extermination of all pagan worship. But in 353–356, the imperial edict of 346 was renewed, a clear indication of its lack of complete success.
- In short, the Christianization of the empire was an uphill battle. The final and prime evidence for this is the reign of the emperor Julian (361–363). Known by Christians as the Apostate, Julian was raised Christian as part of the Constantinian dynasty, but he converted to paganism and sought to restore the empire to its traditional polytheistic religion.

- Trained in rhetoric and philosophy, Julian was lifted from his life as a student in Athens when Constantius II made him Caesar of the west in 355. He proved a more than adept soldier, and in 360, when he was acclaimed Augustus by his troops, he openly renounced Christianity.
- When he became sole emperor in 361, Julian promoted a syncretistic form of religion, in which Jesus was honored with other great men who manifested the divine, and restored the pagan temples to their full functioning.
- He removed Christians from high office and sought to return education to pagan standards. To please the Jews, he began the project of restoring the Temple in Jerusalem, but he did not persecute Christians in any active fashion.
- It remains a fascinating historical question as to what might have happened if Julian had not been cut down in battle and his reign had lasted for decades.
- Succeeding emperors quickly and decisively restored Christian privileges but continued to allow a certain freedom of worship. In contrast, the emperor Gratian (375–383) rejected emperor worship, removed the altar of victory from the Roman forum, discontinued state subsidy for pagan worship, and confiscated temple funds.
- The decisive establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the empire took place under Theodosius I, who ruled the East from 379 to 392 and was sole ruler of both East and West from 392 to 395.
  - His edict “On the Catholic Faith” (380) imposed Christianity on all inhabitants of the empire.
  - He closed all temples, including the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Many of them he seized for Christian worship, and in 391, he forbade any pagan worship. In 392, he declared sacrifice to the gods to be high treason, punishable by death.



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**Theodosius I closed all pagan temples, including the Serapeum in Alexandria and the ancient temple of Apollo at Delphi.**

- Despite such repressive measures against paganism, Theodosius continued to maintain the right of Jews to assemble for worship. But in addition to not being allowed to proselytize, they could not enter into mixed marriages with Christians.

### **The Effects of Establishment on Christianity**

- Official sponsorship of Christianity was a decidedly mixed blessing for the Christian religion, considered as religion. The positive benefits were obvious and on the surface.
  - Security from danger and persecution were an obvious good; being Christian was no longer a crime punishable by the state.
  - Political advantage to Christians extended from the occupation of magnificent buildings and land to an edge in bureaucratic advancement.

- Above all, the opportunity was opened to expand the religion into a genuinely Christian culture.
- The negative effects of establishment were less obvious but no less real.
  - As bishop of external affairs, the emperor involved himself directly in religious matters: The calling of councils was as much a matter of political prudence as it was of religious concern. The overriding issue for the emperor was the unity of the empire; religious divisiveness had to be resolved at all costs in order to secure political stability.
  - Thus, as early as 314, Constantine called the Council of Arles so that the bishops could respond to the Donatist schismatics' appeal from their condemnation by the bishop of Rome. The council rejected the Donatists' petition and condemned the North African movement.
  - In 325, Constantine not only summoned the first ecumenical ("empire-wide") council at Nicaea (in Asia Minor) to decide the Arian controversy, but he actually presided at the opening of the council and provided its agenda.
  - Subsequent emperors aligned themselves with one party to a theological dispute or another and used the power of the state to enforce their will. Bishops, in turn, were all too willing to seek the imperial power in their support.
  - During the complex Arian controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the bishop of Alexandria (Athanasius) was repeatedly exiled and restored according to the doctrinal allegiances of Constantine II (337) and Constantius (339), neither of whom had any real conviction in the matter but tried to put their weight behind who they saw as the most likely winner.

- Already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, then, the lines of what would be called “caesaropapism”—the merging of imperial and religious power—were established.

### Internal Stresses

- The challenge of being a state religion put severe internal stress on Christianity. Despite the impressive institutional and intellectual developments it had accomplished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, it remained ill-prepared for the task of providing the glue for a society.
  - Starting as a sect with a distinct countercultural disposition, it was eschatologically oriented: This world is not permanent or even necessarily valuable. There is much in this religion that argues against stability and good order: Celibacy is better than marriage, poverty than wealth, humility than arrogance, obedience to God over obedience to humans.
  - The canonical writings of Christianity are far from providing a consistent code of behavior even for religious matters, much less directions for a civilization to organize itself.
  - In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, radical impulses continued to flourish under the name of Christianity, despite the efforts to shape a centrist orthodoxy.
- Especially in the East, where imperial rule remained more stable, the precedents of pagan culture provided much of the form for the Christian empire.
  - The basic forms of Greek *paideia*—though suffused with biblical content—remained consistent: logic, philosophy, rhetoric, and the plastic arts.
  - As the imperial religion, Christianity was a Greco-Roman religion, with only vestigial connections to Judaism. Even Scripture was in Greek and interpreted through Greek rhetoric.
- The increased instability of the empire in the West, in turn, would force Christianity both to engage new cultural realities and to forge

a distinctively Christian culture as an instrument of civilization among barbarians. This would evoke flexibility and creativity rather than stagnation.

### Suggested Reading

Dorries (Bainton, trans.), *Constantine and Religious Liberty*.

Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the short reign of the emperor Julian illustrate the fragility of Constantine's initiative with regard to Christianity?
2. Discuss the ways in which "empire" and "Christian" do not necessarily make a good match.



# The Extension of Christian Culture

## Lecture 15

**A**s we have seen, the effects of being established as the official religion of the Roman Empire went far beyond safety, legitimacy, or even privilege. The emperor and the state bureaucracy were intimately involved with the internal affairs of the church. Christianity had become a public political religion in precisely the fashion of the Greco-Roman polytheism that preceded it. In this lecture, we will discuss the role of conversion as an instrument of statecraft and the geographical extension of Christianity. We will also see how the now-official religion extended itself both spatially and temporally in order to meet its new cultural obligations.

### Geographical Expansion

- Under imperial authority, missionary work took on a new character: It became more intentional and more centrally organized.
- During the era of persecution, converts to Christianity were made primarily through networks of association and personal influence, rather than through sudden mass conversions stimulated by preaching or wonder-working. Evangelization was mostly carried out on a small scale; growth in numbers was, in no small measure, due to strong birth and survival rates among Christians.
- After official establishment of the religion, missionaries were often commissioned by imperial authority to work with both the leadership and the populace of other nations and tribes. The king of a client state would “convert” the people by himself converting and then declaring Christianity to be the new official religion of the realm.
- Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, substantial territories and populations become “Christian” through such processes.
  - Christians appeared in Persia in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and were persecuted under the Sassanid Empire until the 450s.

- The kingdom of Armenia, a Roman client state adjacent to Asia Minor, made Christianity the official religion under King Tiridates III in 301 as a result of the influence of Gregory the Illuminator; Armenia was, in fact, the first kingdom in history to declare itself officially Christian.
- The kingdom of Georgia, formerly a Roman province, made Christianity the official religion under Mirian III sometime between 317 and 327 (the dates are disputed).
- In Yemen, at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, a teacher named Hayyan established a Christian school around 400; Christians survived there until overrun by the Muslims in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- Ethiopia became officially Christian in 330 under the ruler Ezana of Axum.
- The East German tribe known as the Vandals had some members converted to Christianity in 364 under the emperor Valens. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, both the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths converted to Christianity.
- Several aspects of this geographical and demographical extension are worth noting.
  - The translation of the Bible into new languages (Ethiopic, Georgian, Armenian, Gothic) was a key element in the “Christianizing” of new lands and people. Christianity in its new languages continued to be a literate and scriptural religion.
  - Christianity became even more catholic (in the sense of “universal”) as it embraced new populations and cultures beyond its original Jewish, Greek, and Roman roots.
- The character of the “Christianity” that thus expanded also had some ambiguous aspects.
  - It was often superficial, with strong elements of indigenous paganism remaining; even more than within the empire, small

villages and remote rural areas maintained traditional ways for centuries after officially being declared Christian.

- It was often practiced in versions that were at odds with orthodoxy as it developed. Thus, Persian Christians adopted a teaching on Christ that was termed Nestorian, while new Christians in Ethiopia and Armenia were monophysite in their tendency; the Germanic converts in Europe were predominantly Arian in their convictions.
- The fringes of the empire thus became a refuge for “heretical” versions of Christianity; the further from imperial control, the greater the diversity of Christianity.

### **The Organization of Space**

- Another expression of Christian expansion as the imperial religion was the organization of space in Christian terms.
- The contrast to the pre-Constantinian era is particularly sharp in this regard given that Christianity formerly needed to be hidden because of the threat of persecution.
  - In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, Christians met for worship in private homes, in buildings constructed for worship that were like houses (Dura-Europos), or in the burial chambers called catacombs.
  - Worship, in turn, was fitted to these small spaces, yet as we have seen, there had already occurred (in the compositions called the Church Orders) an expansion of organization and rationalization of worship.
- With the expropriation and construction of great basilicas as places of Christian worship, liturgy expanded to fill the space allotted to it.
  - The very term “liturgy” derives from the “public works,” such as sacrifices, festivals, and processions, that were sponsored by wealthy patrons in Greco-Roman civic religion.

- Christian liturgy in large spaces began to take on the characteristics of such public liturgy. We find open-air processions, elaborate rituals (bowing, genuflecting, arm gestures), rich garments, and the use of musical chants.
- The *anaphora*, or formal Eucharistic prayer, became a lengthy and public profession.
- Just as “sacrifice” was at the heart of Greco-Roman religion, a holy act carried out by official priests on behalf of the populace and the city-state, so did the Christian Eucharist lose the sense of an intimate meal and develop more fully the sense of a sacrifice offered for the populace by a class of priests.
- The Greco-Roman love of art and adornment found new expression through the portrayal of specifically Christian themes rather than, as before, the themes of gods and goddesses in Greco-Roman mythology.
  - Statuary was dedicated not to the portrayal of the gods but to the portrayal of biblical figures and, eventually, to those whose holiness placed them at a level above the merely human, the saints.
  - Painting (in the form of frescoes), mosaics, and funerary art (on sarcophagi) displayed biblical themes, including stories from the New Testament.
- Movement from place to place in public became a prominent feature of imperial Christianity.
  - In the city of Rome, “station churches” represented stopping points for liturgical processions, with the chanting of hymns during the procession and prayers carried out in each station church.
  - Pilgrimages were made to the tombs of the martyrs, where the sharing of a sacred meal (the *refrigerium*) was a popular form of veneration of the saints; the pagan antecedents of this

practice are clear, and the practice worried such teachers as Saint Augustine.

- Just as pilgrimages were made in Greco-Roman religion to prophetic and healing shrines—people of all social classes went to hear the oracles given by Apollo at Delphi, and thousands traveled to seek healing at the shrines dedicated to Asclepius—so did Christians make pilgrimage to the holy men and women in the desert to experience direct contact with power.
- More elaborate pilgrimages were also made to the Holy Land, the location of the biblical story and, therefore, considered to be particularly filled with power. For example, Helen, the mother of Constantine, traveled to Jerusalem and discovered the relic of the Holy Cross; Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the supposed site of Jesus’s burial.



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**Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the supposed site of Jesus’s burial in Jerusalem; to this day, it is a place to which Christians continue to make pilgrimages.**

### **The Sanctification of Time**

- Christianity also extended its cultural influence through the sanctification of time. The life of individual Christians was marked at each stage by rituals that came to be called sacraments.
  - The most ancient of these rituals are connected to entry into the community: baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. When children are baptized at birth, these rituals are separated in time and become marks of growth (confirmation = “maturity”).

- The sacrament of repentance (or “penance”) sanctified the turn from sin during the course of adult life.
- Ordination to the priesthood was preceded by a number of “lesser” orders (porter, lector, acolyte, exorcist) and two “major orders” (subdeacon and deacon), representing multiple levels of initiation.
- The last sacraments reaching official status were matrimony and final anointing (for the terminally ill).
- Time itself was sanctified by an ever-more elaborate liturgical year that served to bring the biblical past into the present by celebrating moments in the history of salvation and the life of Christ.
  - Sunday, the traditional Christian celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus, was declared a public holiday by Constantine.
  - Over time, a seasonal liturgical cycle contemporized the events of the sacred past. The oldest cycle revolved around Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection: It was preceded by the 40-day period of Lent, followed by an “Easter season,” and concluding with the feast of Pentecost.
  - A similar cycle centered on Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ. It was preceded by the season called Advent (“arrival”) and followed by a “Christmas season,” concluding with the feast of Epiphany.
  - The time outside these cycles was designated as “ordinary time.” In the liturgy, the Gospel stories concerning Jesus’s words and deeds were read.
  - Another liturgical cycle began to develop, centered on the celebration of the saints: first the martyrs, then the “confessors” (those who did not capitulate to persecution though they were not killed), and then virgins and widows. The sanctoral cycle celebrated the “communion of saints,” linking the church

militant on earth—militant because it still needed to do battle with sin and the forces of darkness—with the church triumphant in heaven.

- Like pagan Rome, then, both the old and new Christian Romes saw time punctuated by the rhythm of *fasti* and *nefasti*, holy days and ordinary time, sacred festivals and profane activities. And as Christianity's presence pervaded everything, it was inevitable that Judaism, even when minimally protected by law, would become more vulnerable, both psychologically and in reality.

### **Christian Culture in the Context of Empire**

- After Constantine, we see a distinctively Christian culture progressively being shaped within the context of the empire.
- Especially in the East, the forms of Greek culture based in the Greek language continued—rhetoric, philosophy, art and architecture, and music—but they were now suffused with Christian content, above all, biblical themes. In the West, the Latin language would dominate the communication of the good news to ever more barbarian peoples.
- In the East, continuity was most evident and changes were subtle, while in the West, challenges to traditional culture were more marked, and lines of continuity with classical culture were fragile and would eventually be broken.

### **Suggested Reading**

Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship*.

Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Comment on this proposition: With establishment as the imperial religion, Christianity's worship expanded to fill the space and time allotted it.
2. In what ways did Christianity maintain roots in Judaism? How did the two rival traditions grow apart rather than closer?



# Monasticism as Radical Christianity

## Lecture 16

The new conditions of Christians within an imperially approved and sponsored religion were not regarded by all as uniformly positive. With legitimacy, benefaction, and privilege came both security and prosperity at the material level. This meant that Christianity was increasingly “conformed to the world,” rather than its critic, and the bearer of culture, rather than countercultural. The response of some Christians was the desire to return to what they perceived as a more radical existence. This radical edge—now in reaction to an established imperial church—emerged in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in diverse forms of flight from society and asceticism that are gathered under the term “monasticism.”

### The Turn to Monasticism

- The desire for a more radical existence among some Christians was continuous with elements in the New Testament that exhorted believers “not to be conformed to this age” (Rom. 12:2), and to “go outside the camp” to suffer as Jesus did outside the city, “for here we have no lasting city” (Heb. 13:13). Likewise, some Christians looked back at the portrayal of the first believers as sharing all their possessions and having nothing they called their own (Acts 2:41–47, 4:32–37).
- The desire was continuous, as well, with those elements of radical Christianity that persisted through the age of persecution: the boldness of those facing martyrdom, who chose Christ rather than Caesar; the representation of the apostles as subverters of the social order, who challenged the stability of both household and state; the New Prophecy that looked to a heavenly Jerusalem; the forms of Gnosticism that rejected all outward forms to cultivate the spirit.
- Some precedent for “living apart” in community had been set already by certain Greco-Roman philosophical schools. The Epicureans and the Pythagoreans had a long history of “life

together” outside the bounds of ordinary society. The Pythagoreans, indeed, maintained a regimen of silence, were vegetarian, and shared their possessions in common.

- Precedents can be found also in Judaism—probably influenced by Greco-Roman models: The Essenes and Therapeutae described by Philo of Alexandria and the community life at Qumran revealed by the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate that some pious Jews also sought a more rigorous form of observance away from the distractions of society. The most authentic expression of Judaism in such practitioners’ view was through total dedication, away from possessions, family, and social entanglement.
- Whatever the complex causes and components, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the development of monasticism within Christianity, not only immediately but also in the long term.

### Antony of Egypt

- The symbolic if not necessarily factual start of the solitary wilderness life (eremitical life) is Antony of Egypt (c. 251–356).
- Our knowledge of Antony comes from the *Life* written by Athanasius of Alexandria, around 360, shortly after the death of the hermit. It was written in praise and to provide a model to others; the encomiastic biography had wide influence.
  - While still a young man (c. 269), Antony heard the Gospel passage in which Jesus tells the rich young man, “Go, sell all your possessions and come follow me” (Mark 10:21). Antony took these words literally, left his goods to his sister, and went to the Egyptian desert.
  - Athanasius structures the story in terms of successive withdrawals (in the years 285 and 310) deeper into the wilderness, as Antony’s desire to be alone (*monos*) is thwarted by the desire of disciples to join him. Antony’s ideal was the solitary life of the hermit (*eremos* = “wilderness, desert”).

- Already in this account, we glimpse some of the elements of the early monastic life.
  - The world is perceived as corrupting; the desire to be alone and apart is the desire to achieve true discipleship through struggle.
  - Just as martyrdom was earlier associated with “fighting demons,” that is, the heathen gods and the state that sponsored them, so now the monk “fights the wild beasts,” who are inner demons in the fight for authentic faith. Thus, monasticism is a form of “white martyrdom.”
  - The arena for battle is the human mind and body. The control of the body through mental dedication (asceticism) is a key dimension of early monasticism, sometimes taking extreme forms, such as severe fasting and lack of sleep.
  - In contrast to the Gnostics, these early monks were deeply dedicated to ecclesiastical authority and orthodoxy—at least, this is the portrayal given by Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria.
  - The “sages of the desert” were charismatic in the sociological sense of the term: They drew followers who sought the wisdom they personified.

### Cenobites

- Another form of the monastic life was that of “life together” in the wilderness. The term “cenobite” for such monks comes from the Greek *koinos bios* (“life together”).
- The founder of this form of monasticism in Egypt was Pachomius (290–346).
  - Born a pagan, he served as a Roman soldier and was converted in 313.
  - He founded a monastery (c. 320) at Tabennisi in the Thebaid near the Nile.

- By the time of his death, he had under his authority some nine monasteries for men and two for women, with thousands of members.
- The *Pachomian Rule* regulated for many monks living “the solitary life” in common, in a rhythm of isolation and community.
  - Time alone was spent in prayer and meditation and in the working of small crafts.
  - Time together was devoted to meals, common prayer, and instruction.
- The Pachomian form of monasticism would be amplified and altered by others in the East (Basil of Caesarea) and in the West (Benedict of Nursia). But Pachomius established the dominant pattern of Christian monastic life.
- An important source of knowledge about monastic ideals is John Cassian (360–430). His *Institutes* and *Conferences* are compendiums of monastic lore from Egypt.
  - From Scythia (the territory around modern Russia and Ukraine), Cassian learned from the early monks in Egypt (c. 385), spent time in Constantinople, and in 415, founded two monasteries in Marseilles, where he composed his two great works.
  - The *Institutes* elaborates the cenobitic life in great detail, including manner of dress, work, and prayer.
  - The *Conferences* takes the form of sermons given by the desert monks on topics extending from prayer and contemplation to fighting the “noon-day devil” (*accidie*, or boredom).
- So popular was the wilderness life that a virtual “city in the wilderness” appeared in the Egyptian desert, with monasteries for both men and women scattered everywhere.

- The monks presented an alternative culture, based not on wealth but poverty, not on power but weakness, not on prestige but lowliness.
- In their communal life, they saw themselves as “New Testament Christians” living the “apostolic life” described by the Acts of the Apostles.
- In a real sense, the impulse that drove the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was active already in early monasticism: a return to simplicity, poverty, the imitation of Jesus, and the trusting faith of the heart.

### **Evagrius of Pontus and Palladius**

- The appeal of the monastic life even for the wealthy and sophisticated can be seen in the figures of Evagrius of Pontus and Palladius.
- Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) was born Christian and was educated in Constantinople. After an inappropriate love relationship when in priestly orders, he fled to Jerusalem and joined a monastery of Rufinus and Melania. He spent most of his life in the desert in Nitria. A disciple of Origen, his writings (the *Praktikos* and the *Gnostic Chapters*) had a great influence on later spirituality.
- Palladius (c. 364–420/30) was born in Galatia. As a young man, he traveled extensively in Egypt among the monks, collecting stories in the manner of an ethnographer. He later became bishop of Heliopolis in Bithynia. In his *Lausiatic History*, he presents a vivid picture of the cultural complexity represented by Egyptian monasticism.
  - Palladius is an example of a well-established figure in society who “goes on pilgrimage” to visit the monks of Egypt and Palestine, collecting stories and sayings and seeking a simplicity and nobility of life not available in the cities.

- Among the notable figures on whom Palladius reports are wealthy patronesses, such as Macrina, a Roman matron who used her massive fortune to establish and support monastic foundations and meet the practical needs of the monks. Here, we see the practice of patronage in yet another form.

### The Influence of Monasticism

- Monasticism found a permanent place within Christianity and exercised enormous influence from the first.
- It was important to the imperial church of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.
  - Many bishops of those centuries were drawn from monastic ranks and were, thus, leaders who were ascetical, celibate, and often scholarly, shaped by the discipline and sharing the outlook of monastic life.
  - Monks served as “foot soldiers” in the fierce doctrinal wars of these centuries. They were the most activist, mobile, and militant Christians; it was not unknown for them to riot in patriarchal cities in support of one doctrine or another.
- The role of monasticism in the long run was equally important.
  - Through the ages, monasteries provided a constant “alternative lifestyle” that enabled Christians to express their discipleship in more radical fashion. They were an outlet for those with reforming impulses, and while not always approved by more enculturated Christians, they were always admired.
  - At some times and places, monasteries provided centers for reform through knowledge and practice. In the early medieval period of the West, monasteries preserved and copied manuscripts and taught the techniques of agriculture.

## Suggested Reading

Chitty, *The Desert a City*.

Harmless, *Desert Christians*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What characteristics of early monasticism justify calling it a “white martyrdom”?
2. Discuss the symbiotic relationship between desert monks and their urban patrons and admirers.

# The Emergence of Patriarchal Centers

## Lecture 17

In the last lecture, we saw that monasticism provided an outlet for those Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century who rejected the new comfortable circumstances of the church and sought a more rigorous mode of discipleship. Now, we return to those less heroically inclined, indeed, to those deeply enmeshed in the new cultural reality that was an established Christianity. In this lecture, we consider the organization of the Christian religion and its tendency to mimic patterns of state administration.

### The Growth of “First Cities”

- Rule by such emperors as Augustus or Tiberius in the early Roman Empire was always absolute but was exercised in part directly and in part indirectly.
  - The emperor was the supreme authority and the last resort for all decisions. His court and his power were centered in the city of Rome. In this sense, the principate was, from the start, profoundly centralized and personal.
  - The consultative and administrative power of the Senate, which during the republic had been considerable and important, was only vestigial once the principate took hold.
  - Power over the vast geographical expanse of the imperium, however, had to make use of representatives. In safer provinces, such as those in Italy, Asia, and Cilicia, administration could be carried out by a governor, perhaps a current or former member of the Senate. In more dangerous provinces, including those on the borders, the emperor kept more direct control through military administrators, such as prefects or procurators (Pontius Pilate in Palestine).



- As some cities grew in size (as centers of trade) or prestige (as religious sites), they became symbolically—and sometimes administratively—the “first city” of a province.
  - Thus, Ephesus (keeper of the cult of Artemis and the cult of the imperial family) was the first city of the province of Asia.
  - Lugdanum (Lyons), because of its safety and trade, became the first city of the province of Gaul.
  - Such “first cities,” in turn, exercised influence over other cities of a region.
- Truly large metropolises exercised cultural and political influence over larger areas of the empire.
  - Rome was always “first city” because it was the capital, but Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria grew to considerable prominence in their respective territories.
  - Under the administrative reforms of Diocletian, the empire was divided into *dioceses*, each with its chief city; under Constantine, dioceses were gathered into *praefecturae*, each with a chief city.
  - Antioch was the praefectural city for the Orient, giving it great political authority. In Italy, Milan was made the praefectural city, while Rome remained merely the head of a diocese.
- In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, certain cities, as seats of bishops (who were called “patriarchs”), also exercised ecclesiastical authority over the ecclesial dioceses within their territory and entered into sustained rivalry for primacy within the imperial religion as a whole.
  - The relations among these cities would be of considerable importance for the next several centuries; the doctrinal disputes that raged across imperial Christianity were intimately connected with their political rivalry.

- Each of these cities had its own claims to importance within Christian history, and each was eager to emphasize that importance. The practice of competition among Greek and Roman cities was common, as attested by the orations of Dio Chrysostom to the cities of Asia Minor, which fought to be “number one” in their region.

### The Primacy of Rome

- After the loss of the symbolic first city of Jerusalem—the place where the Christian movement started—the primacy of Rome (and the bishop of Rome) was broadly recognized in the early centuries, though this primacy did not at first bear the sense of administrative authority. Jerusalem itself was recognized as one of the patriarchates, but its position was strictly honorary, and it was not a player in subsequent rivalries.
- An important dimension of Rome’s primacy was the position ascribed to Peter in the New Testament compositions and Peter’s connection to Rome.
  - In the Gospels, Peter is the chief spokesman among the disciples, the one who recognized something of Jesus’s identity before the others. The “confession of Peter” is found in all the Gospels in one form or another and is most elaborated by Matthew, which has Jesus respond with the declaration that he will build his church: on the rock who is Peter. Although he betrayed Jesus before his death—also reported by all the Gospels—Peter is the primary witness of the Resurrection, both in the Gospel narratives and as listed by Paul.



