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## FROM JESUS TO CHRISTIANITY: A HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHURCH COURSE GUIDE



Professor Thomas F. Madden  
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

# **From Jesus to Christianity: A History of the Early Church**

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Professor Thomas F. Madden

Saint Louis University



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From Jesus to Christianity:  
A History of the Early Church  
Professor Thomas F. Madden



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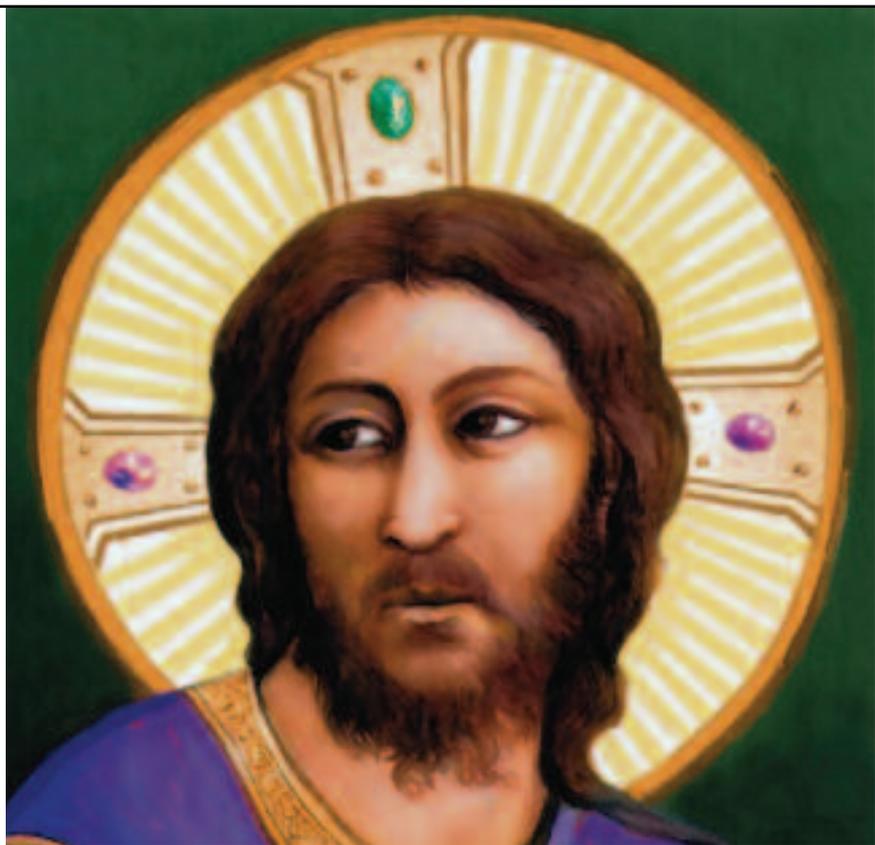


## About Your Professor

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### Thomas F. Madden

Thomas F. Madden is a professor of medieval history and chair of the Department of History at Saint Louis University. A recognized expert on the Crusades, he has appeared in forums such as National Public Radio and the *New York Times*. Professor Madden is the author of *The New Concise History of the Crusades* and *Enrico Dandolo and the Rise of Venice*. He is coauthor with Donald E. Queller of *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* and the editor of *Crusades: The Illustrated History* and *The Crusades: Essential Readings*. Among his published journal articles are "The Enduring Myths of the Fourth Crusade," "Father of the Bride: Fathers, Daughters, and Dowries in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Venice," and "The Fires of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople, 1203-1204: A Damage Assessment."



## Introduction

Entrusting the apostles to continue the work he had started by instructing them to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit . . .,” Jesus kindled the fires of a new religion in a world largely dominated by polytheism, cult leader worship, and mysticism. In the first century of its existence, Christianity was both welcomed and villified throughout the Roman Empire. Many of Christianity’s original adherents were martyred—murdered by those who believed it a danger to their authority or, at the very least, the cause of unrest among an otherwise docile populace.

Christians themselves practiced their religion with great diversity, linked as much to local influences as theology. Political intrigue, theological beliefs, and simple misunderstandings created a need for dialogue between the many practitioners of the growing faith.

Christianity’s adoption as the official faith of the Roman state tied it inexorably to the fortunes of the Empire. This also helped to create a gulf between the two main theological branches of the religion, which remain to this day.

## Lecture 1: The Roman World

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read E.T. Salmon's *A History of the Roman World from 30 BC to AD 138*.

### Rome

Rome was founded around 750 B.C. Around 509 B.C., the Romans revolted against their foreign kings and established a republic. This instilled in them a strong distrust of concentrated power.

Roman expansionism was an ad hoc affair. Romans responded to crises, but found themselves involved in problems farther and farther away.

The Gallic sack of Rome in 390 B.C. convinced them of the necessity of organizing strong defensive alliances with other Italian powers.

By 275 B.C., the Romans were masters of Italy. By 146 B.C., the Romans were the last remaining "superpower" in the Mediterranean world.

Roman involvement in the land of the Jews began in 64 B.C. Various Jewish factions appealed to the Roman general Pompey for aid. He intervened, setting up one faction and placing Roman garrisons in the region to maintain peace.

Although nominally independent, Judaea was ruled by Herod (37 B.C.—4 A.D.), a Roman appointee. After 6 B.C., it became part of the province of Syria.

Large-scale civil wars culminated in the reign of Emperor Augustus (27 B.C.—14 A.D.). Thus began the Pax Romana, a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity in the region.

It would be into this world that Christianity was born.

### Roman Religious Beliefs

The Romans were pious people who believed that the gods had blessed them greatly. They considered impiety and atheism to be both wrong and dangerous.

Roman piety led them to willingly accept the gods of other peoples that they encountered. This was widely believed to be a cause of their great success.

There was always room for one more god or goddess, who was either viewed as a new deity or a new manifestation of an old one.

The cult of the emperor fulfilled both a religious and political function.

Romans were also infatuated with mystery cults. These were often Hellenized retreads of more ancient cults.

Each claimed to hold secret knowledge and ceremonies that were made

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known only to certain initiates. Usually there were various levels of membership that afforded greater access to the “mysteries.”

This approach to religion stumbled when it came upon the exclusive monotheism of the Jews.

In time, the Romans learned to make special accommodations for the Jews, but they were never able to eliminate all frictions.

Monotheism seemed to be insulting, impious, or at least antisocial.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What was the Pax Romana?
2. How accepting were the Romans of other peoples' gods?

### Suggested Reading

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Salmon, E.T. *A History of the Roman World from 30 BC to AD 138*. London: Routledge, 1968.

### Other Books of Interest

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Ogilvie, R.M. *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970.

Sherwin-White, A.N. *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*. London: Sandpiper Books, 2000.

## Lecture 2: Judaea in the Time of Christ

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Emil Schürer's *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*.

### The Jews

Jews saw themselves as both in the world and separate from the rest of the world. They were a people set apart. It was evident to all that they lived differently—the only people unwilling to sacrifice to the other gods.

They remained separate in communities wherever they lived.

However, the Romans, who loved new religions, often found much to praise in Judaism. But they found circumcision abhorrent and frequently the dietary restrictions troublesome.

In most cities, therefore, synagogues allowed Gentile “god-fearers” to take part in worship. These practitioners were uncircumcised, but sometimes were made members by baptism.

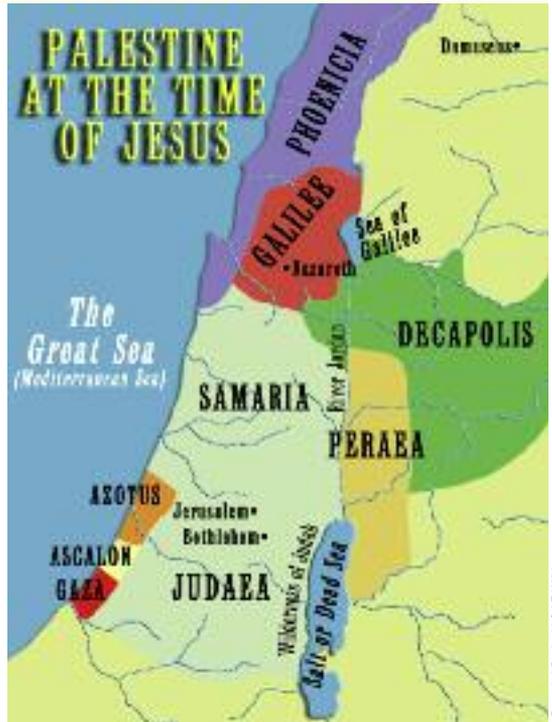
Jewish authorities in Jerusalem disapproved. These people would be fertile ground for Christian ideas.

