

Holy Men and Heretics – A Brief History of Christianity

As we continue to uncover links and connections between specific colors, symbols, and numbers in history, we will occasionally expose historical details which some might find difficult to digest. Please be reassured that the primary objective of this research is to facilitate unity amongst us through a better understanding of our respective religious histories, and through a clarification of the roles that religious traditions have played in history so far. This sometimes requires a frank exposition of the formative aspects of our current belief systems, and a necessary demystifying and de-romanticizing of much that we have chosen to believe is true. For, no matter how convinced we may be of the validity of our chosen (or inherited) belief system, ignorance of the details of its formation - whether those details be attractive or not – will prevent our full and well-informed interaction with our brothers and ‘neighbors’ from other faith traditions. Furthermore, a limited understanding of our own faith tradition precludes our genuine ability to discern its true value.

In this article, we are going to expose some uncomfortable facts. We need to. Devout Christians may be somewhat shocked to hear about the true history of our Christian tradition, but you may be assured that for each of the few examples of institutional deception, corruption and immorality mentioned in this article, there are literally thousands more incidents where the pre-16th century Christian Church in particular exercised her authority and power in ways that can only be described as appalling. Likewise, our brief exploration and commentary on the origins of key doctrines and beliefs; including the creation and development of the modern Bible will no doubt be a challenge for many but, in the belief that knowledge ultimately liberates the mind and the heart, these investigations are presented with what I hope will be perceived by the reader as a sincere and compassionate frankness. Of all the topics discussed in these articles – and for Christians in particular - these may be the most challenging issues to review, but romantic indulgences have not yet, and surely will not solve the ongoing problems caused by religious superstitions and faith-based fanaticism.

This article then will focus primarily upon the underpinning political, moral, and social conditions, key personalities, and historical events that had a direct contributory effect on the explosive arrival of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. With this separation between Catholic and Protestant Christians in the 1500’s, deep-rooted traditions of enmity and mutual suspicion were birthed, which for the most part continue in various forms to this day. In some countries such as the State of Northern Ireland for instance, this mutual resentment is so ingrained in the fabric of daily life, that it has long since gone beyond any semblance of religious division. Instead, it has masked itself in a particularly insidious form of pseudo-religious cultural and political prejudice that uses religious terminology merely as a qualifying mask of respectability; as if by attaching a religious label to their mutual hatred, it somehow justifies the sectarian bitterness. This type of dysfunctional, corrupt ‘piety’ that attempts to justify social evils with religious terminology has unfortunately been a central component of our collective religious histories - particularly within Christianity. Therefore, this paper carries a double-caution for those of us who have naively believed that religion in history is simply the relationship between righteous people, and their God. More often than not I’m afraid, we will discover that ‘God’ has had very little to do with what we so proudly refer to as our ‘holy’ religious traditions.

Another important motivation for the writing of this article is the cautionary aspect, whereby all believers, of all faiths, are respectfully asked to reflect on the

treatment received by men and women of integrity throughout history who have dared to question the status quo, especially the reformers on both sides of the Catholic / Protestant debate and, in context of the 'Golden Rules' of our respective traditions, ask ourselves if we have truly advanced in moral integrity since that time?

With these thoughts in mind, the reader is now respectfully invited to maintain historic objectivity as we tackle some of the more challenging issues in Christian religious history. So without further ado, let's embark on our brief exploration of the colorful yet 'politically incorrect' history of Christianity.

A Brief Church History

Let us begin our review of the first 1600 years of Christian socio-political history from the time of Christ to the Protestant Reformation focusing chiefly on the attitudes and events that shaped our Christian tradition, beginning with the Jewish Zealots revolt of 66AD, some thirty-three to thirty-five years after the crucifixion of Jesus in the Roman province of Judea¹.

During this revolt whereby the rebel Zealots tried to overthrow Roman rule in Judea, the early Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) who incidentally were considered no more than a Judaic 'cult' by the Romans, did not support the aggressive action of the Zealots. This resulted in a sense of betrayal and resentment from the 'orthodox' Jews towards the Christians of the day. After the Romans had completely destroyed Herod's Temple in 70AD, the Orthodox Jews that remained in Jerusalem expressed their building resentment towards the Christians by insisting on strict legalistic orthodoxy, thus excluding any Jewish Christians from the ranks of Orthodox Judaism and creating a definitive line between Orthodox Judaism and Jewish Christianity. In AD 135 after yet another ill-fated Jewish revolt, Rome declared the Holy City of Jerusalem a 'pagan' city and forbade Jews to enter it under penalty of death. This declaration sparked widespread persecution of the Jews throughout the Roman Empire. The preexisting resentment between Jews and Christians intensified when the Christians, (who were by now mostly gentiles – that is 'non-Jews') publicly expressed their belief that Yahweh (God), through the Romans, was now punishing the Jews for crucifying Christ. Then came a period of about 150 years leading up to the end of the 3rd Century, when both Jews and Christians were too busy being persecuted themselves to worry about persecuting each other. This was the period of sporadic martyrdoms and persecutions of Christians (amongst other 'pagan' cults) by different Roman Emperors, interspersed equally with periods of tolerance and even favor, and culminating in the worst period of persecution for the Christians since Nero; AD 303-313 under Emperors Galerius and Maximinus. Then, things changed again.

Emperor Constantine

The tacit 'conversion' of Emperor Constantine to Christianity in AD 312 marked the advent of Christianity as a politically-linked social institution. Suddenly, being a 'Christian' meant having a job; and Christians became 'favored' rather than persecuted citizens of the Roman Empire. Many saw this sudden shift in imperial policy towards Christianity as a great blessing, but many also believed that true Christianity was being corrupted by such sudden (imperial and secular) popularity, and as a result various Christian groups retired to the wilderness to form monastic communities. Some of these ascetic cells survived in the desert regions of Palestine and North Africa, and a similar

¹ Jesus' exact birth date is disputed by scholars. Most place it around 4 BC.

form of monasticism developed later in Ireland in the 4th and 5th Centuries, but most of the localized groups eventually died out, either persecuted or ignored by the growing and increasingly worldly church.

Constantine positioned himself as the head of the Church and the Empire in his new Imperial city of Constantinople (now Istanbul), which soon came to rival Rome as the center of the Roman Empire. In the process of establishing Constantinople as a 'Christian' capital, Emperor Constantine sacked numerous Roman temples in order to furnish the sumptuous new Christian churches. Curiously, during the whole of his reign Constantine maintained his formal position as 'High Priest' of Roman paganism, and upon his death was even promoted to the status of a 'god'. So, although traditionally perceived by some Christian historians as the secular 'savior' of Christianity and the first truly 'Christian' Roman Emperor, the real truth is that Constantine reigned as Emperor; pagan High Priest; and 'Supreme Pontiff' of the Christian Church simultaneously, and refused baptism until his deathbed because of concerns about dying in a state of sin. Technically speaking then, Constantine remained a pagan until his deathbed. This fact however has not prevented Christian tracts from heralding him as "the great secular father of modern Christianity".

Meanwhile, whilst being supportive of 'orthodox' Christianity both Constantine and his son Emperor Constantine II were strongly inclined towards 'Arian' Christianity - a form of Christianity that was later declared 'heretical' because it dared to question the developing mystical theories about the divinity of Jesus. This is a particularly important matter to consider when presuming upon the unbroken chain of doctrinal purity going back to Christ, or, when choosing to believe that only 'pure' Christianity emerged - somehow miraculously unscathed - out of the convoluted political turmoil of history. More realistic perhaps; is to acknowledge that the more ideological or mystical strains of Christianity (which arguably were much closer to Christ's original teachings) were forced underground by the sheer political weight of currently-popular beliefs. In other words, whichever brand of religion was most popular amongst the ranks of the political leaders tended to inherit the 'divine' right to define heresy and defend the faith. Despite early attempts to outlaw it for example, by the year 376 Arianism had become the most popular religion in the Roman Empire, and would not succumb to (Catholic) Orthodoxy until Emperor Theodosius officially declared his own personal preferences in AD 396. Yet Arianism nevertheless retained its hold all across the Empire, and especially amongst the Germanic tribes becoming in effect a second, and very powerful Christian denomination until the early years of the sixth Century and the spread of the influence of the Christian Bishop of Rome (later to be known as the Pope) over Western Europe.