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**The “confession of Peter” (“You are the Messiah”) is found in all the Gospels; in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus responds by declaring that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church.**

- As an apostle, Peter gathered the remnant community at Pentecost, defended it before Jewish authorities, and was one of the three “pillars” of that church before “going to another place.” Paul recognizes Peter as the first witness to the Resurrection and as a leader of the Jerusalem church to whom Paul “reported” early in his own ministry.
- Tradition locates Peter as the first bishop of Rome—the first letter of Peter is written from “Babylon,” a code word for Rome—and as a martyr in the city, together with Paul, under Nero.
- Tradition quickly solidified the symbolic (and real) centrality of the Roman church because of Peter.
  - The Acts of Peter locates Peter’s martyrdom in the city, while the letters of both Clement and Ignatius link Peter and Paul together as martyrs in the city of Rome.
  - In his *Adversus haereses*, when Irenaeus of Lyons responds to the Gnostics’ claim of secret teachers by tracing the “apostolic succession” of bishops, he uses as his example the bishops of the city of Rome, linking them one by one backward in time from his own day to Peter, the chief apostle.
  - The rash effort of Victor I to excommunicate the Asian church around 190 over the disputed date of Easter is clearly an overstepping of the limits to Rome’s authority, but the fact that he tried shows some of the prestige implicit in his position.
  - The moral and administrative authority of Rome nevertheless grew, especially under Damasus I in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century (366–384). In 397, the Council of Carthage in North Africa declared that its decisions needed to be checked with “the church across the sea,” clearly indicating the church of Rome.
  - In conflicts to follow, Rome would establish itself as the great referee.

- Rome’s authority eventually would be restricted to the West (at least in the eyes of others), but in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, its voice was widely acknowledged to be “first.” It was a primacy at least of honor and, in many cases, of actual authority.

### Antioch and Alexandria

- Two patriarchal centers, Antioch and Alexandria, competed with each other without directly challenging the primacy of Rome, especially in the realm of thought. Their rivalry played a key role in the theological controversies that divided Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- Antioch, on the Orontes River in Syria, was where members of the movement were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26) and was the church that sponsored the first missionary work of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3). It was also the church where the issue of the acceptance of Gentiles without demanding observance of the Law was raised and vigorously debated (Acts 15, Gal. 2).
  - Ignatius of Antioch’s letters (c. 107) indicate the prestige he enjoyed as the bishop of that city. He wrote letters of instruction and exhortation to churches across Asia as he traveled to his martyrdom in Rome.
  - Other important figures in the city of Antioch were Paul of Samosata, who was bishop there from 260 to 268, and Lucian, who died as a martyr in the Diocletian persecution in 312. Lucian was a biblical scholar and an influential teacher; among his students was Arius.
  - The intellectual style of Antioch was Aristotelian, with an emphasis on empirical fact and history. Although its biblical interpretation used typology, it avoided the allegory that dominated scriptural interpretation in Alexandria.
  - Antioch’s understanding of Jesus emphasized his humanity (*logos-anthropos*) and tended toward adoptionism. In its benign form, this position simply emphasized the realness of

Jesus's humanity—he was one among other humans. In its extreme form, this position diminished the divine character of Christ, seeing it as something only bestowed on him by God, rather than his “by nature.”

- A constant rival to Antioch, Alexandria in Egypt, with its museum and library, was one of antiquity's great intellectual centers. It was a center for mathematicians, scientists, philosophers, and poets.
  - Alexandria was also the main source of Hellenistic Jewish literature, above all, that of Philo, who was deeply influenced by Plato and used the allegorical method in interpreting the Septuagint.
  - The birth of Christianity in Alexandria is obscure; it is possible that the Letter to the Hebrews, with its strong Platonic outlook, was written by Apollos of Alexandria.
  - The catechetical school at Alexandria was founded by Pantaenus (d. c. 190), a convert from Stoic philosophy; the school counted among its teachers the highly intellectual Clement and Origen.
  - The intellectual tendency of Alexandria was Platonist, with an emphasis on the spiritual rather than the empirical and with a liberal use of allegory in scriptural interpretation.
  - The view of Jesus in Alexandria emphasized his divinity more than his humanity (*logos/sarx*) and tended toward monophysitism. In its benign form, this emphasis recognized the fact that in Christ, God was at work for the salvation of humans. In its extreme form, it denied the humanity of Jesus and saw the divine as simply making use of a human body.
- The patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch were all too willing to employ the favor of the emperor to assert and advance the theological claims of their respective cities and, at the same time, the prominence of their churches.

## Constantinople

- Finally, there was the patriarchate of Constantinople, the last to appear but ambitious to assert its place quickly and decisively.
- Constantinople had no “apostolic” founding, but it claimed to be founded by the “thirteenth apostle,” Constantine. Unlike the other three cities, it was never pagan, being founded as a new Christian metropolis.
- Although it would eventually be a center of Greek learning, with the world’s first true university, in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, Constantinople was not intellectually at the level of Antioch or Alexandria.
- Its claim was grounded in its status as the “New Rome.” Under Constantine, it was the praefectural city and the seat of government. From the start, then, its bishop wanted equality with the bishop of Rome and, as the power of the old Rome faded, desired complete primacy.

### Suggested Reading

Daniélou and Marrou (Cronin, trans.), *The First Six Hundred Years (The Christian Centuries*, vol. 1).

Giles, *Documents Illustrating Papal Authority, AD 96–454*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the rivalry between patriarchal centers derive both from distinctive Christian traditions and the culture of Greco-Roman urban competition?
2. Discuss the ways in which the administrative structure of the Roman Empire helped shape the empire-wide governance of the church.

# Theological Crisis and Council—The Trinity

## Lecture 18

The territorial rivalries we discussed in the last lecture provide the backdrop to the tumultuous theological controversies concerning God and Christ that threatened to fragment the newly “triumphant” Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this lecture and the next, we will try to explain these controversies as they developed over time. We will consider first the question of the Trinity: Who or what is the Christian God, after all? Then we will turn, as the disputes themselves did, to the question of Christ: Who or what was the Messiah who stands at the center of Christian belief and piety?

### A Preoccupation with Belief

- Among world religions, Christianity is distinctively preoccupied with matters of belief; controversies over the elements of belief dominated religious and political struggles in imperial Christianity for several centuries. The question arises: Why was the precise content of belief so critical to Christians when it was not for their Jewish and Gentile neighbors?
  - The answer lies in origins. Christianity is a religion of choice; it began as a Jewish sect that professed Jesus as Messiah (in contrast to possible other anointed ones) and as Lord (in contrast to other masters). Intellectual commitment is at the heart of the movement, and this commitment had definite content.
  - As a religious *haireisis* (“sect, party”), moreover, it inherited the convictions of Greco-Roman and Jewish philosophical schools. The universal premise in philosophy was that right thinking was the basis for right practice, just as bad practice was rooted in corrupt thinking. Philosophical schools competed with each other over the precise character of right thinking and engaged in polemic against each other: One school had to be correct and others wrong.

- In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was divided particularly over the understanding of God and, in the course of these disputes, developed a more coherent understanding of the divine as triune rather than singular.
  - Like Jews, the first believers confessed that “God is One,” and they considered themselves monotheists, but they regarded Jesus as sharing in the divine life and power because of his Resurrection. How is monotheism compatible with the confession of Jesus as Lord?
  - When they confessed “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3), early believers complicated monotheism, making, in the eyes of Jews, “two powers in heaven”—in a word, polytheism, or idolatry!
  - The language of the New Testament is religious rather than theological and maintains a rich ambiguity; the closest thing to a clear statement is 1 Corinthians 8:4–6, where Paul declares, “We know that there is no God but one. Even though there are so-called gods in the heavens and on the earth—there are, to be sure, many such gods and lords—for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we live; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
  - Already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, the impulse toward a rational explanation led to positions that suppressed the distinctive character of the Son in order to protect monotheism. Adoptionists considered the Son divine only through a moral participation in the life of the Father. Monarchians (Sabellians) saw the Son only as a “mode” of the Father, rather than distinct. But the issue waited until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, within imperial Christianity, to be well and truly joined.
- It’s important to note that in all the doctrinal controversies raging across the empire, the concern of the emperors was for the unity of the Christian religion as the new glue of the Roman order.





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Thinkers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries tried to explain the ambiguous language of the New Testament concerning Jesus in more rational terms, in an effort to understand the relationship between the Father and Son.

### Arius and the Council at Nicaea

- The first stage of the crisis came about because of the popular teaching of a presbyter named Arius (c. 260–336) and the calling of the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (325).
- Possibly Libyan by birth, Arius studied in Antioch with Lucian, whose school tended toward adoptionist positions with respect to Christ. Arius became a popular priest in Alexandria; he was also an ascetic and wrote many hymns and letters, including a work called *Thaleia* (“Banquet”).
- Sometime between 315 and 319, Arius began to publicly espouse adoptionist views: Of Christ, he declared, “there was a time when he was not,” and he said, “the Word is a creature.” Christ’s status as Son was consequently bestowed on him by the Father.

- Such teaching was regarded as heretical by those who had already resisted other forms of adoptionism and Monarchianism, seeing them as a threat to the full divinity of Christ. The internal dispute was intense and widespread enough to threaten the unity of the church and, therefore, of the empire.
- The emperor Constantine summoned the Council at Nicaea in 325 to establish religious unity in the empire.
  - After the opening convocation by the emperor, Bishop Hosius seems to have presided as legate (some think Eustathius of Antioch presided). Of the more than 300 bishops attending, only 7 were from the West, plus 2 priests serving as legates of the bishop of Rome.
  - Opinions were sharply divided, but an expanded version of the traditional creed emerged and was promulgated, focusing on the nature of the Son.
  - The Nicene Creed uses biblical images to assert the equality of Father and Son: God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God. But because the challenge was based on rational categories (philosophy), the creed incorporated, for the first time, language that was also philosophical. The Son was “of one being” with the Father (*homoousios* = “consubstantial”) and was “begotten not made” (*gennetos ou genetos*), respective responses to Arius’s views.
  - The Council was “ecumenical” (the first of seven so-called) because it involved the “universal church”; in addition to the creed, it issued excommunications of Arius and his allies. It also definitively settled the dating of Easter, the problem that had upset relations in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- The Council of Nicaea, however, by no means ended the theological controversy; it raged on for another 50 years with a resolution in favor of orthodoxy not at all certain.

## Regional Synods and Continuing Controversy

- The decades after the Council of Nicaea saw the production of literature and the calling of regional synods in support of one position or another.
- The greatest champion of orthodoxy was Athanasius (296–373), a priest at the Council of Nicaea who became bishop of Alexandria and wrote extensively in favor of the conciliar creed’s use of *homoousios*.
- Opposed to Athanasius and the council were followers of Arius (himself now in exile), who continued to insist on the subordination of the Son rather than his equality with the Father; they held several distinct positions.
  - The Anomeans held, as the Greek word suggests, that the Son was “unlike” the Father.
  - The Homoeans held that the Son was “similar to” the Father but not his equal.
  - The Semi-Arians (such as Eusebius of Caesarea) sought to soften the Nicaean formula to *homoiousios* (of “like substance” rather than “the same substance”).
- The position of the imperial power was uncertain—or wavering—which enabled the controversy to continue.
  - Constantine himself backed off the Nicaean formula and, in 328, returned Eusebius of Nicomedia from exile.
  - Constantine’s son Constantius II (317–361) was an avid supporter of the Arians in the eastern part of the empire and several times exiled Athanasius.
  - In the western empire, Constantine’s other son, Constans (337–350), was an equally firm supporter of orthodoxy.

- The situation for orthodoxy was not aided by the fact that missionary successes among the barbarians meant that they were converted to an Arian form of belief.

### The Establishment of Nicene Orthodoxy

- A combination of powerful teaching on the side of orthodoxy and imperial support finally secured the place of the Nicene theology within the empire.
- The Cappadocian writers in the East, including Basil (“the Great”) of Caesarea (330–379); his brother, Gregory of Nyssa (330–395); and Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–389/90), and Ambrose (339–397) and Hilary (c. 315–367/8) in the West wrote powerfully in support of the Nicene position.
- The reversal of Christian fortunes under Julian—who returned the empire to traditional polytheistic religion in 361–363—revealed the fragility of a divided Christianity and led to the establishment of Nicene orthodoxy as the faith of the empire.
  - Theodosius I (“the Great”) was emperor from 379 to 395 and was deeply devoted to the cause of orthodoxy. He called the Council of Constantinople in 381 to finally settle the Arian dispute.
  - The council had no representatives from the West, and some 36 bishops withdrew, but 150 bishops of the orthodox party confirmed the Nicene Creed. Its language about the Holy Spirit as “Lord and Giver of Life,” as “proceeding from the Father,” and as “worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son” rebutted the Arian attacks on the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
  - Among the council’s disciplinary measures was the granting to Constantinople honorary precedence over all other churches except Rome.

## The Outcome of the Trinitarian Controversy

- Although the theological battles over the Trinity are complex and not entirely edifying—the fact of human power politics is all too obvious—they were not insignificant for the development of the Christian religion.
- It would be a mistake to regard the controversies as quibbling over words: Genuine convictions concerning the nature of salvation were at stake.
  - Those on the Arian side thought that they were protecting the “Oneness” of God by making Christ a creature.
  - For Athanasius and his friends, however, it was a question of whether humans were saved by God or by themselves; the divinity of Christ was critical to God alone being given the glory.
- The debate over the nature of the Word, the nature of the Son, and the use of ontological metaphysical language in definition inevitably shifted attention away from what Jesus did or what God did in Jesus to who or what Jesus “is.” In a sense, this was a shift from Easter (the feast of the Resurrection) to Christmas (the feast of the Incarnation).
- The upshot of these developments was that Christian monotheism became a richer, more complex, and more paradoxical monotheism than that of Judaism or Islam: Three persons (*prosopon, persona*) in one God suggests an understanding of “unity” not simply as singleness but as embracing a rich diversity of life.

### Suggested Reading

Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*.

Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 223–279.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why are doctrine and disputes over doctrine so prominent in Christianity in comparison to other world religions?
2. Is Christianity “monotheistic” in the same way that Judaism and Islam are monotheistic? How does Trinitarian belief complicate belief in one God?

# Theological Crisis and Council—Christology

## Lecture 19

In the last lecture, we traced the steps by which the doctrine of the Trinity was argued out by opposing teachers over most of a century. Such controversies continued with even greater ferocity in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries but now with a focus on Christology: the nature of Jesus Christ, the God-man. In this debate, we can see the same combination of elements as in the battle of Arianism: political and personal rivalries between the great patriarchal centers, divergent philosophical approaches to questions of theology, the desire of emperors to maintain unity at any cost, and the summoning of synods and councils of bishops, often serving to worsen the divide.

### Outside the Disputes

- Thinking of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries as totally given over to theological disputes is a historical distortion resulting from the state of our sources.
  - What has been preserved has been a great mass of literature, much of it polemical in character, arguing subtle distinctions concerning doctrine.
  - This literature, in turn, was produced by the “great men” who were the leading figures in the debates, representing “orthodoxy” (Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Cyril) and “heresy” (Apollonarius, Nestorius). Also extant are the letters of bishops and emperors and the acts of councils.
  - What the extant evidence leaves out is a sense of what any of this had to do with the lives of ordinary Christians. For this, we have little or no literary evidence.
- The maxim *lex orandi lex credendi* is certainly true—teaching and prayer shape each other. It makes a difference to Christian prayer whether Jesus is regarded as fully divine or not or whether the

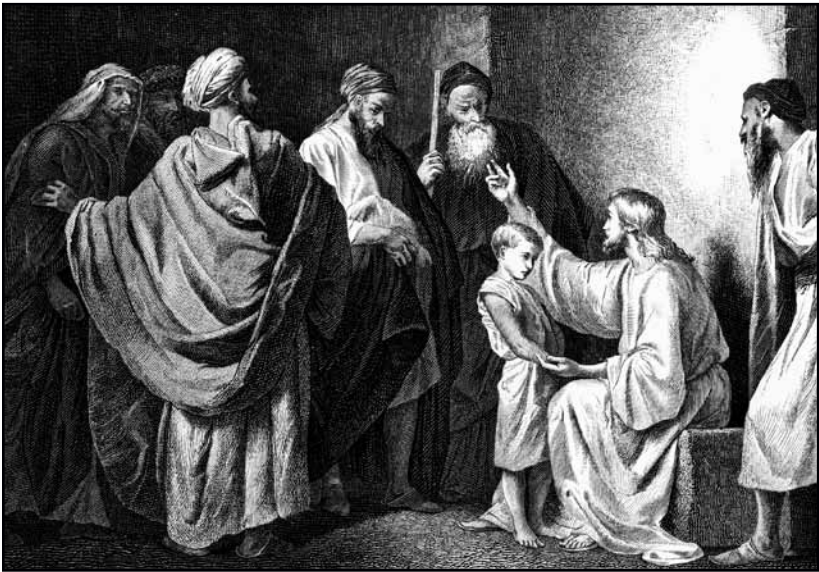
spirit of Jesus within the community is understood as the spirit of the living God. But to what degree and how immediately did the mutual shaping of theology and piety occur among Christians during these centuries?

- There is some slight evidence that others than the experts were passionately involved in the disputes.
  - Gregory of Nazianzus suggests that theology was argued on the street and at parties. Speaking of the disputants, he says, “every marketplace must buzz with their talking, and every dinner party be worried to death with silly talk and boredom.”
  - Gregory of Nyssa notes: “Everywhere ... people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity. If you asked something of a moneychanger, he would begin discussing the question of the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you questioned a baker about the price of bread, he would answer that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate to him....”
  - Cyril of Alexandria rallied monks to exercise pressure in support of his theological positions through marches in the streets and even riots.
  - For the most part, however, the everyday Christian existence of the nonspecialists was probably little affected. The life of worship and popular piety sketched earlier undoubtedly continued to develop, reflected more in architecture, art, and sermons than in polemical treatises.
- Such reminders of the historian’s captivity to available sources are valuable as a caution against reducing history to a “history of ideas.” Nevertheless, these disputes, precisely because they had a permanent effect on subsequent developments, deserve the attention they receive.



## Origin of the Christological Controversies

- The origin of the Christological controversies can be traced in part to the paradoxical character of the earliest Christian experience—as witnessed by the New Testament.
- The language concerning Jesus in the New Testament combines two convictions with equal force and could give rise to sharply different emphases.
  - The humanity of Jesus—his full participation in the human condition—is repeatedly asserted. The Gospel accounts render Jesus realistically in the setting of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Judaism. Apart from his miracles, Jesus appears like other humans: He is born, eats and drinks, associates with others, and dies a mortal death. The Letter to the Hebrews similarly insists that Christ is fully human and tested in every way that other humans are tested (Heb. 4:15).



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**The Letter to the Hebrews asserts emphatically that Jesus is fully human, but at the same time, his divinity is also vigorously asserted elsewhere in the New Testament.**

- At the same time, the divinity of Christ is also vigorously attested. The Gospel of John declares that the Word [of God] became flesh (John 1:14) and that Jesus both came from God and was returning to God (John 13:3). The Letter to the Hebrews (as also Paul and John) asserts the preexistence of Christ and his role in creation of the world (Heb. 1:2) and states that he “comes into the world” (Heb. 1:6, 10:5).
- These affirmations point to the paradoxical character of the first Christian experience: that somehow “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). The pendulum swings of emphasis point to the impossibility of rendering the experience adequately in linguistic formulae.

### The Polarization of Patriarchal Centers

- The passions unleashed by the Arian controversy and the polarization of patriarchal centers served as another source of Christological controversy.
- Apollonarius (or Apollonaris) of Laodicea (c. 310–c. 390) pushed a conviction concerning the divinity of Christ to an extreme: Only the divine Word could be perfect and save humanity, and this Word was, in effect, the replacement for a human soul or mind in Christ.
  - This version of *logos-sarx* (“Word/flesh”) Christology was associated above all with Alexandria. It effectively eliminated Christ’s humanity.
  - The position of Apollonarius was explicitly condemned by the Synod of Confessors in 362 and by the Council of Constantinople in 381.
  - The synod enunciated the basic principle that guided the orthodox position: “only that which is assumed can be saved”; thus, the Word had to assume a full humanity for humanity to be saved.

- Notice that the discourse is nevertheless entirely in ontological terms (“being” and “nature”) rather than in terms of Christ’s moral character or human actions. The classical debate concerned the *what* of Christ (“what is his essence”) rather than the *who* of Christ (“what is his character”).
- In reaction to Apollonianism, the Antiochean school emphasized the full humanity of Christ.
  - This position, known as the *logos/anthropos* (“Word/human”) approach, insisted that a full human person was united to the divine Word in Christ.
  - The extreme version of this position was adopted by an Antiochene monk named Nestorius, who became archbishop of Constantinople in 428 and whose preaching on the radical separation of Word and humanity gave rise to the heresy called Nestorianism. His approach was to deny the title *Theotokos*, “Mother of God,” that traditional piety had attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus.
  - Mary is obviously the mother of a human being named Jesus. That was not in debate. But if Jesus is believed to partake fully in the divine from birth, does this justify calling Mary the “Mother of God”? It sounds shocking, to be sure, but Christians have always been comfortable with paradox.
- The rabid opponent of Nestorius was Cyril, the archbishop of Alexandria from 412 to 444 and a controversialist of uncommon vigor and vitriol. As early as 429, he wrote against Nestorius.
  - Both Cyril and the Nestorians appealed to Celestine I, the bishop of Rome, and a Roman synod condemned Nestorius in 430.
  - Cyril threatened to depose Nestorius if he did not recant, but Nestorius was supported by Bishop John of Jerusalem and Theodoret of Cyrus, who saw Cyril’s position as “Apollonianism.”

- The emperor Theodosius II called a general council to be held in Ephesus in 431. Cyril dominated the council, which affirmed the title of *Theotokos* for Mary.
  - The Antiocheans were not appeased, and mutual excommunications flew between them and Cyril’s Alexandrian allies.
  - A semblance of union was reached through compromise in 433 under severe imperial pressure.
  - Nestorianism was forbidden within the empire but, as we have seen, found a home in populations outside the empire, for example, in Persia.

### Monophysitism

- The Christological battles began again in 447, when the archimandrite of Constantinople, Eutyches (c. 378–454), began a teaching that would be called monophysite and prove more contentious even than Nestorianism.
- In reaction to the division between the divine and human nature in Christ ascribed to Nestorius, Eutyches asserted that there was only one (divine) nature in Christ, thus, *monos physis*.
  - Condemned by a synod in Constantinople in 448, Eutyches appealed to the emperor, who ordered a new council to be held in Ephesus.
  - Pope Leo I (440–461) intervened with a dogmatic letter (the “Tome of Leo”) in 449, which clarified the orthodox position in terms of two natures (both human and divine) in one person— with “person” being understood in the philosophical sense.
  - Nevertheless a “robber council” was held in 449 that represented the victory of the Cyril party in its most radical form and the banishment of members of the Antiochean school.

- At the death of Theodosius II, who had supported the monophysite position, and at the urging of Pope Leo and the western bishops, a new ecumenical council was held in Chalcedon (near Constantinople) in October and November of 451.
  - The Council of Chalcedon followed the lead of Leo I in seeking to affirm both sides of the paradoxical confession, without reduction or suppression of either dimension. An account says that when Leo's letter was read aloud, the cry spontaneously arose, "Peter has spoken through Leo! This is what we believe!"
  - The council declared: "one single Christ, Son, Lord, Monogenic, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference in natures being in no way suppressed by the union, but rather the properties of each being safeguarded and reunited in a single person and a single hypostasis."
- The controversy, however, still did not end, with a strong anti-Chalcedonian tradition continuing to hold a monophysite position, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, as well as Ethiopia and Constantinople.

### **Enduring Consequences**

- The enduring effect of these endless theological and political controversies on Christianity cannot be considered as anything but negative.
- As the great historian Henri-Irénée Marrou has stated: "Not without astonishment and regret the historian finds that in these long, bitter disputes which rent the church, heresy as such counted for less than men's passionate attachment to their own will, than party spirit and obstinacy in schism."
- By placing such emphasis on "right ideas" rather than on "right practice," theology became removed from ordinary life and became a matter of subtle speculation, even when well-intentioned.

- The disputes, carried out in public and with the intervention of imperial power, revealed within Christianity—a religion dedicated to peace and unity—a deep tendency toward conflict and division.
- Depending on the territory, the population, and the whim of a king, Christianity could appear (in the West) as Chalcedonian or Arian and (in the East) as Nestorian or monophysite.

### Suggested Reading

Grillmeier (Bowden, trans.), *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451) (Christ in Christian Tradition, vol. 1)*.

Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 280–343.

### Questions to Consider

1. How did the political and philosophical rivalries between patriarchal centers become exposed in the Christological debates of the 5<sup>th</sup> century?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the use of ontological language (philosophical language about being) to define the significance of Christ?

