

THE EARLY CHURCH (1-600)

Christianity began as a Jewish messianic movement with little thought of outreach to the Gentile world. Peter, reluctantly, baptised the first Gentiles. But to Paul was given that full spiritual insight that enabled him to press for the liberation of the gospel from the legalistic swaddling clothes of Judaism. Called as an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul led the mission to take the gospel throughout the Roman empire. His letters to the various churches that he founded served as written standards of the apostolic witness to the gospel of Jesus. Paul strove to keep together the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church in a unity characterised by diversity and flexibility. He also witnessed the tragic hardening of the Jews against the gospel and the development of the church into a majority Gentile institution.

The following factors contributed to the rapid expansion of the Christian faith: the Jewish Diaspora; koine Greek; the Septuagint; and Roman civilisation.

Early persecution. As the distinction between church and synagogue became clearer, Christians experienced increasing Roman persecution. At first this was sporadic and local. {e.g. Nero (64), Domitian (81-96), Polycarp (150), Vienne and Lyons (177)} Christians were widely abhorred as guilty of atheism, cannibalism, incest and sedition.

Early heresies. Various Gnostic sects attempted to accommodate the Christian faith to popular pagan culture. Marcion totally rejected the Old Testament, abridged the New Testament, and taught a docetic Christ. Montanus promoted a prophetic renewal and Adventist movement with an exaggerated discipline and asceticism.

Early Fathers.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters on his way to Rome and martyrdom in 110.

He taught a threefold order of ministry consisting of a bishop, presbyters and deacons in order to maintain unity and truth in the local church.

Justin was the greatest of the second century apologists. He saw Christ as the *Logos Spermatikos* (seminal reason or word) who had inspired the Greek philosophers to attain some partial knowledge of the truth, which found its fulfilment in Christianity. Justin wrote two Apologies, *Dialogue with Trypho*, and was martyred in Rome c165.

Irenaeus became bishop of Lyons in 177. He combated Gnostic ideas in five books, *Against Heresies*. He emphasised the **apostolic tradition** and the **rule of faith**.

Tertullian was converted in adult life and wrote extensively in Latin, making important contributions to the development of a Trinitarian theology. Inclined to strict moral views, he joined the Montanists c207.

Origen (185-254) was a learned exegete and scholar and a prolific writer. He combined a deep commitment to the inspired Scriptures and loyalty to the church with speculative ideas of a platonic kind.

Later persecutions. Between 250 and 312 sustained attempts were made by various emperors to exterminate Christianity in the interest of the state. Severe persecutions were experienced under Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260), Diocletian and Galerius (303-311). Both martyrdom and apostasy were widespread. Differences over how to treat the lapsed resulted in two major schisms:

Novatianists opposed the reception of the *lapsi* back into the church after the Decian persecution. They set up a rival church which lasted to about the 7th C.

Donatists (312-) rejected Caecilian, bishop of Carthage, on the grounds that one of his consecrators, Felix, was a *traditor*. They became very strong in N. Africa.

An empire converts

Emperor **Constantine** became a Christian in 312, after seeing a vision directing him to follow the Christian God. The **Edict of Milan** (313) gave religious freedom to all. But Constantine's successors took increasing measures to suppress paganism. Julian's attempt to revive paganism failed and by 392 Theodosius had forbidden all pagan worship.

Christian emperors involved themselves closely in church affairs. Constantine summoned the **Council of Nicaea** in 325 to resolve the problem of Arianism. Despite the condemnation of Arius, the Arian struggle continued for another fifty years before the **Council of Constantinople** (381) confirmed the Nicene Creed.

After the Arian struggle the church was drawn into prolonged controversies concerning the union of deity and humanity in the person of Christ. The **Council of Ephesus** condemned Nestorianism (dividing Christ) in 431. Eutychianism (denying that Christ had two natures) was condemned at the **Council of Chalcedon** in 451. Chalcedon produced a complex consensus document that skilfully combined the major theological emphases of the time. Tensions and rivalries between important Christian centres (Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome) played a negative role in these Christological discussions.

Unhappiness with Chalcedon resulted in major schisms in the East. Monophysite (one nature) and Nestorian communities have survived to the present day. Political and cultural factors played a role in these schisms.

Important Church Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries

Athanasius (296-373), the champion of Nicaea and bishop of Alexandria, fought for the orthodox Nicene faith all his life.

Key writers and scholars in the struggle against Arianism were the **Cappadocian Fathers**:

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-90), son of a bishop and himself the bishop of Constantinople for a brief period; **Basil the Great** (330-79), monastic pioneer and bishop of Caesarea, and **Gregory of Nyssa** (335-94), a brother of Basil.