In AD 324, an imperial edict from Constantine instructed all the soldiers of the Roman Army to worship the 'Supreme God' on Sundays, an order that mainly served to merge Christianity with long-established pagan Sunday worship. In the noted work *The History of Christianity* author Gonzalez writes;

During most of his political career, Constantine seems to have thought that the Unconquered Sun (pagan deity), and the Christian God were compatible... and that other gods, although subordinate, were nevertheless real and relatively powerful.

Although technically a pagan, and a declared supporter of Arianism (the Christian 'heresy' of the day), Constantine personally arbitrated complex (orthodox) theological issues based solely upon his position as Emperor and Supreme Pontiff, thus directing

the outcome of the Council of Nicea. It was this particular church council in 325AD which produced the 'Nicene Creed' familiar to modern-day Catholics, which not only formed the doctrinal basis of Christianity, but remains the foundation for much canon law.

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The Two Councils of Nicaea:

Church Councils held in Asia Minor in AD 325 and 787.

The first was called to settle the Arian dispute and resulted in the production of the Nicene Creed, the outlawing of Arianism, and the decision to hold Easter on the Sunday after the Jewish Passover. The second Council was convened to approve the veneration of statues, icons, and other 'holy' symbols after iconoclasts had removed them from Christian Churches in 726. The ban on images was eventually lifted in 843

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By the time of Constantine's death in AD 337, the Roman Empire encompassed North Africa, the Middle East and Persia, and all of Western Europe (except for Ireland and Scandinavia), and Christian Bishopricks were firmly established in the five centers of; Constantinople (the new seat of the Emperor), Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome (the previous capital of the Empire). This was the vast Empire that would be divided between Constantine's three sons; Constantinius, Constantine II, and Constans in 337, and only three years later would be re-divided into Western and Eastern Empires under two remaining brothers. This territorial division of the Empire reinforced the political centrality of Constantinople in the East and of Rome in the West. The emergence of serious religious dissention as early as AD 346 also contributed to the beginnings of the establishment of rival centers of Christianity. The evidence of this dissention (which incidentally, began over a debate about the integrity of the aforementioned Nicene Creed) continues today in the continued theological and philosophical differences between Western Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Churches of Russia, Greece, and Eastern Europe. By the year 410, when the city of Rome was finally sacked by Alaric and his Visigoths, Christianity was well established as the religion of the Roman Empire. However, a great many secular and religious characteristics such as feast-days and religious paraphernalia had been adopted and absorbed from various pagan cultures; a fact still evident today in the

religious rites and rituals surrounding Easter and Christmas and in the sacraments and services of modern Christian denominations. Is it simply mere coincidence one might ask, that Mithras, the savior-god of the Roman Legions before and during the time of Christ, was (i) born on December 25th, (ii) attended by shepherds at his birth, (iii) died on a tree, (iv) resurrected to his father-god's right hand, and (v) inspired inscriptions such as "by my blood have I redeemed you"...? Most disturbing of all perhaps is the fact that so many remarkable 'co-incidences' like these concerning other key figures and doctrines have *not* been presented to us in our Christian educations.

Bishops and Bibles

For a couple of centuries after Constantine, Christianity would flourish all across the Empire, modeling its ecclesiastic structure along the efficient lines of Roman secular administration, and the preexisting rites and rituals of pagan religions. As one might imagine, the ability of the Emperor as both secular and religious leader to keep on top of everything was pretty stretched, and with Rome having the three properties of, (a) being the previous center of secular administration, (b) being the burial place of St. Peter, and (c) being a long, long way from Constantinople, the bishopric of Rome became a very influential center of political and religious activity; and it is in this 'Roman' branch of Christianity (later known as Roman Catholicism) that we will now primarily focus our attention..

In Rome, as in the Empire in general many of the old (now 'pagan') temples were destroyed and most non-Christian religious rites were prohibited. Meanwhile, each major city paid its Bishop a quarter of all revenues raised for the Church, which ensured that Christian Bishops became very wealthy indeed. With wealth came power, and sadly, a good measure of corruption. The famous historian Ammianus Marcellinius (330-391) describes the post of a clergyman of his day thus: "*..enriched by offerings from women, riding in carriages, dressing splendidly, and feasting luxuriously, so that their entertainments surpass even royal banquets*".² Certainly a far cry from the image of the persecuted Christians of the Roman arenas. Ammianus also informs us that as early as AD 366, the Bishopric of Rome was such a prize that the supporters of the two would-be Popes, St. Damasus, and Ursinus, "*left one hundred and thirty seven dead in the Christian basilica of Sicininus*". Yes, **St.** Damasus became the recognized Pope, and it was during his reign that Church scholars formatted the Bible into its current form: The very same Bible that is held up as an absolute and infallible document by many Christians today. The importance and centrality of the Bible to most modern Christians' faith journey requires that we establish a few historical facts about its origins before continuing. An opening article in *The Oxford Study Bible* states;

The earliest list of books which agrees with our present New Testament comes from AD 367, yet it was not until many centuries later that all Christians agreed on what constituted the New Testament.

The current belief amongst certain Christian fundamentalists is that the Bible, as a 'pure' work of inspired literature is absolutely beyond question. However, this position is challenged by an informed awareness of the facts surrounding its canonical compilation. This is not to suggest that the Bible cannot or does not contain Divine inspiration or truths, but rather, that we must also use our 'divinely-inspired' intelligence to be very

² Eerdmans p 138

discerning about the 'absoluteness' of anything, or anybody. The sad reality is that many Church leaders and scholars of very questionable morality and motivations were directly involved in the selection and editing process that formed the basis for our modern Bibles, choosing which books were 'in', and which were 'out'. The Oxford study notes;

Actually, the twenty-seven separate letters and books that now compose the official New Testament canon (or authoritative list) are only a small selection from a much larger body of writings by Christians during the first several centuries of the Common Era. Thus, in order to appreciate the full variety and vitality of early Christian history, this larger fund of material – ranging from long-recognized writings like the letters of Clement or The Shepherd of Hermas to recently discovered works like the Gnostic documents of Nag Hammadi – needs to be studied and assessed. Moreover, why some of these texts were determined to be authoritative (or canonical) by later third-and fourth-century Christians, while other texts were not, provides insight into the debates that came to shape medieval Christianity and indeed Christianity today.³

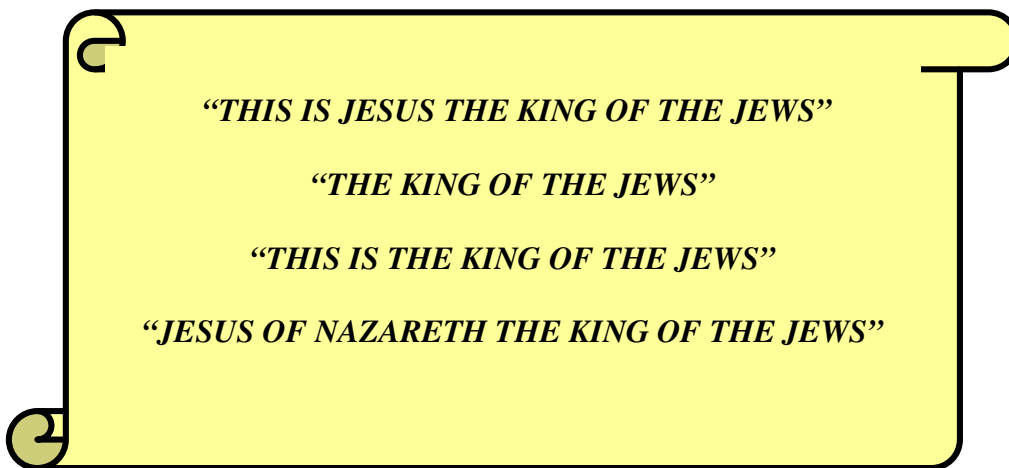
Furthermore, the Bible contains a great many contradictions and semantic misnomers whose very existence challenges any *technical* claim to 'absolute' historical accuracy or factual consistency. Those who make such claims are quite frankly either naive, poorly-informed, or what is worse; are deliberately misleading their listeners. Some easy-to-check examples of technical, and lineage-related contradictions in the K.J.V Bible are:

