

'Ridges and Ravines'

- *Threat, crisis and mission (550-1000 CE)*

DARKNESS AND FEAR

Gregory the Great

Gregory (540-604) has been described as the first mediaeval pope, and the most influential bishop of Rome between Constantine and the Reformation. He came from an aristocratic family with a tradition of service in politics and the church. He began his own career in public administration and became the city prefect in 573. During his childhood and early manhood Rome was sacked five times. But the real seat of power, however, was the church, though its civil influence was precarious due to the effects of the Lombard barbarian invasions that would remain a threat to Rome until the middle of the eighth century.

At the death of his father in 575, Gregory entered a Benedictine monastery; he would be the first pope who had been a monk. From this time on monasticism, especially Benedictine monasticism would be closely linked with the papacy, the two institutions together giving mediaeval Catholicism its distinctive character. He was appointed pope in 590, and the hallmarks of his papacy were:

- Claiming 'universal' jurisdiction over Christendom, rejecting the Patriarch of Constantinople's title 'Ecumenical Patriarch';
- Working to cultivate the rulers of the barbarian kingdoms in western Europe, so strengthening his relationship west and not looking east for help;
- His writings used allegorical interpretation, interest in the saints, relics, demonology, and ascetic virtues; typical of the Middle Ages;
- He confirmed the hierarchy of the papacy and church and proclaimed the 'Christian commonwealth' in which the pope and clergy were responsible for ordering society.

Mission to Britain

Gregory's interest in the people of the west led to one of his most significant acts. Inspired by seeing fair-haired slaves in the Roman market-place, commenting, "They are angels not Angles", he sent a team of 40 monks in 596, led by a priest named Augustine, to England, which initiated the evangelisation of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. They landed on the Isle of Thanet in East Kent and received a courteous welcome from king Ethelbert who was soon converted and baptised (597). He was given permission to set up a monastery at Canterbury. Through Ethelbert's influence Essex and East Anglia embraced Roman Christianity. The success of evangelism depended on the political and religious competition between the Anglo-Saxon kings.

However, Augustine met a cool response from the leaders of the Celtic church which was strong in the west of Britain; their suspicion deepened by his discourtesy in failing to stand when they met him, they would not accept him as their bishop.



Drift into darkness

At the death of Gregory in 604 saw the church in the west so changed from 200 years earlier at the death of Theodosius:

- There was little literacy or education, some priests were illiterate;
- A lack of biblical and theological knowledge;
- There was a sense of powerlessness, 'survival' was the key word;
- Insecurity in people, nature and government;
- Pagan ideas were mixed with Christian ideas;
- In place of knowledge was superstition and an interest in relics;
- Sacraments began to be given magical powers;
- Church were great landowners, bishops often ministers of state;
- Monks rather than priests kept spiritual life alive;
- People looked to the bishop of Rome to halt abuses.

The beginning of the seventh century we see that supple forms of Christian community have calcified into immovable structures, dogma has replaced enthusiasm, human ambition and reason has replaced the mind of Christ. It did not happen suddenly, it was the result of a drift left unchecked.

WEST AND MISSION

Celtic currents

Following the synod of Whitby Britain was swept by plague with the result that there was a dearth of leadership and the threat of collapse in the church. An appeal to Rome resulted in a 66-year-old Greek monk, Theodore of Tarsus, being sent as archbishop of Canterbury. He proved to be a remarkable man who worked tirelessly for the next 21 years to put the church in England on a firm footing and to evangelise widely. The zeal of the Celtic Christians and the structure of the English church combined to be a vital base for mission abroad:

- **Columban** (540-615) is one of the most notable Celtic 'wanderers for Christ'. Before the Whitby era, already 40 years old, he left Bangor in Ireland with a company of monks and travelled to Brittany, and then to Switzerland and finally to northern Italy where he died; at each stage of his journey doing remarkable missionary work.
- **Gall** (550-640) who was one of Columban's original group, became the apostle to northern Switzerland. The city of St Gallen is named after him and still houses one of the finest collection of Irish manuscripts in the world.
- **Willibrord** (658-739) became a missionary to the Frisians [now Holland and part of Belgium]. Pepin protected him against the hostility of the local ruler. He and his eleven companions began work in Utrecht, which they continued through many vicissitudes for the next 40 years.
- **Boniface** (680-754) is the name given to Wynfrith of Crediton, in Devon. He is reckoned to be the greatest missionary in the early Middle Ages, and has been described as 'a man who had a deeper influence on the history of Europe than any Englishman who



ever lived'.¹ He had been a monk to the age of 40; he then worked in Frisia under Wilibrord. Then in 722 Boniface was consecrated by the pope as bishop for the German border. Shortly after this he won a great reputation by felling an oak sacred to the god Thor, the fact he was unscathed proved superior power of his God; he built a chapel with the wood. In 741 he was called on to bring reforms into the Frankish church, and in 744 he founded the great monastery of Fulda, which was to play a special part in Roman Christianity in central Germany to the present day. As he grew older his missionary spirit prevailed and he went back to the pagan areas of Frisia. In June 755 Boniface and his fifty companions were all killed.