Gentiles thus became familiar with the Hebrew Bible. It was translated into Greek in the third century B.C. in Alexandria and was widely considered to have been by divine inspiration. It was the work of seventy translators, so it was called the Septuagint.

Christianity was one of many sects of Judaism.

### Pharisees

The Pharisees were determined to hold onto Jewish customs, culture, and practices in defiance of Hellenism and Rome. They maintained a strict adherence to Mosaic law as well as the rich later scribal traditions and all sacred



writings. They generally believed in an afterlife, because it was referred to in Daniel and elsewhere.

### **Sadducees**

The Sadducees were generally drawn from the highest elites. They rejected any law or writings after Moses. Thus they did not believe in the afterlife. They were willing to work closely with the Roman authorities.

### **Essenes**

The Essenes believed in withdrawal from a corrupt world. They lived in communes in the desert, the largest west of the Dead Sea. They lived a strict life and generally remained celibate. They rejected the priesthood and sacrifices of the Temple, because it was under Roman occupation. Most were nonviolent, but a subset, the Zealots, favored violent overthrow of the Romans.

### **Government in Judaea**

Control of Jerusalem and the Temple was largely in the hands of the Sanhedrin, who were made up of scribes and chief priests, almost exclusively from the Sadducees.

### **King Herod (37 B.C.—4 A.D.)**

A Roman appointee, he was not popular among most Jews. Because his mother was Arab, he was generally not considered to be Jewish.

In order to win favor, he instituted large-scale building projects in Judaea, largely with Roman funds. These included a new Temple, new port city, aqueducts, and other such projects. The classical style of these buildings, though, was troublesome to many Jews.

He ruled cruelly, often lashing out mercilessly against his enemies. He killed many Essenes and burned down their communes.

Although there is no confirmation from other sources, the New Testament story of the Slaughter of the Innocents seems to fit well with what we know of him.

Taxes were farmed out to collectors, who sought to make a profit at the expense of the taxpayers.

The additional problem of the morality of paying taxes to an occupation force further troubled Jews.

In 66 A.D., Zealot groups killed the Roman troops stationed in Jerusalem and began the Jewish Revolt.

A relief force from Syria was also defeated, leading many Jews to embrace the revolt.

The Roman legions arrived to put down the rebellion, led first by Vespasian and then by his son Titus. In 70 A.D., Titus captured Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What Jewish practices did the Romans disapprove of?
2. Describe the Essenes.

### Suggested Reading

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Schürer, Emil. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*. Two vols. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark Publishers, Ltd., 1973.

### Other Books of Interest

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Goodman, Martin. *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66-70*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Levine, Lee I. *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003.

## Lecture 3: The Age of the Apostles

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read L. Michael White's *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries and Storytellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith*.

### The Twelve Apostles

After Christ's death, his followers attested to his resurrection from the dead. The Twelve Apostles had always held an important place in Christ's ministry, and this remained true in the early movement.

Christianity was envisioned as the fulfillment of the prophets, a continuation of the Jewish revelation and not a break with the law of Moses. Christians were members of a Jewish sect, referred to at the time as Nazarenes.

As a Jewish sect, it attracted adherents quickly, both among regular Jews and the Pharisees. Christianity spread to nearby cities, like Damascus and then northward to Antioch, the capital of Syria. It was here that pagans began referring to them as Christians.

Despite Christ's frequent criticism of the Pharisees, many of them did convert, but by no means all.

Saul of Tarsus was a Cilician Jew who found the concept of additions or replacements in the Mosaic law to be reprehensible. He took part in persecutions of Christians, including that of Stephen, the first martyr.

On the way to Damascus, he had a vision of Christ, who spoke to him. Taking the name Paul, he became a Christian. He saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, whose mission was to spread the Gospel among non-Jews.

By working through synagogues in cities like Ephesus, Paul was able to bring some Jews and many Gentiles—presumably many were god-fearers—into Christianity.

Christianity provided the aspects of Judaism that these Gentiles admired. It was a revealed truth, a moral code, and brotherhood of the faithful. Christians believed in their own election and salvation.

However, these converts were unwilling to accept circumcision, nor to keep Jewish dietary and other regulations. There was also some resistance to the Jewish prohibition of consuming foods offered to idols. Often, banquets were arranged in temples, where the food was first offered to the god.

Paul preached that strict adherence to the Law was no longer necessary, for Christ brought salvation in himself. The Law was a way to approaching God, but Christ was the sure way to salvation.

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Paul's preaching led to a major dispute in the early Church. Could Gentiles become Christian without obeying Jewish law?

Because the Church was instituted by Christ, it was crucial that it remain one: one body of Christ, one truth.

A council was held in Jerusalem (Acts 15). This would become the model for the Church as the way to discern the truth and the will of God.

The apostles met, prayed, and decided the issue after some debate.

In the end, they settled on a compromise of sorts. Gentiles could be accepted into the faith, provided they refrained from eating foods sacrificed to idols and kept to other moral requirements, like avoiding adultery.

Peter seems to have been instrumental in making this decision and convincing the other apostles to accept it. Jewish Christians, however, did not disappear.

With the exception of a few, most of the apostles are difficult to trace after those early days. Traditions among believers were preserved for all of them, yet it is difficult to gauge their veracity.

James, son of Zebedee, was martyred in Jerusalem in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2). Medieval reports of James's mission to Spain are highly dubious.

There is good reason to believe that his brother, John, son of Zebedee, moved to Ephesus and probably brought with him Mary, the mother of Christ. He died there of natural causes.

Peter eventually left Jerusalem for Antioch, where he appears to have remained for some time. He then settled in Rome, where he was martyred around 64 A.D.

Philip took his four daughters (who were prophets) to Phrygia.

James (the brother of the Lord) remained in Jerusalem, presiding over the Church there until his martyrdom around 62 A.D.

Later and less reliable traditions place other apostles elsewhere: Andrew in Asia Minor and Greece, including the Greek city of Byzantium, later Constantinople; Thomas in Persia and India; Simon in Persia or Spain; Matthias, who replaced Judas Iscariot, in Ethiopia; and Matthew in Parthia and Macedonia.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How did Christianity's nature as a Jewish sect help it to spread quickly?
2. What were the teachings of Paul?

### Suggested Reading

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White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries and Storytellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.

### Other Books of Interest

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Cadbury, Henry J. *The Book of Acts in History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.

Weiss, Johannes. *Earliest Christianity: A History of the Period AD 30-150*. Magnolia, MA: Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 1984.

## Lecture 4: The Spread of Christianity

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read J.G. Davies's *Daily Life in the Early Church: Studies in the Church Social History of the First Five Centuries*.

### Early Beliefs and Rites

St. Paul and his associates had spread Christianity as far west as Rome and perhaps even Spain.

Christians could be found in all social groups, but the religion had a particular attraction for those among the lowest classes.

Unlike other religions, Christianity held that all people, men or women, free or slave, were the same in God's eyes. All were worthy of respect, love, and charity.

Unlike any other ideologies, Christianity considered slavery to be inherently wrong. Christians were enjoined to free their slaves, although they did not work to end the institution because it was legal and ordained by the state. Free or not, a slave who was Christian was the brother of any other Christian, no matter his or her station.

What were these early congregations like?

They were tightly knit communities, bound together in love. They referred to themselves as brother and sister.

Their focus was on Christ, who had taken on their sins and by his death and resurrection had won for them eternal life.

Two rituals or sacraments were at the center of the religion:

Baptism was the rite of initiation in which the convert not only imitated Christ at the Jordan, but also shared in the death and resurrection of Christ. The convert "died to sin" so as to "rise with Christ."

A Eucharistic celebration (or what would later be called a Mass) was usually offered once a week. This began with readings from psalms or other sacred texts and prayers. The presider, a bishop or presbyter (priest), in the person of Christ, would then change the bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ, which the faithful would consume (1 Cor. 11: 23-30).

Many Christian congregations also held frequent communal meals, called *agape*, or love-feasts. They were often funerary in nature, remembering the dead.

Sometimes these meals would be followed by the Eucharist, but generally they were separate.

Since Christianity was illegal, there were no public buildings or gathering places.

Most ceremonies and celebrations were held in private homes.

In Rome, Christians began meeting in the catacombs, yet this was to be close to their beloved dead, not to avoid detection.

Responding to the commands of Christ, all Christian communities expended plenty of resources on charitable works. This included care of widows, orphans, and the sick.

Christian travelers would receive generous hospitality in the homes of other Christians anywhere.