- *The identity of Esau's wives in Genesis 26:34, Genesis 28:9, and Genesis 36:1, in particular, Ishmael's daughter. Is it Bashemath or Mahalath? Is she Elon the Hittite's daughter, or Ishmael's daughter? And who is Judith? Considering that the Arab peoples trace their roots back to Ishmael and Esau, these are important facts to get right. Facts, not opinions.*
- *Great care and attention went into recording the facts and figures surrounding Solomon's Temple, its construction, destruction, and its rebuilding. In spite of this, there are several discrepancies between accounts of The Temple's dimensions. In Jeremiah 52:21 for example, the stately brass pillars are recorded as being 23 cubits (18 + 5), whilst in II Chronicles 3:15, they are listed as 40 cubits tall (35 + 5). This is quite a large discrepancy for another historical fact recorded in the 'unfaultable' Bible.*
- *There is also Jesus' lineage which differs greatly in the Gospel accounts depending on whether we read Luke or Matthew's account. (Incidentally, neither of whom actually knew Jesus personally). According to Luke there are 56 generations between Abraham and Jesus, whilst Matthew definitively declares there to be only 40, a startling discrepancy of 16 whole generations! Furthermore, key figures such as Solomon are omitted altogether in Luke's account, and practically none of the names match*

³ Oxford Study Bible Articles p5

between the two accounts, - beginning even with Joseph's father (Mary's husband) ... was he called Heli or Jacob?

- *The names of the Twelve Apostles are recorded in the chapters of; Matthew 10, Mark 3, Luke 6, and the eleven remaining after Judas' suicide are recorded in Acts 1:13. Unfortunately, all four of them differ from each other in at least one name, giving rise to reasonable questions about the absolute technical integrity of the information.*
- *Lastly, one would imagine that at least the Gospel facts surrounding the Crucifixion, the very center point of Christian beliefs, would be beyond reproach... but even in a detail so historically important as the exact wording placed by Pontius Pilate above Jesus' cross, - a statement that only contained a few simple words in three languages so that all would understand... not one of the Gospels agrees exactly with any of the other three. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each record this historical event differently:*



...and these are only a few amongst many such examples. This may appear to be a case of hairsplitting, but in fact it is a very necessary principle to challenge the irresponsible myth popular amongst many modern Christians; that any written text declared 'holy' or not, supercedes, or nullifies our human responsibility to discern that text's true value. For if the Bible is indeed to be considered the 'Absolute and Complete' Word of God, then we not only have to blindly resign ourselves to the numerous technical errors and contradictions in the text, but we are also obliged to accept that God has been literally 'silent' for sixteen centuries since its formation in AD 367.

Anyone has the right to believe what they want, but when one serves in a position of public responsibility such as a preacher, pastor or priest, surely the onus is upon such public figures to investigate the validity of their declared beliefs *before* announcing them as 'absolute truths' to trusting ears. Anything less is at best irresponsible, and at worst criminally fraudulent. If our religious leaders were held to the same level of ethical accountability as the private sector – one wonders if the absolutist

rhetoric that flows all too frequently from trusted pulpits would be checked? One wonders indeed how many of our doctors, lawyers, teachers, or mechanics could continue in business if their words didn't match the realities of their profession? Indeed, how much confidence can one have in a doctor or a mechanic who only tells us what we *want* to hear – or what they think we will accept – rather than the real truth? Who indeed is being served by such deceptions?

Simply put, just as there is no excuse for a qualified doctor or mechanic to deceive us about the condition of our body or our vehicle respectively, so is there no excuse for a trusted minister or priest to mislead their congregations about the *technical* validity of the Bible – or for that matter, any other questionable doctrine, dogma, or belief. Telling credulous people that such-and-such a belief or doctrine “is to be believed” whilst one is personally aware of serious and credible challenges to those beliefs is really no different than a mechanic knowingly sending a customer on their way in a dangerous vehicle with the smug and condescending platitude that; “everything’s going to be okay”. When the ‘vehicle’ we are talking about is in fact the spiritual awareness and health of a living soul, then all the more reason – (not less) – to insist upon the legitimacy of the information and the integrity of those who deliver it. Those brave enough to acknowledge and publicize these unpopular facts should not therefore be contemptuously dismissed as either ‘atheistic critics’ or ‘religious skeptics’ simply because they challenge false and misleading piety because in truth, they, (and not necessarily the pious pundits) are taking the role of God’s true prophets for today.

When Jesus said “*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27) - he may just as easily have said “***Religion was made for man, and not man for religion!***” To take it one step further; this includes The Holy Bible, The Qur’an, The Bhagavad-Gita, or any other sacred text or scriptures. YES, they very well may be the inspired ‘Word of God’ - but they are neither the only, nor the complete ‘Word(s) of God’. It is literally impossible.

To suggest that any scripture is the absolute and ONLY Word of God denies any other form of Divine expression in all of the other non-literal aspects of Creation; such as in the beauty and order of the universe; in the lives of the saints or the prophets or other great individuals; or in Christianity’s case - in the life of Jesus himself. Jesus, who was in fact called “*The Word – made flesh!*” (John 1:14). We really must keep things in perspective. For, regardless of the value we place upon them, these ‘divinely-inspired’ words are only words after all, and words are but grammatical tools to a greater purpose. Words are only metaphors for a greater reality that exists upon several planes and in several dimensions. And sacred words - whether written, spoken, sung, chanted, gobble-de-gooked, or ritualized; poetic or profound; literal or symbolic; need to be assimilated into the experience of being human as a tool towards our understanding of The Divine. As a form of communication that is received, interpreted, translated, and proclaimed by mere men; no words, no matter the context or the integrity of the speaker, may be considered either ‘absolute’ or ‘infallible’. There are simply too many ways to interpret, decipher, translate, and assimilate words to claim to be able to convey the absolute character of God Himself upon them. When we insist upon attributing absolute characteristics to such a multifaceted medium as words, we not only deny the potential of the human mind and spirit to reach a higher level of awareness of our God, but we also risk stifling and suppressing any current or future expressions of the ‘Word of God’. For, (excepting a miracle) how indeed is God going to be able to make any new additions to our sacred texts? How indeed will we get advice for this ever-changing and increasingly complex world that we live in? Could it be remotely possible perhaps, that

God might still be trying to communicate with us as we advance *together* through history? In my opinion, we should all consider this point very seriously.

An Important Reminder

As we continue to explore these historical facts, uncovering less well-known facts and figures, I would like to take the liberty of reminding the reader that the early Church, and the Church of the middle ages, particularly before the Protestant Reformation and subsequent Catholic Reformation, was a very different institution to the Christian Churches and particularly the Roman Catholic Church of today. Therefore, any exposure of distasteful or corrupt practices within that pre-16th century institution, should be understood simply as the pre-16th century Christian tradition, which is the same shared foundation from which all modern Christian denominations are descended from.

Same Roots, Different Branches

During the rise in popularity and official recognition of Christianity during the third and fourth Centuries, Christian monks, somewhat alarmed at the worldliness of the Church proper had retreated to their hermitages, monasteries, and isolated enclaves. This is how many purists chose to live-out their Christianity, and how many different sects – some arguably ‘truer’ version of the faith – established their roots. Important centers of monasticism became established in outlying areas such as Ireland and Scotland, where other ‘flavors’ of community-centered Christianity were established; first by the missionary Bishop Palladius, then by St Patrick, followed closely by the monks Brendan, Columba, and Columban. It was chiefly as a result of their missionary endeavors that middle-Europe became converted in the 5th to 8th Centuries. But this Celtic Christianity (which had the local Bishops subordinate to the Abbots) was destined to conflict with the more autocratic ‘Imperial Roman’ style of political Christianity and therefore ceased to flourish around the 12th Century. Some argue that Celtic Christianity was in its essence a much purer interpretation of Christ’s message than its Roman authority and counterpart later proved to be. But even Celtic Christianity’s survival depended upon adopting and integrating a great many local ‘pagan’ festivals and customs. Of course, with serious theological debates and physical battles still raging over the aforementioned ‘heresies’ such the question of Christianity’s ‘true’ integrity (as a reflection of the true nature and mission of Jesus Christ) may now be a somewhat pointless debate. Notwithstanding the

1,000-year brutal suppression of any competing ideologies by the Christian authorities; one has to seriously question the claimed integrity of the historical continuum and the claim of apostolic succession: What indeed were the reasons for so many undoubtedly sincere, yet differing interpretations of the essence of Christianity – each of which regarded the other sects as ‘heretical’? The content of these ‘heresies’ is not so important as the central fact that there were so many of them at such an early stage in the history of Christianity, each supplying a different interpretation of Christ and his mission, claiming direct authority, and accumulating large and loyal followings. Some of them even lasted for centuries despite persistent persecution from the established Church. The big question is, why such a lack of theological consensus so soon after Jesus’ time - when the ‘original’ material of Christ’s mission was still relatively fresh? Why so much conjecture and confusion? Could it possibly be because of a lack of first-hand verifiable material about the life of Jesus himself? This seems the only reasonable explanation for so much animosity and simultaneously accounts for the pre-reformation Christian traditions of promoting religious mysteries, sinister political secrecy, and suppression of scientific truths. They weren’t called the Dark Ages for nothing. Surely we would be foolish not to consider if theological integrity sometimes came second to political expediency - especially when it came to declarations of heresy? Now we can understand historians’ opinion that any ‘uncorrupted’ versions of Christianity simply *had* to develop outside of the imperial political sphere.