# The Distinctive Issues of the Latin West

## Lecture 20

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, dominated by theological disputes over the Trinity and Christology in the East, also saw the development of a flourishing Latin Christianity, especially in Italy, Gaul, and North Africa—one that also included controversies. Although Latin authors contributed to the larger theological debates, the issues distinctive to the West tended to be less theoretical than pastoral and ecclesial: Who belongs to the church and on what grounds? Is the church a pure sect of the sanctified, or is it a body that includes the weak and the flawed? What are the grounds and requirements of salvation, and what is the degree of human involvement in salvation?

### Donatism

- The paradigmatic controversies of Latin theology are Donatism and Pelagianism—each named for its representative figures. Donatism dominated North Africa for more than 100 years and heavily involved ecclesial and state politics.
- The controversy began with a dispute over the election of the bishop of Carthage. The underlying issue, though, was the validity of the church's sacraments, including ordination. Did it depend on personal holiness?
  - The majority party elected a man named Caecilian as bishop of Carthage in 311. But he was regarded by a minority party as morally compromised. In this minority view, Caecilian did not have the requisite holiness to be a bishop, and therefore, his further sacramental actions as a bishop (baptizing and confirming others) would be invalid. Note the element of rigorism represented by the minority position.
  - The minority party elected its own counter-bishop, named Marjorinus, in 312. The minority party gained a new and vigorous leader in 315 when Donatus took over. The Donatists

stood for a sectarian version of Christianity. The church is authentic only when it is uncompromised, perfectly holy.

- Both parties appealed to the new emperor, Constantine. In his first intervention in the affairs of the church, Constantine summoned a council at Arles in Gaul (314), but when the council decided for the majority (Catholic) party, the Donatists rejected the decision.
  - The controversy contained elements of class conflict. The Donatists represented elements of the native Punic population of the countryside rather than the Hellenized and Romanized Catholic party in the cities.
  - Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, wrote extensively against the Donatists in favor of a Catholic vision of the church—the same everywhere and in all its parts—and made a strong effort at reconciliation in 411. But the controversy did not end until the incursion of the Saracens put an effective end to North African Christianity in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.
- The issues raised by Donatism were fundamental, involving the nature of the church and the integrity of its sacraments.
  - Is the church a sect made up only of the holy—those who have never failed—or is it “catholic” in the sense that it embraces sinners, as well? Augustine argued that the Gospel of Matthew’s vision of grain and weeds growing up together in the same plot was



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**In the Donatist controversy, Augustine argued for the vision of the Gospel of Matthew, which saw, in a parable of Jesus, grain and weeds growing together in the same plot of land; it was up to God to decide which ones should be harvested and which ones burned.**



correct: that the church was a mixed body that contained both the imperfect and the perfect.

- Are the sacraments valid only when performed by those who are personally holy (*ex opere operantis*), or are they valid through the performance of any legitimate minister, no matter how holy (*ex opere operato*)? Once more, the tradition substantially agreed with Augustine: The minister who baptizes may be a moral wreck, but the ritual of baptism takes its effect nevertheless.

### **Pelagianism**

- The second major controversy, Pelagianism, is named for a British monk named Pelagius who taught in Rome in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. When the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, he fled to Carthage—encountering a highly resistant Augustine—and then to Palestine.
- As a monk and a moralist, Pelagius taught an optimistic view of human capability; even after the fall of Adam, he said, humans could please God on their own merit. Grace aided humans but was not strictly necessary for them to lead virtuous lives.
  - Pelagius declared that Adam was a mortal even without sin and would have died in any case. Augustine saw this as contradicting the plain sense of Scripture that death came into the world because of sin.
  - Pelagius stated that humans can live without sin and can please God through their own effort. This offended Augustine's own experience of not being able to free himself from his passions until a dramatic intervention by God. Grace for Augustine was always necessary in all circumstances.
  - A synod held at Carthage in 411 condemned Pelagius and these propositions; the monk's appeal to Rome was rejected by Pope Innocent I, and his condemnation was repeated by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

- The theological issue that locked Pelagius and Augustine in debate over many years concerned the absolute need for God’s grace in every circumstance and for any good deed. The sharpness and strength of Augustine’s polemic on this point had a profound—and perhaps not entirely positive—effect on all later theology in the West.

### Doctors of the Church

- Augustine was one of three leaders of Latin Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries who were later designated as “doctors” (that is, teachers) of the church. Each contributed in an important way to the eventual shape of Christianity in the West.
- Ambrose of Milan (337/40–397) came from a noble family. He was trained in rhetoric and was governor of the region. While still a catechumen—that is, not yet a baptized Christian but only a seeker—he was elected by the clergy and people of Milan to be their ecclesiastical leader. He was baptized and ordained a priest and bishop in 374.
  - Adopting an ascetic lifestyle, Ambrose gave away all his goods to the poor and enjoyed great popular favor. He was a mentor for the young Augustine, playing a pivotal role in his conversion from Manichaeism to Christianity. As a bishop, Ambrose was a fierce defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy.
  - Ambrose wore power comfortably and was adept in the play of politics. When the emperor Theodosius I slaughtered 7,000 people in retaliation for a revolt in Thessalonica, Ambrose stood up to him and demanded of the emperor a public repentance.
- The second critical figure for the shaping of Christianity in the West was Jerome (347–419/20). He was born into a Christian family, studied classical Latin language and literature in Rome, was baptized at 20, then dedicated himself to the monastic life.
  - Jerome lived as a hermit for a time in Syria, where his gift for language led to his learning both Greek and Hebrew, the original biblical languages.

- In Constantinople, he studied biblical exegesis with the great theologian Gregory of Nazianzus.
- Jerome spent three years as the secretary and counselor to Pope Damasus I, one of the most powerful of the early bishops of Rome. Damasus assigned him the task of translating the entire bible into Latin in order to provide a standard text (the Vulgate) to replace the many “Old Latin” versions.
- Jerome moved to Bethlehem in 389, where he lived as a hermit until his death in 419/20. Among his many writings, his *Lives of Eminent Men* is an indispensable biographical source for early Christian history. His commentaries on biblical books also show careful attention to historical realities and linguistic accuracy.
- Jerome’s towering achievement was undoubtedly the Vulgate translation of the Old Testament (from Hebrew) and the New Testament (from Greek), which provided the standard text for medieval Latin Christianity.
- The final doctor, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), is by far the best known man of late antiquity because of his autobiographical *Confessions* (composed in 397/98). It is a remarkable composition, both as the first truly introspective analysis of a personal life in antiquity and as a sustained song of praise to God.
  - Born in North Africa of a pagan father and a devout Christian mother (Monica), Augustine was educated in rhetoric and lived what he later considered a dissolute life, siring an illegitimate son.
  - He converted to the dualistic religion called Manichaeism (a combination of Persian and Christian Gnostic systems), attracted by its ascetical appeal. He embraced its radical dualism between matter and spirit, which seemed to offer Augustine’s intellectual soul some liberation from his passion-driven body.

- Strongly influenced by Ambrose in Milan, Augustine converted to Christianity in 386 and, despite his protests that he was ill-prepared, was ordained a priest in the North African city of Hippo in 391; he was elected bishop in 395.
- After a lifetime of prodigious pastoral and literary effort, he died in 430 as the Vandals laid siege to the city of Hippo.
- If Ambrose provided the political posture and Jerome the biblical learning that shaped the subsequent West, Augustine was the supreme source of its intellectual vision.

### Augustine's Influence

- Augustine's *Confessions* is not only a classic account of conversion, but it also introduced a sense of interiority, of "self," that was distinctive. His remarkable self-awareness is revealed, as well, in his *Retractions*, written shortly before his death, in which he reviewed, criticized, and amended each of his voluminous writings.
- Augustine's polemical and doctrinal works provided fundamental guidance for subsequent theology.
  - His anti-Manichean works established a sense of the church and of the material order as positive. Despite his attraction to the ascetical life, he developed a principled defense of the created order: the goodness of the body, food, marriage, and children.
  - His work on the Trinity introduced a profound "psychological" model for understanding the inner life of the Christian God, suggesting that the path of introspection by one created in the image of God might plumb something of God's inner life.
  - His writings against Donatism and Pelagianism asserted, on one side, the importance of the church as an inclusive body of sinners and, on the other side, the necessity of divine grace for any human goodness. On both sides, he emphasized the frailty of humans and the sovereignty and mercy of God.

- Augustine’s sermons and biblical commentaries brought both literal and allegorical methods into creative harmony, while his tractate *On Christian Doctrine* provided a framework for all subsequent medieval interpretation of the Bible.
- His *City of God*, begun in 413 in response to the Visigoth sacking of Rome in 410 and the pagan charge that Christianity was responsible for the fall of the empire, provided a political theology that had a profound impact on medieval church and society. His vision of a society on earth that sought to embody and foreshadow the “city of God” in heaven was a vision that was distinctively Christian, owing little or nothing to classical antecedents.

### Suggested Reading

Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*.

Von Campenhausen (Hoffman, trans.), *The Fathers of the Latin Church*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How did the characteristic problems of Latin Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries differ from controversies in the East?
2. Discuss the distinctive political, literary, and theological contributions made respectively by the three doctors, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.

# Expansion beyond the Boundaries of Empire

## Lecture 21

In the last lecture, we saw that Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine provided a transition from the classical to the medieval world in the West, and we will shortly follow that transition to Christendom. But in this lecture, we note the changing realities that Christianity needed to address because of its engagement with a variety of languages and cultures on the fringes of and beyond the imperial world. This is especially important because of the tendency by some to think of Christianity as a European religion or its appearance in other lands as the result of European imperialism. As we will see, the truth is far different.

### Christianity outside the Empire

- One reason so little attention is paid to versions of early Christianity that emerged outside the empire is that the languages that tell their stories are known by relatively fewer professional scholars. Much of the substantial literature in these languages, especially in Syria and Egypt, remains untranslated and, therefore, unknown to generalists.
- Another reason is that the literature and material culture within the empire are more abundant, accessible, and appealing. By comparison, the German tribes left little evidence of their rapid passage across Europe, and while the architectural remains in Ethiopia are of great interest, they are sparse in comparison to those of the empire.
- Further, the forms of Christianity outside the empire quickly became “heretical” in one form or another and, thus, drifted away from “authorized” versions of the Christian story. It is an easily understandable temptation for the historian to tell the story of those who are our direct forebears.

### Expansion of Christianity in the East

- The expansion of Christianity in the East began early, was inevitably caught up in the doctrinal disputes within the empire, and

through translations of the Bible into new languages, spread both a Christian consciousness and a sense of cultural identity.

- In both Syria and Egypt, Christianity quickly expanded beyond the Hellenistic cities of Antioch and Alexandria.
  - By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Christianity flourished around Edessa in East Syria. Early translations of the Old and New Testaments were in the form of Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic); a complete translation of the Bible (the Peshitta) was completed by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. A great ecclesiastical literature also was generated in Syriac.
  - Similarly, in upper Egypt, evidence of Christianity in the Coptic language appears from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, with the New Testament appearing in several Coptic dialects and Gnostic writings, such as those found at Nag Hammadi, composed in Coptic.
- In Persia, Christianity made an appearance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and continued to flourish through some vicissitudes.
  - Under the Sassanid king Shapur II (310–380), Christians underwent a 40-year persecution; the ecclesiastical historian Sozomen reports that 16,000 were killed.
  - From 399 to 420, in contrast, Christians enjoyed royal favor. The Bible was read in Syriac, but some efforts were made to translate it into Middle Persian. From 420 to 450, there was again persecution.
  - Persia became the center of Nestorian Christianity, which emphasized the humanity rather than the divinity of Christ. Nestorianism eventually became the national church and the source of missionary activity along the trade routes to the Far East.
- In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Constantius II (the imperial sponsor of Arianism) sent Bishop Theophilus to the Sabaeen tribal people in Yemen. An Arabic translation of the New Testament appeared there in the 7<sup>th</sup>

century. But Christianity in Yemen was overrun by Islam, and the remaining Christians were Nestorian in their outlook.

- As we have already seen, the kingdom of Armenia became the first official Christian state in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Gregory the Illuminator converted King Tiridates III.
  - In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Mesrob established a school of Christian literature; in 433, an Armenian translation of the Bible based on the Greek was produced. A substantial Christian Armenian literature followed.
  - The Armenian church became monophysite in its doctrine, emphasizing the divinity of Christ and downplaying his humanity.
  - From the 6<sup>th</sup> century on, the Armenian church developed separately from the church of the empire.
- Christianity appeared in Ethiopia (Abyssinia) in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, where it quickly became deeply entrenched, independent, and idiosyncratic. Mixed with Jewish and Islamic elements, Ethiopian Christianity survives, and thrives, to the present.
  - Two men, Frumentius and Edesius, were sold as slaves from India to the court at Axum and converted King Ezana. The Ethiopians refused Constantius's offer to convert to Arianism. Instead, under the influence of the church in Alexandria, Ethiopian Christianity became decidedly monophysite.
  - In the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, a translation of the Bible into Ethiopic was carried out. And in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, evangelization took place among the Nubians (north Ethiopia) and the Nabataeans; a Nubian translation of the Bible dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

### Expansion in the West

- In the West, Christianity found adherents among the Germanic peoples as they were sweeping around and through the western part of the empire.



- The context of Christianity’s encounter with these tribes is the great migration of peoples that occurred over a period of several hundred years in a broad movement westward and southward, even into Africa. It is impossible to neatly sort out everything that happened because movements were simultaneous and overlapping, but we can make three framing comments.
  - Relations with the empire among the tribes varied from neutral to hostile to positive. By no means is it appropriate to think solely in terms of an invasion or conquest of the empire, although battles and victories were sometimes involved. More adequate is to think in terms of the Roman administration incapable of handling the floods of people who wanted some part in Rome.
  - Overall, the Germanic peoples demonstrated a strong tribal structure, with value given to loyalty and honesty, and a native pagan religion that was open to the supernatural. Clearly, some form of Christianity held a strong attraction for them.
  - Because of their rapid geographical movement, the Germanic peoples left behind little monumental or literary evidence of their Christian commitment. It was through Christianity that literacy came to these tribes. We can review, briefly and inadequately, the traces of five groups of tribes, whose presence placed extraordinary pressure on the western empire, finally overwhelming it completely.
- The Visigoths (western Goths) moved from the northern shore of the Black Sea along the Danube all the way to Spain.
  - They were evangelized by Ulfilas for almost 40 years (345–383) under the direction of the Arian emperor Constantius II. He was a Greek-speaking Cappadocian who learned the Gothic language, devised an alphabet for the language, and then translated the Bible into the “Gothic version,” of which is extant the so-called *Codex Argentum* (*Silver Codex*).

- The Visigoths located first in Thrace, then moved through Greece and Italy, and ended in southern Gaul and Spain (c. 419), where they mixed with the local populations.
- They remained Arian in their understanding of Christianity until the 7<sup>th</sup> century, regarding Christ as not fully divine.
- The Ostrogoths (eastern Goths), another German tribe, started in Pannonia—an area encompassing modern Poland—and migrated to Italy in 489, establishing an extensive and stable kingdom under Theodoric the Great (471–526).
  - The Ostrogothic kingdom lasted for some 60 years, until 553, and included Italy, Sicily, Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Provence—with ambitions to annex the Franks.
  - The Ostrogoths were also Arian and repressed Catholic Christians, imprisoning the philosopher Boethius (in 524–525) and Pope John I (526).
- The tribe called the Lombards also started in Pannonia, leaving there in 586 and conquering most of Italy, with the exception only of Ravenna, Rome, and part of the south.
  - The Lombards were mostly Arian and hostile to Catholics.
  - Eventually, they became Catholic, and the Lombard and Roman populations merged.
- The most aggressive tribe, the Vandals, started in Pannonia, devastated Gaul in 409, settled in Spain for a time, then crossed over to North Africa (429).
  - Under King Genseric (428–477), Roman power in North Africa was crushed, and a stable Vandal kingdom was established, lasting almost a century, until the reconquest of North Africa by the emperor Justinian in 524.
  - The Vandals also were Arian and intensely hostile to Catholics.

- Finally, the Germanic people called the Franks would eventually become the most dominant in Europe. They came from the lower Rhine in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Their king, Clovis I (481–511), ended Roman rule in Gaul in 486 and conquered all of middle Europe. Clovis converted to Catholicism in 496, and Catholicism thrived in the Frankish kingdom. It was through Frankish rule, as we shall see, that Europe eventually adopted the Catholic rather than the Arian form of Christianity.

### Expansion to the North

- During these centuries, Christianity also extended itself northward to embrace the Celts and Anglo-Saxon peoples.
- Britain was conquered by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The island was evangelized as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and developed in distinctive ways because of pagan influence. Only in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (590), when Pope Gregory the Great sent Saint Augustine and 50 other Benedictine monks to Britain, were relations with the Roman church firmly established.



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**Many legends surround Saint Patrick, but two authentic letters written by him are extant.**

- Rome never invaded Ireland, which became Christian through the mission of Saint Patrick (432–461). As a result of his efforts, Ireland became thoroughly Catholic and a major center of monastic life.
- Southern Scotland became Christian toward the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century through the work of the Briton Saint Ninian; the northern part of Scotland was evangelized by the Irish abbot Saint Columba (d. 597) over a period of 34 years.

### Conclusions about the Expansion

- Although the Roman Empire had attractions, Christianity succeeded in some places despite imperial power rather than because of it. This religion, in whatever form it appeared, clearly had the capacity to attract people on its own terms.
- The “catholicity” (universal character) of the church included an ever greater diversity of populations, languages, and cultural forms, and although the more familiar forms of Christianity developed within the framework of an imperial heritage, the forms of Christian expression from North Africa to China in the years 400 to 800 testify to a remarkable cultural adaptability.
- This survey confirms the point made earlier that what is called “orthodox” Christianity is, to a large extent, to be identified with imperial Christianity, while outside the empire, Christianity was most often Arian, Nestorian, or monophysite.
- The powerful movement of peoples in the West and the evangelization of those tribal peoples would form the future cultural context for the Latin church.

### Suggested Reading

Bihlmeyer (Mills, trans.), *Church History*, pp. 216–240.

Daniélou and Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years, (The Christian Centuries, vol. 1)*, pp. 281–375.

### Questions to Consider

1. What does the success of Christianity among new peoples say about the inherent attractiveness of the religion?
2. Discuss the reasons that “orthodoxy” tends to be coterminous with the boundaries of empire.

# The Court of Justinian and Byzantine Christianity

## Lecture 22

The emperor Justinian I (b. 483–d. 565) can be considered as pivotal a figure in the history of the Roman Empire as Constantine, both as the last of the “Roman” emperors and as the shaper of the Byzantine Empire. A man of astonishing energy and vision, he accomplished magnificent things in his effort to restore the Roman Empire to its former glory. Although his efforts fell short because of various adverse forces, his accomplishments were sufficient to secure a form of civilization that endured for another 1,000 years and, during the years of European “dark ages,” represented to visitors and admirers a vision of ancient beauty and new possibility.

### The Life of Justinian

- Justinian is rightly called “great” because his long life and distinctive gifts enabled him to shape both the present and the future.
- We have unusually good information on his life because of Procopius of Caesarea, a secretary to Justinian’s general Belisarius.
  - Procopius’s *History of the Wars* is an eyewitness account of both eastern and western conquests, as he accompanied the general.
  - His *On the Buildings* enumerates the great building projects of the emperor. And the *Secret History* is a not-always-flattering account of the life and times of the court, including an unfavorable portrait of Justinian’s consort, Theodora, and a riveting account of the ravages of the plague in 541–543.
- Born in Dalmatia (on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea) in 483, Justinian’s path to power came through his uncle and adoptive father, who became the emperor Justin in 518.
  - Justinian functioned as a counselor and even co-ruler with Justin between 518 and his own installation as emperor in 527.

In effect, through his uncle and on his own, Justinian exercised imperial power for 47 years.

- He married a much younger woman named Theodora in 525. Procopius claims she was a former prostitute, but given his general hostility toward her, the information must be taken with caution. She proved to be a formidable power at Justinian's side.
- Justinian faced severe difficulties from the start of his reign: the loss of the western empire, the threat of the Persian (Sassanid) Empire at his eastern borders, the revolt of city factions against him in 532, and being personally afflicted with the plague in 540. Yet his great energy and his ambition drove him to significant accomplishment.
- Justinian's ambition was nothing less than to restore the former greatness of the Roman Empire through conquest, organization, and adornment; his ambition was abetted by a willingness to exercise supreme rule and to concentrate all control in himself, as well as the personal traits that accompany political greatness.
  - On the positive side, Justinian was brilliant, courageous, tireless, tough, and bold. Examples include his marrying and sharing power with Theodora and his brilliant commissioning and efficient construction of the great church Hagia Sophia.
  - On the negative side, he was ruthless and cruel. Witness the slaughter of his foes in the Nika rebellion or the blinding of General Belisarius in later life out of jealousy.
  - His religious disposition was sincere and grew stronger as he aged; his commitment to Nicaean Christianity went hand in hand with the willingness to suppress other traditions.

### The Restoration of Roman Greatness

- By concentrating all power in himself yet making use of superb generals and administrators, Justinian went a long way at the political level toward restoring the greatness of Rome.

- Through the military genius of Belisarius, Justinian gained back territories that had been lost—especially in the west—through defeats at the hands of barbarian tribes.
  - The Persian army was first defeated at Dara in 530, but when the Roman troops were subsequently defeated, Justinian secured an “eternal peace” with the Sassanid Empire through a tribute in gold. The breaking of the peace by the Sassanid Empire in 540 led to more tribute, setting a practice followed by successors. Security of the borders for the eastern Byzantine Empire was won by tribute more than the prowess of armies.
  - In 533–534, Belisarius defeated the Vandals in North Africa and restored an African prefecture to the empire.
  - Between 533 and 554, in a protracted and difficult campaign, Belisarius fought the Ostrogoths in Italy and won back much of the Italian peninsula.
- Justinian buttressed the security of the empire through the use of mercenary armies and erected and interconnected fortifications throughout the empire, including the city of Constantinople, which he surrounded with a massive, impregnable wall.
- He dramatically increased the wealth of the court through the cultivation of agriculture, trade, and industry. Finally, he imposed taxes and collected them efficiently.
- Between 529 and 534, through the court official Tribonian, a legal genius, Justinian undertook the codification and revision of the vast and unwieldy body of Roman law that had accumulated over the centuries and shaped it into the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.
  - Consisting of the *Codex*, the *Digest*, the *Institutes*, and the *Novellae*, the Justinian law collection provides irreplaceable information about social processes and practices in the late Roman Empire.

- It formed the basis for Byzantine law; through its dissemination in Italy, it became the basis for European legal codes in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and, later still, passed into Russia.

### Patronage of the Arts and Architecture

- Justinian undertook massive building projects—beyond the building of walls and fortifications throughout the empire—especially in Constantinople.
  - The Church of the Holy Apostles and, above all, Hagia Sophia were all the more stunning for the speed with which they were constructed. Hagia Sophia was legitimately considered a wonder of the world.
  - The Great Palace, the gates of the city, and the massive cisterns built to ensure the city's safety from attack were all splendid examples of architecture and luxuriously adorned with art.



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Among the massive building projects undertaken by Justinian was the Hagia Sophia, then and now considered a wonder of the world.



- The churches of San Vitale and Sant'Apollinare in the imperial city of Ravenna in Italy, as well as the Great Palace in Constantinople, display magnificent frescoes and mosaics in honor of God and the imperial family.
- Under Justinian, the literary arts of history and poetry flourished. But the emperor's whim also led to the state closure of the neoplatonic Academy in Athens in 529. It had been a real and symbolic center of Greek culture for almost 1,000 years.
  - The Pandidakterion (sometimes called a “university”) of Constantinople was founded in 425 under Theodosius II; Justinian used its resources in his architectural and legal initiatives.
  - The school had 31 chairs for such subjects as arithmetic, geometry, law, medicine, music, and rhetoric; 16 chairs teaching in Greek; and 15 chairs teaching in Latin. It flourished as a shining example of higher learning until the 9<sup>th</sup> century and survived in diminished form for hundreds more years.

### **Efforts at Religious Unity**

- In religious matters, Justinian was a staunch defender of the Nicene Creed and made real if unsuccessful efforts to achieve unity within the empire in matters of doctrine.
- As part of his policy of embracing the western part of the empire and seeking to restore it as part of a unified state, Justinian recognized the primacy of the bishop of Rome in 528 and maintained the doctrinal definition of Chalcedon, reversing the monophysite position that had dominated the empire since 483.
- At the same time, he sought to placate the strong monophysite advocates in Constantinople—not least Theodora—tendencies that he also increasingly shared.
  - In the Theopaschite controversy (the term refers to a member of the Trinity suffering on the cross), Justinian adopted this

position by decree in 533 and secured the approval of Pope John II in 534.