The rise of congregations of Gentile Christians did not mean the end of parallel communities of Jewish Christians. Hybrids of sorts also existed, wherein Gentiles would become Christians but adopt some Jewish practices.

Frictions would often arise between Jews and Jewish Christians.

As the numbers of Christians expanded, Jews would sometimes persecute Christians or turn them in to the authorities.

Around 85 A.D., Jews formally declared Jewish Christians to be heretical. Throughout the world, Jews began praying in their synagogues that “the Nazarenes and the heretics be suddenly destroyed and removed from the Book of Life.”

Jewish Christian communities survived into the fourth century, yet they were a tiny presence even by the mid-second century.

The Jewish Revolt changed the Roman perspective on Judaism and, potentially, Christianity. Widespread anger at the Jews led to strong levels of anti-Semitism.

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem had a profound effect on Jews across the Empire.

Jesus Christ, who was crucified for sedition by the Roman procurator, could be cast in the light of the rebellion.

Rumors, falsehoods, and the passing of the generation that knew Christ led to the writing of the Gospels.

In the first few decades, the Old Testament was paired with oral accounts of the sayings of Jesus and the letters of Paul during religious instruction and celebrations.

The synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles were written between roughly 68 and 71 A.D.: first Mark, then Matthew, then Luke, and finally, Acts.

These written accounts spread rapidly through Christian congregations and achieved widespread acceptance.

Numerous other works were penned after this, many of them finding favor in various congregations. Among these was the Gospel of John, written sometime around 100 A.D.

By 200 A.D., there was an established canon of the New Testament.

As with authority and orthodoxy, a direct connection to the apostles was crucial for verification and acceptance.

By the second century, Christianity had spread through many cities and even sometimes into the countryside.

The letter of Pliny the Younger written in 112 A.D. describes Christians in the city and countryside, so many that the temples were all but empty.

Stories of bizarre rituals were becoming less common as more people learned of the religion.

By the third century, Christianity even began penetrating the Roman aristocracy, predominantly among women who learned of it from their household slaves.

A religion that saw women and men as equal in God's sight was attractive to them, as was the Christian insistence on the sanctity of marriage.

Geographically, Christianity was a creature of the Roman Empire. It spread throughout its borders.

There were always more Christians in the East, in places like Asia Minor or Egypt, but that is because there were also many more people living there.

Italy, which was also populous, had 100 bishops' sees by 250 A.D.

In the second century, Christianity spread slowly outside the Roman borders to the east, particularly in Armenia and Mesopotamia. There is also evidence for early communities as far away as India.



## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Why did Christianity appeal to the lower classes?
2. Describe the Eucharistic celebration.

### Suggested Reading

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Davies, J.G. *Daily Life in the Early Church: Studies in the Church Social History of the First Five Centuries*. Cambridge (UK): Lutterworth Press, 1955.

### Other Books of Interest

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MacMullen, Ramsay. *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100-400*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

## Lecture 5: The Organization of the Early Church

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read William Telfer's *The Office of a Bishop*.

In the earliest Christian communities, the organization was very loose and irregular. Offices or titles of some sort, however, existed (1 Cor. 12:28).

First was the apostle, or his delegate. Then came prophets, like Agabus, described as predicting a famine in Acts 11:28.

Next were teachers of the faith, then miracle-workers, then helpers, administrators, and those who spoke in tongues.

As Christianity spread to new areas, it was no longer practical to have itinerant apostles or their delegates responsible for far-flung communities. Instead, a local leader or group of leaders would take on the duties of the apostle, both in terms of overseeing the activities of the community and also in celebrating the Eucharist and presiding at other functions.

This permanent office was known interchangeably as a bishop (overseer) or presbyter (elder) (Titus 1:5-7).

According to Acts 6:1-4, the apostles, while still in Jerusalem, selected seven men to see to the day-to-day matters of the community so as to free them to concentrate on prayer and ministry. The early Christian communities elsewhere followed this example, appointing deacons, usually seven in number.

Their job was to serve the bishop, especially in matters of finance and administration. They also took care of providing alms and other charitable work.

They assisted at baptisms and the Eucharistic feast, but they could not perform the sacraments themselves.

During the first three centuries of the Church, there were also ordained deaconesses. Unlike deacons, they did not have a liturgical function. Their primary function was providing charitable assistance to women. They also assisted women during their baptism, which was by full immersion.

By the late second century, a clear demarcation was emerging between the bishop and the presbyters.



**Agabus's prophecy  
concerning Paul**  
by Gerard Hoet, 1728

Image courtesy Brzestli Bible Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries

An increase in converts in a region required more churches and congregations, which in turn required someone to perform the sacraments. One bishop could not do it all.

Multiple presbyters, which would come to be called priests, were ordained by the bishop, who remained the overseer of the whole community.

New bishops would be chosen by the whole congregation, yet they would be ordained by visiting bishops, particularly those with direct apostolic succession.

This trend continued in the third century as congregations grew larger. The church in Rome had, in 251 A.D., one bishop (the pope), forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven subdeacons, and numerous other support personnel.

With the passing of the apostles and the first generation of Christian missionaries, the question naturally arose as to where authority lay when disputes arose.

This was particularly pressing in light of the proliferation of Gnostic challenges to orthodoxy.

Ignatius of Antioch, who succeeded Peter as bishop of Antioch and probably knew him, insisted that the bishop held the same apostolic authority to interpret Scripture and judge the truth. This was not novel, but was a statement of a widely accepted view.

In the third century, bishops of provincial capitals, or metropolitans, were recognized as having oversight authority over other bishops in that province. These came to be known as archbishops.

The bishops of the three largest cities in the Roman Empire—Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria—were generally accepted as having jurisdiction that extended beyond their provinces.

This would be codified at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.

The bishop of Rome had several claims to preeminent authority in the Church. Rome was the capital of the Empire, which made its position seem natural.

Rome was sanctified by the lives, deaths, and bodies of Saint Peter and Saint Paul.

According to Matthew 16: 18-19, Peter had been singled out by Christ for special authority and position in the Church.

*“And I say to thee: That thou art Peter [Rock], and upon this rock I will build my church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven.”*

In the 90s A.D., Clement, the bishop of Rome, wrote a letter of correction to the Christians of Corinth, who had accepted heretical beliefs and deposed their bishop and clergy.

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Clement makes clear that the first bishops were chosen by the apostles:

*“Similarly, our Apostles knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be dissensions over the title of bishop. In their full foreknowledge of this, therefore, they proceeded to appoint the ministers I spoke of, and they went on to add an instruction that if these should fall asleep, other accredited persons should succeed them in their office. In view of this, we cannot think it right for these men now to be ejected from their ministry, when, after being commissioned by the Apostles (or other reputable persons at a later date) with the full consent of the Church, they have since been serving Christ’s flock in a humble, peaceable and disinterested way, and earning everybody’s approval over so long a period of time. It will undoubtedly be no light offense on our part, if we take their bishopric away from men who have been performing its duties with this impeccable devotion.”*

—Epistle, sec. 44

In the second century, Ireneaus wrote:

*“. . . that great and illustrious church founded and organized at Rome by the two glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, and to the faith declared to mankind and handed down to our own time through its bishops in their succession. For unto this church, on account of its commanding position, every church, that is to say, the faithful from everywhere, must needs resort and in it the tradition that comes from the Apostles has been continuously preserved by those who are from everywhere.”*

—Ad. Haer. III, 3, Shotwell and Loomis, ed., 267.

Thus from an early period Rome was considered to have a preeminence of some sort, although it was generally assumed to be a first among equals.

By the fourth century, Rome’s position as judge between disputing congregations or leaders as well as its preeminence of honor was codified in several councils and synods.

Pope Damasus (366 A.D.–384 A.D.) stressed that popes, by virtue of their succession from St. Peter, held the power of the keys, which gave binding and loosing authority.

Papal judgments took on the form of imperial decrees. The pope became much more important as a central authority in the West to impose discipline on the Church.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Describe the organization of the early Christian communities.
2. Why would Rome have had a special place of authority in the Church?

### Suggested Reading

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Telfer, William. *The Office of a Bishop*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962.

### Other Books of Interest

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Dix, Dom Gregory. *Jurisdiction in the Early Church*. London: Faith House, 1975.

Hatch, E. *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*. London: Longmans Green, 1909.

## Lecture 6: Christian Heresies

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read Kurt Rudolf's *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*.

Heresy simply means variance from established authoritative doctrine. It was a crucially important concern for Christians for several reasons.

They believed that there is but one truth and one faith. Belief in that truth, through Christ, is the only avenue to salvation.