The East-West Schism

The first three hundred years of Christianity can therefore be generally summarized as the period when ‘pagans’ persecuted Christianity (although early Christianity was considered a ‘pagan’ religion by loyal Roman citizens), and the following twelve hundred years is when Christianity, as the mainstream religion of the (Holy) Roman Empire, in turn, persecuted the pagans and any other dissenting ‘fringe’ Christians. Amongst those ‘fringe’ Christians were the aforementioned ‘heretics’, and the Eastern Orthodox Christians of Constantinople who suffered the destruction of their city by the (Roman) Christian Crusaders of Western Europe in the 13th Century whilst en route to recapturing Jerusalem from the Muslims. This action exacerbated the existing bitterness and hostility between the two major branches of Christianity - Constantinople and Rome - each claiming apostolic succession (being descended from the Apostles), and whose hostilities towards each other had reached such an extent that they had mutually excommunicated each other in the year 1054. You may not be too surprised to hear that the original schism, or split between the Bishop of Constantinople (the Patriarch), and the Bishop of Rome (the Pope), arose over petty theological disputes that developed into major political issues. For example; such issues as the use of unleavened bread during Mass, the issue of married priests, and arguments over the creedal term ‘filioque’ referring to Jesus’ relationship to God and the Holy Ghost - provided the basis for the 1st great schism. When added to territorial sovereignty issues concerning the right to claim new converts, and the debate over the Pope’s right to rule the Western part of the Empire, one can see how the different religious viewpoints led to the first Great Schism in European Christianity, a division which has already lasted nearly a thousand years.

The main *political* difference between the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Roman Pope was in their acceptance or rejection of the moral authority of the secular rulers in church matters. In early Constantinople the Emperor Constantine made himself head of both secular and religious institutions, whereas in Rome, the powerful Bishops made it quite clear that they felt they had absolute moral authority. This tradition of moral

surrender to the secular rulers, or the claim to moral authority over them, continues respectively to this day in both Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox Churches operate around a democratic-type model, believing that God makes himself known *through the people* in the form of councils and committees; whereby the Vatican and the Pope have inherited an autocratic, 'from the top down' ecclesiastic model. The Pope's continued presumption of moral authority over the Eastern Orthodox communities remains a major obstacle to genuine Christian unity.

Of course, this first thousand years of Christian history wasn't only comprised of political intrigues and semantic hostilities, but we should all be very aware that the image of our Christian Churches being founded upon 'the blood of holy martyrs' and a lineage of theologically-pure piety is little more than manufactured propaganda which at best, is a mere fraction of the true foundations of contemporary Christianity. We have naturally tended to exalt the early martyrs of the first three centuries because by focusing upon, and identifying with their heroic courage and simple piety we generate a nostalgic image of romantic religiosity whose emotional influence is *almost* sufficient to keep our minds and consciences from dealing not only with the shortfalls of modern religion, but also from dealing with the other 95% of pre-16th Century Christian history, which quite frankly, contains very little to be proud of.

When we are made aware of such information as this - whether it be questions about the integrity of our history, or of our sacred texts and doctrines - the type of information which has previously been in the protected domain of the church scholars and the seminaries - surely we are moved to question some of our commonly-held presumptions about the purity of our Christian heritage? In the added light of facts that confirm the conflicts and corruption amongst third and fourth century church leaders, are we not being somewhat naive when we declare that the doctrines, dogmas, traditions, or manuscripts born of that era and handed down through the ages are beyond question?

Persecution of the Jews and the Muslims

Both the Jews and the Muslim peoples would suffer extensively at the hands of the Christian Empires - especially at the hands of the Church-and-State sponsored Crusaders of the 10th to 13th Centuries who, 'in the name of Christ' did their utmost to cleanse the earth of these 'pagans and infidels'. The Jews in particular suffered extensively under various different Christian Kingdoms, being expelled from several countries including England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1497, and being severely persecuted by the Inquisitors. Theirs is a sad history indeed. In 1215, during Pope Innocent III's Fourth Lateran Council it was decreed that Jews would wear identifying badges and be confined to ghettos whilst Christian monarchs confiscated their property. Sound familiar? Often they would be blamed for natural disasters such as the 'black death' plague as an excuse to expel them from a particular area and plunder their belongings and property. Many too were forced to 'convert' upon pain of death. Ironically, the Jews found refuge in Islamic countries that at least adhered to a policy of religious toleration, and although they suffered many restrictions, the Jews undoubtedly received fairer treatment at the hands of the Muslims of the Middle Ages than from the Christians.

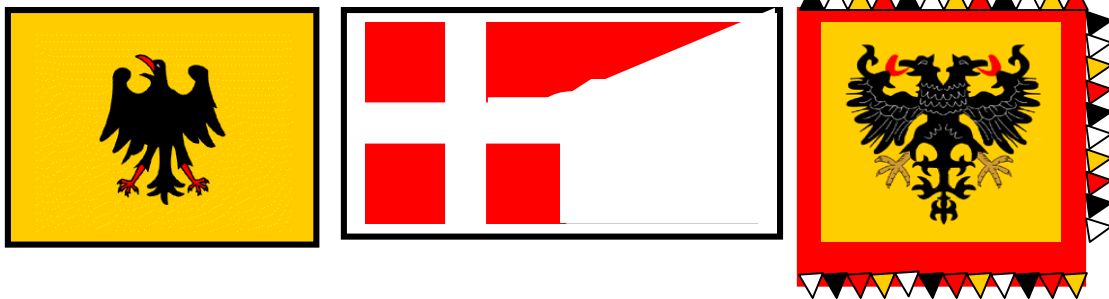
Although peacefully occupying Spain for many centuries in harmonious cohabitation with Jews and Christians, the Muslim Moors would also be forcefully expelled or 'converted' during the Catholic Spanish Inquisition of the 16th Century. Meanwhile, the persecution of the Jews became official policy throughout Christendom,

expressed in its most evil form in the Russian Pogroms, and in The Holocaust of the 20th Century. Yes, that's right – technically, both Stalin and Hitler were baptized Christians.

These facts may be worth remembering in light of the current political, cultural, and religious tensions that threaten our world. For history clearly shows that our own 'Christian' tradition played an enthusiastic role in these shameful foundations. Perhaps it is worth noting that there was a hundred year period between AD 632 and AD 732 when the (potentially corrective) influence of Islam swept through Christendom, only being halted in Western Europe by Charles (*"the Hammer"*) Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 AD. Martel was the grandfather of Charlemagne, who would later be crowned by the Pope as the first 'Holy Roman Emperor' in 800 AD. Charlemagne's crowning marked a new era in the history of the Church, with a real opportunity for the secular and religious arms to unite to create a God-centered society. Happening exactly 800 years after Christ's birth, and with the recent exposure to Islam's simple monotheistic theology, and Islam's advanced scientific and cultural endeavors, the timing and the logistics for a new beginning in Western Christianity seemed to fit the providential pattern precisely.

Unfortunately, by the time the Popes and the Emperors decided to get along, hostilities between the Christians and the Muslims had long since passed the point where either side were open to inter-religious dialogue. Each side considered the other to be 'the emissaries of Satan' and treated each other accordingly. Therefore, if it was indeed God's wish that the simplicity and purity of original Islamic theology and culture would influence a divided, confused, and corrupt Christendom by the time of Charlemagne's rise to power, He was to be sadly disappointed. And the providence would take a different turn once again.

