

Introduction to Church History

The Medieval Church in the West

1. The collapse of the Roman Empire and the “Dark Ages”

The Survival of Christianity in the British Isles

Rome abandons the province of Britain in 407AD. Waves of Saxon/Jutes/Dane invaders arrive soon after. Romano-British culture and Christianity moves West into Wales and Cornwall. Wales becomes the first centre for monastic evangelisation:

St Patrick (trafficked to Ireland by pirates, escapes home, then returns as a missionary monk) – c.400 – c.461.

St Illtud : mid 6th century,

St David: early 6th century to 589.

Scotland had never been evangelised in the Roman era as it wasn't part of the Empire.

In 563, St Columba (Columcille) arrived on the Isle of Iona, just off the Scottish mainland and founded the Abbey there.

Evangelisation of the Saxons

From the North:

St Aidan sailed from Iona to Lindesfarne (off the Northumbrian coast) at the invitation of the local king St Oswald (who had converted prior to inheriting the throne).

St Cuthbert is a key leader and protagonist for Christianity in the North.

From the South:

In 595AD, Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great) initiated a mission to convert the Anglo-saxons, with Augustine (later, Augustine of Canterbury) at its helm. Augustine was successful in converting the local gentry of Kent and established Canterbury as his first cathedral.

Christianity spreads north from Kent to meet Christianity in Northumbria. Two provinces exist, centred on York and Canterbury.

Different practices between the old British Christian communities and Rome – due to historical isolation. Centred on *Calculating the Date of Easter*, *Monastic Tonsure*, and *The Baptism Liturgy*. The matter came to a head, and was formally resolved at the Synod of Whitby (664) where the Northumbrian church accepted the Roman practice.

So-called ‘Celtic Christianity’

BEWARE THIS TERM! Now academically suspect as a concept:

- a) Not really restricted to ethnic Celts – which predate Roman occupation.
- b) Used by the Protestant cause in the English Reformation to suggest British Christianity was

somehow 'independent' from Rome on principle – it wasn't.

c) Muddled with 19th century romanticism and 20th century new-age ideas to imply 'closer to nature' than other forms of Christianity. No evidence it was – some evidence from 19th century sources was fabricated.

The spread of Christianity among the tribes of Europe

Britain was influential in helping to evangelise the tribes of the European mainland:

St Columbanus (543 – 615) From North of Ireland, worked in Burgundy amongst the Franks, then his companion **St Gall** went into Switzerland while Columbanus went to Lombardy (Northern Italy) to evangelize there (and to correct their Arianism). Founded monastery at Bobbio and is buried there.

St Boniface (657 – 754) Originally called 'Winfrith', born in Exeter. Left England in 716 to go to Frisia (Holland) to join work started by **St Willibrord**. Went to Rome and with papal blessing (and renamed Boniface) travelled to Germany and evangelised local pagans – the cutting down of the sacred oak.

Boniface was also an excellent diplomat and organiser, helping plant the structure of the Church, not just the faith, amongst the German peoples. Made the first Archbishop of Mainz by the pope.

2. The Carolingian Renaissance to the High Medieval Period

The phrase 'Carolingian' is from the Latin for 'Charles' and relates to 'Charles the Great' or 'Charlemagne', King of the Franks 742 – 814. Over his lifetime, Charlemagne successfully united most of Western Europe under his rule (including France, Germany, Switzerland and Northern Italy and Eastern Europe as far as the Slavic border). As a result, Pope Leo III crowned him as the first Holy Roman Emperor in 800.

Big supporter of the rule of the papacy: the stability of his reign allowed theology to thrive in a way it hadn't for centuries.

Charles' empire did not survive him, with the Eastern borders most pressured. Nevertheless, his influence was lasting and felt throughout what became known as 'Europe'. The later 'Holy Roman Empire' (from 962) was based on Charles' title, though centred on Germany rather than France. Charlemagne's rule effectively ensured an organised Church throughout Northern Europe.

By the year 1000, Western Europe was essentially fully Christian: so by the time of the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066, there was never again to be an issue of a conquest by a foreign faith.