They believed that Christ would continue to make known the truth through his Church, which he founded through the apostles. All congregations, therefore, must be in communion with that Apostolic Foundation.

### **Gnosticism**

Gnosticism is a blanket term that covers a large number of diverse and shifting beliefs, some pre-Christian, that spread and mutated in the first century and beyond.

One common feature is the belief in a special or secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that set its believers apart from others. As such, it particularly appealed to the well-educated or other elites. It was clearly influenced by similar concepts held by mystery cults.

Another is some level of dualistic belief that divides the universe into spirit and matter, the former good and the latter bad, or just irrelevant.

All held that the soul must ascend out of this material world through various planetary spheres and spiritual creatures by means of secret passwords or other charms, to attain unification with the divine spirit.

A redeemer was necessary, who was usually Christ, but his role and nature varied greatly. Many of those who accepted Christ did not accept his corporeal nature.

The earliest manifestations of Gnostic beliefs were in the communities that St. Paul himself planted.

At Corinth, some believed that they, unlike other Christians, held a wisdom and knowledge so great that they had already achieved perfection. They held that the physical was nothing and the spiritual everything, thus they were free to live and indulge as they pleased, relying on the sacraments to provide them with spiritual sustenance.

At Colossae, some held that angelic powers that were connected to astrological bodies needed to be consulted and worshiped.

Gnostic beliefs could keep their adherents from the danger of martyrdom. Because other gods did not exist, they argued, why avoid eating food sacrificed to them?

St. Paul addressed this, agreeing with the argument but pointing out that eat-

ing this food might lead others, less well informed, to judge that the other gods did exist and thereby leading them away from Christ (1 Cor. 8).

Their insistence on the evil nature or irrelevance of the natural world led to divergent approaches to it.

Some believed that asceticism, mortification, and celibacy were necessary because this would reduce connections to the natural world and avoid enslaving more souls.

Others believed that people should engage in whatever practices they chose, without restrictions, because this world was unimportant or depraved.

Some of these were turning the *agape* into wild parties (Jude 1:3-16).

Gnostic dualism led some sects to conclude that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as the father of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament God of the Jews was foolish or evil, while the New Testament God of Jesus was good and loving.

Complicating this was the New Testament insistence on the continuity between the prophecies of the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New Testament.

Marcion, the Gnostic bishop of Sinope, concluded in the second century that the New Testament must have been corrupted by Judaizers and set about rewriting it.

Others, like those who followed Valentinus, accepted the Old Testament as allegory. They, however, insisted that Christ had given secret knowledge to his apostles, who passed it down to the elites like them.

This began a spate of new “Gnostic Gospels” claiming to be superior to established Scripture and frequently containing alleged secret sayings of Jesus (one example: the Gospel of Thomas).

### **Montanism**

In Asia Minor in the 170s A.D., a recent convert to Christianity, Montanus, along with two women, Prisca and Maximilla, began having episodes of ecstatic prophecies, which they claimed to come from the Holy Spirit.

They spoke in the first person and accused those who disbelieved them of being guilty of sin against the Holy Spirit.

Many in the region believed in these prophecies—often whole congregations.

There does not at first seem to have been anything heretical in the prophecies. They had more to do with reaffirming accepted teachings, condemning Gnosticism, and enjoining various devotions.

Most bishops did not accept the three, excommunicating them from their congregations.

The first-person nature of the prophecies was more akin to possession than prophecy. The prophets claimed greater authority for their utterances than the Gospels or the apostles.

By 180 A.D., the three had died, but their sayings were collected and revered by those who remained faithful to them.

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A separate Montanist church spread across Asia Minor and found adherents elsewhere in the Empire. The famed Tertullian became one.

Later Christians were often unclear whether Montanists were heretics or schismatics.

Montanist congregations could still be found as late as the fifth century in Asia Minor.

### **What constituted a heresy? What constituted orthodoxy?**

These were important questions for Christians. They must be bound together not only in love but also in truth.

As the successors of the apostles, it was the job of the bishop to maintain orthodox belief. If the bishop or an entire congregation went astray, other bishops, particularly the bishop of Rome as successor to Peter, had to correct the error (Clement, Epistle to the Corinthians).

Orthodox responses were initially confined to ad hoc corrections to local communities or expulsions of heretics. By the second century, Christian writers were providing reasoned arguments to combat the spread of heresy.

Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, wrote *Adversus haereses* with the stated purpose of allowing Christians to detect and refute false teachings.

It rests above all on the authority of the apostles, who knew the truth and passed it down through their successors. Heretics might claim special or secret knowledge, but bishops could claim direct succession from the apostles chosen by Christ. If such knowledge existed, why would the apostles not have passed it down? And how did it get into the hands of the heretics?

*"We are able to name those who were appointed bishops by the Apostles in the churches and their successors down to our own times. They neither taught nor knew of any such thing as these hallucinations. Yet, if the apostles had been aware of any hidden mysteries, which were disclosed to "the perfect" apart and secretly from the rest, they would have delivered them first of all to the men to whom they committed the churches. For they desired above all that these men should be perfect and blameless in everything, since they were leaving them behind as their successors and entrusting their own office of government to them."*

Ad. Haer. III, 3, trans. Shotwell and Loomis, 267

Irenaeus, therefore, points to the Roman Rule of Faith, later known generally as the Apostles' Creed.

Tertullian wrote his *Liber de praescriptione haereticorum* about 200 A.D. Like Irenaeus, he insisted that truth lay in the authority of the Apostolic Foundation.

*"Christ sent His apostles, who founded churches in each city, from which the others have borrowed the tradition of the Faith and the seed of doctrine and daily borrow in order to become churches; so that they also are Apostolic in that they are the offspring of the Apostolic churches. All are that one Church which the Apostles founded, so long as peace and intercommunion are observed. Therefore the testimony to the truth is this: We communicate with the Apostolic churches."*

He considered it ludicrous that all of the baptisms, miracles, martyrs, and every other component of Christianity had been wrong until the coming of some new thinker with a few followers.

For the truth, he referred the faithful to the Roman Rule of Faith (or Apostles' Creed).

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What is Gnosticism?
2. What is Montanism?

### Suggested Reading

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Rudolf, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.

### Other Books of Interest

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Grant, Robert M. *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.

Rankin, David. *Tertullian and the Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

## Lecture 7: The Early Church Fathers

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Michael J. Aquilina's *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Fathers*.

This lecture will explore the lives and writings of some of the most important fathers of the early Church. These will include those that were firmly orthodox, like Clement of Rome, as well as those who approached heresy, like Origen and Tertullian.

### Justin Martyr

Born in Syria in the early second century from a reasonably well-off background, Justin went to Ephesus to pursue study in philosophy.

After experimenting with various philosophical schools, most importantly Stoicism and Platonism, Justin was struck by a chance meeting with an old man who told him of the prophets of the Old Testament.

This led to his conversion to Christianity.

He had never been able to reconcile the quiet calmness of Christians about to be executed with the immoral lives they were supposed to lead.

Throughout his life in Ephesus in Rome, he wrote many works, some in defense of the faith, some against Gnosticism.

Justin embraced both pagan philosophy and Christianity.

Plato, who believed in the immortal soul, was right about much.

Embracing the parable of the sower, he insisted that God scattered the seeds of reason and truth across the world, not simply among the Jews.

Thus someone like Plato was like Abraham, one who by divine revelation approached Christ before his coming.

He was among the first to train philosophical thinking on the question of Christ's relationship to the Father.

Christ comes from the Father, but takes nothing from him. Like the passing of a candle flame to another candle, Christ is "Light from Light."

Made flesh, Christ is the medium by which the transcendent God is made fully manifest in the world.

With several other associates, Justin was arrested around 165, tortured, and executed.

### Irenaeus

Born in Asia Minor in the first half of the second century, he heard Polycarp in Smyrna while a young man.

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He later moved to Gaul, becoming a priest at Lyon during the persecution of Marcus Aurelius. After the martyrdom of the bishop, Irenaeus was made bishop of Lyon around 180 A.D.

He wrote a number of antihetical tracts in Greek, particularly against various Gnostic sects.

His arguments came down to the authority of the apostles, who had received the truth from Christ and founded the Church on that truth.

Because truth is one, all of the Christians are one in faith across the world.

Compare that, he said, to the thousands of quarreling sects of heretics who devise, then revise their beliefs with each passing fashion.

He rejected the Gnostics who rewrote Scripture or added their own Gnostic gospels. These were not apostolic, but false innovations.

His description of the New Testament is the first that closely matches the accepted canon.

After writing several other, now lost, works, Irenaeus appears to have ended his days peacefully in Lyons.