"The First Reich" A.D.800 – 1801.



Emperor's Flag until 1401 H.R.E. War Flag Emperor's Banner until 1806

The First Reich

Beginning in the AD 800s during Charlemagne's reign, Kings and Princes became subject to the (Holy) Roman Emperor, a sort of 'King of Kings' who controlled central Europe, including what is now Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, Austria, and parts of Italy. Both the Popes and the Emperors governed this region in a tense partnership of varying effectiveness and cooperation, during an historical period of 1,000 years known as *The First Reich* (first kingdom) culminating with the Napoleonic conquest of 1801. Hence, until the Reformation period in the 1500s there was really only one Church in central Europe, a Church very much involved in the politics of power. The Emperors, Kings, and Princes of Christendom could do very little without the blessing of

the Pope, who, through the instrument of the clergy held the general public in a mystical but very powerful grip, often manipulating the uneducated masses for motives that in retrospect, seem far from admirable.

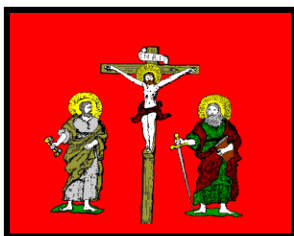
In exchange for 'God's Blessing' on the Emperor's political maneuverings, the Pope, the clergy and the monasteries in turn relied substantially upon the protection and goodwill of the Emperors, thereby creating a governing partnership whereby (in principle) the Emperor and the Pope, as figureheads of the political and religious institutions, represented both the material and the spiritual well-being of their people.

Unfortunately, because many religious offices carried considerable wealth and power, they became very appealing to unscrupulous merchants and noblemen, who often maneuvered politically in order to secure a religious title for their own family members. Alternatively, they could simply purchase one, a practice known as simony. Once the official recognition was theirs, there was of course a temptation to abuse their positions for selfish ends. In such a manner, certain highly placed unscrupulous secular 'churchmen' were able to influence Church policy, and cause all manner of suspect policies to be visited on the trusting masses, always of course, in the holy name of God!

A Corrupt Papacy



Papal Banner 1600s



Papal Flag 1669

As early as the AD 900's Popes and Bishops had become what were in effect regional Prince-Bishops, with both secular and religious power, including wealth and property, landholdings, and with serfs and vassals in their service (sort-of indentured servants), even including armed militia.

This would not necessarily have been a problem except for the fact that secular concerns quickly replaced the spiritual responsibilities of the Papal office, the sad outcome being that whatever the original founding principles of Christianity - by the tenth century

"Popes had become moral degenerates"⁴. Such an example was Pope Sergius III (904-911) who, as a common priest deposed and incarcerated Pope Leo V after only a month in office, and then declared himself Pope. His listing in Grun's 'The Timetables of History' is as follows: "With Pope Sergius III begins the era of pornocracy, the darkest period in the history of the Papacy; his mistress Marozia becomes the mother of Pope John XI (931-936), the aunt of Pope John XIII (965-972), and the grandmother of Pope Benedict VI (973-974).

The College of Cardinals generally elected new Popes after 1179, but prior to this time the coveted Papal seat would often be hotly contested amongst rival political factions. All too often intrigues and murder associated themselves with the throne of St Peter and often, as in the aforementioned case of Pope St Damasus in AD 366, bloody battles were fought between dissenting 'Popes' - the losers of such challenges often setting

⁴ Grun's "Timetables of History"

themselves up as alternative Popes later to become known as ‘antipopes’, that is, a second or third Pope who laid claim to the title for a variety of reasons. There were no fewer than forty such incidences spanning a twelve hundred year period from as early as St. Hippolytus in AD 217, to John XXIII in AD 1415, which amounts to a ratio of about one in three Papal appointments being politically compromised at source by rival claimants, during this 1200-year period alone. Even after the investiture of the College of Cardinals, it was not uncommon for the Sacred College to politically elect as Pope someone who had never even been ordained a priest! In fact, technically speaking, even today any baptized Catholic male of appropriate age can be elected Pope whether ordained or not. Although the infamous Pope Sergius III previously mentioned was indeed a priest, this lack of elementary religious training in the backgrounds of so many elected Popes may go some way to explaining the political turmoil, moral corruption and decadence that marked some of their reigns – for example:

- *Pope Formusus’ body being exhumed in 896 and subjected to a mock trial concerning the validity of his election.*
- *Pope Benedict IV excommunicating a Count for murdering an Archbishop in 903.*
- *Pope John X being murdered in 928.*
- *Alberic the Duke of Rome forcing the clergy to make his 17-year-old illegitimate son Octavian Pope in 954. Octavian became Pope John XII the following year.*
- *After being deposed, ten years later Octavian marched against Pope Leo VIII and Holy Roman Emperor Otto I. Octavian (John XII) then excommunicated and deposed Leo VIII.*
- *At age 28, Pope John XII (Octavian) dies, reportedly during sex with a married woman. Then, Emperor Otto I exiles the new Pope Benedict V and restores Pope Leo VIII to St Peter’s seat.*
- *In 987 Pope Benedict VI is murdered by the deacon Franco who is then appointed Pope Boniface VII. After being chased out in a revolt, Boniface VII (Franco) returns to depose and imprison Pope John XIV whereupon John subsequently dies of starvation in prison.*
- *In 996 Pope Gregory V is expelled from Rome by the ruler Crescentius II*
- *Suspicious over the untimely deaths of Pope Sergius IV and his patron John II Crescentius indicate murder. The next ‘Pope’ Gregory is expelled by Italian nobility and replaced with one of their own men; Pope Benedict VIII.*
- *In 1046, Emperor Henry III deposes Popes Sylvester III and Gregory VI for illegal practices. Subsequently Benedict IX is also deposed by Henry and replaced with the Bishop of Bamberg as Pope Clement II. A year later, Benedict IX returns to Rome and reassumes the papacy thus preventing the appointment of the next Papal nominee; Bishop Poppo of Brixen.*
- *Pope Honorius II’s army takes Rome in 1062 after defeating Pope Alexander II’s troops. A third (secular) army arrives to keep the peace between them.*
- *In 1075 Pope Gregory VII suggests creating an absolute Papal Monarchy with power over all secular rulers. The following year King Henry IV of Germany holds a council where the German bishops renounce Pope Gregory and declare him deposed. Pope Gregory then excommunicates Henry.*
- *1086 – Pope Victor III is prevented from taking office by ‘antipope’ Clement III*

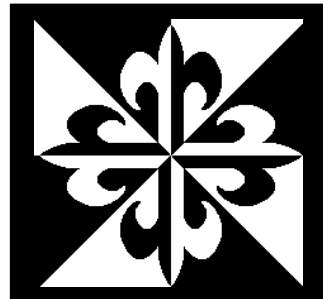
...and so on! These few excerpts from the history of the Papacy span less than two hundred of the 1600 years of Church History before the Reformation, and clearly illustrate that whatever romantic notions we may carry about our Christian heritage, or about the notion of direct unbroken 'holy' lines of succession all the way back to St Peter - are just that: Romantic notions and obvious nonsense! Sadly, there are plenty of reasons to question the moral and spiritual integrity of individual Popes and the associated institution of the pre-Reformation Papacy. Furthermore, we now know that there were no fewer than twenty-seven married popes, many of whom also had mistresses and concubines, as did many regular clergymen. So, although there is a great onus on celibacy for modern Catholic priests and nuns today, ostensibly because of the reasoning that both Jesus and Paul were celibate, it doesn't appear to have been much of an issue for the clergy for many centuries. In fact, celibacy was chiefly introduced as a means to prevent Church property from passing into private hands through lineage-related inheritance. When one uncovers such immoral attitudes at the heart of the papacy, not only towards the piety of the priesthood, but also towards the sanctity of marriage, surely one is obliged to question the moral authority of such Church leaders? When we add the fact that Pope Urban VI (1261-64) later banned the study of Aristotle, and then exercised his 'God-given' authority by having some of his dissenting Cardinals tortured to death for their 'disloyalty', one begins to understand why righteous and pious men would have reason to challenge certain abuses of Papal authority, and rise up in opposition to the corruption of the Church in their day.

