

# 'Turbulence and Erosion'

- *Shaken Structures, Radical Voices (1300-1500 CE)*

## WINDS OF CHANGE

### Days of restlessness

As the 13th century draws to a close and the 14th century dawns, changes begin to take place in western European society that would have appeared inconceivable only a century before:

- The papacy was being weakened by political forces and by disagreements between cardinals at papal elections;
- The monasteries are either losing enthusiasm, or they are being disbanded or curtailed out of fear of extremism;
- There are new movements in thought and spiritual life which are displaying independence and a freedom from papal control;
- There is a growing emphasis towards personal faith, ending the strength of the established church institutions;
- The urban population is growing faster than rural, creating an atmosphere in which dissent finds a louder voice, bringing rebels and eccentrics together in large numbers;
- The urban environment is one in which the extremes between poverty and riches become more acute; it gives birth to protest movements that are too strong to be repressed;
- There are constant demands at all levels that the church should be reformed.

### National politics

Behind all of this there were strong political forces at work bringing about change on an even greater scale. We have seen how the struggle between the papacy and the Germanic emperors weakened imperial power, and between 1254 and 1273 there was no emperor. The papacy was losing its advantage through its misuse of power, but individual European kingdoms took advantage of this weakness to strengthen themselves and gradually become states in the modern sense:

- England and France defined the boundaries of their respective kingdoms through the events of the Hundred Years War between 1337 and 1453;
- Spain was unified in the marriage of Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon, with the Inquisition of heretics, Jews and Muslims from 1478 and capture of Granada from the Muslims in 1492.

### Fears within and without

Finally, there were other powerful influences at work that were to make this very much an age of fear and death:

- Externally there was the increasing threat from the Turks who finally conquered Constantinople in 1453; they remained as a continued threat to the West, especially in places like Bulgaria, Hungary and Austria;



- Internally there were the ravages of bubonic plague, which originated in Asia and first struck Europe in 1347; it became known as the 'Black Death' and it is estimated that it killed at least a third of the population before it was spent.

So these were remarkable times; there was struggle, fear and death, yet a growing confidence, individualism and intellectual and spiritual flowering. It was still very much the medieval world, but new eras were beckoning.

## **ECLIPSE OF PAPACY**

### **France versus Italy**

In 1294 Boniface VIII appeared to come to the papacy on the full crest of traditional power. He loudly proclaimed that 'every human creature is to be subject to the Roman pope', if they required salvation. But everything was not as it seemed, times had begun to change. Not only did such statements irritate secular rulers, but also the latter now had the power to do something about it. In 1303 King Philip of France sent his servant to Italy to arrest Boniface because of a dispute over the king's temporal power. The now aged pope was so roughly handled in the incident that he died a month later. Papal misuse of power had sown the seeds of spiritual decay and now the growing forces of nationalism across Europe resented its claims.

### **Avignon Popes**

In 1305 pro-French cardinals elected a new pope. For various reasons, but not least because of his close links with the King of France, he chose not to live in Italy. By 1307 he had settled in Avignon where in fact the papacy was to reside for the next 70 years. The Romans referred to this period as 'the Babylonish captivity' of the church due to its miserable servitude to the French monarch.

In reality it was not inconvenient for the papacy to be centred at Avignon. It was easy to communicate with the whole of Christendom. However, it meant the papal court had a strong French influence and appeared to be under the influence of the French king. It also developed a court of 3,000 to 4,000 people, which resulted in huge taxation to sustain it and in consequence a tarnished reputation.

### **Great Schism**

In 1377 pressure from the Roman people, and elsewhere in the church, managed to persuade Pope Gregory XI back to Rome. However, in 1378, on his death, an even greater scandal broke. The French cardinals elected a pope to sit at Avignon, while another was elected in Rome. This was called the 'Great Schism' and its influence was so great that Rome's power would never be quite the same again. For 40 years we have a succession of two popes; each cursing the other, each claiming to be the true successor to St Peter.

The 'Great Schism' showed the deep sickness and corruption of the church. In an attempt to resolve the situation a General Council of the church was called in Pisa in 1409. Both existing popes were removed and a new one was elected. In the event, what actually happened was that both the original popes refused to stand down and Christendom had



three popes! It was not until the Council of Constance in 1414 that the matter was eventually resolved with a single universally accepted pope once more appointed. These events not only deeply weakened the concept of the authority of the papacy, but they also showed that a council of the church had more authority than a pope. Everywhere, it was obvious that reform was needed, but how?