### **Tertullian**

Tertullian was born in Carthage around 160 A.D., where he spent the rest of his life. He converted to Christianity in his 30s and later was ordained a priest.

He had immense learning matched with a sharp wit and biting sarcasm. He was deadly in a debate.

His writings concentrated on defending Christianity from pagan attacks as well as Gnostic heresies. He insisted that Christians avoid anything that approached idolatry.

They should not serve the pagan state, either in the civil service or the military.

They should stay clear of pagan philosophy. The Greek philosophers were the “patriarchs of the heretics.”

They should never attend spectacles.

By about 206 A.D., Tertullian became enamored with the New Prophecy of the Montanists.

### **Clement of Alexandria**

In Alexandria, Gnosticism, particularly the Valentinian variety, was much favored by those who were well educated in Greek philosophy.

Clement wrote treatises in which he weaved Greek philosophy into the Christian faith. He demonstrated that those who claimed “knowledge” had, in fact, abandoned the simple reasoning of the philosophers.

Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers saw the truth and were, therefore, divinely inspired.

He also wrote on manners in polite society, seeking in some ways to refine those who continued to follow the apostolic tradition.

Christians, he insisted, should study Greek philosophy, for its search for truth leads naturally to the truth of Christ's Church.

He died about 215 A.D.

### **Origen (184 A.D.–254 A.D.)**

Origen was an incredibly prolific writer, said to have penned nearly 6,000 works. Born in Alexandria, his father was martyred while he was in his late teens. He continued his education in philosophy, particularly in Platonic and Stoic schools.

He wrote philosophical treatises and opened a school in Alexandria to support himself and his family.

Greek philosophy informed Origen's theology, but he never accepted that the philosophers were divinely inspired.

Origen studied the Bible closely. He believed it was crucial to combating heresy and debating with Jews.

He accepted the allegorical nature of the Old Testament, even in those passages that seemed resistant to it.

His numerous homilies and treatises made him famous across the Christian world.

He traveled to Rome and across the East. In Athens, he argued that even Satan was not beyond salvation.

Around 230 A.D., he was ordained a priest in Syria, which led to a dispute with the bishop of Alexandria and his eventual banishment.

He lived out his days in Caesarea, where his library remained long afterward.

Around 235 A.D., he wrote *Contra Celsum*, disputing the new attacks on Christianity.

Some considered him heretical, something that he vehemently denied, but most did not. His writings would continue to greatly affect Christian thought for many centuries after.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What spurred Justin's conversion to Christianity?
2. What were the teachings of Tertullian?

### Suggested Reading

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Aquilina, Michael J. *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Fathers*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

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Barnes, Timothy D. *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Chadwick, Henry. *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Rankin, David. *Tertullian and the Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

## Lecture 8: Roman Persecutions

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read W.H.C. Frend's *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

### Creating Martyrs

Unlike some other Jewish groups, like the Zealots, the Christians viewed the Roman Empire in a reasonably good light.

Christ had commanded his followers to pay their taxes and St. Paul (Rom. 13), who was a Roman citizen, saw obedience to the authorities as divinely ordained.

Since Christians, whether Jewish or not, were initially lumped together with Jews, Romans were generally tolerant of them.

Occasionally, though, Jews would denounce the Christians, claiming that they were perverting Judaism and worshiping no god at all. From the Roman perspective, this sounded like atheism.

Since Christian ceremonies were held in secret, rumors of incest and cannibalism abounded.

Since Christians tended to be the lowest classes, they were not well liked and often suspect.

The first known Roman persecution was that of Nero. Looking for a scapegoat for the fire of Rome in 64 A.D., he settled on the maligned Christians.

Saints Peter and Paul were killed in this persecution, as were many other Roman Christians.

This set a precedent, and being a Christian was soon considered a capital offense. Because Christians refused to worship pagan gods and were generally disowned by Jews, they must therefore be atheists.

Nevertheless, Romans in general stayed out of religious matters, and so persecutions were relatively rare.

Unlike previous emperors, Domitian (81 A.D.–96 A.D.) considered devotion to his cult a test of loyalty to the Empire. Christians who refused to sacrifice to the genius were executed.

Emperor Trajan (98 A.D.–117 A.D.) rescinded those orders, although Christianity remained a serious offense.

About 112 A.D., the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan for guidance on the problem of Christianity. The letter attests to the widespread success of the faith. It also provides a factual, if schematic, account of the religion's ceremonies.

Trajan confirmed that the impiety of the Christians was punishable by death, but counseled leniency. He did not consider Christians to be a threat.

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In the second century, bad events of all kinds were frequently blamed on the Christians, because their atheism had angered the gods.

Tertullian complained that “if the Tiber rises too high or the Nile too low,” the remedy is always feeding Christians to the lions.

Christian apologists, such as Justin and Tertullian, rushed to the defense of the religion, seeking to end the persecutions.

Tertullian’s *Ad nationes* was an attempt to turn the tables on the persecutors.

- Christians were accused of infanticide, yet it was the pagans who practiced exposure and abortion, which Christianity forbade.
- Christians were accused of incest, yet it was pagans who held riotous feasts and orgies.
- Christians were condemned for not sacrificing to the genius of the emperor, yet they did pray for him, while the pagans revolted from his rule and sought to murder him.

By the third century, Christianity was no longer a mystery. Stories of bizarre practices were subsiding and most people felt they knew what Christians did and believed, although few approved of it.

In many areas, this led to a reduction or suspension of executions. Most governors practiced a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy toward Christianity.

### **Resurgence in Persecutions**

Some emperors, such as Alexander Severus (222 A.D.–235 A.D.) and Philip the Arab (244 A.D.–249 A.D.), were sympathetic to Christianity. Others, such as Maximinus Thrax (235 A.D.–238 A.D.) and Decius (249 A.D.–251 A.D.), were actively hostile.

Decius required all Romans to hold documents certifying that they had sacrificed to the gods.

The general disorder and economic decline in the Empire during the late third century was frequently blamed on the Christians, who had angered the gods.

Diocletian (284 A.D.–305 A.D.) instituted far-reaching reforms to restore Roman greatness.

These included the administrative splitting of the Empire into two halves.

Pagans, including the oracle of Apollo at Miletus, insisted that the Christians were causing false omens.

Diocletian came to believe that Christianity was killing the Empire.

In 303, Diocletian decreed that all Christian bishops and clergy were to be arrested, all Bibles and liturgical books confiscated, and churches destroyed.

In 304, he decreed that all must sacrifice to the gods or be put to death.

Horrible persecutions, particularly vehement in the East, lasted almost a decade.

These persecutions led to schism.

## **Apostasy**

What constituted apostasy, and could such a sin be forgiven? What of apostate bishops and priests?

The Donatists, who became particularly active in North Africa, insisted on the strictest interpretation.

Tertullian famously wrote that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” This was so. Intermittent executions provided dramatic evidence of the courage and faith of the Christians. This strengthened the Christian communities and led others to seek them out, while never seriously threatening their survival.

Christians revered their martyrs as heroes, carefully recording their stories and preserving their relics.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What was the Christian attitude toward the Roman Empire?
2. How did Tertullian defend the Christians in *Ad nationes*?

### Suggested Reading

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Frend, W.H.C. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.

### Other Books of Interest

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Wilken, Robert L. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

## Lecture 9: The Conversion of Constantine

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read Arnold H.M. Jones's *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*.

The conversion of Constantine brought a dramatic change of fortune for the Church, paving the way for it to go from being under the heel of the Roman Empire to becoming its official religion.

Constantine was the son of Constantius, who served as Augustus in the West, 305 A.D. to 306 A.D. His mother, Helena, was of low birth, so her marriage was a form of concubinage.

It is likely that there were some pro-Christian sympathies in the family. The persecution decrees were all but ignored in Gaul and Britain under Constantius's rule.

Constantine, however, worshiped the Unconquerable Sun, as did his father.

Constantius died in 306 A.D. at York. The legions there proclaimed Constantine the new Augustus.

However, Constantine's brother-in-law, Maxentius, was in Rome and had the support of the Praetorian Guard, which proclaimed him emperor a few months later.

Open hostilities did not erupt until 312 A.D., when Constantine led his troops to Rome.

Before the battle with Maxentius, Constantine claimed to have had a vision of a shining cross with the words "in this you will conquer." That night he had a dream in which Christ spoke to him, showing him the symbol of the labarum and telling him to use it to defeat his enemy.

Constantine believed with all his heart that Christ himself had chosen him both to conquer the enemies of the Church and also to lift it up.

At the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine defeated the numerically superior forces of Maxentius.

With his colleague, Licinius, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., which decreed tolerance for Christianity.