These missionaries built monastic houses at the frontline of their work, where they worshipped and worked at cultivation. This brought them close to the peoples around them and sensitive to their culture. Added to this, while they respected native tongues, their use of Latin in liturgy gave the peoples a language that would greatly help in the unification of mediaeval Europe.

CRESCENT AND THE CROSS

Muhammad and Islam

Amid the sands of Arabia events were shaping that would shake the world, but Byzantium and the west were oblivious of them. In 571 a boy was born in Mecca the trading centre of western Arabia. He was Muhammad, soon to be an orphan reared by a kindly uncle, who developed a deep spiritual hunger, and a revulsion at the greed and paganism of the city merchants. As a caravanner he was to meet Jews and Christians in his travels. Their belief in one God haunted him, but Jews had no time for a young Arab and the Christians could not give a coherent presentation of their faith. Why had the Arabs had no prophet like they had had? By the age of 40 he had married a rich widow Khadijah and now had time to ponder the issues further.

Spending hours in meditation in a nearby cave he began to receive revelations of the one God Allah. Believing that divine judgment was at hand he began to recite his inspired messages, which he proclaimed publicly and met a hostile response, drawing only a few younger people around him. In 622 he migrates 200 miles north to the oasis of Medina where the inhabitants ask him to bring them his teaching. Here the first Muslim (lit 'those who submit to Allah') community is established. He faces strong opposition from the forces of Mecca but by 630 they are defeated, and by his death in 632 the vast tide of opinion is turning towards him and the message that has been revealed in the Quran. The Ka'bah, with its black stone were consecrated to Allah and became the focus for prayer and pilgrimage.

Muslim conquest

By 633 Arabia is Muslim and forces led by his friend Abu Bakar pour out of the desert on to an unsuspecting world which was spiritually and politically weak, and which tumbled before their zeal and virility:

- By 638 Palestine and Syria which are conquered;
- By 642 Alexandria and Egypt were Muslim;

¹ C Dawson 'The Making of Europe' quoted in S Neil 'History of Christian Missions' Penguin 1964; 74



- By 698 Carthage was captured;
- By 651 Persia submitted to the invaders;
- By 711 the conquest of Spain had begun.

The Arab armies were held at the Taurus mountains in Asia Minor though three times in the next century they would reach the walls of Constantinople. In 732 a Muslim raiding force approached Poitiers in the heart of France but were defeated by the Frankish leader Charles Martel.

Crescent, Cross and confrontation

From now on Islam was perceived as the great Christian enemy. Churches in the east collapsed under them, others struggled to survive. In North Africa there were 40 bishops at the time of the conquest, five in 1053 and two in 1076. The churches centre of gravity shifted north from the Mediterranean. Arab presence in the Mediterranean made communication between east and west by sea difficult, and Slav domination between the Danube and the Mediterranean formed a land barrier between the Greek east and the Latin west, with obvious consequences.

HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

Pepin and the Pope

Circumstances were conspiring to bring about the most fundamental change to the political and religious structure of western Europe. The Frankish (Merovingian) kingdoms, descendants of Clovis, were weakening; their kings were coming under the control of a warrior family from Austrasia, called the 'Mayors of the Palace'. One of them was Charles Martel; who defeated the Muslims at Poitiers in 732. His son Pepin 'the Short' asked the pope to recognise him as the true king of the Franks, and was so crowned by Boniface, the apostle of Germany, in 751. In return for this honour, the pope asked Pepin to remove the threat of the Lombards from Italy and restore to the papacy the territory they had taken. This he did in 756. The result was the creation of the 'Papal States' over which the pope ruled, which were to last until 1870. They appealed to 'The Donation of Constantine'² for their authority. More fundamental is the emergence of the unique relationship between the pope and the kings of France. This further increased the tensions between the pope and the emperor of Constantinople.

Charlemagne

In 768 Charlemagne (742-814) - his name means 'Charles the Great' - the son of Pepin, came to power and as a political force strengthened the unity of western Europe:

- He defeated the Lombards;
- He 'converted' the Saxons in a 33 year reign of terror;
- He pushed the Muslims back into northern Spain;
- He incorporated Bavaria into his kingdom;
- He destroyed the nomadic Asians, the Avars.