## Spirituality in the east

Two theologians in the east are worthy of attention at this time:

**Gregory Palamas** (1296 – 1359): He was the most important spiritual writer since Symeon the New Theologian. He wrote against the teachings of a Calabrian monk by the name of Barlaam (1350). Barlaam argued against the hesychasts of Athos that God could not be truly experienced through the Jesus Prayer and that the vision of light seen by the monks could not be the *uncreated light* (God himself) but a created light. He maintained that God was essentially unknowable. Union with God (*theosis*) could not really be achieved because God can only be known in an indirect way through created things. God in his *essence* was unknowable. Gregory masterfully took the earlier teachings of the eastern Fathers and stressed that although God in his *essence* was unknowable, God in his *energies* could really be known and seen as divine light. Gregory preserved the Eastern emphasis on the possibility of entering into a direct and personal relationship with God while maintaining the mystery of God's essential nature. The church historian N. R. Needham (a Baptist) sums up Palamas' ministry in this way:

"Palamas himself, whatever one thinks of his theology, remains one of the most attractive figures in the Byzantine world. As archbishop of Thessalonica from 1347, he preached sermons setting forth a Christ-centred theology and spirituality with lucid simplicity, and condemned social injustice with scathing audacity. He also displayed a remarkable tolerance towards Islam. When he spent a year as prisoner of the Turks, Palamas held friendly religious discussions with the son of Turkish emir Orkhan, expressing the hope that 'a day will soon come when we [Christians and Muslims] will be able to understand each other.'"

In the Orthodox Church he is commemorated every year on the first Sunday of Lent.

**Nicholas Cabasilas** (c 1322-1387): He spent the first half of his life as a high-flying civil servant. When the emperor John VI Cantacuzenus was deposed in 1354, Nicholas retired to a monastery. From there he wrote two great treatises, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* (about Orthodox worship) and *The Life in Christ*. The second of these is 'perhaps the most readable spiritual masterpiece in the history of Byzantine Orthodoxy' (NR Needham). He was the last of the great Byzantine theologians and like Palamas and Symeon before him, emphasized the need for an intimate and life-giving union with Christ. The way to this relationship was through love toward God and neighbour, sustained by regular participation in the eucharist.

## RENAISSANCE

### 'New birth'

Amid the shaking of the papacy, the threats from both the Turks and bubonic plague, the forces of political and social change, we see a remarkable intellectual awakening take place, which expresses itself in many social, cultural and spiritual ways. It is to have such



significant and lasting effects that later historians, looking back upon these times, would speak of them as the 'Renaissance' or 'new birth'.

## Sources and characteristics

The Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was significant for many reasons. With this event the beleaguered remnants of the ancient Roman Empire finally expired. For the Orthodox church it was traumatic; the Patriarchs were now controlled by the sultans, and most other eastern churches were also in lands ruled by the Muslims. From this time on it is Russia that takes up the leadership of the churches in the East, and Moscow sees herself as the 'new' or 'third' Rome. For the West, the events of 1453 were also highly significant; floods of refugees poured into their territories and brought with them numerous ancient Greek manuscripts and philosophical ideas, which were to be vital fuel in an era of enthusiastic learning and artistic expression. The Renaissance cannot be described easily; it was an environment, not an event:

- It was not a radical break with the Middle Ages, rather a rediscovery of antiquity in all its forms; literature, the arts and sciences;
- It flowered in Italy, in cities such as Florence, where educated people were closer;
- It spurred a passionate interest in ancient literature, which was lying dormant in many of the old monasteries;
- It was tired of Aristotle and the schoolmen and amazed to discover many new Greek philosophers and poets, which provoked a great desire to learn Greek and to make comparative studies of manuscripts and translations;
- It was greatly aided by the development of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1445, which began to make books and therefore ideas more widely available.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Renaissance was not simply studying ancient manuscripts, but beginning to live in the spirit in which they were written. The primary focus became an emphasis upon the 'human' position in the created order or, in the words of the pagan Greek philosopher Protagoras, 'Man is the measure of all things.' For this reason people who took on the values of the movement were called 'humanists'. This did not mean that they no longer believed in God, not at all; rather that they drew on good sources to direct their own lives and those of others.

## Expressions and effects

Humanism revealed itself in every form of human expression; in the very way that people looked at the world and the way they acted. It was seen in books and writing, but equally in architecture, painting, sculpture and music. It made its impact through the patronage of the rich and influential, and by being taught in the universities. It produced some of the greatest architects, artists and sculptors the world has ever known – Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci lived in this era. It was patronised by several popes and as a consequence St Peter's in Rome received much attention.

Humanism was a breath of life; a spirit of adventure was in the air, a spirit of enterprise. It was not only an intellectual stimulus; it affected how people saw themselves and their place in the world, even seeming to stir geographical travel:

- In 1488 Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope;
- In 1492 Christopher Columbus discovered America;
- In 1498 Vasco da Gama opened up the sea route to India.



It is interesting that in Italy humanism tended to have a much more worldly outlook, and at times was openly pagan; while in the countries of northern Europe such as Holland, England and Germany the fruits were much more spiritual and biblical. They encouraged a return to the Scriptures, and a study of the Greek text of the New Testament in particular.