Martin of Tours (335-97) left the Roman army when he was converted to Christ. He was appointed bishop of Tours and deeply influenced religious and monastic life in France.

Ambrose (339-97) was a civic leader of Milan who was elected bishop by popular vote while still a catechumen. A renowned preacher and hymn writer, he strongly influenced Theodosius.

Jerome (347-420) was a great biblical scholar who produced the Latin Vulgate translation and wrote many biblical commentaries.

Chrysostom (347-407). One of the greatest preachers of the early church, he was later appointed bishop of Constantinople where his plain preaching incurred the wrath of Empress Eudoxia resulting in his banishment and exile.

Augustine (354-430), a dissolute Manichee in his youth, he was later converted in Milan through the influence of Ambrose, and served for 35 years as the bishop of Hippo. He wrote extensively against Manicheism (dualism), Donatism and Pelagianism (denial of human inability).

Patrick (390-400), the apostle of Ireland, was brought up in a Christian family in Britain. Captured by Irish pirates at the age of 16 he served six years as a slave in Ireland. Managing to escape, he later received a call to return to Ireland to evangelise the people.

The collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, which was overrun by Barbarians, contributed to the growing separation between Eastern Orthodoxy and western (Roman) Catholicism. The bishops of Rome developed a theological basis for their supremacy in the church.

THE MIDDLE AGES (600-1500)

Gregory the Great served as a monk before becoming bishop of Rome from 590 to 604. Drawn into temporal as well as spiritual affairs, he strengthened the papacy, wrote extensively, and organised a mission to England.

THE RISE OF ISLAM. Born in 570, Muhammad claimed to receive revelations from God. By the time of his death in 632, the whole of Arabia had been brought into submission to Islam. In the next hundred years Muslim armies conquered the Middle East, much of the Byzantine Empire, North Africa and most of Spain. By the time that the westward spread of Islam was stopped by Charles Martel at Tours in 732, the new Muslim empire stretched from Spain to the Indus (Pakistan).

In the Western Europe Anglo Saxon missionaries such as **Willibrord** (Apostle of Frisia, 658-739) and **Boniface** (Apostle of Germany, 680-745) played an important role in extending the faith. A renaissance of Christian civilisation was promoted by the king of the Franks, **Charlemagne**. In 800 he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by pope Leo III. Charlemagne's chief advisor was the English monk, **Alcuin** of York, one of the most learned scholars and theologians in Europe. Many monastic and cathedral schools were established. Charlemagne saw himself as a sacral ruler with authority over church and state. In order to secure the independence of the church from secular control, the popes magnified their power and authority, sometimes by devious means (e.g. the Donation of Constantine and the pseudo Isidorian Decretals). In the Carolingian era controversies raged around the doctrine of predestination (Gottschalk vs. Hincmar) and the eucharist (Radbertus vs. Ratramnus).

Charlemagne's empire fell to pieces after his death. German rulers revived the concept of a Holy Roman Germanic Empire in the 10th century. Invasions and raids by pagan Magyars and Norsemen (Vikings) brought much destruction to Christian Europe in the 9th and 10th centuries. The papacy, too, became corrupt, incapable of effective leadership. Despite these reverses, however, the gospel continued to spread to the northern and eastern parts of Europe. The Scandinavian peoples were evangelised in the 10th and 11th centuries. Bohemia, Poland and Hungary were also reached in the same period.

The Cluniac Revival. Founded in 909, the monastery of Cluny in France led a movement for the restoration of church discipline and freedom from secular control. A leading reformer, Hildebrand, was elected pope **Gregory VII** in 1073. He was determined to wrest control of ecclesiastical appointments out of the hands of civil rulers. His campaign against lay investiture brought him into conflict with emperor Henry IV who was forced to submit to Gregory at **Canossa** in 1077.

The Crusades. When the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine forces in 1071 and overran Asia Minor, Alexius Comnenus appealed to the West for aid. Pope Urban II responded by calling Western Christians to take up arms to free the Holy Land from Muslim control. The first crusade (1096-99) succeeded in capturing Jerusalem. Muslim counter attacks and the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187 prompted three more crusades, none of them really successful. The 4th crusade, financed by

Venice, conquered Constantinople, greatly embittering Eastern Christians. The era of the crusades finished with fall of Acre in 1291.

New Monastic Orders. In 1097 the monastery of Cîteaux was founded, the motherhouse of the Cistercians. They emphasised isolation, labour, simplicity and austerity. The most famous Cistercian was **Bernard of Clairvaux**, one of the greatest preachers of the Middle ages—‘superior to all the other teachers’ said Luther, ‘because he preaches Christ so excellently.’ He also influenced the 2nd crusade.

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) renounced wealth to preach repentance, simplicity and joy. The Franciscan Order was approved in 1209.