The Heretics and the Witches

Whilst the Crusades were still being promoted by the Papacy, promising free entry into Heaven for all who participated and encouraging the massacre of both Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land, the Inquisition by authority of the Pope was seeking out, trying, torturing and burning 'heretics' in France. (Incidentally, the Latin word *haeresis*, from which we get heresy, means 'The exercise of choice').

For exercising their conscience-based choice to differ in belief, many good and righteous Christians were mercilessly persecuted by the agents of the Church, chiefly by the Dominican Inquisitors, who became known as the '*Friars in Black*'. The ominous portent of 'The Friars in Black' was well earned by the Dominicans of the

Inquisition years. For six hundred years, from 1231 to 1834, the Inquisition would rage throughout Christendom, seeking out supposed heretics and witches with ruthless efficiency. One particular group of zealous and pious enthusiasts who were known as the Waldenses had started out not unlike St. Francis of Assisi, promoting the virtues of poverty and preaching from the Bible in the local French dialect. This direct exposure to scripture prompted them to raise questions about prevailing Catholic doctrines and practices, including the centrality of the clergy and the practice of selling indulgences, which in turn led them to challenge the very worldly clergy; who responded by banning their activities in 1181. Shortly thereafter in 1229, the Inquisition in Toulouse France, expressly forbade all laymen from reading scripture, thus ensuring the central 'spiritual' position of the clergy to the lay-person⁵. If anyone was caught in breach of this direction -



The Dominican Order

⁵ See "The Timetables of History" by B. Grun.

having the criminal audacity to attempt to discern scripture for themselves - it could result in death for the offender. Hence many of the Waldenses and other 'heretics' such as the Albigensians were tried and found guilty by the inquisitors, who then handed them over to the civil authorities for public execution, because (believe it or not) the Church wasn't *technically* allowed to spill blood directly. The Waldenses continued to be persecuted well into the 19th Century before establishing themselves in both Italy and South America (where they continue to this day), and in the United States whereupon many merged with the Presbyterians. The Albigensians however, were completely exterminated by the Christian Church and her agents by the 14th Century.

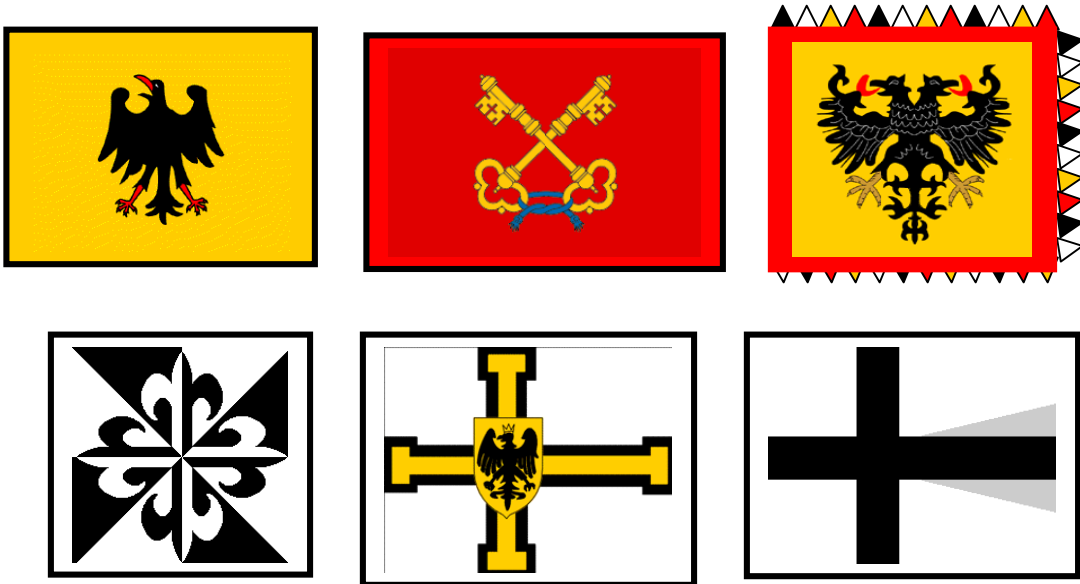
In these examples we not only clearly see the power of the Church over the civil institutions, but also the blatant hypocrisy of the agents of the Church as they practiced mass persecution and religious oppression chiefly for political and material, rather than spiritual reasons. One should particularly notice the similarity of the roles played by martyrs, Church and State, in the context of the trial and execution of Christ, who was also handed over to the civil authorities for execution for exactly the same hypocritical reasons. 'Heresy' thus became the catch-all charge against any political threat, and when heresy was difficult to establish - there was always the possibility that the accused was in fact in league with the devil!

The Chronicle Encyclopedia of History informs us that Pope John XXII (1316-34) first ordered the Inquisition to be directed toward witches whom he was personally terrified of. After about 150 years of sporadic trials, tortures and burnings of accused witches in the villages of the Alps and the Pyrenees of France, Pope Innocent VIII issued a Papal Bull denouncing the spread of witchcraft in Germany, and authorized two infamous Dominican Friars, Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, to deal with the problem. They began by producing an encyclopedia of witches called "Malleus Maleficarium" (*Hammer of the Witches*) which was published in Rome in 1486. This exquisite piece of literature provided an abundance of 'evidence' (that was mostly extracted under torture) that 'proved' amongst other things that;

Witches can fly, raise hailstorms, stir up hurtful tempests and lightening, cause sterility, make horses go mad under their riders, eat children, have sex with devils, and engage in sexual and cannibalistic orgies.

Armed with such sterling justification, Friars Sprenger and Kramer launched their perverse 'holy' quest against mainly poor, widowed, and elderly women, and set the stage for many Bishops and Abbots and affiliated secular authorities, to clear their territories of any dissenters, heretics, or political challengers, simply by accusing them of witchcraft – for a handsome fee of course. In such a manner, the paltry 20 pilgrims executed in Salem Massachusetts in 1692 in the famous witchcraft trials of the early American pioneers, seems like a mere sideshow when compared to the numbers of citizens burnt by the Dominicans, the Teutonic Order, (a religious regiment who answered only to the Pope), the Bishops, and the Abbots in Germany during a forty-year period, from 1593 to 1633. We should remember that this period came seventy-five years *after* the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, just in time for counter-reformation activities where a surprising amount of Protestants were also found to be witches! Imagine that! In this forty-year period of enthusiastic witch-hunting, the Christian authorities condoned such atrocities as:

- *The burning of one hundred thirty-three people in a convent in Quedlinburg.*
- *Three hundred and sixty eight executions by the Archbishop of Trier (1593).*
- *In 1603-1605, the Prince-Abbot Balthasar von Dernbach, and his sidekick Balthasar Ross dispatch over two hundred accused witches at the Abbey of Fulda.*
- *In a seven year period in Ellwangen, Church officials burned three hundred and ninety citizens at the stake.*
- *In 1629, the Prince-Bishop of Eichstatt murders two hundred and seventy four.*
- *Bishop Philipp Adolf von Ehrenberg of Wurzburg holds the record with a whopping nine hundred public executions in 1630, amongst which were nineteen dissenting priests, his own nephew, and several young children.*
- *Also in 1630, the Teutonic Order burns one hundred and twenty four.*
- *1633, Bamberg Germany, Bishop Johann Georg II von Dornheim burns another six hundred witches and heretics.*



*The grisly work of the Dominican Inquisitors and the Teutonic Order
was commissioned by the Popes, and the Emperors (above)*

Despite the general corruption of the Papacy, the folly of the Crusades, and the brutality of the Inquisition, this thousand-year period of The First Reich would also produce many notable saints and scholars, and even some reformer-Popes, who actively fought against those who had a vested interest in maintaining a corrupt Church system. However, the fine balancing act between promoting righteousness, whilst living amongst great immorality and corruption, proved too great a task for many good men, and many thus found themselves denounced and attacked as heretics for simply standing up for the truth.

Into this morally challenging environment such men as Jan Hus of Prague, John Wycliff of England, and Martin Luther of Germany, proved themselves to be men of faith, of conscience, and of outspokenness – a volatile combination of virtue, tenacity, and determined action that in the climate of the day, was destined to bring them into direct confrontation with the Church.