Constantine made no attempt to displace paganism, but he obviously favored his new faith.

His coins do not mention Christianity, nor do they say anything about the gods. The same is true for his arch, which still stands in Rome.

He gave the pope a palace on the Lateran, which would remain the pope's home for many centuries.

He poured money into the building of churches in Rome. These included the first foundations of St. John Lateran and St. Peter's.

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A shrine outside the Circus of Nero already existed. It held the bones of Peter. Constantine expanded the shrine.

Subsequent rebuildings of the church would carefully place the high altar directly over the tomb of Peter.

Pagan ceremonies no longer played a role in civic events.

Sunday was made a day of rest.

Historians in past centuries used to argue that Constantine embraced Christianity as a political expedient, either as a way to gain support among a sizeable population or to use its dynamic qualities as a force of unity in the fractured empire. It is also sometimes said that Constantine hoped to use Christianity to support his own power.

These interpretations, though, require one to ignore the letters of Constantine and the accounts of his contemporaries—or at least to assume that they constitute only lies so as to deflect attention from an elaborate conspiracy.

Christianity was a minority religion. At most it claimed 15 percent of the West and perhaps 35 percent of the East.

Christianity was widely blamed for the decline of the Empire.

Christianity was itself torn by disunity.

Although Christians would pray for the emperor, they were unwilling to participate in his cult.

Constantine was not baptized until just before his death, which was common at this time among people in positions of authority.

If his conversion was insincere, why not accept baptism immediately? Or avoid it altogether?

Believing that he was called by God to heal his Church, Constantine began at once to find solutions to the disputes that raged.

Donatism had led to intense unrest in the North African communities.

Synods in Rome and Arles ruled against the Donatists, but they refused to accept it.

Relations between Constantine and Licinius were tense. In part this was a pure power struggle. It was further aggravated by Licinius's resumption of Christian persecutions in the East.

In 324 A.D., open warfare erupted. Constantine defeated Licinius and became sole emperor.

Constantine soon learned of a dispute even more destructive than that of Donatism.

Arius, a priest in Alexandria, and his followers argued that Christ was made by God, and therefore was less than God.

The orthodox position, that Christ and the Father were one in being and that Christ was begotten, not made, was championed by a deacon in Alexandria, Athanasius.

Constantine attempted various avenues to bring about a reconciliation, which all failed.

To deal with Arianism and other matters of dispute, Constantine summoned the bishops of the Church to Nicaea in 325 A.D.: the First Ecumenical Council.

Constantine opened the council, but left the final decisions to the prelates. This was an important distinction that would lead in the West to the concept of Church and state as separate institutions.

Arianism was condemned. The authority of the three patriarchates was asserted. Easter date discrepancies were cleared up.

The Nicene Creed, based on the old Apostles' Creed, was drafted and approved.

Shortly after Nicaea, Constantine's mother, Helena, who probably converted with her son, traveled to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage.

She founded a church of the Holy Sepulcher and another at the site of the Nativity.

She is also credited with the discovery of the True Cross.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What was decreed by the Edict of Milan?
2. Who was credited with the discovery of the True Cross?

### Suggested Reading

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Jones, Arnold H.M. *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.

### Other Books of Interest

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Barnes, Timothy D. *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Elliott, T.G. *The Christianity of Constantine the Great*. Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1996.

## Lecture 10: Christianity as the Official Religion of Rome

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Archibald Robertson's (ed.) *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*.

On May 11, 330 A.D., Constantine formally dedicated the new capital of the Empire in the East, Constantinople.

Pagan and Christian mixed in this new city.

The founder's statue in the Forum of Constantine is emblematic of that.

Constantine built at least three major churches, Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia), Holy Peace (Hagia Eirene), and Holy Apostles.

Constantine received baptism and died in 337 A.D. His body was laid in the Church of the Holy Apostles. His reign charted a new course both for the Empire and the Church.

The conversion of the imperial family made Christianity not only broadly acceptable, but actually a religion of the elite. Conversions grew exponentially.

Paganism survived, but it became less and less important. Eventually it came to be seen as either antiquarian, or an ideology of the intellectual elite.

Constantine's sons succeeded him in power. Murder and rebellion, though, eventually eliminated all of them except Constantius (337 A.D.–361 A.D.).

### The Arian Matter

The Arian matter, though, did not die. Arians, led by Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, continued to work to salvage something of the theology. Eusebius professed loyalty to the Nicene creed. He was willing to accept that Christ was like the Father, but not the Nicene position that he was one in essence.

Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria in April 328 A.D. He worked tirelessly to remove all heresy and schism.

Eusebius worked within the imperial court against Athanasius, accusing him of severity against former Arians and threatening a dock strike if Constantine did not support him.

A synod at Tyre excommunicated Athanasius in 335 A.D.

Constantine exiled Athanasius to Trier in Gaul.

Eusebius worked against other enemies in the East until the death of Constantine in 337 A.D. It was Eusebius himself who baptized the emperor.

Under Constantius, Eusebius moved from the former capital of Nicomedia to become the bishop of the new capital at Constantinople.

Athanasius, unable to return to his see, appealed to Pope Julius (337 A.D.–352 A.D.).

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Like previous popes, Julius claimed the right to settle disputes between bishops.

A synod of bishops in the East met at Antioch in 341 A.D. to deny being Arians, but also to insist that although Rome had a claim to great honor as the see of St. Peter, they did not recognize its right to judge such cases.

Arianism was unknown in the West. It appeared that schism between the two halves of Christianity was brewing.

In 342 A.D., Eusebius died, leaving his party without a leader for a time.

Athanasius returned to Alexandria in 346 A.D. to great adulation.

But by 350 A.D., Constantius had defeated his rivals and was sole emperor. He was greatly influenced by Valens, an Arian bishop.

Constantius ordered several synods in the West to condemn Athanasius, which they did, although some who refused were exiled. Pope Liberius also refused.

Athanasius was thus deposed from his see, although it took a military force to remove him in 356 A.D. and install a new Arian bishop.

Athanasius fled into the desert to live out his life as a monk.

He wrote numerous pamphlets against the Arians and imperial authorities.

The Egyptians, who were both orthodox and now anti-imperial, supported him.

The new bishop of Alexandria, George, was a full Arian, believing that the Son was part of creation. Similarly, Eudoxius, the new bishop of Antioch, believed the same.

In 360 A.D., general councils were held in which the Son was declared to be only like the Father, which allowed Arianism. As Jerome noted, "The world groaned to find itself Arian."

This did not settle the matter. Religion was mixed with politics as unrest spread.

Communities in the East frequently had more than one bishop, each professing either Nicene Christianity or one of many varieties of Arianism.

The vacillating of emperors toward the religious dispute served only to make matters worse.

### **Julian and Paganism**

In 361 A.D., Julian came to the imperial throne. Like everyone else in the imperial family, he was a Christian. Or so it was thought. He proclaimed that he was, in fact, a pagan.

Julian had a great love for the old ways and hoped to restore Roman greatness by restoring the pagan religion.

He did not institute a persecution, which would have been difficult in any case. Instead, he spent liberally to open and restore pagan temples and revoked all privileges of the Church.

He decreed tolerance for all Christian sects, hoping that their vehement differences would cause them to destroy each other.

His efforts did not bear fruit. He was upset to learn from pagan priests that Christian conversions were on the rise. Julian attributed this to Christian charity and good works and enjoined the pagans to do likewise.

He wrote a treatise, *Against the Galileans*, in which he argued that Christianity was no religion at all—thus atheism—because it claimed to come from Judaism. Yet the Jews disowned it.

Why, he asked, would anyone want to follow a religion of such recent vintage rather than the ancient faith of Judaism?

These arguments led him to favor Jews at the expense of Christians. He even began a project of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

Earthquakes and mysterious explosions claimed many workers' lives and thus the project was abandoned.

In 363, Julian began a military campaign against the Persians. This was advised by the oracles and soothsayers and was to be a clear example of the power of the ancient gods.

It went badly from the start. At last he was forced to retreat, greatly grieved by the loss.

During the retreat, he was wounded by a spear. A later tradition, perhaps untrue, held that he said on his deathbed, "Galilean, you have won."

With Julian went his anti-Christian initiatives. All subsequent emperors were Christian.

### **Theodosius I**

Doctrinal strife continued in the East until the accession of Theodosius I, who became the last man to rule a unified Roman Empire.

Theodosius, who ruled the West from Milan, was baptized in 380 A.D. during a severe illness. He was orthodox.

Within a few months he entered Constantinople, deposed the Arian bishop, and called an ecumenical council, which met in 381 A.D.