Dominic Guzman (1170-1221) founded the Order of Preachers to combat heresy and promote missions.

The universities and scholasticism. Out of monastic and cathedral schools the first universities developed in the 12th centuries. Scholastic theology flourished producing great teachers such as **Anselm of Canterbury** (1033-1109), whose *Cur deus homo* became a classic on the atonement; **Peter Abelard** (1079-1142) whose daring reasoning earned the hostility of Bernard of Clairvaux; **Peter Lombard** (1100-1160) whose *Four Books of Sentences* became the most widely used theological textbook of the Middle Ages; **Bonaventura** (1221-74), the Franciscan mystical theologian who became head of the Franciscan order; **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-74), the Dominican scholar whose *Summa Theologiae* became one of the most influential books on Systematic Theology ever written. It attempted to reconcile Catholic teaching with Aristotle’s philosophy, building the temple of Christian truth on the foundation of rational knowledge and divine revelation.

Papal power and growing unrest. Innocent III (pope 1198-1216) determined to build a strong papal state as a bulwark of papal independence. He asserted his authority over the rulers of Germany, England and France. He placed England and France under interdict to bring about submission to his will. Heretics and Jews experienced increasing oppression. The **Cathars** were a dualistic movement that flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries, especially in southern France. In 1208 Innocent III launched a crusade against them. In 1227 the Inquisition was established with the aim of rooting out heresy. The **Waldenses** were the followers of Valdes of Lyons who gave all his wealth to the poor about 1174 and began to preach (cf. Francis). Opposition by the clergy forced them out of the church.

Clement V, elected pope in 1305, moved the seat of the papacy to Avignon in France where it remained nearly 70 years (**Avignon captivity** 1309-77). Gregory XI returned to Rome but after his death tensions between Italian and French interests resulted in the election of two popes, one in Rome and the other in Avignon (the **Great Schism**, 1378-1417). Different countries supported different popes.

To bring this scandal to an end leading scholars called for an ecumenical council to heal the rift and reform the church. The **Council of Pisa** (1409) deposed both popes and elected another, resulting in three popes. The **Council of Constance** (1414-18) succeeded in healing the schism (and executing John Huss). But the conciliar assertion of authority over the papacy was rejected by the new pope, who ignored the

Council of Basle (1431-49). The conciliar movement fizzled out. A powerful papacy became deeply involved in the Renaissance, sinking to new depths of intrigue, immorality and corruption (e.g. Rodrigo Borgia–Alexander VI who burnt Savonarola in 1498).

Despite the problems of medieval Christianity, its accomplishments must not be overlooked: the evangelisation of Europe, the recovery of Spain, the rise of schools and universities, improvements in literacy and education, and the establishment of some measure of order and stability.

Eastern Orthodoxy in the Byzantine Empire

After the collapse of Roman power in the West, Constantinople became the centre of the continuing Roman Empire in the East, better known as the Byzantine Empire. The Eastern Church was officially one with the church in the West, but for cultural, political and geographic reasons it was practically quite separate and went its own way. In the 8th century, the Eastern Orthodox Church was convulsed by the **Iconoclastic Struggle**. Beginning with Leo the Isaurian (717-41), various emperors sought to suppress the use of icons as idolatry. Iconodules such as John of Damascus defended the use of icons as an aid to worship and accused iconoclasts of denying the proper relation between God and his creation. The Second Council of Nicaea (787) approved the use and veneration of icons but not their worship.

Relations between the Eastern and Western churches continued to deteriorate. Controversy over the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed led to mutual excommunication and formal schism for a brief period (the Photian schism 867-869).

The expansion of Orthodoxy to the Slavs.

Cyril and Methodius were the pioneer missionaries to Moravia in 860, inventing a script for the Slavonic language. Orthodoxy spread to Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania. In 988, Vladimir, prince of Kiev, received the Orthodox faith, together with many of his subjects—the beginning of Russian Orthodoxy. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453), Moscow emerged as the foremost centre of Orthodoxy in the world (the 3rd Rome).

Various factors led to the growing rift between East and West: rivalry between Rome and Constantinople; differing religious practices (celibacy, unleavened communion bread, modes of baptism); theological differences (especially *filioque*). Tensions came to a head in 1054 when the pope's representative, cardinal Humbert, excommunicated Patriarch Cerularius, who responded in like manner. Any hopes that the schism might be healed were dashed by the capture of Constantinople by crusading armies in 1204. Although the Byzantines were able to regain Constantinople, their empire was fatally weakened and fell to the Muslims in 1453. Despite its political misfortunes, Eastern Orthodoxy still produced many vigorous spiritual movements and individuals of great piety and theological insight, such as **Simeon the New Theologian** (949-1022) and **Gregory Palamas** (1296-1359).