² This was a document that claimed Constantine, at his death, bequeathed all the land of the west to the authority of the bishop of Rome in perpetuity; the pope is called 'the hands of Peter'. In the 14th Century this document was proved to be a forgery from about 750.

Charlemagne was an expansionist who often used Christianity as an excuse. He claimed his campaigns were part of extending the kingdom of God, of which he believed he was the earthly king. His Christian commitment symbolises the times. He was a huge man, nearly 7ft tall, with a voracious appetite for food and sex (married 4 times with many mistresses). Yet he hated drunkenness and homosexuality, severe on clerical morals. There was much immorality in his court, yet he was scrupulous about church attendance. He would also enforce his views on the pope on theological matters.

Alcuin influence

Charlemagne's court in Aix-la-Chapelle became the centre for a renaissance of learning. He brought the finest scholars in western Europe there, many of them monks, the most significant of whom was Alcuin, the Anglo-Saxon scholar from York:

- Latin, scripture, liturgy and the church fathers were emphasised;
- Beautiful manuscripts were produced in the copyists workshops;
- Monastic schools to educate the clergy were set up;
- A Roman liturgy, steeped in Hebrew imagery, was established;
- Reform moved towards ritualism and legalism;
- Monastic discipline was established.

Holy Roman Emperor

On Christmas day 800 Charlemagne was crowned as 'Roman emperor' by the pope. The perceptions on both sides are interesting; the pope believed he was giving something to Charlemagne and creating a deputy, Charlemagne he was the protector of the church and embracing what was his right. From now there were two poles around which western society moved; the pope had a rival, the emperor believed he held a sacred position with almost divine right. In Constantinople Charlemagne was considered a usurper; increasing the tension between the two states and two churches. The political empire (Carolingian) disintegrated soon after Charlemagne's death in 814, but the spiritual empire continued into the mediaeval church.

EAST AND MISSION

Weakness and tension

The eastern Roman empire had lost Syria, Palestine and Egypt to the Muslims. Slavs and the Bulgars threatened it to the north and east. It had simply become a Greek speaking Asiatic state, and from now on is known as the Byzantine Empire; after the ancient town Constantinople had been built upon. The patriarchates of Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch weakened because of their isolation within the Muslim world; this served to strengthen the role of the patriarch of Constantinople in the eyes of the eastern churches and increase the rivalry between him and the pope in Rome.

Icons and iconoclasm

Amid all the political traumas faced by the Byzantine Empire, the Eastern church was torn by a dispute over icons for over a century (726-843). These 'books for the illiterate' (as they were unkindly called) were rather 'silent sermons' or 'windows into the divine' as said by some to capture the presence they represented, which led to accusations of



superstition and idolatry. The emperor had destroyed a venerated image of Christ above the palace gate, which led to iconoclasm in favour and riots in opposition. Monks even suffered martyrdom to defend icons. The second council of Nicaea defended the legitimacy of icons provided they met rigorous theological principles, and the storm subsided.

The greatest theological defender of icons in Eastern Church was an Arab Christian named John of Damascus (Mansur ibn Sarjun Al-Taghlibi) (675-749)

He served the Muslim Caliph of Damascus as a Chief Administrator. Because he lived outside of the Byzantine Empire he was able to write freely in defence of icons. He defended icons on the ground that they were an affirmation of the incarnation. To John's mind the battle against icons was a battle against the goodness of the material world:

“Of old God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was not depicted at all. But now that God has appeared in the flesh and lived among humans, I make an image of the God who can be seen. I do not worship matter but I worship the Creator of matter, who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from honouring the matter through which my salvation was effected.”³

Although the second council of Nicaea defended the legitimacy of icons in 787 persecution against the *iconodules* started again in 815. It wasn't until 843 that icons were permanently restored to churches in the Byzantine Empire by the Empress Theodora. This event is remembered annually in Orthodox Churches on the first Sunday in Lent. It is referred to as the 'Sunday of Orthodoxy' or the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy'.

Mount Athos and more

Towards the end of the ninth century Byzantium went into a brilliant period; it was the greatest city of its day. There was military and literary success. In 863 a university was founded. Most important of all was the blossoming of monastic life; seen in 963 with the establishment of the famous republic of monks on Mount Athos, high place of orthodox spirituality.

Paulicians and Bogimils

There was also dissent. A movement called the 'Paulicians', who had dualistic views, rose in Armenia and began to challenge the Orthodox church's involvement with the physical and material around 650. Its claim that only the Gospels and Paul's writings were scripture (hence their name), brought hostile response. Its leaders were stoned and burned, and in the ninth century tens of thousands were massacred.