- In the affair of the Three Chapters, Justinian sought to appease the monophysite party by condemning, in 543, three 4<sup>th</sup>-century writers as guilty of Nestorianism. The West and Pope Vigilius at first refused to accept this condemnation, but through isolation and privation, Justinian pressured the pope to do so. The Second Council of Constantinople in 553 condemned the Three Chapters and, by implication, Vigilius, though it continued to declare communion with Rome.
- These incidents reveal a growing chasm between the western (Chalcedonian) and eastern (monophysite) churches. We shall see how the rift will grow ever greater until a final schism occurs in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.
- Justinian's strong patronage of Christianity had as its dark side the active suppression of other religious traditions.
  - His *Codex* proscribed paganism, even in private life, and the remnants of pagan observance were actively suppressed.
  - The civil rights of Jews were further restricted, and religious privileges were threatened. Adding insult to injury, Justinian wanted Jews to read Torah in the Greek Septuagint translation rather than in Hebrew!
  - Against the Samaritans, Justinian leveled severe edicts because they resisted conversion to Christianity, and many Manichaeans were persecuted and killed during his reign.
- Such interventions reveal a situation that would later be termed caesaropapism, in which the state exercises total authority over the church.
  - The Second Council of Constantinople in 553 declared that the church could affirm nothing contrary to the emperor's will.

- The other side of the coin was that the emperor was the supreme benefactor of the church, enacting its decisions (when it agreed with him) and, as the *Codex* indicates, providing legal support for ecclesiastical policies.

### **Mixed Results of Justinian's Reign**

- As remarkable as the reign of Justinian was, the results of his efforts were mixed.
  - Certainly, his goal of restoration fell short: The expanded empire shrank back in size after brief success in the west. Further, the policies of Justinian set some bad precedents.
    - The system of taxation was efficient but also oppressive and, ultimately, not a real economic plan; as conquests failed and crops were poor, the resources of the empire were steadily drained over time.
    - The increased use of mercenaries in the imperial army made the empire reliant on others and was incredibly expensive, another drain on the imperial treasury.
    - Finally, the policy of pacifying enemies through tribute was shortsighted: It won temporary relief but could not be a permanent solution.
  - Even more devastating was the blow struck at the empire and Justinian himself by the “Plague of Justinian,” a health disaster that was unparalleled until the Black Death hit Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The plague was probably carried by rats on grain boats from Egypt. Its height in Constantinople occurred in 541–543, when it killed, according to Procopius, as many as 5,000 people a day.
  - Despite these negatives, Justinian's lengthy and brilliant reign established an empire of great stability and endurance, within which the Christian religion continued to play a critical role to the end.

## Suggested Reading

Diehl (Walford, trans.), *Byzantium*.

Rosen, *Justinian's Flea*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In light of Justinian's rule, discuss the advantages and disadvantages to Christianity of having imperial protection and patronage.
2. Identify the ways that the Byzantine Empire continued the traditions of Rome and the ways in which it was something new.

# The Rise of Islam and the Threat of Iconoclasm

## Lecture 23

In 540, Justinian had accomplished what he thought was an “eternal peace” with the Persian Empire through the payment of tribute. But the peace won by Justinian was illusory: There was constant war with the Persians from 572 to 591, and the Byzantine Empire progressively found its earlier gains taken away. Between 614 and 625, the Persians took over Damascus and Jerusalem, overran Egypt, occupied the Hellespont, and attacked Constantinople itself. The Byzantine army decisively defeated the Persians at Nineveh in 627. But a new religious and political challenge arose that would eventually conquer Byzantium—the religion of Islam.

### The Emergence and Spread of Islam

- The prophet Muhammad was born in 570 C.E., had his initial vision on Mt. Hira in 610, fled to Medina in the Hijra in 622, and died in 632.
  - From the time of his first vision, the prophet recited aloud in Arabic the words he received by dictation from Allah; these words, organized into *suras* (“chapters”), were posthumously gathered into the Qur’ān.
  - The confession of Islam that “Allah is One and Muhammad is his Prophet” is simple and compelling; the most grievous offense against *islama* (“submission”) is to *shirk*, to fall away into idolatry, by “giving partners to Allah.” In the time of its origin and today, part of the appeal of Islam is its utter simplicity.
  - Although the Qur’ān builds on—and recasts—the biblical story and expresses admiration for Jews and Christians as “people of the book,” Muslims consider both Jews and Christians to have given partners to Allah and, therefore, to be in need of submission.

- The Qur'ān provides a vision for the ordering of society, with legislation concerning every aspect of life; subsequent generations developed its statements and the *hadith* (example) of the prophet into a system of law (*shariah*) governing an Islamic state.
- Unlike the earliest stages of Christianity, therefore, Islam was, from the beginning, prepared to provide a religious ordering to society as a whole.
- A tradition holds that the prophet, before his death, issued a summons to the other empires of the world, demanding their submission to Allah. Whether or not the tradition is apocryphal, the story indicates that Islam saw a path of world dominance as grounded from the first in the ministry of the prophet.
- After the prophet's death, Arab armies spread Islam through a remarkable swath of conquest.
  - In 633, they attacked Persia. In the same year, the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria were lost to Christianity because of Islamic conquest.
  - Between 634 and 637, Syria, Persia, Egypt, and Gaza were conquered. In 639, the kingdom of Armenia was attacked and, in 694, defeated.
  - Under this onslaught, Persia sought the aid of China in 638, but by 641, it fell to the Arab army. Once the East was secured, the Arab forces turned westward. In rapid order, Arab armies conquered Tripoli, Cyprus, North Africa, Carthage, Algeria, and Spain.
  - In 655, the Arab navies defeated the Byzantine fleet, and in 693, the Arab army defeated the Byzantine army at Sebastopolis in Cilicia.



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**Immediately after the prophet Muhammad's death, Arab armies began the spread of Islam through conquest; their progress was halted in the West at the Battle of Tours by Charles Martel, leader of the Franks and grandfather of Charlemagne.**

- By 715, Islam extended from the Pyrenees to China, and its ambitions did not stop there; its eyes were on the complete subordination of Europe to the rule of Allah. In 716, Lisbon was conquered by Muslim troops, and in 720, the Muslim army reached France (Narbonne).
- In the West, only Charles Martel, leader of the Franks and grandfather of Charlemagne, was able to stop the Muslim progress at the Battle of Tours (or Poitiers) in 732. In the East, this aggressive religious and political threat hovered at the edge of the Byzantine Empire until the eventual collapse of Constantinople in 1453.

### **Byzantine Christianity**

- In the context of the political and religious pressure exerted by Persian and Muslim incursions, Byzantine Christianity continued its struggle to seek unity within a highly fractious context shaped by continuing adherence to the Christological position known as

monophysitism, the teaching that emphasized the divine in Christ to the virtual elimination of the human.

- The emperor Heraclius (610–641) met with monophysite leaders in an effort to construct a compromise understanding of Christ.
  - They declared that although there were two natures in Christ (as Chalcedon had defined), there was but a “single energy” (*mia energeia*). This proposal was popular with many, including Cyrus of Alexandria, but was rejected by Sophronius of Jerusalem.
  - Pope Honorius was consulted in 634; he responded with the idea of “one will” (*monon thelema*), from which the term monothelism derives.
  - The patriarch of Constantinople, Sergius, then composed a work called the *Ecthesis*, advancing the monothelism understanding of Christ: Only the divine volition was active in Christ. The implication is that any real human obedience of Jesus directed toward God is eliminated.
  - A dogmatic edict in support of this understanding was issued by the emperor Heraclius in 638 and was confirmed by two synods in Constantinople in 638 and 639.
- The declaration was staunchly opposed by three successive popes, who held to the Chalcedonian understanding of Christ: two natures in one person, with the implication that Christ as human had a real human will. But the major opponent to the monothelite variation of monophysitism was the theologian Maximus the Confessor (580–662).
  - An imperial secretary under Heraclius, Maximus abandoned the court and became a monk in 614. In the Persian invasion of 626, he fled to Africa, ending in Carthage.



- In 640, he wrote several tractates against the monophysites and monothelites, arguing that Christ had a full humanity, including a human will.
- He secured the condemnation of monotheletism at several African synods and helped secure its condemnation by the Lateran Council (in Rome) of 649.
- In 653, Maximus was forcibly brought to Constantinople, where the emperor Constans II used pressure (and even torture) on the theologian and finally exiled him to the Caucasus, where he shortly died as a result of what he had suffered.
- The Third Council of Chalcedon in 680–681 defined orthodoxy in terms of two wills in Christ (the divine will and the human will), corresponding to the two distinct but united natures in one person. Monotheletism was condemned.
- The duration and fierceness of the Christological battle in Byzantium indicates how fragile any agreement or unity was in this form of Christianity that placed such an emphasis on right teaching (orthodoxy).

### **The Battle over Iconoclasm**

- An even more divisive controversy arose in Byzantine Christianity some 40 years later that caused even deeper divisions, namely, the battle over iconoclasm (meaning the breaking of icons or images), which raged for more than a century (725–842).
- Icons are painted representations of Christ, Mary, or other saints that had traditionally been used by the faithful in prayer, both liturgically and privately. The use of such images affirms in a fairly direct fashion the deep convictions of orthodoxy concerning the humanity of Jesus and the sanctification of the material order by the divine. Because God entered into humanity, the artistic depiction of Jesus as human can symbolize the presence of the divine.

- Despite the popularity of icons, especially among monks, there were several factors in Byzantine Christianity that were hostile to their use.
  - Monophysitism (and its nephew monotheletism) diminished an appreciation of the humanity of Jesus in favor of his divinity; for those holding such a view, an artistic representation of the “son of God” might appear to be close to pagan idolatry.
  - In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a Byzantine sect called the Paulicians held a radically dualistic view of reality and denied the Incarnation altogether—what was important were the teachings of Christ. Material things are evil; only Spirit is good.
  - A final factor was the insistence of Islam on what might be termed a “naked monotheism”—Allah is singular and can have no partners—and its refusal of all artistic representations of Allah.
  - These perspectives combined as an immovable object (icon veneration) and irresistible force (resistance to idols), and Byzantine Christianity was thrown into its final theological paroxysm.
- The controversy began when the emperor Leo the Isaurian (717–741) argued that the practice of venerating icons kept both Jews and Muslims from converting to Christianity and, in 726, issued an edict forbidding the use of icons as idols and ordering their destruction.
  - Germanus, the patriarch of Constantinople, appealed to Rome to settle the issue but was deposed by Leo in 730.
  - Monks throughout the empire supported the use of icons and were, in turn, persecuted by the emperor.
  - Pope Gregory III held two synods in Rome in 731, condemning the followers of Leo and his iconoclastic program.

- In 753, the son of Leo, Constantine V, intensified the imperial rejection of icons, identifying them as idols and aligning them with both monophysitism and Nestorianism.
  - Tarasius, the patriarch of Constantinople, appealed to Pope Hadrian I, and under Leo IV (775–780), the imperial policy was reversed.
  - In 787, the seventh ecumenical council (the Second Council of Nicaea) condemned iconoclasm and carefully defined the proper degrees of veneration due icons.
- Despite these decisions, iconoclasm remained a strong movement, especially in the army, and in 814, a second iconoclastic controversy erupted under Leo V, “the Armenian” (775–820), involving the direct and violent persecution of monks who maintained devotion to icons and the installation of patriarchs who were iconoclastic.
- The persecution continued until the death of the iconoclastic emperor Theophilus in 842. His widow, acting as regent, installed Methodius as the patriarch and ended the iconoclastic terror.
- Although iconoclasm was a distinctively Eastern issue, it had an indirect and significant impact on Western Christianity.
  - A mistranslation of the acts of the Second Council of Nicaea led Frankish bishops to think that the “worship” of idols had been sanctioned, and they eventually condemned the council at the synod of Frankfurt in 794 and at a meeting of bishops in Paris in 828.
  - Only the work of several Latin theologians and the steadfast stance of the papacy led to a gradual acceptance of the Second Council of Nicaea in the West.
  - This misunderstanding, however, is usually taken to be one of the decisive elements in the eventual schism between Greek and Latin Christianity—along with the object lesson learned from the rampant caesaropapism revealed in the iconoclasm controversy.

## Suggested Reading

Barber, *Figure and Likeness*.

Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways Islam both threatened the Byzantine Empire politically and influenced it religiously.
2. How does the iconoclastic controversy reveal the deep tensions within Byzantine Christianity?

# Eastern Orthodoxy—Holy Tradition

## Lecture 24

**A**fter centuries of religious struggle, Christianity in the Byzantine Empire settled into a long period of stability. The conflict over the nature of Christ ended in a state of resolution fairly close to the Chalcedonian position, and the violent turmoil unleashed by iconoclasm finally ceased. The pressure exerted by external enemies made the Byzantine Empire more compact and inward-turning. Constantinople remained the greatest city in the world, but the age of imperial aggression and expansion was over. Eastern Orthodoxy, furthermore, experienced no great intellectual crises, such as the Reformation and Enlightenment. This lecture considers the expansion of Orthodoxy to the Slavic peoples and three signal elements in the Orthodox tradition: the liturgy, the role of monasticism, and spirituality.

### The Mission to the Slavic Peoples

- An indication of the internal vibrancy of Christianity in the Byzantine Empire was the mission to the Slavic peoples in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.
- The mission was initiated by two brothers from Thessalonika, Cyril (826–869)—earlier known as Constantine—and his older sibling, Methodius (815–885). They are rightly designated as “the apostles of the Slavs.”
  - They were both highly educated, and both worked as part of the vast and effective civil service established by Justinian that was a hallmark of the late empire; both then became monks but remained at the disposal of the emperor.
  - In 860–861, the brothers went on a diplomatic mission to the Khazars (north of the Caucasus) and, while there, learned the Slavic language, which as yet existed only in speech, not in writing.

- In 862, the emperor Michael III sent them to Moravia (a territory east of the present Czech Republic), where they began to teach in the vernacular they had earlier learned.
- Cyril then invented the Glagolitic alphabet (Cyrillic), which became the medium for the translation of the Bible into Slavic and the development of a substantial ecclesiastical literature in Slavic.
- Christianity took a firm hold in the Ukraine and Russia through the grand prince Vladimir (d. 1015), who held sway over those lands. He came to the assistance of the emperor Basil II and then married into the imperial family by taking Basil’s sister as his wife in 989. Adopting Orthodoxy, he subsequently imposed it on the territories he had conquered.
- Almost immediately after the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453, the Russian city of Moscow was declared by its propagandists to be the “New Rome” or the “Third Rome,” in the manner that Constantinople had inherited the mantle of the first Rome.
  - Subsequent history shows how closely the relationship of the Russian patriarch in Moscow and the czars (“Caesars”) mimed the dance of caesaropapism characteristic of Constantinople. Indeed, as the title of a recent study of Stalin suggests (*The Court of the Red Czar*), such influence continued even after the fall of the Russian Empire.
  - Nevertheless, Orthodoxy was able both to survive and thrive in this new geographical context and escaped eradication by Islam.

### The Liturgy of the Orthodox Tradition

- Orthodoxy in Byzantium also had great internal energy. The most visible and, in many ways, the most impressive expression of faith within the Orthodox tradition is its public worship, or liturgy. Through the centuries, the liturgy has provided a powerful attraction to this version of Christianity.

- The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom (from the 5<sup>th</sup> century) is the most widely used form of worship in the Byzantine tradition.
- There are other Eastern liturgies besides those originating within the empire, all with claims to considerable antiquity.
  - The Chaldean (or Assyrian) rite is celebrated in Syriac among certain Christians of the Middle East.
  - The Armenian rite is used among Christians in the country of Georgia.
  - The Maronites of Lebanon, Cyprus, Syria, and Israel celebrate a distinct form of the liturgy in Syriac.
- In addition to the Liturgy of John Chrysostom, two other forms of worship are celebrated within Orthodoxy.
  - The Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great (from the 4<sup>th</sup> century) is used on the five Sundays of Lent, the saint's feast day, and some other occasions.
  - The Divine Liturgy of Saint James of Jerusalem is apocryphally ascribed to the 1<sup>st</sup> century but probably comes from the 4<sup>th</sup> and is also used rarely.
- Orthodox worship is kinesthetic and aesthetic in both a dramatically and theologically powerful manner. Although the basic elements of the Eucharistic celebration are the same as in the Roman liturgy, there is no mistaking the distinctively grand style of the Orthodox version, even in the smallest and poorest church.
  - The wearing of rich and ornate vestments, the singing of chants, the liberal use of incense and candles, the constant movement of ministers with processions and prostrations—all provide a wealth of sensory impressions. If Protestant worship sometimes seems mainly a matter of the head and if Catholic liturgy seems often a matter of the heart, Orthodox liturgy is unmistakably a matter of the body.

- In addition to movement, the liturgy makes dramatic use of vision through the iconostasis—the half-wall adorned with icons—that distinguishes the sanctuary (the holiest area) from the nave (the place of the people). Ministers move in and out through the three doors. The arrangement of the icons on the wall itself has symbolic significance.
- In the Orthodox liturgy, the “construction of the world” found in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation finds dramatic expression.
  - Just as the sanctuary and nave are separated yet linked by the iconostasis, so is worship understood as a human (visible) participation in the (unseen) worship of God in heaven by the angels and saints. Worship is a glimpse of the “truth” of sanctified human existence: that it participates in the divine life.
  - In distinctive chants such as the Trisagion—“Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy immortal One, Have Mercy on Us!”—accompanied by bows and ritual gestures, we find a genuine expression of “the numinous” in religion.

### The Role of Monasticism in Orthodoxy

- Another distinctive characteristic of Orthodoxy is the critical role played by monasticism. We have already traced the origins of this distinctive manifestation of Christianity and will shortly consider its importance in the West. But in Orthodoxy above all, monasticism occupies a central place.
- Because ordinary clergy (priests) are not required to be celibate, their lives are closer to those of the laity; they are expected to exercise pastoral and liturgical roles but not roles of intellectual leadership. This role falls to monks.
  - In the East, monasticism takes three forms: fully coenobitic (life completely together), semi-eremitical (monks live separately but share much of their liturgical lives), and eremitical (life alone).



- All monks are pledged to the “angelic life,” meaning that they make vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience. Their life apart enables them to cultivate both scholarship and a life of prayer in a manner unavailable to the local clergy caught up in family and pastoral concerns.
- Because ordination to bishop or patriarch requires celibacy, for the most part, leaders are drawn from the ranks of monks; hence, the tradition carries a strongly monastic character. Virtually all the great theologians and spiritual writers of the Byzantine period were monks.
- An impression of the popularity and prestige of monasticism can be gained from the splendor of certain important centers and from the sheer number of monastic sites in the Byzantine Empire.
  - Among the most renowned monastic sites are Saint Catherine on Mt. Sinai, founded by Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and Mt.



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One of the most important manuscripts in the history of Christianity, dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was discovered at the monastery of Saint Catherine in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Athos (“the Holy Mountain”) in Macedonia, founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, which by itself contains some 20 monasteries and their dependencies.

- Such monastic “cities” concentrate populations dedicated to the ascetical life and prayer. At the same time, they are repositories of remarkable artworks gathered over the centuries, including murals, icons, and precious manuscripts.
- Even today, the lands of the former Byzantine Empire contain a remarkable number of surviving monasteries: 53 in Greece, 22 in Serbia, 8 in Cyprus, 45 in Moldova, 150 in Bulgaria, 363 in Russia, and 520 in Romania.

### Hesychasm

- Especially within the context of monasticism, Orthodoxy developed a distinctive form of mysticism called hesychasm (“silence” or “quiet”) that was passed from generation to generation through a series of great teachers.
- An otherwise unknown author named Dionysius the Aereopagite (in such works as *Mystical Theology*) constructed a conceptual framework that influenced mystics in the East and West.
  - He envisaged reality as a great chain of being that links all existent things, both visible and invisible. Within that chain of beings, the “God-man” Jesus represents the full offer of the divine to humans, and the supreme gift of Christ is *theosis*, a “divinization” of humans that prepares them for God’s glory.
  - The ultimate “radiance” (“glory”) of God is a “dark cloud” that cannot be grasped with the mind but can be attained/touched through nonrational prayer (“silence”).
- Two monks of the 7<sup>th</sup> century were of great importance for solidifying this mystical tradition.
  - Maximus the Confessor (580–662) was, as we saw, a defender of Chalcedon against monotheletism, who died as a

confessor to the Orthodox faith. His spiritual writings combine theological rigor and profound piety.

- John Climacus (579–649) was abbot of the monastery at Saint Catherine, whose name derives from his writing, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (*klimachos* = “of ascent”). He describes 30 steps of discipleship, the final 4 of which introduce the “stillness/quietness” (*hesychia*) that gives the tradition its name: The highest form of prayer is silent and involves “breathing” the name of Jesus. His work was most widely read by other monks.
- The tradition continued in two other influential monastic writers centuries later.
  - Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) left the imperial service to become a monk and then abbot at the monastery of Saint Mamas; in such works as the *Catecheses*, his vivid writing on the vision of the divine light, on Christ, and on the Eucharist earned his title, making him the equal of the great Gregory of Nazianzus.
  - Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) provided an argument for hesychasm against the philosopher Barlaam: It is not rational argument but mystical experience that leads to the truth of God, and this experience is possible because of the divine-human connection established by the Incarnation and *theosis*. In *The Triads*, Gregory elaborates more fully the techniques of hesychasm, especially the role of the body and the control of breathing.
- The practice of hesychasm passed also into Slavic Orthodoxy and continues to be practiced within the monastic tradition.

### Suggested Reading

Ware, *The Orthodox Church*.

Wells, *Sailing from Byzantium*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Consider the Orthodox tradition in light of the assertion that it did not experience, as did the West, the Reformation or Enlightenment, which gave rise to critical thought concerning religion.
2. How does Orthodox liturgy and mysticism, each in its own fashion, give expression to a coherent vision of reality as suffused with the divine presence?

# From Roman Empire to Holy Roman Empire

## Lecture 25

This lecture marks the second great transition in our historical survey of Christianity; here, we move from imperial Christianity to medieval Christianity, from the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire. For the most part, this section of the course turns from the East to the West, where we find the Latin language instead of Greek, the pope instead of patriarchs, tribal kings in place of an emperor, and instead of cultural continuity, cultural disruption and creative adaptation. It was in the medieval period, roughly between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, that Christianity established itself across all of Europe.

### Political Context: 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries

- Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the western part of the Roman Empire went through a process of rapid disintegration and slow reintegration.
- We have already seen the disintegration in broad terms when we traced the movements of tribal peoples westward and southward over the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, Vandals, Burgundians, and Lombards.
  - In the face of these assaults—some friendly, some not—the former imperial structures in the west (e.g., Gaul, Spain, Italy) were battered and finally broken.
  - The temporary recovery by Constantinople of lands in Africa and Italy under Justinian (in the 6<sup>th</sup> century) did not last; only the area around Ravenna remained securely in Byzantine control.
  - Under the assault of Persia and Islam, as we have seen, the Byzantine Empire ceded control of the west—in fact if not in theory—in order to survive in its own diminished domain.

- The process of reintegration and stabilization began with the emergence of the Germanic people known as the Franks as the dominant force in Europe. As we trace these first steps, it is good to remember that as so often with historical periods of great importance and considerable obscurity, we are substantially dependent on a single main source, Gregory of Tours (539–594) in his *History of the Franks*, supplemented by the *Chronicle of Fredegar* (588–641).

### The Franks

- The German tribe known as the Franks—distinguished as Salian and Ripuarian in the earliest sources, though the geographic distinction is not entirely clear—appeared between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- Beginning in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Frankish Merovingian dynasty—named for King Merovich (d. 457)—began to conquer and consolidate ever larger portions of Europe under a single rule.
- A series of strong Frankish leaders helped to secure both the political and religious stability of the territories situated in and around ancient Gaul. Among these was Clovis I (466–511), who became king of the Salian Franks in 481 and conquered the Ripuarian Franks and the Thuringians.
  - Around 496, Clovis converted to Catholicism—a decision that proved fateful for the entire future of Europe—and in 507, he overthrew the Arian king Alaric II. To appreciate the importance here, remember that the German tribespeople who had converted to Christianity had been almost entirely Arian in their understanding of Christ: He was more human than divine.
  - Clovis understandably gained the aid of Catholic bishops, as well as the agents of Rome (Byzantium); in 508, the Byzantine emperor Anastasius recognized his status and declared Clovis to be a Roman proconsul. This is a bit like being designated a congressman when one has already been elected president.

- Clovis sponsored the establishment of the Salian (or Salic) Law in 507 or 511; written in Latin, it provided the basis for a legal code for the Frankish kingdom.
- More than a century later, Charles Martel (690–741), nicknamed “the Hammer,” the son of the Merovingian King Pepin II by a concubine and himself destined to be the grandfather of Charlemagne, fought for control of the Merovingian kingdom from 714 to 718.
  - Charles was recognized by the Byzantine emperor Leo III as *princeps Francorum* (“ruler of the Franks”) in 723. This was a considerably higher recognition than that accorded Clovis.
  - His greatest historical significance lies in his monumental victory over the Arab army at Tours (or Poitiers) in 732, just when the Arabs seemed destined to conquer all of Europe. Charles stopped the northern expansion of Islam utterly; courted by the papacy, he was the protector of such missionaries as Boniface and Willibrord.
- Pepin III (“the Short,” 714–768) was the son of Charles Martel and the father of Charlemagne. He became sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom in 747. Pope Zacharias approved his election as king in 751 and then repeated the coronation ceremony in 754. Note the regular and increased mutual courtship of the Germanic rulers and the papacy.
  - Pepin III was another strong military leader. His armies conquered Saxony, Aquitaine, and Alemannia.
  - In fulfillment of a promise made to the pope, Pepin won back Ravenna, the last outpost of the Byzantine Empire in Italy and was named “protector of the Holy See.” He increased the prestige of the Roman church by siding with monks—allyed with Rome—against aristocratic bishops.