The Conquest and Reconquest of Muslim Europe

Mohammed lived between c570 and c632. In 711, Islamic forces from North Africa crossed into Spain, conquering the Goths and Visigoths who had settled there. The expansion continued until the Moors crossed the Pyrenees into Gaul but their advance north was stopped by **Charles Martel**, (c. 688 – 741) a Frankish king and ancestor of Charlemagne. The Moor's territory was reduced by degrees in the later medieval centuries. The last Moorish stronghold was Granada, which fell in 1491 to the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Muslim intellectual thought thrived during the period of the Moorish occupation, and in many ways Muslim Spain was further advanced in the area of science and technology than was Catholic Europe. Significant thinker: **Averroes** (Arabic: Ibn Rashd; 1126 – 1198) had drawn from Aristotelian

texts which had been translated into Arabic in Baghdad in the 9th century. With the reconquista, Averroes' work reintroduced lost work by Aristotle into the intellectual life of medieval Europe.

The Papacy

The Bishop of Rome's significance had grown through the Patristic period. Rome had played a key role in the critical debates in the early Council, and its Western voice was key to the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, with the influence of the *Tome* of Pope Leo I.

Two key popes helped grow the influence and claims of the Bishopric of Rome to be the mother church of the Western Church: **Gregory the Great** (540 – 604) was a monk, reformer and theologian who established the credibility of the papacy at a time of upheaval. Decline during 8th century. In 1049, **Pope Leo IX** sought to reform the office, along with other bishoprics, by reform of Canon Law. Key roles of the papacy included approving the coronation of the Holy Roman emperor and claims over the jurisdiction of kings. In the 14th century, political and military struggles meant the papacy moved to **Avignon**, but this eventually led to schism (due to competing royal protection) eventually to the point when there were THREE popes: in Avignon, in Rome, in Pisa and in Avignon. The schism was eventually resolved by the Council of Constance (1414). The Council was a great success and led a view (known as *Conciliarism*) that the Church may be best governed by General Councils, when there were disputes involving the Church and the papacy. This stance was later used by Martin Luther in appeal against the pope.

Heretics, Saints and Religious Movements

The position of Christian heretics was perilous from the time of the conversion of Constantine. In the West, burning of heretics began in Spain in the 11th century. In England, in the early 1400s Parliament passed the *de heretico comburendo* (on the burning of heretics), which was in force throughout the Reformation.

The first heresies of the early medieval period were old ones: mainly from Arian visigoths, manichaeans and Donatists. However, in the high medieval period, periods of ecstatic religious activities gave rise to condemnations and burnings. The **Cathars** of the 12th century held a dualism of good vs evil, and an anti-clerical attitude which was condemned. They were ruthlessly persecuted in southern France, and this led to a number of violent and bloody battles.

A number of key saints are associated with monasticism (see Reading Topic). **St Benedict** (c. 480 – c. 547) of Nursia re-organised monasticism around his Rule. The outright success of this communal life paradoxically led to a decline in its demands upon its members, and a number of movements arose within monasticism to reform the laxity that came to Benedictine communities through their wealth. These included the *Cluniac Reform* based in Cluny, Burgundy. And the *Cistercian Reform*, based in Citeaux, south of Dijon.

In the 12th century, two saints, **Dominic** and **Francis**, each adopted a different approach to the religious life which surrendered the stability of the abbey in favour of a more peripatetic approach to ministry. Dominic founded the *Order of Preachers*, in Castile, Spain in 1215.

Francis had no particular religious affections until he was taken a prisoner of war, during which his faith was kindled. Whilst on pilgrimage to Rome, he joined some beggars at St Peter's. On returning to Assisi, he had a vision whilst visiting a derelict chapel in which an icon of Christ spoke to him from the cross, asking him to rebuild his church. He established a small community, focussing on serving the needs of the poor, the sick and marginalised. Pope Innocent III recognised the order, even though its rejection of any wealth or possessions was regarded as suspicious by

some.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). He studied at the University of Paris where his teacher was the fellow Dominican *Albertus Magnus*, who had been influenced by the 'new' Aristotelian philosophy from Averroes (see above). Albert's influence on Thomas was to set the trajectory of this theology, which sought to integrate Aristotle's interest in the natural world with Christian faith. Thomas also inherited Aristotle's practice of *logical inquiry*: which used *dialectic* to establish principles (Principal statement, Counter statement, interaction/conclusion). Thomas went on to follow Albertus to Cologne, then returned to Paris as a teacher at the university. Eventually, Thomas built up two large compendiums of theology, the first intended as apologetics for the Faith (*Summa Contra Gentiles*) and then the magisterial *Summa Theologiae* which was intended to be a complete theological curriculum. Thomas' work still continues to strongly influence Catholic theology and doctrine to the present day.