

## Chapter 20 Christian History

### Chapter Summary

Following decades of mild to severe persecution of early Christians, Emperor Constantine (288–337) issued the Edict of Milan (313) ordering the toleration of Christians and a stop to their persecution. Yet persecution resumed after his death until Emperor Theodosius (347–395) made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire for purposes of state functions.

During this early period of church history, Christians struggled in two main realms: (1) doctrinal—unlike all other major world religions, Christianity places primary emphasis on right belief (orthodoxy); and (2) right practice—particularly with respect to slavery and the Roman games (Christian opposition had a role in ending both by around the sixth century). Barbarian invasions were also a challenge to the church leading to destruction and persecution, but before long the barbarians adopted the religion of the conquered. The charge that Christianity had only brought destruction to Rome was answered by St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) in *The City of God*, wherein he argued that God is the God of history.

As to orthodoxy, Christians wrestled with what to do with Jesus as he related to the God of Abraham: the Torah teaches there is only one God who alone can forgive sins, yet Jesus consistently said and did things that God alone can say and do (e.g., “your sins are forgiven”). At the Council of Nicea (325) the doctrine of the incarnation was established: Jesus was simultaneously fully God and fully man.

Christian history divides following the destruction of the Roman Empire in the fifth century into the Byzantine Empire in the East based in Constantinople and various barbarian kingdoms that dominated the West. The Byzantine Empire, although little known to Western Christians, continued as a Christian civilization until Constantinople was captured by Turks for Islam in 1453.

Until around the tenth century, Western Europe was unstable and continually raided by pagan invaders. The Venerable Bede (673–735), a monk who lived in northern England, wrote of the tribulations of Christians living on the northern frontier in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731). Christianity had been brought there in the second century by missionaries, traders, and soldiers drafted into Roman army. When the Romans withdrew, pagan Anglo-Saxons destroyed existing Christian society. Reconversion began when the pope sent in missionaries. Vikings subsequently destroyed Christian culture although it was eventually rebuilt by faithful Christians and missionaries from Europe.

A similar process of conversion took place all over Europe as people saw something in Christianity that attracted them. Rigorous standards applied before converts were baptized and many miracles are reported to have occurred during this era.

The great monastic orders played a key role throughout this early period. The Rule of St. Benedict was followed by members of the Cistercian monastic order, and became the basis for Western monasticism and one of the most important documents in the Christian history of the West. As a missionary organization, the Cistercians were unrivaled, their monasteries revolutionizing agriculture and developing mining, manufacturing, and trade. In an age of chaos, the monasteries were islands

of stability that preserved education and civilization. Rigorous asceticism was also encouraged, which some say undermined faith.

At the height of their power, the monastic orders created the basis for modern Europe. They built great complexes in the countryside and provided excellent preachers to urban cathedrals. They created a communications networked that crisscrossed Europe at a time when secular powers could scarcely retain control. They introduced hospitals and medical training, supported universities, and sent evangelists throughout the world.

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church flourished in Western Europe while the Eastern Orthodox churches were evangelizing Russia and Slavic regions.

By the 1500s, however, many monasteries were failing to attract new recruits and standards of discipline and spirituality had fallen to low ebb. A pious, Augustinian monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) set off a chain reaction that was to change Europe and the world. In a search for peace with God and authentic spirituality, he tore apart the unity of medieval Christendom and created two blocks: northern countries except Poland and part of Ireland became Protestant, whereas the south (Italy, France, Spain, and Austria) remained Catholic.

Appointed professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1512, it is usually said that the Reformation began when Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the door of the palace church in that city. This normal way for scholars to engage academic debate launched what became known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther questioned the basis of salvation as taught by the Catholic Church, particularly the selling of indulgences said to free people from sin. He insisted Scripture taught that only faith in Christ leads to forgiveness.

Initially, Luther merely wanted to reform the church and remove practices he viewed as contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. Catholic authorities took a hard stance and eventually condemned him as a heretic. Luther responded by challenging other beliefs such as purgatory and celibacy using the guiding principle of removing from the Catholic Church anything contrary to Scripture. John Calvin (1509–1564) went further, insisting if something was not mandated in Scripture, it should be removed from practice. Calvinists eventually rejected bishops in favor of a presbyterian form of church government.

Baptists went further yet, arguing that Scripture allowed for only believing adults to be baptized. The rise of other Anabaptists in Europe (Mennonites, Hutterites, and others) split the Protestant movement. Anglicans in England remained Catholic in ritual but Protestant in doctrine.

Following the Reformation, the Catholic Church launched a renewal movement known as the Counter-Reformation. The movement was spearheaded by the Jesuits, founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola. As a highly centralized and efficient organization, they were founded to spread the Word of God. Inspired by the Jesuits, more traditional Catholic orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans were revitalized to help in establishing schools, universities, and charitable organizations and also creating rich artistry and music.

As European rulers chose between Catholicism and Protestantism, political allegiances changed leading to the Thirty Years' War which started in 1618 and went until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. One of the significant questions arising out of the war was: How could people professing to

believe in Christ kill one another simply because of differences in doctrine? This led to a growing skepticism among European intellectuals leading to the Enlightenment and a large-scale rejection of Christianity.

The Thirty Years' War was influential in the rise of Pietism, which emphasized unselfish works, love for others, and praying for one another instead of arguing. Among the leaders of this movement were writers such as Johann Arndt (1555–1621), preachers like Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and scholars like August Hermann Francke (1663–1727). A battle between Pietism and rationalism ensued with the latter winning out via the views of thinkers like Christian Wolff and G. W. Leibniz, who promoted German intellectual development and disdain for orthodox Christianity. Deism emerged in the writings of influential intellectuals like Goethe, Kant, and Schliermacher. Pietism became inward looking and contributed to the rise of Christian missionary efforts among both Catholics and Protestants in the late eighteenth century.

Political revolutions in America (1776) and France (1789) saw an emphasis on deism and Methodism in the former, and political upheaval and religious persecution in the latter. English Deism took root on the Continent leading to an emphasis on the science of folklore and the eventual emergence of biblical criticism, which Hexham suggests had an anti-Semitic element to it. The dominance of liberal theology in America at the end of the nineteenth century led to the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the early twentieth and Billy Graham's "neo-evangelicalism" in mid-century.

Liberal theologians dominated universities in the twentieth century giving emphasis to such schools of thought as "liberation theology" and "black theology." Theologians like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer opposed anti-Semitic overtones as did spokesmen for the Catholic Church like Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. As the twentieth century closed, a new emphasis on atheism emerged fueled by writers like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.