- “Popes and Franks” may sound like ballpark food, but the phrase sums up precisely the two power sources that worked to create the catholic world of the Middle Ages.

### Political Context: 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries

- The second stage in the medieval political context begins with Charles the Great (Charlemagne, 742–814), the son of Pepin III, who is one of the most significant figures in the political and religious history of the West.
- Charles was anointed as king of the Franks by Pope Stephen III in 754 and became sole heir of the kingdom in 771. He immediately engaged in a path of conquest and consolidation under his authority.
  - Between 771 and 799, he conquered Lombardy, the Saxons, Bavaria, the Avars, Pannonia, and Italy.
  - In 778, he crossed the Pyrenees to conquer Spain, which was in the hands of the Muslims, and was defeated at the Battle of Roncevalles. Thirteen years later, in 801, he conquered Barcelona and made it the center of the Spanish March (a buffer zone separating the Muslim and Frankish kingdoms).
- In view of these triumphs, Pope Leo III, on Christmas Day, 800, in the city of Rome, crowned Charlemagne as emperor. It was an extraordinary act, and its implication (that the Franks were the approved continuation of the Roman heritage) was not appreciated by the Byzantines. Eventually, the emperor of the West would claim the formal title of Holy Roman Emperor.



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**Charlemagne's military triumphs established his authority firmly over the West; he was crowned emperor in the year 800 by Pope Leo III in Rome.**



- In addition to these military conquests, Charlemagne solidified the new Roman Empire by attention to cultural realities in what is called the “Carolingian renaissance.”
  - Politically, he extended his power and influence through the use of personal delegates and the issuing of laws from his capital city of Aachen, the westernmost city of present-day Germany.
  - Educationally, Charlemagne established a palace school that sponsored an educational reform and drew such scholars as the great Alcuin. This was the real beginning of “chapter schools” throughout Europe, where young men could be prepared for royal and religious service.
  - Religiously, Charlemagne reciprocated the patronage of the papacy by a thorough commitment to Catholicism. He sponsored ecclesiastical reforms, supported the Latin Mass (Eucharist), and published canon law.
  - In short, the new emperor of the West took over all the privileges and responsibilities of patronage as it was practiced by the first emperors of Rome.

### **Manorialism and Feudalism**

- Within this new political framework, a new form of society emerged that has been called “feudalism” or “manorialism.” This form persisted from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe.
- The term “manorialism” refers to the character of an agriculturally based economy in which the basic unit was the *demesne* (estate or property).
  - The system possibly had roots in the ancient Roman villas. The manor was the main building at the center of fields that produced crops for the occupants and for sale.
  - The “lord” of the manor had complete authority within and over the estate, supervising the labor and collecting from the crops and livestock of those in direct dependence on

the master (serfs) or those who were indirectly his clients (peasants/knives).

- Technology from the classical period was adapted and developed within this agricultural setting, including the heavy plough, horse collar, horseshoes, water mill, tide mill, winepress, grindstone, artesian well, heating through ducts, chimneys, and wheelbarrows.
- In the towns and small cities of the early medieval period, guilds eventually formed for masons, carpenters, painters, clothing makers, tanners, bakers, shoemakers, apothecaries, and candlemakers. Exquisite art was practiced in brass, silver, gold, stone, and wood.
- The larger societal system called “feudalism” extended the pattern of manorialism to the level of the kingdom: as the serf was to the master, so was the vassal (the individual landowner and master) to his lord (the king).
- The king served as patron and master, supporting individual landowners and offering them protection from external and internal threats through his royal resources. The vassals owed the king payment (*feudal* = “fee”) either in tribute or, in times of trouble, the warriors from their estates to form the king’s army.
  - A major technological development, the stirrup, enabled the development of metal-armored and heavily weaponed knights. Small arms, such as the sword, bow, and lances, were buttressed by heavier weapons, such as the crossbow, the catapult, and other siege engines.
  - The knight and his entourage of squires, as well as foot soldiers, formed the “fee” of the vassal to a king as an expression of fealty (loyalty).
  - The greater the king, the greater the number of vassal knights whose fealty he could command.

- The church also had its “lords of manors” in the form of abbots in monasteries and bishops in cathedral towns—who invariably controlled and were supported by precisely the same sort of reciprocal economic relationship with those who tilled their land and watched their herds and flocks.
  - On the positive side, the monasteries and dioceses functioned effectively within the same economic system, often playing a key role in the prosperity of a locale, because monasteries were typically models of efficient farming and small crafts.
  - On the negative side, the question must arise as to whom the abbot or the bishop owed ultimate fealty: the king or the pope. Many of the conflicts in medieval European Christianity played themselves out within the tension created by these disparate loyalties.

### Suggested Reading

Bloch (Manyon, trans.), *Feudal Society*.

Fichtenau (Munz, trans.), *The Carolingian Empire*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How did the alliance between the papacy and the Frankish kings consolidate a new political order in Europe?
2. In what ways did the new feudal society in Europe mirror the patronage system of the ancient Roman Empire?

# Benedictine Monasticism and Its Influence

## Lecture 26

In the last lecture, we saw the importance of the Frankish conquests and the consolidation of Frankish rule under Charlemagne as the Holy Roman Emperor, which involved, as well, a commitment to Catholicism and to the bishop of Rome. We have also sketched the basics of feudalism as the political-cultural context for medieval Christianity, and we saw briefly how monasteries both fit and caused some tension within this cultural system. Monasteries established cells of Christian life throughout Europe that contributed to the agricultural economy and served as examples of Augustine's "city of God." In this lecture, we'll look in particular at Benedictine monasticism, highlighting the key role it played in shaping medieval Christianity in the West.

### Benedict of Nursia

- The true founder of Western monasticism is Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 550), often called the patriarch of Western monasticism because of the widespread influence of his Rule for monks (also called the Benedictine Rule).
- The few details of Benedict's life are known from the brief biography provided shortly after his death by Pope Gregory I (*Dialogues* 2). The account is highly laudatory and contains a considerable amount of legendary material. Gregory sought to portray Benedict and his sister Scholastica along the lines of biblical saints.
  - Born in Nursia in the region of Umbria, Benedict was educated in Rome, but for reasons unknown—



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**The great achievement of Benedict, his Rule for monks, sought to describe a life that anyone of good will could live; his work represents a "school of the Lord's service" for what we might call "beginners" to the religious life.**

quite possibly simply the desire for holiness—he left secular life to live as a hermit in Subiaco (about 40 miles east of Rome). He was there joined by followers and founded a community, possibly even a group of monasteries.

- He moved with a small group of disciples to Monte Cassino (midway between Rome and Naples) and founded the monastery that became the mother house for all Benedictines, surviving repeated destructions and rebuildings. The most recent reconstruction followed the Allied bombing in World War II to dislodge Nazi soldiers, who used the monastery as a mountain fortress.
- Benedict's great achievement was his Rule for monks, composed circa 540 in lapidary Latin. It is widely and properly regarded as one of the most impressive constitutions ever composed, providing a version of the monastic life possible to very ordinary people. Earlier founders seemed to envisage monks seeking a harsh and demanding regimen. Benedict sought to construct a life that anyone with good will could live.
  - Benedict did not make any claim to originality: His rule freely acknowledges his debt to such earlier monastic teachers as Basil, Augustine, and above all, John Cassian. In his epilogue, he recommends these authors as spiritual reading.
  - Benedict's modesty makes more puzzling the lack of reference to a monastic rule on which he clearly relied, the anonymous *Rule of the Master*. We know nothing about the origin of this longer rule: Was it a draft for Benedict's Rule, or was his Rule an epitome? Whatever the literary relationship between the two, Benedict's genius is shown in the brevity and clarity of his version.

### The Benedictine Rule

- The prologue sets the framework of the Rule, summoning the disciple to “hearken to the words of the master” and return to God by way of obedience after having turned away from God by disobedience.

- Obedience to the Rule and the abbot (the head of the monastery) structures the entire way of life. Benedict closely connects disobedience to pride and obedience to humility, and he envisages the return to God as an ascent (paradoxically) up a ladder of increased degrees of humility.
- The monk does not seek to do his own will but God's. Effectively, though, God's will is mediated by the Rule and the abbot.
- Benedict explicitly embraces the “common life” (*coenobites*) precisely because it provides a “school of the Lord's service” for beginners. He admires hermits because they are heroic, but his beginners are not ready for that. In contrast, he despises those who call themselves monks but only wander about in aimless pursuits.
  - Benedict's Rule does not demand severe physical asceticism. In fact, in matters of clothing, food, and drink, his monks were probably more comfortable—because more secure—than the majority of peasants in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.
  - The asceticism demanded by the Rule is precisely that of life together, avoiding murmuring and cultivating charity in the daily grind of life lived in a face-to-face community.
  - The distinctive Benedictine vows, besides obedience, are stability (to live in one community until death) and *conversatio morum*, a continual “conversion of life” in the context of community.
  - Benedictines do not take a vow of poverty even though “a monk shall call nothing at all his own”; instead, they have a community of possessions, all of which are subject to the disposition of the abbot. Once more, the emphasis is on sharing rather than on heroic self-dispossession.
  - The monk's life of celibacy is not the subject of a vow but a corollary of a single-gender community. Benedict's sister

Scholastica was abbess over female Benedictines, who also lived by the Rule.

- The system of governance for the monastery outlined by Benedict is widely admired for its careful checks and balances.
  - The abbot is elected by the monks and serves for life or until he retires; monks are to be obedient to the abbot, but the abbot also is to be obedient to the Rule.
  - The abbot is not only checked from tyrannical behavior by the Rule but must also consult with the chapter of monks and get their counsel on important decisions. The monks can appeal to the abbots of other monasteries should their abbot prove tyrannical. Indeed, monasteries have regular outside visitations to check on the state of the community as a whole.
  - The abbot appoints a prior and subprior as administrators, and the Rule specifies a number of important positions that are filled by capable monks appointed by the abbot: porter, novice master, cellarer, and perhaps most significant, guest master. Benedictines make hospitality the most important expression of Christ's love, especially the welcoming of the poor, who "are to be received as Christ."
- The "school of the Lord's service" is organized according to the broad categories of work (*labora*) and prayer (*ora*).
  - Work involves all the tasks required of the common life (cooking, washing, tailoring, baking, receiving guests), as well as the tasks of supporting the community through farming and herding. Work is as essential as prayer: The cellarer is to regard the implements for work as though they were "the vessels of the altar."
  - In some monasteries, especially at founding or in difficult circumstances, all the monks performed manual labor. In better established monasteries, where division of labor was possible, the "choir monks" devoted themselves to the full life of prayer

and to mental work (including the production of manuscripts and study), while the “lay brothers” did the manual work, as serfs would do in a manor.

- The link between work and prayer is indicated by the term *opus Dei* (“the work of God”) that Benedict applies to the common prayer of the community.
  - Much of the Rule is taken up with the careful disposition of the reciting (chanting) of the Psalms in the divine office every day, so that the entire Psalter is recited each week. Benedict chided monks of his day who took a whole week to do what the desert fathers did in a single day!
  - The monks pray in choir at regular intervals throughout the day: when they rise (Lauds); at the first, third, sixth, and ninth hours (Prime, Terce, Sext, and None); in the early evening (Vespers); and before bed (Compline). They rise in the early morning for the longest period of common prayer (Matins).
  - Over the course of time, when the majority of choir monks become ordained priests, the celebration of the Eucharist is also a daily part of the round of prayer.
  - The contemplative dimension of Benedictine life tends to be connected to the practice of individual reading of Scripture or of the fathers called *lectio divina* (“holy reading”). Such reading is ruminative and reflective, rather than actual study, a form of meditation.
- The Rule lays out all these practices in considerable detail and provides sanctions for their observance: mutual correction, temporary excommunication from choir and meals, and in worst cases, even expulsion from the community.
- The spirituality of the Benedictine life is not elaborate. It emphasizes obedience as the expression of faith, humility, and silence, which is necessary not only for “hearing” God’s Word but



for practicing charity in a community where people are committed to each other for life.

- Benedict sees the common life as a time of preparation for the higher states of commitment, as in the life of the hermit.
- For many who lived it, however, the life was sufficiently rigorous and demanding to require a lifetime of dedication to accomplish true obedience.
- As monasteries became more prosperous, the “school” dimension came to the fore, and monasteries formed the basic source of both Christian discipleship and learning for centuries.

### **The Legacy of Benedictinism**

- Pope Gregory I (“the Great”) was himself a Benedictine monk and wrote the biography of Benedict. He used Benedictine monks as the instruments for the restoration of the church in England.
- In 596, Gregory sent Augustine, the prior of the monastery of Saint Andrew in Rome, together with other monks, to England and made him the archbishop of Canterbury.
- Augustine converted King Ethelbert, whose wife, Bertha, was already Christian, and through the king, England rapidly became Catholic.
- The Benedictine monasteries, which fit so well within the manorial system of medieval society, became places that exemplified and enabled a deeper commitment to the faith. English monks in particular were critical to the next stage of evangelization in Europe.
- Perhaps the most remarkable testimony to the work of Benedict is that despite a long series of repressions and reforms, the way of life according to his Rule continues to be lived by men and women around the world to the present day. Not many 1,500-year-old books have worn as well.

## Suggested Reading

Casey and Tomlin, *Introducing the Rule of Benedict*.

Knowles, *Christian Monasticism*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did the Rule of Benedict provide an accessible form of the “life of perfection” in a way earlier rules had not?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of understanding the path to God as mediated by “a Rule and an abbot”?

# Evangelization of Western Europe

## Lecture 27

In the past few lectures, we have identified important elements in the formation of a Catholic Europe: At the political level, we saw the Frankish conquests and consolidation and the commitment of the Merovingians to Catholicism and to the papacy. At the religious/cultural level, we saw how Benedictine monasticism fit within the manorial economic system and provided a place for the learning and dissemination of a specifically Catholic culture. In this lecture, we will pull together more firmly and directly three of the main players who together helped make Europe Christian: the monks who worked as missionaries, the kings who either sponsored them or were converted by them, and the popes who commissioned and directed them.

### The Bishops of Rome

- The pope was by far the central figure in bringing the Christian message to all of Europe. The strength and relative independence of the papacy over the course of some nine centuries played an important role in securing and expanding the Catholic tradition in the West.
- Not all popes were great or even competent; many were mediocrities. But when greatness in a person combined with the significance of the office, powerful things could happen. Already in this course, we have noted the importance of two bishops of Rome whose tenure was sufficiently lengthy and whose moral and intellectual integrity were sufficiently impressive to exercise great influence.
  - Damasus I was a vigorous opponent of Arianism and Donatism; united himself with the Cappadocians; strengthened the position of the papacy (establishing its archives); and commissioned Jerome to translate the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Bible, which provided a uniform Scripture to the West.

- Sixty years after Damasus, Leo I (440–461) opposed Pelagianism—the teaching that God’s grace was not necessary to live a moral life—and was the critical player in forming the orthodox position in the monophysite controversy, with his “Tome of Leo” anticipating the dogma established by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. He believed in the divine and scriptural basis for the primacy of Rome and exercised it vigorously.
- By far the most important pope in this sequence is Gregory I (“the Great”), who lived from 540 to 604 and was pope from 590 to 604.
  - The son of a senator, Gregory was prefect of the city of Rome in 573; abandoning his municipal role, he sold all his possessions and founded six Benedictine monasteries in Sicily and one in Rome (St. Andrew), which he then entered as a simple monk.
  - But Gregory was too capable to live a secluded life entirely. Pope Pelagius II appointed him as delegate to the Byzantine court in 579, and he asserted the primacy of Rome over Constantinople; in 585, he returned to the monastery and was elected abbot.
  - In 590, he was elected pope. Facing the challenges of Ostrogoth/Byzantine wars and the aftereffects of the Justinian plague, he struck a separate treaty with the Lombards in 592–593, asserting independence from the Byzantine presence in Ravenna.
  - In 596, Gregory sent Augustine and 40 other monks to England, thus establishing the monastic character of Catholicism there and a basis for further evangelization. He gave privileges to monks, which made them more directly dependent on the papacy.
  - Gregory made significant contributions to the shape of the Roman Mass (the signs of which remain in the so-called Gregorian Sacramentary). His voluminous writings (*Book of*

*Pastoral Regulations, Moralia in Job*, sermons, letters, and the *Dialogues*) were widely read and studied in the Middle Ages. He richly deserved the title “the Great.”

- Other notable popes of the early medieval period helped secure the Catholic character of the West, as well as the real independence of Roman-led Catholicism from the hegemony of Byzantium. Four highly capable popes who ruled for some 60 years across a single century deserve at least a mention.
  - Gregory II (715–731) supported the missionary work of Boniface, excommunicated the Byzantine emperor Leo III the Isaurian for his support of iconoclasm, and denied the right of the emperor to interfere with the church in matters of doctrine.
  - Pope Zachary (741–752)—the last Greek pope—had good relations with the Franks and also supported Boniface; he, too, condemned iconoclasm in the East.
  - Hadrian I (772–795) strengthened the city of Rome by his building and administration; he had good relations with Charlemagne, who helped the papacy by conquering the Lombards in Italy, though differing with him on the iconoclasm issue (Charlemagne supported it). Hadrian sent the Gregorian Sacramentary to Charlemagne between 785 and 795, which the king then used to unify liturgical observance throughout his dominions.
  - The link between the Merovingians and the papacy grew even stronger because Leo III (795–816) needed Charlemagne’s support against opponents of his papacy; in turn, he crowned Charlemagne emperor on Christmas Day, 800.

### **Missionary Monks**

- The careers of two great monk-missionaries reveal the complex dynamics of the relationships we have been sketching. These missionaries were the ones who risked their lives, and spent their lives, in the most arduous sort of efforts for the gospel. Their work

was carried out in trackless forests with hostile tribes; in places still deeply committed to pagan forms of worship; and without the aid of roads, vehicles, communication, or even supply lines. The strategy of founding monasteries as centers of influence and the cultivation of rulers was the only one possible in such circumstances.

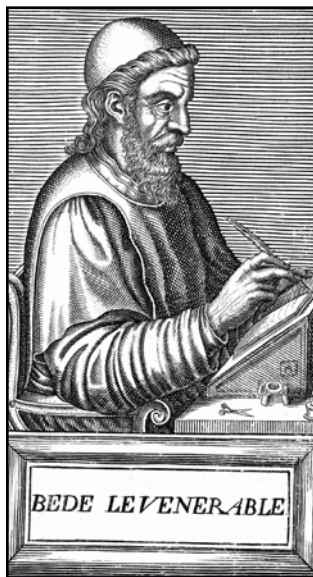
- Saint Willibrord (c. 658–739) is called the “Apostle of the Frisians.” Anglo-Saxon, he was educated at Ripon Abbey in England under Saint Wilfrid; he joined an Irish monastery for 12 years and was ordained a priest. In 690, he went to work among the Frisians (a Germanic group in the Netherlands), where he founded a number of monasteries.
  - In 693, Pope Sergius I provided papal support for his mission, and in 695, Willibrord was made archbishop of the Frisians.
  - The Merovingian King Pepin gave him land for a cathedral outside Utrecht, and in 698, he founded the monastery of Echternach in Luxemburg.
  - He received steady support from the Merovingians and, in 719, received help as well from a fellow missionary, Saint Boniface. His life was written by Alcuin, whom we met before as a scholar in the court of Charlemagne.
- Saint Boniface (born Winfrid; c. 680–754) is called the “Apostle of the Germans.” Born in England, he was educated at a Benedictine monastery at Winchester and became a key figure in the reform of the Frankish church, as well as its alliance with the papacy.
  - A learned man, Boniface wrote poetry, a grammar, and a treatise on metrics. Some 150 of his letters are extant. In 715, he went to Fulda, where he worked with Willibrord unsuccessfully among the Frisians.
  - He then went to Rome, and in 719, Gregory II commissioned him to preach to the heathen among the Germans, bestowing on him the name “Boniface” (*bonum facere* = “do good”). He worked among the Hessians and Thuringians, founding many

monasteries. A legend told of Boniface is that he tested the power of a pagan god by felling an oak dedicated to the deity; when a wind blew down the tree as he began cutting and no punishment came to the missionary, the crowd viewing the scene converted to the Christian God.

- Boniface worked under the protection of Charles Martel, and in 732, Gregory III appointed him archbishop of all Germany. Martel divided Germany into four dioceses and made Boniface metropolitan (primate) over Germany east of the Rhine (Mainz).
- At the Concilium Germanicum in 743, Boniface worked for the reform of the clergy—a constant preoccupation in an age when lack of learning and training often led to less-than-adequate ministers. Boniface then went to work again in Frisia, where he was killed in 754. His life was written by Willibald shortly after his death.

### Scholar Monks

- The monasteries founded by such missionaries as Willibrord and Boniface served as centers of worship, as well as of civilization. Two monk-scholars of the era give evidence for impressive levels of knowledge and scholarship, illustrating the role of monasteries as centers of cultural diffusion.



**The Venerable Bede, a classic scholar-monk, wrote biblical commentaries; texts on computation, grammar, and natural science; lives of saints; and the monumental *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.**

- The Venerable Bede (c. 673–735) spent his entire life in the Benedictine monasteries at Wearmouth and Jarrow; ordained a deacon at 19 and a priest at 30, he devoted his life to scholarship.
  - He wrote a number of works that exist in so many manuscripts that they clearly formed the curricula for others: on metrics, computation, grammar, and natural science.
  - He wrote commentaries on a large number of biblical books noteworthy for their use of earlier authorities and their sober treatment of the literal meaning of the text.
  - He wrote lives of saints, and his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 731) is the most important source for the early history of England.
- Alcuin (c. 730–804) was a major contributor to the Carolingian renaissance, a versatile scholar who transmitted to the Franks the knowledge of Latin culture, which had remained alive in Anglo-Saxon England.
  - Born in Northumbria, Alcuin studied at the cathedral school of York; he established a library at the Frankish court and, in 781, was invited by Charlemagne to join the other scholars there. He was in England from 786 to 793 but returned to France as abbot of St. Martin's Abbey in Tours from 796 until his death.
  - Wide-ranging in his scholarship, Alcuin wrote on grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, orthography, and mathematics, as well as poems on a number of subjects (including the library he established); other works included philosophical, theological, and biblical treatises.
  - As abbot of St. Martin's, he authorized the production of full manuscripts of the Bible; he also revised liturgical texts (the Roman lectionary and the Gregorian Sacramentary).
- Through the efforts of Merovingian rulers, Benedictine monks, and a strong and aggressive papacy, the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century



saw a firmly established form of Catholic Christianity in northern Europe, thoroughly orthodox in doctrine, reformed in morals and clerical regulation, and increasingly uniform in liturgical observance. Catholic Europe was ready to embark on its centuries-long history.

### Suggested Reading

Knowles and Obolensky, *The Middle Ages*, (*The Christian Centuries*, vol. 2), pp. 3–15, 27–68.

Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty: 500–1500 AD (A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 2).

### Questions to Consider

1. Why did the circumstances of life in northern Europe make the founding of monasteries the most effective instrument of spreading the Christian religion?
2. How did the reciprocal interaction of kings, popes, and monks make them the dominant players in the shaping of a Catholic Europe?

# The Great Divorce between East and West

## Lecture 28

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, relations between Christianity in the East and in the West, between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, were severed and remain so to the present. The two earliest forms of Christianity have been in a state of schism for more than 1,000 years. The symbolic date for the split is 1054, but as with so many divorces, this one built on centuries of growing alienation. And like other divorces, this one was undoubtedly sad in the experiencing; it is surely one of the most depressing sequences in Christianity's long history to recount, testimony to the consequences of a religion deeply overinvolved with politics.

### Administrative Division and Rivalry

- The story begins with the administrative division of the Roman Empire that was initiated by Diocletian and perfected by Constantine. It institutionalized the possibility of faction among and between strong leaders, and insofar as emperors were regarded as “bishops for external affairs,” religious policy could differ dramatically in the East and the West.
- The ecclesiastical rivalry among the four patriarchates (Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople) that mirrored such administrative “spheres of influence” stimulated and expressed polemical views on doctrinal matters.
  - After the Muslim conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, only Rome and Constantinople remained as functioning patriarchies.
  - This did not diminish but exacerbated the rivalry between the two most politically defined centers of Christianity.
- Even more than these simple political, structural elements, the historical and cultural developments in the East and West were dramatically different.

- The eastern part of the empire expanded (see Justinian) and contracted (under Persian and Muslim attack), but it maintained a political and cultural order until 1453 that was (at least on the surface) continuous with the ancient empire. Its political genius was shown not least in its success in diverting to the west the migrating nations from the north.
- In contrast, the western part of the empire collapsed as an institutional whole under the successive waves of nations (Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Lombards), so that only a portion of Italy was held by Byzantium (Ravenna); the city of Rome exercised no real political power.
- The role of the respective patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople was affected by these shifting historical circumstances.
  - The patriarch of Constantinople frequently asserted equality with Rome but in practice was still responsive to Rome's authority in many cases. This was especially true given that appeal to Rome gave the patriarchs of Constantinople some small leverage against the control of the Byzantine emperors.
  - The bishop of Rome could be harassed by the Byzantine emperor but, through a series of extraordinarily strong leaders (such as Gregory the Great), asserted Rome's religious independence. Further, the papacy eventually struck up an alliance with the new Frankish kingdom (which came to be called the Holy Roman Empire).
- Language itself divided rather than united: In the East, Greek was exclusively used for politics and theology; the Latin that was studied in the University of Constantinople was "classical Latin." In the West, Greek was neither spoken nor easily read; Latin was a living language undergoing constant change (medieval Latin is far from "classical"). This change is symbolized by the figures of Ambrose and Augustine, both doctors of the Western church.