Jan Hus and the 2nd Great Schism

In 1305, after another series of political depositions and Papal excommunications, King Philip IV of France orchestrated the appointment of a French Bishop as Pope Clement V and subsequently moved the Papacy to Avignon, France in 1309, where it remained under French control until 1377. Upon the election of the Italian Pope Urban VI in 1378 a major problem developed because Urban had no intention of moving to France whereupon the French-controlled clergy declared his election void. In his place, a Papal legate who was responsible for the massacre of the inhabitants of Cesana, Italy the previous year, was elected antipope Clement VII in Avignon. Thus began the (2nd) Great Schism, when first two, then three, and even a fourth ‘Pope’ claimed simultaneously to be the true leader of the Church. This disturbing multiple-Pope situation persisted for forty years until 1417, when Popes John XXIII, Gregory XII, and Benedict XIII eventually yielded to the election of a fourth contender; Pope Martin V, exactly 100 years before the Protestant Reformation.

Meanwhile in 1415, in an farcical but tragic irony a Czech Priest named Jan Hus, a sincere and pious scholar who first defined the church as *“The Body of Christ”* with *ONLY* Christ at it’s head, was burnt at the stake for this, and other challenges to Papal supremacy. Caroline T. Marshall writes: *“In his writing and public preaching Hus emphasized personal piety and purity of life.”*⁶

Considering the profound divisions and general unrest within the established Church of the day, and considering the fact that Hus was deviously tricked into appearing before the inquisitors and then betrayed by the Emperor, the political execution of this saintly man who dared to question the (multiply-contested) Papacy is especially galling. Like John Wycliff before him - another prominent scholar and philosopher at Oxford University in England, Hus had encouraged the laity to study scripture for themselves. Wycliff was also condemned by the Pope in 1377, but carried enough personal influence amongst the intelligentsia of the English Court to escape a terminal case of persecution, and managed to produce the first English translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible before his demise in 1384. His work did much to prepare England for the reforms of Luther in the 1500’s. This tradition of Christianity denouncing its own scholars as ‘heretics’ goes all the way back to the semantic arguments of Simon Magus, the ‘magician’ of Acts 8:9, from whom we get the term ‘Simony’ (buying religious positions), from his attempt to ‘buy’ a vocation from St Peter. Magus also holds the dubious distinction of being amongst the first to be denounced for his ‘heretical’ views about three years after the death of Christ. So we can see that there has been a long history of opinions, differing beliefs, arguments, schisms, denunciations, excommunications, trials, inquisitions, tortures, confessions, recantations, and executions.. that pepper the ‘holy’ track of our Christian faith traditions.

Such incidences as the Great Schism and the martyrdom of Jan Hus contributed considerably to the outspoken public questioning of the institution and authority of the

⁶ Eerdmans p 330

Papacy, in particular the claim of direct unbroken Papal succession to St. Peter. As previously mentioned, this notion of the Pope's unbroken succession to Christ through St. Peter as the first 'Bishop of Rome' was often used by Catholic Church authorities to qualify the sacred authority of The Church and its claim to the divine right to create or revoke doctrines, whether scripturally supported or not. This, plus other issues such as simony (mentioned above), the selling of indulgences, and the clergy's taking of concubines, were amongst the issues challenged by Hus, and later by Luther, provoking their denunciation and excommunication.

'Saint' Martin Luther?

As the Middle Ages were coming to a close, and the new 'Modern Age' was shaping up, bringing many new discoveries, ideas and concepts with it, a devout and sincere young man named Martin Luther gave up his law studies in 1505 and joined the Mendicant Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt, Germany at the age of twenty two years. He faithfully carried out the duties of his office as a penitent monk, a pastor and a professor of theology for the fifteen years it took him to explore his own, and the Church's spirituality, before eventually coming to the conclusion that he must speak out against certain injustices and corruption within the Church itself.

Chief amongst those injustices was the issue of selling indulgences, whereby under the Papal banner of authority *'the faithful'* were encouraged to purchase remission from sins, and spiritual liberation for 'lost' souls - a practice which Luther found to be both erroneous and corrupt, and therefore wrote down his objections in his famous "95 Theses" in October 1517. The publication of his "95 Theses" was done primarily for the perusal of his colleagues and superiors, but would soon be recognized and adopted by others who would later print and circulate Luther's protests. One should understand that by the time all this came to pass, Luther had held a position in Wittenberg University as a Doctor of Moral Theology for more than five years, and was therefore surely qualified to pass opinions on these questionable practices within the Church. If he did have a major 'flaw' in his character, it was perhaps his intense sense of righteousness and zeal for the truth, which would inevitably bring him into conflict with some of the less scrupulous members of the very powerful clergy and nobility of the day.

Ironically, the chief reason why Luther's protests caused such a stir was not primarily theological. It was actually because Luther's protests exposed political and economic corruption at the highest level. Pope Leo X had a financial arrangement with a regional nobleman Albert of Brandenburg; whereby Albert could promote the sale of indulgences in his region, splitting the profits with Pope Leo, and, for a further payment of ten thousand ducats, Albert would also acquire the most important archbishopric in Germany, that of Mainz⁷

In Gonzalez' highly readable and very thorough account of Church history, we read that Luther's protests threatened the productivity of this corrupt fund-raising operation, where such promises were made to common sinners as; *"you will be made cleaner than when coming out of baptism"* and *"cleaner than Adam before the Fall"* and that *"the cross of the seller of indulgences has as much power as the cross of Christ"*. Gonzalez continues; "Those who wished to buy an indulgence for a loved one who was deceased were promised that, *'as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs'*" - further evidence of the depth of moral and political corruption at the

he Story of Christianity Justo L. Gonzalez

heart of the Papacy at the time of the Reformation. So we can see that whatever spirit it was that prompted the writing of the *95 Theses*, the outcome was that Luther exposed a nest of corruption and political deception, and in the reactions bred out of the subsequent confrontation, we see the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. After refusing to recant his challenges to corrupt Church policies and certain theological issues, Luther was condemned as "*the devil incarnate*" and excommunicated (expelled from the Church and from eternal salvation) and a decree was issued by Emperor Charles (Karl) V, in conjunction with the Pope, that gave any person in the Holy Roman Empire the license to kill Martin Luther without fear of civil prosecution. Thus Luther was literally 'fair game' for anyone who felt like committing state-and-church sanctioned murder. Very fortunately, he received secret protection from a supportive nobleman, Frederick the Wise, which certainly saved him from an ignominious murder, or a heretic's death - that of being burnt at the stake! In spite of this unholy persecution, Luther still persisted in his critiques and beliefs, and spent several years in hiding translating the Bible into the common German language. In 1522 Luther finished his translation of the New Testament, which would be copied 100,000 times during the next 40 years, finishing the Old Testament translation twelve years later. He married an ex-nun, and eventually died peacefully in his bed.

The Catholic Reform Commission

Reflecting upon the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation, it appears quite reasonable to conclude that Martin Luther was very much involved in doing God's work in his day. This is not to say that great good was not *also* being done by blessed and sincere individuals in the Catholic Church of the day, in fact, at exactly the same time that Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Cathedral door in Wittenberg a small group of Catholic laymen and clergy quietly initiated an informal society called "*The Oratory of Divine Love*" in Rome itself.

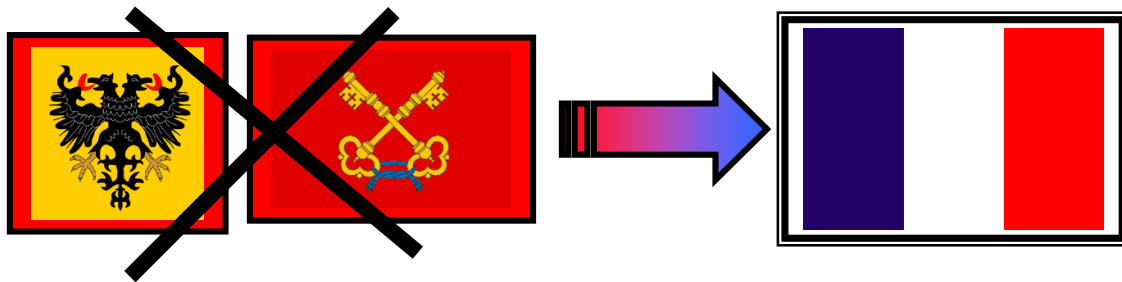
This informal organization would only last ten years, but was extremely important as a potential source of internal collaboration *within* Catholicism - with many of Luther's proposed reforms. The aim of this gathering was to achieve substantial reform within the institutional Catholic Church, chiefly through the avenues of "*prayer, love, and moral improvement*."⁸ Amongst the ranks of the members of "*The Oratory of Divine Love*" were several very highly placed and influential church members, including four future cardinals, amongst whom the most notable was Cardinal Gasparo Contarini. As the appointed chairman of the Catholic Reform Commission, Contarini made several attempts to reconcile with Luther and his successor Phillip Melanchthon, but in so doing, faced charges of heresy himself, which he narrowly avoided by dying somewhat prematurely. Faced with such internal opposition, and the ever-present danger of charges of heresy because of their willingness to negotiate with the reformers, "*The Oratory of Divine Love*" was quietly disbanded by its own membership in 1527.