This council affirmed the Nicene Creed, with some modifications, and condemned the Arians. By imperial decree, Arian bishops were exiled and orthodoxy was restored.

This council also afforded the patriarchal see of Rome "primacy of honor," with Constantinople coming just after it.

Rome sent no delegates to the council and never accepted this canon.

Theodosius persecuted Arians, but was tolerant to Jews and pagans.

Beginning in 391 A.D., Theodosius began ordering the closing of some pagan temples and restricting practices at others.

This did not mean the end of paganism, but it was becoming an extreme minority.

Although no decree was issued making Christianity the official state religion, it certainly had the position by the death of the emperor in 395 A.D.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What were the three major churches that Constantine built?
2. Why did Julian want to restore paganism?

### Suggested Reading

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Robertson, Archibald, ed. *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1892).

### Other Books of Interest

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Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

King, Noel Q. *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity*. Westminster (UK): Westminster Press, 1960.

## Lecture 11: The Rise of Christian Monasticism

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read Marylin Dunn's *The Emergence of Monasticism*.

At first glance, Christianity might not seem a likely religion to embrace a monastic ideology.

Christ had commanded his followers to serve others. However, Christ had spent forty days in the desert and had also enjoined his followers to give up all they had to follow him.

In its first three centuries, Christianity was difficult, made doubly so by persecutions. The end of the persecutions and embracing of Christianity by most Romans meant that opportunities for martyrdom or other acts of Christian heroism were severely limited.

### **Christian Monasticism**

Christian monasticism began in Egypt with holy men who sought solitude separating themselves from a sinful world in order to come closer to God. They would go into the desert, living in caves or other makeshift dwellings.

Their reputation for holiness attracted many visitors, who sought out their wisdom or knowledge of God's will. It was taken for granted that the words of these holy men were divinely inspired, and so they were collected into books.

Antony is the most famous of these holy men, although he was not the first. Born in the mid-third century into a well-off family, Antony later took on the discipline of a hermit.

He lived in a tomb, not far from his hometown. Pestered by visitors, he moved to an abandoned fort, where he remained for several decades. He crafted an eremitical form of monasticism—a community of hermits.

Pachomius instituted the coenobitical form of monasticism in a community near the Nile around 318. Monks in these communities lived in common, sharing everything, engaging in manual labor and prayer.

They were engaged, above all, in an enterprise to save their souls. The community was organized along military lines with barracks and a superior to whom all owed obedience. Pachomius founded eight such monasteries during his life.

### **Irregular Forms of Monasticism**

Aside from these regularized forms of monasticism, there were an abundance of irregular forms.

Wandering hermits could be found almost anywhere. They acquired a reputation for troublemaking in some areas.

Unregulated asceticism often led to bizarre forms of competition.

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Basil of Caesarea set up monastic communities in Asia Minor on the coenobitical model.

Basil attempted to reconcile the monastic life with Christ's commandments by insisting that the monks work and pray as a service to God's church and people and not simply for the salvation of their own souls.

All monks owed unquestioned obedience to their superior. No one was allowed to fast or mortify themselves without approval of their superior.

In order to serve, Basil's communities were obedient to the local bishop. This avoided problems that existed elsewhere. Because hermits often taught without regard to the local church authorities, they could easily fall into heresy.

Monasticism in Syria and Mesopotamia tended to draw disproportionately from simple, rural people with little formal education.

Here asceticism could be extreme. Symeon Stylite (390–459) lived in Syria, where he quickly gained a reputation as a holy man. Crowds flocked to his various caves and huts.

To remove himself from the crowds, he built a column on which he lived. Subsequent columns became larger, until he was living fifty feet above the crowds. Column dwelling became a popular devotion in the East for centuries.

### **The Desert Saints**

As an Eastern phenomenon, it took some time for monasticism to make its way to the West. It came in the form of lives of the Desert Saints.

These models of Christian piety were picked up by hermits in Europe, who went to the hills and forests.

Monasteries of one sort or another sprang up. Benedict of Nursia (480–543) came from a noble family in Rome, but soon became disillusioned by life in the big city.

Benedict became a hermit for three years, gaining a reputation as a holy man.

After agreeing to become superior of a monastery in need of reform, he resigned after several of the monks attempted to poison him.

Benedict began founding his own houses, establishing a rule, or constitution, based on other rules current at the time.

These monasteries were for laymen who wished to save their souls. The rule enjoined manual labor, prayer, obedience to the superior, and moderation.

Although at the time the Benedictine Rule was just one of many forms of Western monasticism, its subsequent adoption by the Carolingians would give it extraordinary preeminence.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Where did Christian Monasticism begin?
2. What was the origin of column dwelling?

### Suggested Reading

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Dunn, Marylin. *The Emergence of Monasticism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2003.

### Other Books of Interest

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Chapman, John. *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972.

Duckett, Eleanor. *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*. New York: Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 2000.

Rousseau, Philip. *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

## Lecture 12: The Latin Fathers

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Michael J. Aquilina's *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Fathers*.

By the end of the fourth century, the large majority of Romans were Christian. This meant that powerful and well-educated men were for the first time reconciling their lives with that of Christ and the apostles. In the West, Christian thought was shaped by three men above all.

### Ambrose of Milan

Born into one of the most noble and powerful families in the Roman West, his father was prefect of Gallia. His family was Christian.

Ambrose also entered government and prepared for a life of privilege.

In 374, he was sent by the emperor to Milan to keep order while the people chose a new bishop. To his surprise, they called for him.

Ambrose was thus baptized and ordained to the episcopate at the age of 35.

This was a position of importance, for the emperors frequently ruled from here rather than Rome.

Ambrose played an important role in preserving orthodoxy in the West, given his close association with Emperors Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius.

It was his influence that led Theodosius to go to the East and eradicate Arianism.

He wrote numerous tracts on Christian morality, pastoral care, and theology, as well as hymns.

In 390, he excommunicated Theodosius for his part in the massacre of seven thousand people in Thessalonica.

The emperor returned to Milan and did penance for his sins.

This episode would portend much for the future of Church-state relations in the medieval West.

### Jerome

Born around 340, he was educated in Trier and then went to the East. After several travels, he became a monk, settling in Bethlehem in 386.

Unlike the early Church fathers, Jerome's education was very much in the Latin, not Greek, world. He was an avid fan of Cicero as well as other Latin masters.

Jerome worried, though, about the juxtaposition of pagan with Christian. In a dream, he heard the voice of God refer to him as a "Ciceronian."

He wrote tracts against heretics as well as historical works. His most important work was the translation of the Bible into Latin: the Vulgate. He died in 420.

## Augustine of Hippo

Born in 354 to a Christian family in North Africa, he was extremely gifted and was trained in rhetoric and philosophy in Carthage.

He held several professorships before ending up in Rome. His desire was to use his position and contacts to acquire a position in the government.

In Rome, he took a concubine, who bore him a child. Although his mother, Monica, prayed for his conversion to Christianity, he became a Manichean, which he considered to be much more sophisticated. It was a dualist faith, a hybrid of Gnosticism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism.

The Elect would transcend this battlefield of good and evil, while Hearers were on their way to that status.

In 384, he moved to Milan, where he met Christian intellectuals, who for the first time inspired him.

In 387, he and his son were baptized by Ambrose.

He wrote works against the arguments of Manicheans and others, largely dealing with authority vs. reason and the nature of evil.

He returned to Africa and was ordained a priest. In 395, he became bishop of Hippo.

In 397, he wrote his *Confessions*.

Much of his time was taken up by the Donatist controversy, which continued to cause schism eighty-five years after Diocletian's persecution.

A council in Carthage heard all sides in 411. Emperor Honorius outlawed the Donatists.

The sack of Rome in 410 led to the production of the *City of God*, which would fundamentally shape Western Christian philosophy.

Augustine recast history as one of man's movements toward salvation, or the City of God.

His other treatises touched on a wide array of subjects.

Echoing the opinion of Paul, Augustine insisted that Jews must be tolerated. They were the living reminders of the promises of God that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The necessities of Christian rulers required an understanding of warfare in the Christian perspective. Augustine defined just Christian warfare, arguing against those who insisted on pacifism.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What was the influence of Ambrose of Milan?
2. What was the effect of Augustine's *City of God*?

### Suggested Reading

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Aquilina, Michael J. *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Fathers*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

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Brown, Peter R.L. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Kelly, J.N.D. *Jerome*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.

McLynn, Neil B. *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

## Lecture 13: Christianity and the Fall of Rome in the West

**Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .**

Read Jeffrey Richards's *Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*.

Germanic invasions of the western half of the Roman Empire began in earnest after 406 A.D. During the next several decades, the Western Empire was completely lost in all but name.