- Ambrose of Milan (339–397) was educated in both Greek and Latin, corresponded with theological writers from the East, and was comfortable in the Eastern theological idiom.
- Augustine of Hippo (354–430) knew little if any Greek; he worked with the Latin text of Scripture entirely and was trained completely in Latin literature and rhetoric. His theological work is, therefore, marked by his own genius more than a prior tradition (see his *On the Trinity*).

### Trinitarian and Christological Controversies

- As we have already seen, serious divisions arose in the discrete parts of the church from the 4<sup>th</sup> through the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- In the Trinitarian controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (the battle with Arianism), the emperors of the East and West adopted different positions, and although the orthodox parties in both areas were united, counter-councils were held (Tyre, 335; Sardica, 343; Antioch, 379) that bishops of one area or another boycotted or from which they were excluded.
- In the Christological controversies of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the West, especially in the person of the popes, represented the position finally defined as doctrine at Chalcedon in 451; both before and after that date, the Eastern emperors and patriarchs characteristically favored a monophysite or monothelite position.
- Twice in these centuries, indeed, there were periods of actual broken communion between East and West.
  - From 404 to 415, relations between East and West were severed after the emperor Theophilus deposed John Chrysostom. Rome objected to the deposition and withdrew from communion for eight years.
  - From 484 to 519, Pope Felix III excommunicated the patriarch Acacius of Constantinople because of his support of monophysitism, leading to a state of schism for 35 years.

## The Iconoclasm Controversy

- As we saw in Lecture 23, even greater tension was generated in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of the iconoclasm controversy.
- In the iconoclast struggle, the papacy steadily represented the orthodox position and was a source of support for iconodules—those who venerated sacred images—in both East and West; consequently, the iconoclast emperors were intensely hostile to the papacy.
  - In 732, Leo III (the Isaurian) took away major territories from the jurisdiction of the pope (Calabria, Sicily, Illyricum) and assigned them to the patriarch of Constantinople.
  - The collapse of Byzantine power in Italy (at the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards in 751) impelled the popes to seek political support from the Frankish kings; Pope Stephen II and King Pepin struck an alliance in 754.
- The bitterness of the iconoclast controversy, in turn, complicated the tangled involvement of the papacy in the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Photian affair, a miserable and complicated power struggle in which absolutely no real religious value was at stake.
  - The patriarch Ignatius was appointed by the empress Theodora in 847, but he was harsh toward former iconoclasts. When Theodora was deposed, Ignatius was replaced by Photius, an educated man with more moderate views.
  - Theodora's replacement, the emperor Michael III, invited the pope to send legates to a council in order to condemn iconoclasm. The legates recognized Photius as patriarch. But Pope Nicholas I, influenced by followers of Ignatius, rejected Photius and reinstated Ignatius as patriarch. This was a form of interference that was insupportable to the Byzantines.
  - In 865, the Bulgarians converted to Orthodoxy but then turned to Rome and agitated for inclusion of the *filioque* in the Nicene Creed. This was regarded by the Byzantines as a further

instance of interference by Rome and by the Frankish kingdom at the very gates of Byzantium.

- Photius denounced the *filioque* as heretical, and a council held in Constantinople excommunicated Pope Nicholas I.
- When Bulgaria severed its relations with Rome and reverted to Byzantium, tempers settled. Photius remained in communion with Rome, and in 879–880, the pope’s legates agreed in council that nothing should be added to the creed—decisions accepted by the papacy.

### The *Filioque* Controversy

- The controversy that finally split the two bodies of Christianity apart arose from the addition of the words “and the Son” (*filioque*) to the Nicene Creed immediately after the words “who proceeds from the Father,” with reference to the Holy Spirit; thus, the creed reads: “the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” This phrase became the overt cause of the final split between Rome and Constantinople.
- The term first appeared in the West. The Third Council of Toledo (in Spain) added it to the creed in 589. It was adopted by the Frankish monks who chanted the creed in the liturgy. Despite some resistance, it was then adopted by Rome soon after 1000.
- As noted, the formula was vehemently condemned by the patriarch Photius in 867.
  - The East objected to the addition to the creed in principle because such additions had been forbidden by earlier ecumenical councils.
  - The East also regarded the phrase as theologically erroneous, tending to weaken the monarchy of the Father—that everything flows from the Godhead. In *The Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, Photius noted that the Western addition upset the balance of unity and diversity in the Trinity.

- The dispute over this minute element of doctrine provided a convenient flashpoint for the political-ecclesiastical rivalries, cultural distance, misunderstandings, and conflicts that had extended over centuries.

### **The Final Break**

- The final break in 1054 involved naked power plays on the side of both Rome and Constantinople.
- The papacy insisted on the adoption of Latin liturgical practices in the Greek churches of southern Italy that had been liberated from Byzantine control by the Normans. At the same time, the patriarch of Constantinople forced Latin churches in that city to adopt the Greek liturgical usages and say the creed without the additional words.
- The head of the Bulgarian church, Leo of Ohrid—encouraged by the patriarch Michael Cerularius—attacked the Latin practices, which led Pope Leo IX to send an embassy led by Cardinal Humbert to Constantinople in 1054.
- Cardinal Humbert was abusive and arrogant, and his attitude was matched in both by the patriarch. On July 16, 1054, Humbert and his legates laid a statement of excommunication of the patriarch and his supporters on the altar of the Church of St. Sophia.
- By order of the emperor Constantine IX, the statement of excommunication was burned, and a synod he summoned in Constantinople excommunicated in return Humbert and his associates. The schism was final.
- Two serious efforts were subsequently made to heal the schism but with no lasting success.
  - The Second Council of Lyon (1274) saw the *filioque* affirmed by the Greek delegates, and peace lasted for 15 years, ending in 1289.

- At the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439, the Greeks sought unity with the West in light of the threat to Constantinople from the Turks. Long debate on doctrinal and ritual matters led eventually to compromise and the basic acceptance of the Latin positions. But many of the Greeks subsequently recanted, and the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 rendered the peace void.

### Suggested Reading

Louth, *Greek East and Latin West*.

Nichols, ed., *Rome and the Eastern Churches*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways in which linguistic and cultural differences complicated relations between East and West over a period of centuries.
2. How does the schism between East and West reveal the deep political entanglement of “the imperial church”?



# Monastic Reform

## Lecture 29

The split between East and West in the 11<sup>th</sup> century occasioned by the *filioque* controversy shows how independent the Catholic tradition, headed by the pope, had become from the imperial Orthodox tradition. In the West, the world shaped by popes, kings, and monks was called simply “Christendom,” and it was a world that was pervasively and profoundly Christian in coloration if not always in character. From the 10<sup>th</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, moreover, monasticism was the dominant formal expression of Christianity in the Catholic West, with hundreds of separate communities and many thousands of adherents. In this lecture, we’ll look at three famous monastic houses of the medieval period and the forms of reform and renewal each represented.

### The Appeal of the Monastic Life

- For people today, even many Christians, the appeal of the monastic life is difficult to understand. A life apart from the pleasures of society and in pursuit of God does not meet contemporary standards of happiness or fulfillment.
- Here is where some historical imagination helps. In fact, the medieval understanding of the world and the meaning of life illustrates the attraction of monastic life and makes intelligible its great success across centuries.
  - The Venerable Bede, recounting a story on the brevity of human life (*History* II, 13), commented, “The life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant.” Christianity revealed what went before and what came after—above all, what awaited humans after death.
  - Thus, the short and mostly painful time given to humans was considered to be a period of preparation for an eternal destiny;

life was ordered to “the four last things”: death, judgment, heaven, or hell.

- A freely chosen modicum of deprivation and discipline during mortal existence seemed a small price to pay when compared to the cost of eternal misery caused by luxury and vice and far better than passing through an afterlife “purgatory.”
- A life dedicated to God in such an explicit fashion prepared the monk for the only thing that really mattered: participation in eternal life in heaven. There was, for the medieval mind, nothing irrational in choosing sacrifice in this life in order to gain everlasting bliss in God’s presence.
- Less explicit but no less real were the obvious material benefits that the monastic life made available, even to members of the nobility.
  - The cloister offered safety, security, and an orderly way of life rather than the chaos and struggle of secular existence. Diet in the monastery was better and more consistent, sleep more regular, days more meaningful, and therefore, health much improved. For women in nunneries, lack of sexual activity meant that the terrors of childbirth, infant mortality, and rapid aging were avoided.
  - For women and men alike, life within the cloister gave access to beauty through architecture, music, and the liturgy; the chance to practice the crafts of calligraphy and bookmaking, weaving, pottery, and gardening; the possibility of a genuine education; and the chance to hold positions of authority.
- Precisely because of its great popularity during these centuries, the institution of monasticism also required constant reform.
  - Greater numbers in communities inevitably meant that some members were more dedicated to the implicit benefits of the life than to the explicit ideals. For some monks in every age, a comfortable pallet for sleep and meals on a regular basis trump any religious motivation.

- The size of monastic houses also led to the specialization of activities, so that the delicate balance between work and prayer stressed by the Rule of Benedict could be lost. And the more monks were separated from the realities of hard manual labor, the more their existence could be seen—by others, as well as themselves—as privileged.
- An unintended corollary of community size and noble patronage was a growth in material prosperity, which led to the paradox of “poor” monks who “called nothing their own” living in grand buildings with splendid ornament.

### The Abbey of Cluny

- The founding of the Abbey of Cluny in Burgundy in the year 910 by William I, duke of Aquitaine, began a two-century period of influence for that monastery.
- Cluny deliberately set out to initiate a reform movement, and it was, consequently, innovative in its approach to the Rule of Benedict. Duke William served as a generous patron to the monastery. This patronage liberated its first abbot, Benno, from any allegiance to secular powers and enabled him to establish a direct allegiance to Pope Sergius III.
- Cluny served as the “mother house” of an extended organization of monasteries and nunneries subordinate to it, with only Cluny having an abbot. The purpose of this centralization was to ensure a uniform and strict observance of the Rule in all the houses. It also



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**Cluny served as the “mother house” of a congregation of monasteries and nunneries that were subordinate to it; under Abbot Hugh between 1049 and 1109, more than 1,000 Benedictine houses belonged to the Cluniac order.**

encouraged a sense of belonging to a broader reform movement (“the Cluniac Reform”).

- Another innovation, this one perhaps more problematic, was that Cluny effectively dropped the manual labor side of the Rule’s motto of *labora*—such menial work was assigned to “lay brothers”—in favor of a complete concentration on prayer, above all, in the divine office (the *opus Dei*) and the Mass (Eucharist).
  - The monastery thus became involved in making petitions and saying intercessory prayers for the monks themselves and for others, who made donations to the monks so that such prayers might be said.
  - Significant patronage from those seeking supernatural help enabled the construction of grand buildings at Cluny and the making of fine altar vessels and vestments for liturgical practice.
  - The “work” component of the Rule for choir monks was expressed not by plowing in the fields but in intellectual labor: The library and scriptorium were sites for study, teaching, and the copying of manuscripts. Out of such labor arose the distinctive monastic culture that has been called by Jean LeClercq, “the love of learning and the desire for God.”
- Almost inevitably in such circumstances, however, wealth and power had their own corrupting effect on the rigor of monastic life.
  - The magnificent clothing and vessels adorned not only the altar but also the abbot’s table; the food was not only good but, often enough, a pretentious display. Worldliness—at least at the level of those members of the nobility who served as abbots—crept into meals that Benedict had conceived as simple and unadorned.
  - The entry of the nobility into the monastery and their inevitable ascent to power led, in turn, to the almost inevitable election of abbots of Cluny as bishops, thus extending even further the

influence of the Cluniac sensibility. Three monks of Cluny were even elected bishops of Rome.

- The influence of Cluny remained strong until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and even at that date produced a final remarkable leader in Peter the Venerable (c. 1094–1156). Peter was elected abbot in 1122 and defended Cluny’s commitment to scholarship against another famous monastic reformer, Bernard of Clairvaux.

### **The Abbey of Cîteaux**

- Bernard began as a monk of the second great reforming monastery, the Abbey of Cîteaux, founded in 1098. The Cistercian monks sought a more rigorous observance of the Rule of Benedict than was practiced in communities associated with Cluny.
  - Like Cluny, Cîteaux established an order that exercised control over the reform in its daughter houses. At the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there were some 500 monasteries associated with Cîteaux across Europe and even in the Latin East.
  - The ideal of Cîteaux was to locate communities in isolated places. The mother-house abbey church was begun in 1140 and completed in 1193; the dukes of Burgundy were generous benefactors of Cîteaux.
  - The most marked feature of the reform was the embrace of manual labor as an ideal, returning to the balance between work and prayer that the Rule had first envisaged. By locating in remote areas, the Cistercians sought to ensure that agricultural labor—not labors of the mind—would remain at the center of the monastic *labora*. In this sense, it was a reform in the direction of the primitive.
- The most well-known alumnus of Cîteaux was the Cistercian monk Saint Bernard (1090–1153), who became the most famous—and, in some respects, contentious—of the reformers in the Benedictine tradition. Bernard left the monastery of Cîteaux in 1115 to found his own monastery at Clairvaux and become its first abbot.

- Bernard was a man of great abilities and decided views who actively exerted power on a number of fronts and seemed to relish the exercise of authority. At the synod of Troyes in 1128, he wrote the rules and helped approve the new order of Knights Templar. He later intervened in a disputed papal election and helped secure the position of Innocent II (1130), thus winning even more papal privileges for the Cistercian order.
- Bernard was a preacher of stunning ability: His “Homilies on the Song of Songs,” preached to his fellow monks, is a masterpiece of mystical theology. These homilies helped win him the later designation of “doctor” of the church.
- Bernard was, alas, also capable of hatred. He sharply criticized the Cluniac monks and attacked the brilliant theologian Abelard in 1140 as a heretic; when Abelard was given refuge by the abbot of Cluny, Bernard’s hostility only grew greater.

### **The Houses of Saint Bruno and Saint Romuald**

- Our third example of monastic reform is found in the two forms of semi-eremical life founded by Saint Bruno in 1084 and Saint Romuald between 1012 and 1023.
- Bruno founded a house called the Grand Chartreuse in the Dauphine Alps near Grenoble; it had no special rules but demanded of its members perfect mortification—that is, the total eradication of all human desires—and a complete renunciation of the world.
  - The Carthusian monks only slowly developed a rule, which was approved by Innocent II in 1133; the order included houses for both men and women.
  - Monks lived in silence and, for the most part, in their respective cells, working and praying; they met in common only for Mass and office and for meals on feast days.

- In Italy, a Benedictine monk named Romuald founded a monastic house at Camaldoli near Arezzo that also demanded only the bare minimum of communal ties.
  - Specific practice differed from house to house, with an emphasis less on communal conformity than the individual development of the spiritual life, which demanded more time alone than the Cluniac or Cistercian traditions allowed.
  - The Camaldolese consciously tried to unite the best ideals of the Benedictine common life with the more Eastern emphasis on the eremitical life.

### Suggested Reading

Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*.

LeClercq (Misrahi, trans.), *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the factors (explicit and implicit) that made monasticism attractive to medieval Christians in a way that it is not for most people, even Christians, today.
2. What tendencies in monastic life necessitated reform within and outside the Benedictine tradition?

# Cathedrals and Chapters

## Lecture 30

All across Europe, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries saw Christians undertaking ambitious building projects that revealed both self-confidence and the economic means to take on truly large projects. The weather was good; the crops were substantial; the population was growing; and a sense of new possibility was in the air. One expression of this ambitious construction was the castle, and a second, as we saw in the last lecture, could be found in monasteries. But perhaps most emblematic of Europe's becoming "Christendom" in a fully self-confident fashion was the building of huge and artistically compelling cathedrals as centers for Catholic life in cities and towns. These magnificent edifices symbolized a society constructed around the worship of God.

### Cathedrals as Architecture

- The cathedrals impress us today, first of all, simply as magnificent buildings. As architecture, they reveal both a startling ambition in a culture supposedly dedicated to humility and an ability and persistence that still astound observers. The two main styles of cathedral show, on one side, continuity with tradition and, on the other side, innovative breakthroughs.
- The Romanesque style builds on the Roman tradition of architecture, especially in its use of the Roman arch, but in this period, the style was often also influenced by Byzantine architecture. This Byzantine influence is especially well represented in Italy, as in the cathedrals of San Vitale and San Gennaro in Ravenna.
  - St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice (1071) is definitely Romanesque but shows the strong influence of Byzantine style in its architecture, whereas the cathedrals of Pisa (1063) and Mont Saint-Michel in France (11<sup>th</sup> century) are typically Romanesque.





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**Chartres Cathedral, located in a town outside of Paris, is among France's most spectacular Gothic cathedrals and is known for its rose windows.**

- Romanesque churches are characterized by the barrel vault. They have great strength and stability but are limited by the need to thicken their walls in order to gain height, which decreases interior light. Thus, some examples convey a sense of heaviness.
- The Gothic style, in contrast, represents a genuine architectural breakthrough: Its use of the flying buttress as a structural support enabled great height without widening the walls, thus allowing for the inclusion of more delicate features, such as the pointed arch and the rose window.
  - In England, there were some 16 Gothic cathedrals completed before the Reformation, including such splendid examples as Lincoln (1074), Ely (1090), and Durham (1093).
  - France has some of the most spectacular Gothic cathedrals, including St. Denis (1140) and Notre Dame (1163) in Paris and Chartres (1145) in a small town outside Paris.

- Much like the earlier basilicas that were adapted from the Roman royal halls, the basic floor plan of medieval cathedrals was simple and allowed for many variations.
  - The front entrance (usually with multiple doors through a highly ornamented façade) gave access to the long rectangular nave (from *navis*, “ship”), where the people gathered. Gazing upward at the ceiling of such a cathedral gives the unmistakable sense of being in an upside-down ship. Thus, the architecture supports the allegorical reflections on the church as the ship of salvation.
  - The nave, in turn, leads to the apse or chancel, which was the area for the performance of the Mass—the sanctuary. Here was located the great chair of the bishop and the high altar; from the pulpit on the edge of the sanctuary, Scripture was read and sermons were preached.
  - The nave and the apse increasingly were separated, much in the manner of the iconostasis in the East, by the rood screen, on which was the representation of the Cross of Christ, as well as images of saints.
  - Perpendicular to the nave were the transepts, wings to the right and left that gave the cathedral its typical cruciform appearance. In the transepts were often ambos containing side altars; altars were found also in the crypts of cathedrals.
- The Gothic cathedrals in particular display a range of plastic and decorative arts.
  - The stonemasonry attests to both exquisite craftsmanship and sophisticated engineering to raise edifices of stone to such great heights.
  - The famous rose windows and other forms of stained-glass windows often elaborated realistic representations of biblical scenes, creating a “Bible for the illiterate.” Every scene of Christ’s life was depicted in glorious color, together with rich

allusions to other biblical scenes. The windows of cathedrals were, in this respect, not unlike the illuminated biblical manuscripts of the medieval period.

- Both internal and external statuary was dedicated to Jesus, Mary, and the saints. Even various demonic powers were given a place in the gargoyles that often appeared on the outside of cathedrals. The statuary revealed a range of artistic styles, from the hieratic, to the realistic, to the grotesque.
- Exquisite woodworking is found in the rood screen, choir stalls, and the bishop's official throne.

### **Liturgy as a Public Sacrifice**

- Worship within these cathedrals corresponded to the architectural structure, emphasizing liturgy as a public sacrifice performed by professionals on behalf of the people.
- The High Mass was a solemn performance carried out by the bishop with his attendant clergy in great splendor. With the altar facing the wall, the bishop “faces God” to make intercession for the people. The long nave and the rood screen emphasize the distance between minister and people.
  - The Mass was understood as a propitiatory sacrifice more than as a participatory meal. In the medieval period, the reception of communion became less frequent, eventually demanding a rule for fulfilling the “Easter obligation” (receiving communion once yearly). The nature of the Eucharist as a meal, which it was in earliest Christianity, was almost completely lost.
  - Instead, the holiness (the “otherness”) of what came to be called the “Blessed Sacrament” was signaled by a demand for fasting before taking communion. The words of consecration by the bishop were regarded as effecting the transubstantiation of ordinary bread and wine into the actual (sacramental) body and blood of Christ. The exposition of the Host after consecration

is the high point of the Mass (signaled by the ringing of bells) rather than the partaking of a meal.

- Low Masses, in turn, were recited quietly by the ordinary clergy connected to the cathedral at the side altars, offering “sacrifice” for the benefit of those who had made donations for this purpose. Thus, the Mass was not only a sacrifice but also part of a system of patronage.

### **Cathedral Chapters**

- Cathedrals were not only places of worship: As the grandest and most important edifices of an area, they served multiple social functions.
  - They were obvious places of gathering for the population of a town or region for protection from violent storms, public proclamations, or the celebration of feasts.
  - The sanctuary of the cathedral served as a place of refuge for those fleeing authorities or enemies. It was sacrilege to do violence to anyone claiming the sanctuary offered by God.
- The priests and other clergy who made up the staff of the cathedral formed a “chapter” with a variety of purposes, above all, to live a Christian life according to basic monastic principles. Thus, they also had “rules” (canons) and lived a common life but without making solemn vows, as monks did. Members were called “canons regular.”
- Cathedral chapters also established schools in the manner of monasteries, first to train the cathedral choir, then to offer basic instruction in grammar, and eventually, to provide offerings in the liberal arts.
  - In such schools, much medieval interpretation of the Bible took place, not in academic studies but in the form of chants that elaborated the meaning of Scripture in sophisticated ways.

- Chapter schools were the seedbeds for the eventual development of universities in such cathedral cities as Paris, Bologna, and Oxford.
- Especially in England, cathedrals also were the location for anchorites and anchoresses; the terms derive from the Greek word for “living apart” as a hermit. These people lived literally walled into the cathedral, dependent on the offerings of the faithful, while fasting and praying on their behalf. The honor shown such anchorites by the populace again testifies to the complex social interrelationships developed in medieval Christendom.

### **The Controversy of the “Real Presence”**

- The liturgical and educational context of the medieval cathedral is essential for understanding one of the major theological controversies of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It concerned the nature of the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.
- Berengar of Tours (1010–1088) was a theologian whose entire life was spent in the context of the cathedral chapter and school, first as a canon of St. Martin’s in Tours, then as a student at Chartres (1028), then as archdeacon (1040) and treasurer (1047) on the staff of the cathedral at Angers, and finally, once more as “master of the schools” at St. Martin’s (1070).
- Berengar caused controversy through his teaching that at the words of consecration, there is only a “symbolic” presence of Christ in the Eucharist; he was attacked by Lanfranc of Bec for the inadequacy of his statement of “the real presence.” Berengar then wrote a treatise traditionally known as *De sacra coena* (“on the sacred meal”), in which he argued for a “real” presence that did not require a material change in the elements.
- This controversy is important for several reasons.
  - The doctrine of transubstantiation used the philosophical categories of Aristotle and the debate used the techniques of

dialectic: The controversy was a stepping-stone on the way to medieval Scholasticism.

- More important, the controversy reveals that attention was given to the Eucharist as an “object” to be worshiped and adored, rather than as the element of a meal to be eaten.
- The more the Eucharist was understood in this fashion, the more the distinction between clergy and laity consisted in the “mysterious/magic” power to effect the “transformation” of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Note that the Protestant taunt that yielded the phrase “hocus-pocus” for something magical and phony was based on the solemn words of consecration in the Catholic Mass in Latin: *Hoc est Corpus Meum*, “This is my body.”

### Suggested Reading

Clark, *Medieval Cathedrals*.

Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How can disputes over the Eucharist (transubstantiation) be connected to the character of Christian liturgy as performed in the great medieval cathedrals?
2. Discuss the role of cathedral chapters as centers for Christian life in the towns and cities of medieval Europe.

# The Crusades

## Lecture 31

It can be argued that the 11<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries represent the high water mark of the European civilization called Christendom, shaped by specifically Christian values and institutions. As much as in the monasteries with their schools and the cathedrals with their chapters, and as much as in the universities that we will talk about in the next lecture, the vibrancy and vision of this Christian society is expressed by the series of military expeditions against the Muslim occupiers of the Holy Land. The Crusades—part popular movement, part political calculation, part religious fervor—began in 1095 and extended, both literally and symbolically, for centuries.

### Backdrop to the Crusades

- Like the building projects described in the previous lecture, the expeditions known as the Crusades expressed a new sense of power and self-confidence in “Christendom”—that is, European Christianity.
  - In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Europe as a whole had barely escaped coming under Muslim rule during the great expansion of Islam that had swallowed all of the East (except Byzantium), North Africa, and Spain.
  - Charles Martel had stopped the advance of Muslim armies at the Battle of Tours in 732. His victory was the foundation, as we have seen, of the Frankish kingdom, the prominence of the papacy, and the feudal system that structured medieval society.
- In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the time seemed right for payback—to reverse the conquests of Islam and take back at least the places that Christians regarded as especially holy and worthy of pilgrimage.
- As for an armed expedition, Christianity had long since grown comfortable with the notion of “holy war”; recall that Charlemagne,

in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, had invaded Spain in an effort to drive back the Muslim armies and had established the Spanish March as a buffer zone against Islam.