Despite many apparently sincere attempts by Pope Paul III (1534 - 1549) to end papal corruption and establish the necessary reforms, including setting up the Council of Trent in 1545 (a series of meetings of church leaders to discuss changes), the distance between the zeal and piety of the reformers and the problems within the established church were simply too great. A split became inevitable. This split was further fuelled by Pope Paul's political maneuverings in favor of his son Pier Luigi Farnese, and his systematic hostilities towards Protestants, including military campaigns, political

⁸ Rome responds, by Robert D Linder, Erdman's

crusades, and employing both the Jesuits and a new Roman Inquisition against Protestant teachings. Consequently, in spite of sincere attempts at unified correction by men of integrity, the problems continued to grow, and dissatisfaction with the established church quickly spread throughout the Empire. With the absence or failure of moderates like Contarini and Melanchthon to reach a 'Christian' brotherly compromise, the hardliners on both sides proceeded to dig their theological trenches, and prepared for the religious warfare that was to come.

The following three centuries saw much innocent blood being shed on both sides, giving considerable impetus for the development of various Protestant sects, and the subsequent emigration of many persecuted groups from Europe to the 'New World' of America. Many of these persecuted sects traveled to an unknown future rather than remain in war-torn Europe, where religious bitterness, bigotry, and hatred flowed like poison. It wouldn't be until 1801, a full thousand years after the first Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne was crowned by the Pope, that Napoleon Bonaparte would bring the Holy Roman Empire finally to its knees, thus ending a thousand year partnership between the Emperor and the Pope, and replacing the black, red, and yellow of the Empire, with the red, white, and blue tricolor of the French Revolution.



Even the colors of history reflect the political change from the patriarchal autocracy of the Holy Roman Empire, towards a new democratic paradigm

As we now summarize this very brief overview of the first 1600 years of Christianity, let us recognize four important facts:

Firstly, our collective Christian history contains much that we should be ashamed of.

Secondly, we should by now be in agreement that given the circumstances in Luther's time, some sort of corrective reform was plainly necessary to retain the integrity of the Church, in which case, we may safely conclude that God's hand was (at least partially) involved in guiding Martin Luther's course. Ideally, rather than causing a total split into the two separate ideologies now generally known as Catholicism and Protestantism, perhaps a more fruitful outcome would have been the humble acceptance by the Church hierarchy of the validity of the protests, thus initiating a willingness to reform before a schism developed. Be that as it may, the net result of the Protestant Reformation was a rejection by many of corrupt practices and corrupt Church officials, and the development

of enhanced individual spirituality through a personal reading of scripture. Surely no believer can challenge the virtue evident in these developments.

Thirdly, despite the split between Protestantism and Catholicism, great moral reform was also prompted in the Catholic Church because of Luther's protests, even continuing to this day. There is little doubt that few Catholics today would relish a return to the attitudes and policies of the 16th century church, and for this they have in great part to thank Father Martin Luther. He was after all a priest too.

Fourthly, the date that Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, was October 1517. This was exactly 100 years after the 'Great Schism', and exactly 400 years before Leon Trotsky and his Bolsheviks would storm the Winter Palace in Russia in October 1917, thereby initiating the global threat of communism, reflecting and repeating a 400-year historical pattern particularly evident in Judeo-Christian religious history.

Summary and Conclusion

As we review the numbers and colors associated with these first 1500 years of Christianity, once again we see a pattern emerging. This pattern appears to support the aforementioned conclusion that for the first 300 years the integrity of Christianity was somewhat ensured by the martyrs and the monastics but, after the conversion of Constantine in AD 312 it became much more difficult to qualify exactly what 'being a Christian' really meant, not only because of the sudden worldliness of the Church, but also because of all the theological mystery and confusion. Of course, it was a wonderful thing for sincere Christians to suddenly have the support of the Emperor but the official public acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century also ushered in an insidious relaxation of the tenacious piety that is necessary to maintain the integrity of true faith. Thus there is room to hypothesize, whether or not God's Holy Spirit wandered off into the desert with the many sincere Christians of the day who were intent on protecting the integrity of their faith, or, whether the conversion of Constantine, and the resultant development of the Papacy and medieval Christianity, with all its associated darkness and intrigue, was actually where the Holy Spirit battled with the forces of evil for the next twelve centuries?

Sadly, this brief historical overview portrays a picture of pre-reformation Christianity that is far from perfect. When we also explore some of the theological issues that have traditionally divided us, we will realize that Christianity is even less perfect, and this leads us to the question of whether or not our church leaders were in fact actually carrying out the providence of God during the 1200 year period between AD 312 to 1517? The color symbolism alone suggests a severe imbalance in the piety of the institution of the Christian church during this period, let alone the supporting historical evidence.⁹ It appears that whatever substantial grace was evident in the Christian church, was for the most part being made manifest amongst those who were themselves being persecuted by the church authorities. Hence there is a serious case for reflection about who indeed was in charge of the Christian church of the Dark Ages and Middle Ages, Christ, or Satan? For, whatever one's religion or politics, surely no informed student of history will now deny that by the time of the Reformation, a chronic moral crisis had existed within the ranks of the established church for quite some time.

⁹ See <http://color-of-truth.com> for more information on colors and their psychobiological values

Whatever the case, we can see that there is little room for romance when reviewing Christian history frankly and honestly, and there remains grave cause for concern about the legitimacy of a tradition that even today often continues this pattern of suppression, secrecy and denial when confronted with difficult truths. For how indeed are we ever going to get past our problems if we do not first acknowledge them? In fact, it could be reasonably argued that the reason for the persistence of so many insidious evils within institutionalized religion today is chiefly because of the continuation of just such a pattern of systematic denial. Denial of history, denial of truth, denial of guilt, and denial of responsibility. All in all, amounting ultimately to a denial of reality, and a denial of God Himself.

In reviewing the many disturbing details of this brief study, it is difficult to imagine anyone feeling truly proud of our collective Christian heritage, and although it may not be easily read beneath the veneer of rites and rituals, and the various external trappings of the business of religion today; all these instances of corruption, deception, and immorality have undeniably taken their toll on the character and nature of modern Christianity – some denominations more than others. Much like the battle-scars of a warrior after many years in the field, these war-wounds accumulate to the point where brave or not, willing or not, in denial or not, the soldier can no longer carry his load. The more untreated wounds he has – the sooner the demise. More simply put, if Christianity is incapable of carrying the providence forwards because of her compromised integrity, then the Holy Spirit must find another ‘soldier’ to further the cause. For until we have cleared our heads of our wishful romantic notions, and become collectively aware of what *God* envisions when He hears the word ‘Christian’ or ‘Christian history’, perhaps we should be a little more cautious about where we invest our pride and our confidence.

In the meantime, and until we understand what it truly means to call ourselves ‘Christians’ in the historical and moral sense of the term; continued resistance to, or denial of the lessons of history, whilst simultaneously promoting our own particular faith tradition as “the one and only true Church” or any such comparable notion, amounts to little more than an act of collective immoral collusion, in propagating a self-perpetuating romantic fraud on unsuspecting innocents – and although we may be doing a pretty good job of fooling ourselves – we’re certainly not fooling God.

“Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven... But whosoever shall mislead one of these little ones... it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18: 5).

The process of positive change begins with learning from past mistakes. For those that still have the humility to learn, and the courage to act, that process can start today. Surely, we owe this at least to our children?

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