Paulicians formed successful armies, but were driven into the Balkans where their teachings took hold in the tenth century giving rise to a movement called the 'Bogomils' ('friends of God').⁴ They developed a strong ascetic life, despising marriage, meat and wine; and rejecting the sacraments. Their ideas, which had obvious Gnostic overtones,

³ His arguments were used as a basis for the second council of Nicaea (the seventh ecumenical council).

⁴ We do not know if this is simply a name that the Bogomils adopted for themselves or whether it was shaped from the name of an influential bishop Theophilus (Gk: friend of God') who supported them.



spread west and probably influenced the Cathari in southern France later in the Middle Ages. We see in these movements' challenges to the religious status quo.

Mission impact

From the churches in the east missionary activity was taking the Christian faith in many directions and with significant consequences:

- **Nestorians and China:** Nestorian missionaries, who took the gospel as far as China by the seventh century, exploited the overland trade routes from the east. In 635 a certain Alopen arrived there from Syria planting a church that had influence for some 200 years. It was based in monasteries (understood from Buddhism) with up to 300 monks at times. This cultured and educated people presented difficulties for missionaries; a monk travelling in China in 987 could find no Christian witness.⁵
- **Cyril, Methodius and Slavs:** in 863, in response to an appeal from a Slav prince, the patriarch sent two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, to Moravia. They invented an alphabet (Cyrillic) for the language into which they translated scripture and liturgy. However, missionaries from the west, also working in the area insisted that only Latin or Greek could be used in worship. The tension led to the imposition of the Latin liturgy after the brothers' death. Their disciples took refuge in Bulgaria where the people adopted the Cyrillic alphabet and Slavonic liturgy.
- **Vladimir and Russia:** this people of different tribal origins was opened up to missionaries through the trade routes running from Scandinavia through Kiev to Baghdad and the Black Sea. Early attempts were abortive.

A legend tells of how Vladimir came to accept Eastern Christianity as his and his people's faith. He sent emissaries out:

- To the Muslim Bulgars, but they said that the worship had a sense of 'mournfulness'
- They went to Germany and Rome but their worship had 'no beauty'
- They went to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and reported:

"We knew not whether we were in heaven or earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of other places. For we cannot forget that beauty."

Vladimir was deeply conscious of the Christian law of mercy when introducing the Byzantine law code (mitigated its more savage and brutal features)

There was:

- No death penalty
- No torture
- No mutilation
- Corporal punishment was very rarely used

⁵ For further insights into early Christian impact in China and recent discoveries and reflections see M Palmer *'The Jesus Sutras'* Piatkus 2001



Vladimir placed great emphasis upon the social implications of Christianity. He would always distribute food to the poor and sick at every feast at his court.

It has been said that nowhere else in medieval Europe were there such highly organized 'social services' as in tenth century Kiev. Prince Vladimir Monomachos (1113-25) wrote in his testament to his sons:

"Above all things forget not the poor, and support them to the extent of your means. Give to the orphan, protect the widow, and permit the mighty to destroy no man."

On Vladimir's death in 1015, the elder brother of Boris and Gleb came to seize their principalities. Rather than fight and involve their people in war they chose to voluntarily lay down their lives. They were proclaimed saints and given the title "Passion-bearers". This is a form of witness much prized by Russian Orthodox Christians – to voluntarily accept suffering and death in imitation of Christ.

Orthodox Spirituality at the turn of the millennium

Towards the end of the 10th century Mount Athos in Northern Greece began to become the most important centre of Orthodox spirituality. It became known as the Holy Mountain. By the 11th century Athos had become almost an independent monastic republic, with 40,000 monks in residence. The monks emphasized the use of the Jesus Prayer – "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." This was to be repeated until it was truly said from the heart without having to consciously say the words. The monks expected to personally experience the presence of Christ and to see him as 'uncreated light'. Their spiritual method was called hesychasm (From the Greek *hesychia* – quietness or peace. Today Mount Athos is still the most important centre of Eastern Orthodox monasticism.

Meanwhile in the capital of the empire, Constantinople, the monk St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) became a fierce critic of 'nominal' Christianity. He insisted that baptism and church attendance were useless without a changed life. He spent his life turning people away from a formal ritualistic religion and towards a real, personal, conscious relationship with the Holy Spirit. He upheld the sacraments of the Church but emphasized the need for all Christians (laity as well as monks and priests) to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and receive the gift of tears. He is honoured in the Orthodox Church with the title 'Theologian' because of his very personal 'hymns of love' to God. (In Eastern Christianity a theologian is one who knows God, not through academic study, but through personal experience).

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