- Further, some outlet was needed to channel the aggressive militarism of the ascendant Normans.
  - The Normans were descendants of the Vikings who settled on the western coast of France; the duchy of Normandy dates from 10<sup>th</sup> century.
  - The Norman leader Robert Guiscard had already conquered the Saracens (Muslims) in Sicily and Malta—with the pope's blessing—and in 1038–1040, we find Normans serving as mercenaries in the Byzantine army.
  - Again with the approval of the pope, William II of Normandy (William the Conqueror) overcame the Anglo-Saxons in England at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The Normans were great warriors and were spoiling for a fight.
- Another strong incentive to undertake a military expedition was the loss of the eastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire to the Seljuk Turks (who were Muslims) in 1071, which threatened not only Byzantium but potentially also the West.
- Religious incentives were offered, as well: The papacy promised protection of property for participants, granted plenary indulgences, and promised to regard those who fell in battle as martyrs.
  - Indulgences were a feature of medieval Christianity that made sense only within the framework of a highly evolved view of the afterlife.
  - The theory was as follows: If Christians died in mortal sin, they would be punished forever in hell; if they died in a perfect state of grace, fully repentant of all their sins, they would go to heaven.



- But if Christians died in a state of grace without making full repentance for their (venial) sins, they went to purgatory, a place of temporal cleansing from sin after death that was just as painful as hell but only temporary and offering hope of reprieve.
- Indulgences were, in effect, “time off” from such punishment; plenary indulgences represented a “full pardon.” Therefore, participation in the Crusades could mean, even if one survived, a direct ticket to heavenly bliss.
- All present-day historians agree on this point: From the start and increasingly, the Crusades represent a deeply ambiguous expression of Christian identity.
  - There is no question that many of the crusaders were men of genuine piety who accepted generously the cost of such expeditions: separation from home and family and the possibility of suffering and death for the sake of an ideal of no benefit to them personally.
  - Yet the idea of a holy war was certainly—however much it had become familiar over the centuries—a corruption of original Christian ideals, which advocated peace and the acceptance of violence toward the self rather than its imposition on others.
  - Not all crusaders had purely religious motives, especially not those most responsible for the missions. Some were probably avid for political and economic gain through booty and through access to lucrative trade routes, although this motivation was probably not dominant.
  - Perhaps most problematic was the equation of “defense of the faith” with the killing of “infidels” (“the unfaithful”), including both Saracens and Jews, without acknowledgment of them as humans, much less as people of genuine if different faith in the same God.

- As many as seven expeditions going by the name of “Crusades” moved from the west to the east, from the north to the south, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will review only the first four, because they are religiously and politically the most significant and set the pattern for the others.

### The First Crusade

- The First Crusade was summoned by Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont on November 27, 1095. He summoned the Christians of Europe to free Jerusalem and to relieve the besieged Byzantine Empire.
- The pope’s legate Adhemar, bishop of LePuy, was put in charge, together with Robert of Normandy and Godfrey of Bouillon. The cause was hugely popular, and knights and peasants alike were rallied for the expedition.
  - The knights were disciplined and kept separate from the peasants, who had no military training. It is among the peasants that the Crusade took on the character of a popular movement. The so-called “People’s Crusade” was an offshoot that was led by the charismatic Peter the Hermit.
  - Lack of discipline (and ignorance) also led to the outbreak of anti-Jewish attacks in both France and Germany. Such “infidels” were closer to hand and viewed as responsible for the death of Christ. The robbing of Jews and the killing of many was the first outbreak of such violence in centuries and set the pattern for a tragic history in Europe.



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The name “Crusade” derives from the cross (*crux* or *crossier*) that was worn by soldiers on their way to Palestine to liberate the Holy Lands from their Muslim occupiers.

- The army of Christian knights crossed the Balkans and Asia Minor, conquering Antioch in 1098 and liberating Jerusalem in 1099. The First Crusade was far and away the most successful of all the expeditions.
  - Fortified Latin states were established in Jerusalem, Tripoli, Antioch, and Edessa, with subsidiary fiefdoms established in Galilee, Transjordan, Jaffa, and Ascalon. The states lasted from 50 to 100 years.
  - In Jerusalem in 1099, some knights banded together to provide hospice for pilgrims (the Knights Hospitaller), and in 1119, others vowed to protect pilgrims on their way to the church of the Holy Sepulchre (the Knights Templar). These knights organized themselves along the lines of religious orders, with a commitment to piety.

### **The Second Crusade**

- The Second Crusade was called by Pope Eugene III in 1147 because of the shocking collapse of the Latin state of Edessa to the Saracens.
- The pope enlisted Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most influential figures in Christendom, to preach the Crusade, which Bernard did through an extended tour.
- This Crusade was led by King Louis VII of France and King Conrad III of Germany. Once more, mob action was carried out against Jews across Germany, leading Bernard and other leaders to condemn such action.
- The military effort in the East was a failure, except for the 13,000 troops who—carrying out another, more local program—managed to free Lisbon from Muslim control.
  - The great Kurdish Muslim general Saladin (1138–1192) overran Jerusalem and eliminated the Latin state there in 1187.
  - The Christians were reduced to occupying the stronghold at Tyre, a humiliating setback.

### The Third Crusade

- The Third Crusade (1189–1192) was led by three Christian kings of Europe: the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1122–1190), Richard I of England (1157–1199), and Philip II of France (1165–1223).
- The kings demanded financial support from bishops to finance the Crusade—the “Saladin tithe.”
- The crusaders, especially Richard of England, managed to recover territory along the coast from the Saracens, but Jerusalem itself remained in Muslim hands. King Richard negotiated the right of pilgrims to visit Jerusalem.

### The Fourth Crusade

- The Fourth Crusade in 1202 was stimulated by Pope Innocent III, who assured the Byzantine emperor Alexius III that he would be safe from crusader attack.
- The Crusade was, however, hijacked by the Venetians, the emerging commercial force in Italy that was intensely hostile toward its rival Byzantium, and the crusaders attacked Constantinople in 1203.
  - The Venetians established in Byzantium a Latin empire ruled by the pretender Alexius IV.
  - Deep local resentment led to the assassination of Alexius; the crusaders responded by sacking the city and establishing Baldwin of Flanders as the Latin emperor. This Latin version of the Byzantine Empire lasted until 1261.
- The Fourth Crusade represented a low point in the collapse of the initial ideal of freeing the Holy Land by pitting parts of the Christian world against each other; the incident only hardened the resentment Eastern Christians felt toward the West.

## Later Crusades

- Efforts at mounting and carrying out Crusades continued in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but (as with the partly legendary “Children’s Crusade” in 1212), most were exercises in vanity and futility.
- The Latin states were slowly overrun, and by 1291, all the remaining Latin holdings on the mainland disappeared. The grand experiment in Christian conquest had failed even in strictly military and political terms, not to mention religious ones.
- The crusader ideal was even more sullied when it was transferred to the efforts of kings and popes to extirpate heretics. Innocent III launched an “Albigensian Crusade” in 1208 to try to dislodge and destroy the dualist heretics in southern France. And in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the popes spoke in terms of crusade in their battles against the Hohenstaufen dynasty in Italy.

### Suggested Reading

Frankopan, *First Crusade*.

Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss this statement: The “crusader ideal” was, from the beginning, far from ideal.
2. Why were the Crusades doomed to eventual military and political failure?

# Papal Revolution

## Lecture 32

The era of great building projects and military expeditions was also an era in which the role of the papacy was asserted more forcefully than ever before, both as a political and a religious power. The papacy of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries was also intimately involved with changes internal to the life of the church. Reform of the secular clergy was needed, and new forms of religious organization less committed to stability and contemplation were required. In this lecture, we will examine the increased role of the papacy as illustrated through the careers of two popes (Gregory VII and Innocent III), and we will learn of the founders of two new and active religious orders (Saint Dominic and Saint Francis).

### Gregory VII

- In the last quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Gregory VII (c. 1020–1085; r. 1073–1085) was the key figure in the ascendancy of the papacy and the aggressive assertion of its powers in both temporal and spiritual matters.
- His life before becoming pope shows that Hildebrand (his given name) was strongly committed to monastic ideals but was also a skillful political infighter within the papal court.
  - Born in southern Tuscany, he studied first at a Roman monastery, then stayed at Cluny. When Abbot Bruno of Cluny was elected Pope Leo IX, Hildebrand joined him in Rome as deacon and papal administrator.
  - He served as a legate successively to Leo IX, Victor II, and Stephen IX; he organized the troops to overthrow the antipope Benedict X and was elected archdeacon of the Roman church in 1058.
  - He was the power behind the throne during the papacy of Alexander II (1061), who had been elected by the cardinals

alone according to the new procedure introduced by his predecessor. Before this, papal elections often involved various rulers and nobles and the messy participation of the people of Rome. Given that the pope also appoints the cardinals, the procedure ensures a totally ecclesiastical process.

- When he was himself elected pope, Gregory VII was extraordinarily active and aggressive in the assertion of papal powers in both the religious and secular spheres. In addition to Italy, he asserted papal control over Corsica, Sardinia, Spain, Hungary, and even Denmark. He condemned Philip I of France for the practice of simony (the purchase of spiritual power by financial means), and he sought to establish positive relations with Byzantium.
- Gregory VIII is perhaps most well known for his role in the investiture controversy.
  - The investiture issue is by nature messy and had been an irritant for some time. The basic question was whether the state authority or only the pope had the right to “invest” new bishops with the symbols of their authority; in effect, the issue concerned the power of appointment.
  - The state had an interest because such positions could be purchased, and placing political favorites as bishops strengthened the hands of secular rulers. The papacy had an interest for the same political reasons but with regard also to the central control of the church throughout the empire. Secondly, the papacy was concerned that simony would corrupt the appointment process entirely.
  - The issue flared in Gregory VII’s relations with Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, leading to mutual condemnations and excommunications. In 1075, Gregory charged the young king with crimes that deserved the ban of the church and even sought to depose him from his position as king.

- Gregory's intemperate language led Henry to summon a synod at Worms in 1076 that sought, in turn, to depose Gregory from the papacy. Gregory then excommunicated Henry, divested him of his royal authority, and released his subjects of their fealty.
- Lacking support from his nobles to effectively depose Gregory in turn, Henry went through an elaborate repentance at Canossa, but the actual issue of investiture remained unresolved.
- When conflict again flared, Gregory sought to excommunicate and depose Henry a second time, but the German princes rallied to Henry. Henry entered Italy with an army in 1084, and Gregory was forced into exile.
- The Concordat of Worms in 1122 subsequently agreed that appointments should be in the power of the church but stated that rulers could advise during the process.
- Gregory VII's internal reforms of the church also moved in the direction of greater centralized control by the papacy.
  - In all ecclesiastical disputes—say, between bishops—Gregory insisted that appeal was to be made to the pope rather than to synods of bishops, an initiative that bishops in some regions understandably resented.
  - The moral standards of local clergy were addressed through the imposition of compulsory celibacy; Gregory wrote an encyclical in 1074 that absolved Christians of obedience to bishops who allowed married priests. Similarly, simony—the practice of buying ecclesiastical positions—was strictly forbidden.
  - It was Gregory VII who demanded that Berengar, the theologian who had offered a minimalist “symbolic” understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, perform a confession of faith with respect to the “real presence” of Christ, thus presumably stimulating greater reverence for the Eucharist.



### Innocent III

- A full century later, we meet another super-pope, Innocent III (1160–1216; r. 1198–1216), who displayed an even more aggressive assertion of papal authority in matters both secular and religious.
- Born in the papal states of Italy of a noble family that over time produced nine popes, Lotario di Segni was educated in Rome, Paris, and Bologna, with a specific concentration on canon law. He took on a number of roles in the papal service, became a cardinal in 1190, and was elected pope by the College of Cardinals in 1198.
- As pope, Innocent III was obsessed with the *plenitudo potestatis* (“fullness of power”) of the papacy; he was the first pope to designate himself as “vicar of Christ” and spoke of himself as “between God and man; lower than God but higher than man.” He demanded absolute obedience from both bishops and kings.
  - In his encyclical letter “Venerabilem” (1202), Innocent asserted the right to examine those chosen by the imperial electors and then to appoint them; thus, he made Frederick II king of Sicily when the ruler recognized fealty to the pope.
  - Similarly, when King John of England was willing to recognize Innocent as his feudal overlord, the pope helped establish him in his reign.
  - Innocent called for the Fourth Crusade to liberate the Holy Land and saw its disastrous turn that led to the sacking of Constantinople and the establishment of Latin rule there.
  - He then declared a crusade against the heretics called the Albigensians—the “Cathars,” located in southern France, who represented a version of Gnostic Christianity. Innocent called for the armed crusade when a series of preaching missions against them failed. The resulting war extended for decades.

- The high point of Innocent III's papacy was the Fourth Lateran Council, called in 1213 and held in 1215. It was attended by many bishops, abbots, priors, and the representatives of several monarchs.
  - The council ratified the primacy of the papacy over other patriarchates, as well as its role in secular affairs; it also approved the election of Frederick II as emperor.
  - In addition to an exposition of the faith and of the sacraments, the canons of the council regulated religious orders and dioceses in considerable detail. Provincial councils every three years would look to the reformation of clergy. Clergy were to receive education at cathedral schools.
  - Particular attention was paid to the misconduct of clergy and to the regulation of marriage. Christians were to receive extreme unction before death and were to confess their sins at least once a year to the parish priest.
  - Jews and Muslims were to wear special clothing to distinguish them from Christians, and Christian princes were called on to take measures against anyone who blasphemed Jesus Christ.

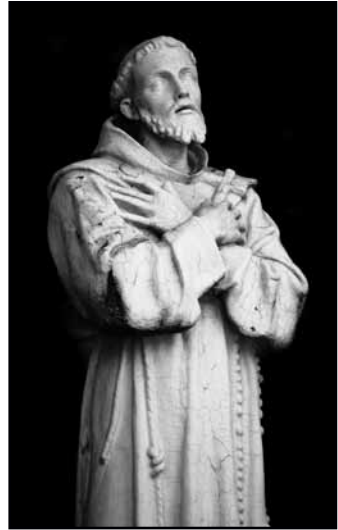
### **Saint Francis and Saint Dominic**

- Even though the Fourth Lateran Council forbade the establishment of new religious orders, Innocent III had already given approval to two significant innovations to the committed Christian life. The mendicant orders (the term comes from the Latin word for "beggars") were able more flexibly than monks to address changing needs and pursue the goals of a centralized church.
- Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) abandoned his wealth and status to serve Christ in poverty. He was a mystic and, before his death, received the stigmata—his body bore the wounds on hands and feet that were like those of the crucified Christ. His "little brothers" gathered around his charismatic figure and, wearing simple garments, preached everywhere, depending on alms for their support. A noblewoman named Clare founded a corresponding

order of women known as the Poor Clares.

- Innocent III approved Francis's short rule for the friars in 1209, and Francis may have attended the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The itinerant lifestyle of the Franciscans made them flexible instruments for many ministries.

- The history of the early order is extraordinarily complex, but out of Francis's ideals arose thousands of men committed to evangelical poverty, the care of the poor, and the saving of souls.



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**The first of the mendicant orders was founded by Francis of Assisi around the year 1209.**

- Almost inevitably, the order also gave rise to great theologians and mystical teachers, including Duns Scotus (1265–1308) and Bonaventura (1217–1274).

- Dominic de Guzmán (1170–1221) studied arts and theology, then sold his possessions during a famine to help the poor; he joined the canons regular in Osma and, after undertaking legations to northern Europe, conceived of the ideal of preaching the gospel to pagans. When he became engaged with the Albigensians, he and his companions founded the Order of Preachers (1208), which was approved by Innocent III in 1216 and fully recognized by Honorius III in 1218.

- From the Latin *dominican* came the tag “dogs of the Lord” for the fiery preaching and disciplined zeal of the new order.

- Despite his zeal to oppose heresy, it is doubtful that Dominic himself led the inquisition (the papal-led interrogation of those

suspected of heresy), but because of their great learning and dedication, both Dominicans and Franciscans were used by the papacy as agents of inquisition.

- Like the Franciscans, the Dominican order produced great theologians, including Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and great mystics, including Meister Eckhart (1260–1327), John Tauler (d. 1361), and Henry Suso (1295–1366).
- Together, the two mendicant orders not only served as flexible instruments of papal policy, but they energized evangelization and the care of the poor. Their commitment to the intellectual life made them the leading figures in the development of the medieval universities.

### Suggested Reading

Miller, *Power and the Holy in the Age of the Investiture Conflict*.

Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216)*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the political (and moral!) implications of the forgery known as the Donation of Constantine.
2. What does the investiture conflict tell us about the increased confidence of secular rulers in the West?

# Universities and Theology

## Lecture 33

One of the most impressive signs of a mature Christian culture in the High Middle Ages was the development of universities. As we have seen, the desire for higher learning within Christianity was never completely lost, even during the most chaotic periods of life in the West. Universities, though, were a new invention in the West; they emerged when they did because of the convergence of a number of factors. In a flash, over the span of some 80 years, four great universities were founded in Europe that quickly became important centers of learning and eventually contributed heavily to social change: Bologna in 1119, Paris in 1150, Oxford in 1167, and Cambridge in 1200.

### Context for the Emergence of Universities

- The convergence of a number of factors set the stage for the emergence of universities in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. We have already noted the increased wealth and security in Europe based on predictably good weather, steady crops, and successful trade—all these, plus population growth in urban areas, set the context for leisure as the basis of culture. Of considerable significance also was the production of manuscripts in monastery scriptoria, which reached a point of sufficient dissemination to enable shared learning at a higher level.
- The development of a professional clergy, as in the Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as the development of a professional diplomatic corps, demanded higher levels of education. The ordinary clergy would remain woefully undereducated within Catholicism until the Counter-Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but both monks and mendicants represented the most learned people of the medieval world.

- In such cities as Bologna and Paris, the number of cathedrals and monastic houses, each with its school, drew larger clusters of students and teachers together in a single location.
- The availability of scholarly resources for the first time made concentrated study in a specific field more possible.
  - A legal scholar named Gratian (d. c. 1160) drew into the framework of a tractate called the *Decretum Gratiani* some 4,000 canons that he pulled together from patristic writers, councils, and papal pronouncements.
  - The *Decretum* became the stable basis for the study of canon law, one of the main subjects in medieval universities and one required for adequate training in political and ecclesiastical life.

### Earliest Universities

- In their first stages, the universities were not the great sprawling campuses and huge dedicated buildings we associate with present-day universities; rather, they grew out of existing buildings and processes gathered into a “whole” (*universitas*).
- Students moved about from one “faculty” or “master” to another in the various monastic and cathedral schools; the growth of colleges (*collegia*) with distinct student bodies and faculties came with the establishment of student residence halls as growth in student numbers dictated.
- There were no “sciences” in the contemporary sense, thus, no laboratories or physical experimentation. Reading texts, lecturing on texts, and taking notes on lectures and texts made up the essential pedagogy. Students paid masters directly after a lecture and on the basis of its satisfying character.
- The curriculum through which students passed began with the study of the seven liberal arts and then moved to the advanced study of

either law or theology—the professional schools that prepared leaders for church and state.

- The first part of the liberal arts was the trivium, consisting of the three basic arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. It is important to note that the textual basis for these arts was entirely Christian: the Bible and other “classics” of the Christian tradition.
- The quadrivium was given to the four more advanced arts: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Again, these were grounded in lore derived from the classics of Christian history. To the quadrivium should be added philosophy, which was regarded as the necessary entry point into theology.
- It is important to be aware of the entirely Christian character of the medieval universities: Everything was in service of the church and depended on the support of the church. The study of law was canon law; the study of theology was Christian (Catholic) theology.

### Scholastic Theology

- In the medieval universities, theology was truly “the queen of the sciences” not only because its knowledge gave preferment in the most important profession, but also because it provided the fullest expression of the medieval conception of reality *sub specie aeternitatis* (“from the perspective of eternity”).
- The subject matter of theology was conceived of primarily in terms of doctrines. Over the course of centuries, the statements of the creeds and of Scripture were collated into collections of “sentences” (*sententiae*) that expressed key doctrines, together with the scriptural passages that supported the propositions.
  - This represented a radically different approach to the learning and reading of Scripture than had obtained in the monasteries and cathedral chapters; there, *lectio divina*, as we have seen, was a ruminative and meditative reading. But the schools were training professionals who had to be brought up to speed

within a short time; thus, Scripture was employed technically as “proof texts” for theological positions.

- The four books of *Sentences* written by Peter Lombard (1100–1160) provided doctrinal statements and scriptural proofs organized according to the topics of the Trinity, creation and sin, Incarnation and the virtues, and the sacraments and “last things” (death, judgment, heaven, hell). The *Sentences* became the standard textbook for Catholic theology and the basis for commentary by subsequent masters.
- If the substance of Scholastic theology was doctrine contained in propositions or sentences, its life and bite came from the invigoration offered by the challenge of philosophy, specifically that of Aristotle, whose works had been translated from Greek into Arabic by Muslims and from Arabic into Latin.
  - Aristotle’s teachings (for example, on the human soul and on the relation of God to the world) were less apparently congenial to Christian doctrine than had been those of Plato, whose view of the world had been adjudged compatible with the Bible by Christian thinkers from Justin through Origen to Augustine.
  - For such masters as Thomas Aquinas, however, the teachings of Ibn Sīnā (Latin, Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Latin, Averroës), based in an understanding of Aristotle that emphasized the godless aspect of the Greek sage, had to be engaged by the Catholic faith in the same way that ancient philosophers had to be engaged by the early church fathers if Christian faith was to be considered fully rational in character and reasonable to maintain.
- In its medieval manifestation, Scholastic theology had great dynamism because of its employment of dialectic, developed especially by Peter Abelard (1079–1142). His *Sic et non* (*Thus and Not Thus*) brought dialectical reasoning to theology as he worked through some 158 apparent contradictions in Christian philosophy and theology.



## Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus

- A brief look at two great Scholastic theologians reveals both the consistency and diversity in medieval theology, as well as its cosmopolitanism.
- Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), known later as the “Angelic Doctor,” produced a staggeringly great volume of thought in more than 90 works in his short 49 years of life. Although he called his work “so much straw” before his death and although it was at first condemned by the church, it remains the gold standard for Catholic theology.
  - Aquinas wrote commentaries on the philosophical writings of Aristotle, especially in metaphysics; commentaries on Scripture; defenses of the Dominicans against their opponents; liturgical works; philosophical treatises; and some 85 sermons.
  - His greatest works, however, are the two *Summas* (meaning “compendium” or “systematic encyclopedia”), the *Summa contra gentiles* and the *Summa theologiae* (or *Summa theologica*).
  - Following the basic structure of Lombard’s *Sentences*, the four parts of the *Summa theologiae* move inexorably through every question that faith poses to the human intellect, above all those posed by philosophy. Thus, Aquinas boldly and famously developed five rational proofs for the existence of God, though he knows the character of God must be learned through revelation.
  - The pattern of every “disputed question” is that of dialectic: presenting arguments for and against a truth before demonstrating the correct opinion, then answering the objections. The *Summa* is a thoroughgoing engagement of Christian faith and Greek philosophy.
- John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) was a Franciscan who studied and lectured at Oxford, then completed his requirements for the

doctorate in Paris and became a master there in 1305 before his life ended in Cologne.

- Dying even younger than Thomas (at 42), his main work is his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, as well as a set of commentaries on the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Porphyry.
- Scotus, known as the “Subtle Doctor,” sought a middle ground between Aristotelianism and Augustinian thought, distinguishing himself from Thomas in a number of important ways. Overall, he placed more emphasis on the human will and its freedom than he did on the intellect.
- Scotus placed particular emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ, arguing that it would have happened even if humans had fallen into sin. His thought was influential particularly within the Franciscan order.

### *The Divine Comedy*

- The suffusion of Christian theology in all the arts is illustrated brilliantly by the magnificent poem *The Divine Comedy*, written by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321); its three parts (the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*) encompassed the entire medieval worldview.
- Inspired by a Florentine woman (his “Beatrice”), Dante dedicated to her “a poem such as had been written for no lady before” and spent the years from her death in 1290 to his own in 1321 in the completion of his masterpiece.



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**Born in Florence, Dante sided with antipapal forces within Italy and then with Emperor Henry VII, and his opposition to the papacy led to several exiles from his native city.**

- The poem is an impressive fusion of classical and Christian cultures; both the descent to the underworld and the ascent to heaven are classical themes, but Dante combines them with the distinctive Christian understanding of purgatory as the place of postmortem purification.
- Combining political commentary and religious pathos in a structure as impressive as Thomas's *Summa*, Dante imagines a world in which human freedom and divine love intertwine in a drama that extends from the coldness of alienation from the divine to the ecstatic bliss of the vision of God.
- As much as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, Dante's poetry reveals the essence of the High Middle Ages in its synthesis of unity and beauty, of classical and Christian themes, and in the organization of all reality as a movement toward God.

### Suggested Reading

Evans, ed., *The Medieval Theologians*.

Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Compare and contrast the spirit and structure of the medieval and contemporary universities.
2. How did Scholastic theology provide an overarching view of reality that made sense of all other learning?

# The Great Plague

## Lecture 34

The self-confident ventures of the High Middle Ages—the Crusades, cathedrals, and universities—were followed by a period of calamity in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that had negative effects on the church and society. The first devastating event of this century was the great famine of 1315–1317, brought on by a general shift from a moderate to a colder climate. A mere nine years later, the plague hit, killing about half of the population worldwide. This was followed by manmade disasters, including a series of wars between Christian kings and their vassals. The obvious effect of these disasters was to induce an even sharper sense of mortality and fear within the population—and a desperate search for causes.

### Conflict in Christendom

- In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Crusader spirit was twisted beyond recognition in an endless series of wars between Christian kings and their vassals, leading to death and destruction within Christendom itself.
  - The papacy was caught up in the dynastic struggles of the Holy Roman Emperors, as well as other kingdoms, and was entangled in the constant battles among Italian powers, such as Venice and Florence.
  - An even more obvious example was the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between England and France, which was partly an expression of nationalism and partly a distortion of the idea of holy war.
- The papacy exceeded its prior claims to total authority in matters secular and sacred but found itself less a power broker than a pawn of powerful kings.
  - Boniface VIII (c. 1298–1303) issued a papal bull, *Unam sanctam*, in 1302 that not only claimed papal authority over the world but declared that no one could be saved without

acknowledging that authority. In 1303, he died as a prisoner in the Vatican.

- In 1309, the French pope Clement V took up residence in Avignon, a town in the southern region of France, beginning what's known as the "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," a period of more than a century when the popes resided outside of Rome.
- The death of Gregory XI in 1378 resulted in a divided papacy, with Clement VII reigning at Avignon and Urban VI in Rome. The "Great Schism" of pope and antipope continued until the Council of Constance in 1414 and was not completely resolved until 1417.

### Extreme Responses

- Such extreme circumstances generated and seemed (at least to some) to justify extreme behavior, even beyond that generated by the sheer need to survive in famine and plague. Christians seemed to have lost their moral bearings.
- Until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, bishops had followed the advice of Bernard of Clairvaux with respect to heretics: "Faith should come through persuasion rather than force," but that reasonable position changed with the decree *Ad abolendam* of Pope Lucius III in 1184. The initiative is all the more severe when we remember that heresy was not nearly the threat to the church in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that it had been in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, when only rhetoric was used as a weapon.
  - Lucius declared that bishops were to make inquisition for heresy in their dioceses and hand heretics over to secular authority for punishment.
  - When this local process proved ineffective, Pope Gregory IX took control of the inquisition around 1233, using members of the new mendicant orders as inquisitors. The mendicant inquisitors were answerable only to the papacy, not to local

bishops, although they still relied on secular authorities to carry out their decisions.

- Even more extreme, Innocent IV's *Ad extirpanda* in 1252 authorized the use of torture by the inquisition, although there is no evidence of its use in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Those found to be heretics who repented received the same sorts of penances (fasting, pilgrimages) that other sinners would receive after confession. Serious offenders could be confined in the inquisition's prisons and burned at the stake by secular authority; perhaps three people a year, on average, were thus executed.
- The inquisition was turned against the Knights Templar by Philip IV of France in 1307 and was even used by Pope John XXII against Franciscan "spirituals" in 1318.
- In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish rulers received permission from Sixtus IV to organize the inquisition against "Christianized Jews." After an *auto-de-fé* ("act of faith") confessing their crime, those convicted were executed.
- The hostility toward, and persecution of, Jewish communities that began with the First Crusade and was expressed in the controlling laws of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215)— and the burning of the Talmud in Paris (1242)—exploded in unparalleled violence in response to the great plague: Jews became a handy scapegoat for the sudden and unexplained deaths.
  - Fear and hysteria were fomented by rumors of Jews' poisoning wells or causing the plague by sacrificing Christian children.
  - In 1349, the Jewish communities of Mainz and Cologne were wiped out; in the same year, 2,000 Jews were murdered in Strasbourg. In all, some 60 major Jewish centers and 150 smaller settlements were destroyed during these irrational and violent outbursts.

## The Rise of Mysticism

- Perhaps not surprising in an age of such external turmoil, the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the flourishing of mysticism as an expression of Christian faith.
- We have already noted the presence of mystics among the new mendicant orders: Francis, Clare, and Bonaventura among the Franciscans and John Tauler, Henry Suso, and Meister Eckhart among the Dominicans.
- In the turmoil of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the female mystics Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) and Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373) invoked mystical visions to support a witness that was surprisingly activist, calling for the unification of the papacy and the reform of the clergy.
- Perhaps the rise of mysticism was most evident in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.
  - *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous guide to the contemplative life—through “shooting darts of love through the cloud of unknowing”—arose in a monastic (probably Benedictine) context in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Richard Rolle (1300–1349) was an anchorite whose meditations and poems on the Passion of Christ seem to emerge directly out of the experience of the plague.
  - Julian of Norwich was an anchoress of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century who recorded a series of visions (*Showings*) that revealed to her mysteries concerning God and “mother Jesus.” With her also, the sufferings of Christ were a constant preoccupation.
- One of the most distinctive writings of the time was *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an autobiographical account by an uneducated but well-off wife of a merchant (1373–1438), who traveled as a pilgrim to visit holy men and women (including Julian of Norwich) and had aspirations to the mystical life.

## Vernacular Literature

- Vernacular literature—increasingly widely disseminated with the invention of the printing press in 1440—testified to another kind of lay restlessness and portended later and greater changes. The century that saw the Black Death savage Europe also saw the beginnings of the Renaissance, a rebirth of classical learning.
- In England, roughly contemporary works provided a lay viewpoint on the condition of the church and society.
  - *Piers Plowman*, a work in Middle English attributed to William Langland (c. 1362–c. 1387), is an intense moralistic poem in which a simple plowman guides people to the truth. The work is profoundly medieval in sensibility and deeply critical of worldly abuse in the church.
  - *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400) recounts the stories told by pilgrims on the way to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, evoking the wide range of late-medieval religious postures, from the sincerely pious to the hypocritically ribald.
- In France, François Villon (1431–d. after 1463) attended the University of Paris, reveled among the disreputable, and killed a priest in a brawl. He was also the finest French poet of the late Middle Ages, with little of piety intruding in his verse. A century later, François Rabelais (1494–1553), a former Franciscan and Benedictine, became a physician and wrote the bawdiest of all great satires, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.
- In Italy, two authors in particular signaled the beginning of the Humanism characteristic of the Renaissance—a rediscovery of classical sources and ideals that would deeply challenge the certainties of the medieval worldview.
  - Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch, 1304–1374) spent his early life in Avignon; he was a great scholar who studied law at the University of Bologna and was deeply interested in Greek and Latin literature. He wrote extensively in Latin but was most



influential (on Chaucer, among others) through his poetry composed in Italian, in which themes of both human romantic love and religious longing are intertwined.

- Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) was also deeply learned in the classics. His most famous work, the *Decameron*, consists of 100 tales told by 10 young people over a period 10 days when they have fled the plague in Florence. A spiritual crisis later led Boccaccio to reject his earlier career, and he turned to composing more sober works in Latin.



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**We see the same combination of human romantic love and religious longing in Petrarch's poetry as we do in that of Dante, yet with Petrarch, there is a turn much more toward the classical than the Catholic.**

- Such writers show that creativity and imagination can thrive even in the worst of material circumstances. In the next lecture, we will see how equal creativity was summoned by Christians who sought to bring about reform in the face of growing ecclesiastical corruption.

## Suggested Reading

Arbeth, *The Black Death*.

Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways in which the plagues in the time of Justinian and in the 14<sup>th</sup> century fundamentally altered the course of history.

2. How does the inquisition appear from this distance as a desperate effort to exercise control in a world that refused to conform to the desire of the papacy to control it?

# Corruption and the Beginnings of Reform

## Lecture 35

**T**hroughout its history, Christianity has had the ability to generate reform movements based on the conviction that its high ideals were being compromised by actual practice. Early monasticism, for example, can be seen as a form of organized resistance to what the monks perceived to be the compromised position of the church after Christianity became the imperial religion. Later, such popes as Gregory VII and Innocent III worked for the reform of the clergy and fought the practice of simony. In this lecture, however, we consider the sort of corruption those reforms could not touch: the deep and systemic dysfunction in late-medieval Christianity and the first efforts at structural—as distinct from moral—reform.

### Christendom in the Middle Ages

- Given the chaotic state of the West during the migration of nations in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the medieval synthesis is remarkable both for its stability and its comprehensiveness.
  - If we mark the starting date for this synthesis as the coronation of Charlemagne in 800, Catholic culture shaped Europe for some 800 years.
  - This culture gathered a bewildering variety of warring tribes and diverse languages into a single coherent civilization from Poland to England, from Italy and Spain to Scandinavia.
  - Coherence was achieved not least by the use of a single language (Latin), a single creed, and a single religious authority (the pope).
- For all the tensions and corruptions that it created, the political dance between pope and emperor (and, later, between pope and kings) provided a fundamental stability to society and mutual legitimation of both institutions.

- Emerging first from a struggle simply to survive, Christianity grew to shape significant cultural accomplishments.
  - The way of life in monasteries and cathedral chapters represented an ideal of human existence ordered to the worship of God, in which “the love of learning and the desire for God” were intricately connected.
  - Cathedrals and the arts employed within them provided a focus for a religious form of art that has had enduring value.
  - The development of universities, with their study of law and theology, united the life of faith and the use of reason in a critical synthesis.
- There is, finally, no question that Christianity during this period provided the setting and stimulus for men and women of great sanctity. The religious fervor involved in the Crusades, pilgrimages, monastic vows, mendicant wanderings, mystical prayer, and so on may not always have been pure but was nevertheless largely genuine and astonishingly widespread.

### Structural Issues in Christianity

- Still, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was becoming clear that the medieval synthesis was badly in need of correction, not because of minor faults or problems but because of major and structural issues.
- The Scholastic theology that developed in the cathedral and monastic schools and in the universities quickly became “scholastic” in the negative sense; it was more philosophical and academic—removed from the life of faith.
  - Theology used Scripture as a repository of proof texts more than as a set of compositions that could challenge or energize thinking.
  - Doctrinal attention, in turn, both reflected and affected shifts in piety. For some, the divinity of Christ was so greatly

emphasized as to deemphasize his humanity, and the honor shown Mary threatened to displace the worship of Christ.

- In liturgy, worship in the cathedrals was more a matter of performance by the clergy than of participation of the faithful, carried out in a language (Latin) that was increasingly unknown to any but the learned clergy.
  - Eucharistic controversies stressing the “real presence” led to the “adoration” of the host more than the eating of a meal. The adoration of the Blessed Sacrament may have been initiated by Francis of Assisi and is attested as a lay practice in Paris around 1226. Eventually, the service of “benediction of the Blessed Sacrament” entered Catholic life.
  - “Sacramentals” increasingly displaced the sacraments as the focus of Catholic piety: devotion to the saints, collection of relics, pilgrimages, and the winning and selling of indulgences.
  - The life of piety could be regarded more as a set of practices designed to avoid eternal punishment in hell or the terrors of purgatory, rather than an expression of a living relationship with the resurrected Christ.
- In the political realm, the long involvement of the church in the affairs of state—supported by the Donation of Constantine—had the paradoxical effect of actually lessening its spiritual authority, making it appear (as it often actually was) as one power broker among others, rather than the representative of a “rule of God” that transcended human authorities.
- The hierarchical structure of Catholicism itself seemed badly in need of reform.
  - It established, in effect, a caste system, with ignorant laity completely disenfranchised, ignorant local clergy only slightly more powerful, and then (in ascending order of prestige, power, and wealth), monks, mendicants, bishops, cardinals, and the pope.

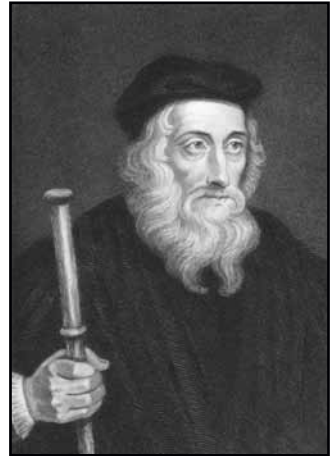
- Predictably, corruption in the system involved sex, money, and power.
- The centralized power of the papacy, once so important in forging the medieval synthesis, appeared increasingly to be a problem more than a solution, especially when its claims—as with Boniface VIII—stretched credulity. In the years of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism, the moral authority of the papacy was greatly reduced.

### The Beginnings of Reform

- The stirrings of reform and even revolt appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries among men and women who thought of themselves as Christians and good Catholics, but whose desire to reform, when resisted, sometimes became more radical, foreshadowing the great Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- Already in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Marsilius of Padua, rector at the University of Paris, wrote a devastating attack on the power of the papacy in *Defensor pacis* (*Defender of the Peace*, 1324). He was excommunicated for his views by John XXII in 1327 and spent the rest of his life, predictably, under the protection of the emperor.
  - Marsilius argued that the state is the unifying force in society and that the church must be subordinated to state authority; the church has no inherent authority in either temporal or spiritual matters.
  - The papacy, furthermore, is a human not a divine institution and would have no authority at all were it not for the Donation of Constantine (still thought to be authentic).
- The female mystics Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena both called for the reunification of the papacy and the reform of the morals of the clergy. Although they did not call for structural changes, their voices are significant for illustrating the awareness of moral corruption, even within the ranks of the most deeply committed Christians.

- John Wyclif (1330–1384) was one of the most important forerunners to the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He was a philosopher and theologian whose life was centered in the environs of Oxford. His radical teachings eventually lost him support at the university, and his teachings were condemned by the Council of Constance in 1415; nevertheless, he had enormous influence on later reformers.

- Wyclif sought guidance directly from Scripture and earlier patristic writers rather than the Scholastic theologians, and he inspired an English translation of the Bible undertaken by his disciples (1380–1392).



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- He developed a theory concerning the church that distinguished its eternal ideal from its material realization; all authority depended on divine grace, and rulers and clergy could be deposed if they were not in a state of grace.

**Wyclif sought guidance from Scripture and earlier patristic writers; in this sense, he represents a return to sources that would be important for the Reformation, analogous to the return to sources that generated the Renaissance.**

- In tractates written in 1377–1378, Wyclif argued that Scripture was the sole authority for the “eternal” church and that the papacy was not authorized by Scripture. In his work *On Apostasy* (1382), he argued that religious orders (especially the mendicants) had no basis in Scripture.

- In *On the Eucharist*, Wyclif attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation as superstitious and inculcated the moral and spiritual aspects of communion.

- John Huss (Jan Hus, c. 1372–1415) was born of a Czech peasant family in Bohemia, was ordained a priest, and became dean of the philosophical faculty at the University of Prague, as well as a popular preacher.
  - Huss became aware of Wyclif’s works, especially his political doctrines concerning the elimination of private property and hierarchy within society, and his teaching on the spiritual as opposed to the material church.
  - His violent sermons on the immorality of the clergy stimulated resistance, and under Innocent VII, Huss was forbidden to preach in 1407. When the Czech state took over the University of Prague and made Huss rector, papal resistance was even greater. Huss was excommunicated in 1411, and his followers were interdicted.
  - After writing his *On the Church* (substantially borrowed from Wyclif), Huss was granted safe passage to the Council of Constance, but on his arrival, he was imprisoned, and he died at the stake in 1415.
- Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406–1457) was an Italian Humanist and a professor at Pavia, but his controversial writings led him to seek refuge with King Alfonso of Aragon.
  - In 1440, his use of historical-critical methods established that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery; this eliminated a cornerstone of the papal claims to temporal power in Europe.
  - In 1442, he undertook a critical comparison of the Greek New Testament and the Vulgate, which had the effect of diminishing the assumed authority of the version of Scripture used in churches.
- Finally, Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was a Dominican priest who studied philosophy; as a professor at San Marco and the University of Bologna, he emphasized the knowledge of Scripture in the original languages.



- When he became rector at San Marco in 1491, Savonarola adopted an apocalyptic style of preaching, condemning the corruption of society and the church.
- On the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, he set up a theocratic regime in Florence, seeking to establish a Christian culture based on the Bible in opposition to the “pagan culture” of the Humanists.
- Despite being excommunicated by Alexander VI in 1497, Savonarola continued to preach and published a defense of Christianity. Declaring that Alexander was not even a Christian much less pope, Savonarola turned public opinion against himself and, after being condemned for schism and heresy, was hanged and burned in 1498.
- These Catholic reformers anticipated virtually every theme that would form the basis of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but they remained too isolated to accomplish the goals that in the next century would become more widely shared and more effectively pursued.

### Suggested Reading

Evans, *John Wyclif*.

Weinstein, *Savonarola*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Discuss the ways in which “good Catholics” of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries anticipated in thought and action the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Comment on the following statement: The reforming initiatives of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were distinguished by their focus on structural and not merely moral changes.

# The Ever-Adapting Religion

## Lecture 36

Our survey of Christianity has been along fairly well-lit paths, where historical evidence has been sufficient for us to observe the ways in which this religion has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for cultural adaptation. In this lecture, we will review that historical path and follow it briefly from the 16<sup>th</sup> century into the present. We'll also examine the question of the religion's fidelity to its own identity through all of its cultural permutations. In the end, we find this fidelity in the lives of the "saints"—not just those who are well known to us but those who sought to live by the gospel as they understood it and, by doing so, communicated something of its power to succeeding generations.

### Tracing the History of Christianity

- Beginning as a sect of Judaism in Palestine and interacting intensely with the symbols of Torah as it shaped its own Scriptures, Christianity's first great expansion involved interaction with the dominant Greco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean world.
- During the centuries of persecution, as the movement sought self-definition within a hostile empire, further negotiations with culture were required: To Judaism's Scripture, Christians said yes, but to its language and law, they said no; to Greco-Roman moral philosophy, Christians said yes, but to its religion, no; Christians said yes to powerful religious experience, but no to experiences that threatened tradition.
- Becoming the established religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine caused the greatest cultural adaptation: A formerly despised sect regarded as a superstition became the religious glue for a world-spanning empire. In every respect, Christianity had to stretch mightily in order to play the role assigned it.

- The form of Christianity based in Constantinople became ever more Greek in character and ever more integrally entwined with the culture called “Byzantine.” This form continued after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 in the Orthodox Christianity of the Russian Empire.
- The form of Christianity based in the old capital city of Rome had to negotiate its existence in the face of the collapse of the empire. A fusion of disparate elements was required to shape “Christendom,” a civilization that lasted for more than 700 years: the emergence of the papacy, the development of religious orders in harmony with the papacy, and the nurturing of a new Holy Roman Empire in the Frankish kingdom.

### **The Reformation and Beyond**

- This clear historical narrative would continue for the following centuries and reveal even more vividly Christianity’s adaptive capacities.
- The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century divided Christianity even more decisively than the split between Catholicism and Orthodoxy in 1054. The fragmentation of reform into many Protestant denominations would have as a corollary the conformation of diverse forms of Protestant Christianity to diverse national cultures.
- A perhaps unexpected effect of the challenge put to Catholicism by Protestant reformers was the Counter-Reformation, which involved simultaneously a reaffirmation (even a hardening) of doctrinal and ecclesiastical positions and a thoroughgoing moral and educational reform of religious orders and local clergy.
- The religious crisis caused by the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also had the unanticipated result of generating enormous energy in every form of Christianity in Europe. Christian kings sent missionaries to accompany explorers in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the discovery of new lands and peoples generated

fresh translations of the Bible and the establishment of Christian institutions in distant lands.

- Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, therefore, Christianity became a truly “world religion,” with adherents in every land and language.
  - As it expanded, Christianity was increasingly required to engage questions of cultural diversity. Such questions, in turn, raised concerns about the possibility of compromising Christianity’s identity or the use of the Christian mission as an instrument of European cultural hegemony.
  - These questions remain open, even as Christianity faces more severe challenges that have been posed by modernity. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all, in light of the greatest part of Christian history, is this: How would Christianity deal with the end of the Constantinian era, when the church was decisively severed from its role as glue to the state if not society and when the state could once again even be hostile to this religion?

### **The Limits of Historical Knowing**

- It is important to recognize that this “grand historical narrative” also misses a great deal of “what really happened” in the Christian past. As we noted in the first lecture of this course, there are intrinsic limits to our historical knowing.
- Our ability to talk about this religion as a historical entity depends a great deal on Christianity’s involvement in the political order, precisely because it is in the realm of the political that chronology, documentation, and major events are most in evidence.
- When Christianity has lacked clear political involvement or when historical evidence is not available, little can be said about the religion in those times or places.
- There is every reason to believe, however, that Christianity thrived at the level of peoples’ lives, even when little or nothing of historical significance rose to the level of analysis.

## Fidelity to the Christian Identity

- It is against the backdrop of such observations concerning historical visibility that any question concerning Christianity's fidelity to its identity through all its cultural permutations should be posed.
- The question of "the essence of the religion" and "religious forms" is a worthwhile one but is particularly difficult to answer in the case of Christianity, which as we have seen, had no stable identity or form of its own before it engaged, was shaped by, and shaped the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural worlds. Were the first "forms" of Christianity constitutive of its "essence"? Or is the essence one that can exist in dramatically different expressions?
  - The answer to the question may depend to some extent on what forms draw our attention. If we focus, for example, on the forms of institution, public liturgy, conciliar decisions, and structures of authority, we might come up with one conclusion.
  - If we focus, however, on forms of religious expression that do not rise so easily to visibility, we might draw another conclusion; such forms might include acts of piety, forms of prayer, or the witness of married life or celibate existence. Note that we are not, here, appealing to a vague "spirit" as distinct from the "body" so as to argue that real Christianity is an inward, "spiritual" thing; we are talking entirely about bodies in different degrees of visibility.
- The differences in Christianity in the forms that are available to historical inquiry are obvious and dramatic.
  - There is a great distance between the simple rituals of baptism and Lord's Supper in the age of persecution and the elaborate liturgy and sacramental system of the church under Constantine.
  - The desert mothers and fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century might recognize a fellow ascetic in Benedict of Nursia, but they would not know what to think about the magnificence of the

Abbey of Cluny and the hierarchical and liturgical dance of life in that monastery.

- The bishops who exercised care within dioceses in the 4<sup>th</sup> century could hardly have imagined the central authority of the papacy in the High Middle Ages, nor could Pope Gregory I have understood the actions and claims of Gregory VII or Innocent III.
- The Christian gatherings in private homes and catacombs in the first three centuries would have been swallowed by the grand spaces of the Roman basilicas and the medieval cathedrals.
- The evangelist Matthew, who reported Jesus as forbidding retaliation, and the martyrs who willingly died despite being treated unjustly could not have comprehended the logic behind the Crusades that killed thousands of Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims.
- The structure and selling of indulgences, the system of Scholastic theology, and the practice of the inquisition could have found no place in Christianity's earliest period.
- Indeed, as the study of Christian theology and art can easily demonstrate, even the conceptions of Christianity's central figure have undergone constant cultural adaptation.
- Precisely such dramatic changes in religious and cultural forms made the Protestant reformers charge that in Catholicism, Christianity had also lost its essence and that only a return to the earlier forms, such as those found in the New Testament, could restore the truth of the Gospels.
  - Thus, reformers insisted that the essence of Christianity—authentic Christianity—was to be found in the elimination of the elaborate and highly structured and a return to the simple and spontaneous.

- The targets of the reformers were consistent: Scholastic theology, the power of the papacy, the complications of the liturgy and canon law, the institution of monasticism and religious life generally, and the emphasis on externals rather than internal realities, on “works” rather than the simple response of the heart.
- The justice of the reformer’s charges is difficult to deny, for the changes they point to are obvious to anyone with a historical sense. Yet the fundamental charge that Christianity had lost its “essence” in the time leading up to the Reformation may be much too strong.
  - The problem with a counter-assertion, however, is the difficulty of substantiating it; can it be shown that ordinary Christians lived lives fully consonant with the Jesus of the Gospels, the teaching of Paul, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit?
  - Did the elaboration or even the corruption of public forms also corrupt in a fundamental way those practices of piety, charity, generous devotion, and quiet witness of a good life that had always, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, been the proclaimed goal of the Christian message?
  - Here, the evidence of the saints must count for something. By “saints,” we mean others than those officially recognized by the church, just as we must include others than the visible historical players.
  - We must include those who lived lives of patient endurance, quiet service, and deep charity in accordance with the gospel and, by so living, communicated something of the gospel’s power from one generation to the next. It does not matter whether they were monk or mendicant, pilgrim or poet. What matters is the character of their lives.
  - In the final analysis, although it would make for dull reading because it would be so lacking in high adventure or political

intrigue, perhaps the most authentic history of Christianity is, after all, the history of the saints.

- Perhaps there were not so many of such folk as one would like in all these long years, but there were surely enough, for it must be said that without some such spark of life being transmitted from generation to generation, there would not have been any history at all to speak of.

### Suggested Reading

Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*.

Pelikan, *Jesus through the Ages*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How does the question concerning the “essence” of Christianity force us to recognize the limits of historical knowledge?
2. How does the post-Constantinian era alter the rules of the game within which Christianity was played for most of its history?



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