The Germanic invasions brought with them enormous economic, social, and political upheavals. In the ensuing anarchy and dislocation, the institution of the Church was all that survived. Bishops found themselves thrust into the position of adopting political authority for the survival of their cities.

This can be seen most notably in Rome, where the pope was increasingly looked to as the city's most important leader. Pope Leo I (the Great) (440-61) was the only thing standing between Rome and an invasion by the Huns. In 452, he met with Attila and averted the capture of the city. When the Vandals later captured Rome in 455, it was Leo who negotiated for the lives of the citizens.

The Germans who invaded the Western Empire were already Romanized to various degrees. Most had adopted the Roman religion of Christianity, but had been converted by Arians. Thus Arianism, dying in the East, was given new life in the West.

A clear religious line of demarcation existed, then, between the German Arian rulers and the Roman Catholic population of Europe. In 476, the last Roman emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the German Odovacer.

### **Theodoric**

Emperor Zeno in Constantinople sent the Gothic leader Theodoric to depose Odovacer, which he did in 489.

Theodoric ruled Italy, theoretically with Roman authority from Constantinople, until his death in 526. Theodoric instituted a program to restore Roman greatness in Italy. Nevertheless, the religious difference between himself and his Goths as Arians, and the pope, Romans, and the emperors in Constantinople as Catholics, continued to cause friction.

He instituted Roman law in Italy, thus ending the various customs that were considered the birthright of Germans. At last he resolved to do away with Catholicism, closing the churches and enforcing Arian Christianity. He died before those measures could be enacted.

In 493, Clovis, ruler of the largely pagan Germanic tribe, the Franks, accepted baptism as a Catholic.

At first this provided more difficulties for the popes, since Theodoric suspected them of treacherous dealings with his enemies.

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Over time, however, this would be an enormous boon for the Church, which gained a powerful ally in the West.

### **The Fall of the Empire**

From the time it happened, people have wondered how the powerful Roman Empire could have fallen.

Pagans blamed Christianity, which caused the Romans to turn their back on the gods.

This was resurrected in an altered form during the Enlightenment by Edward Gibbon. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he asserted that Christianity robbed the Empire of its best and brightest, who were shut up in monasteries rather than devoting themselves to the state. Scholars have rejected this reasoning, because it fails to account for the survival of the Empire in the East.

By 565, Emperor Justinian had reconquered Italy, restoring Roman control over Rome. Theoretically, the pope was subject to the emperor in Constantinople.

### **Roman Authority**

In truth, though, Roman authority in the wake of the Lombard invasions was so precarious that the pope was the de facto ruler of Rome.

As the only patriarchal see in the West, Rome was increasingly isolated from the Christian culture of the East.

It increasingly paid less attention to synods and councils in the East, focusing instead on the immediate necessity of restoring what was lost in the West.

Pope Gregory I (the Great) (590–604) was a prominent example of a pope who not only led the Western Church, but Rome as well.

He was born into an affluent Roman family and later became a monk.

The lack of officials or troops from Constantinople left the business of governing and defending Rome to the pope.

He also paid close attention to the welfare of the whole Western Church. He founded new episcopates in areas newly converted, sending the pallium from Rome as the symbol of his approval.

Gregory sent missions to spread or restore Christianity in the West.

The Saxon invasion of England had virtually erased Christianity from the island.

King Ethelbert of Kent, a pagan, married a Catholic Frank, which provided an opportunity for conversion. Gregory sent a fellow monk, Augustine, to the capital of Kent, Canterbury.

Ethelbert converted to Catholicism along with the rest of his tribes.

The Roman see of York was restored, but Augustine preferred to stay in Canterbury rather than London, thus establishing it as the other metropolitan see.

It was increasingly obvious that the drastically different conditions in the East and West were causing frictions that were slowly driving the two halves of the Christian world apart.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Essays & Questions

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1. Who was the last Roman emperor in the West?
2. Why did Edward Gibbon assert that Christianity had helped to cause the fall of the Roman Empire?

### Suggested Reading

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Richards, Jeffrey. *Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 1979.

### Other Books of Interest

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Brown, T.S. *Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy, A.D. 554-800*. Rome: British School at Rome, 1984.

Pelikán, Jaroslav J. *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

Richards, Jeffrey. *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great*. New York: Routledge, 1980.

## Lecture 14: Challenges from the East

### Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Patricia Crone's *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*.

The position of Christianity in the Empire led to two complementary dynamics.

Well-educated people trained in classical philosophy were becoming theologians, bringing that perspective with them.

This led to ever-deeper probing of the religion, particularly into vexing questions like the nature of Jesus Christ. Probing and analysis led naturally to disagreements. These disputes, however, did not remain merely theological, but often took on a related political character.

A competition existed among sees, particularly between the metropolitan or patriarchal sees.

Constantinople, now the capital of the Empire, sought not only to become a patriarchate, but also to position itself above much older sees like Antioch and Alexandria. Competition between Antioch and Alexandria for control of Constantinople was yet another dynamic. To win these contests, imperial favor was a necessity.

### Nestorianism

Nestorianism began with Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, who personified the Antiochene school. He argued that Christ had two distinct and separate natures, one human, the other divine. This helped to explain how a God, who by definition is immortal, could die. It flew in the face, though, of the popular devotion to the Virgin Mary as *theotokos*, or Mother of God. Nestorius insisted that Mary was the mother of the man only.

Fierce battle raged between the Nestorians and those of the Alexandrian school, which insisted on the indivisibility of Christ's nature. The Council of Ephesus formally condemned Nestorianism, yet it survived in parts of the East outside the Empire. It still exists today in Kurdistan and parts of Iraq.

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 defined Christ's nature as being both man and God united together, but still distinct. In Alexandria, where opposition to Nestorianism was the strongest, even the Chalcedon pronouncement seemed too much of a compromise.

Monophysitism became the dominant belief. It held that Christ had but one nature and one person in which the human was completely subsumed by the divine. In order to implement Chalcedon, bishops were sent by the emperor to Alexandria, but the people would not accept them. Years of attempts to settle the issue left only rancor between Alexandria and Constantinople. The Monophysite belief would survive in the Egyptian Coptic Church, the Jacobites of Syria, and the Armenian Church.

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Emperor Justinian (527–565) was the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as his native tongue. His wife, Theodora, was a Monophysite sympathizer and may well have been one herself. His numerous attempts to reconcile with the Monophysites all failed. His ambitious reconquest of the West restored North Africa, southern Spain, and Italy to the Empire, thus expelling or converting many Arian Germans. He ordered the construction of the magnificent church, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), the largest and most beautiful church in Christendom throughout the Middle Ages.

### **Eastern Christendom**

Eastern Christendom, already wracked by divisions, was dealt a severe blow by the invasion of the Persians in 612. In 614, the Persians captured Jerusalem, destroying the church of Holy Sepulcher and carrying away the relic of the True Cross. In 619, the Persians conquered Egypt. In 626, Constantinople itself was besieged by the Persians and their allies. Emperor Heracles, in a bold move, invaded Persia itself and, in 627, defeated it, ending the war.

Muslim Arabs invaded the Roman and Persian empires in 634. Both empires were exhausted after the long and brutal wars. The Monophysites, who were persecuted by Constantinople, considered the Muslim conquerors to be liberators. Within a century, Muslim armies had conquered Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. The core of the Christian world was lost.

Disputes over Christology remained in the conquered territories, yet they were removed from the political sphere because Muslim rulers had no interest in the distinctions.

Christianity, which had spanned the entire length of the Roman Empire, was shrinking rapidly. Of the five patriarchal sees only two remained: Rome and Constantinople. In the Middle Ages, Eastern and Western Christendom would cluster around these two poles—the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox worlds.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What conflicts arose on the nature of Christ as both human and divine?
2. What is Monophysitism?

### Suggested Reading

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Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

### Other Books of Interest

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Berkey, Jonathan P. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Gray, Patrick T.R. *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East*. Boston: Brill, 1979.

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## COURSE MATERIALS

### Suggested Readings:

- Aquilina, Michael J. *The Fathers of the Church: An Introduction to the First Christian Fathers*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.
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### Other Books of Interest:

- Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- . *Constantine and Eusebius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
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- Cadbury, Henry J. *The Book of Acts in History*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Chadwick, Henry. *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

### Other Books of Interest (continued):

- Chapman, John. *Saint Benedict and the Sixth Century*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- Dix, Dom Gregory. *Jurisdiction in the Early Church*. London: Faith House, 1975.
- Duckett, Eleanor. *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*. New York: Peter Smith Publisher, Inc., 2000.
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