## **Erasmus of Rotterdam**

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) is the person who illustrates the character of the Christian humanist. He has been described as ‘the prince of the humanists’, and it was his work that paved the way for the Reformation in the 16th century more than anyone else. It has been said that ‘Erasmus laid the egg which Luther hatched’; the illegitimate son of a priest who became a monk, a priest and an enthusiast for ancient literature. He travelled extensively throughout Europe studying and talking to humanists. He lived in France, England, Italy and Germany and died in Basle. He was a close friend of the English humanists John Colet and Thomas More. He wrote in an easy style but with a biting wit. His intention in writing was ‘to regenerate humankind by purifying religion and baptising culture’. He wanted to take theology back to its sources for the purpose of discovering Christ, and he wanted the gospel to be available to all people in their own languages so they would find the wisdom to live the Sermon on the Mount. He said that religion was ‘none other than true and perfect friendship’. His most important contribution was to produce a printed edition of the Greek New Testament; it was published in Basle in 1516 – the year before the Reformation began.

## **SPIRITUAL STIRRINGS**

### **Fear and loathing**

For ordinary people the fear and the horror of death hung over the 14th and 15th centuries in the form of war and plague:

- Many believed it was judgment from God and sought to expiate human sin by becoming flagellants, travelling through towns flailing themselves until the blood flowed.
- Others saw Satan as the source and began witch-hunts, with thousands being burnt in the flames as sorcerers or sorceresses; in fact an obsession with witchcraft gripped the European psyche until well into the 17th century.
- Added to this the church was in deep corruption.

### **People-spirituality**

Against this background we hear an ever-increasing cry for true spiritual life. The answer does not come from the institutional church but from among individuals and small groups who discover truth and express God among themselves in a remarkable way:

- **Greet Grotte** (1340–84) was a native of Deventer in eastern Holland who lived a life of self-indulgent luxury until he was converted in 1374. From that time on he devoted himself to practical piety. As a result of his work a movement was established which became known as the ‘Brethren of the Community’ or the ‘Deventers’. Grotte opened his home to students to help them in their studies and moral welfare; also helping them find jobs later. Men and women who joined the movement became involved in ‘monasticism without monasticism’; they laboured with their hands and worshipped together. They practised poverty, chastity and obedience without taking any formal vow.



The Deventer movement spread widely through Germany, Holland and Switzerland. Grotte himself died of the plague, which he caught from a man he was trying to help.

- **Thomas à Kempis** (1380–1471) was a Deventer and in 1406 became an Augustinian canon near Zwolle where he remained until he died. He wrote books, copied manuscripts, preached and counselled others. His *Imitation of Christ*, which was published in Augsburg in 1471, was destined to become one of the most widely read books on Christian devotion ever written.
- **Meister Eckhart** (1260–1327) was born at Erfurt, a Dominican, who lived in Paris, Strasbourg and Cologne. He was accused of propagating erroneous doctrines about divine nature. He went to Avignon to defend himself and it was there that he died. In 1320 the pope condemned him on the basis of his writings and sermons noted down by his disciples. He is now recognised as the chief representative of Rhenish mysticism and a dynamic force in German spiritual life before the Reformation.

## The Beguines

These were lay-womwn's monastic communities that grew up in towns. They were made up largely of women who took a vow of chastity and lived together simply in very ordinary houses. They are found throughout northern Europe throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. There are records of up to 37,000 members of Begine communities in the area of Cologne.

Their name 'Beguine' is thought to derive from 'Albigensians' and shows the suspicion many people held them in. So originally a pejorative term. It seems to have almost always had heretical undertones. Early defenders preferred to speak of "holy women" or "religious women". This reluctance to use the word "Beguine" without further qualification continued until the latter half of the thirteenth century.

It is important to remember that women in the latter part of the mediaeval era encountered greater difficulty as their independence and authority was severely limited. Previously in monastic circles, some women had authority, but now ecclesiastical and civil officials were determined to put a stop to all that and the power of abbesses was curtailed.

Medieval attitudes toward women were inconsistent and contradictory at best. In "The Position of Women" Eileen Power writes that women were looked upon as objects worthy of pedestal worship, since they compared favourably to the virgin mother of Christ or were seen as sources of temptation who lured others toward a bottomless pit, and, as such, were denigrated as obstacles in the way of those who sought salvation.

Married women were to be submissive, and wife-beating was acceptable. One of the biggest problems facing women, particularly in the Low Countries, was the greater proportion of women to men mainly owing to wars, the crusades etc. Women therefore became surplus, a commodity which result in them increasingly joining together for mutual protection and to have the opportunity to worship and engage in religious activities, specifically to live according to the *Vita Apostolica*, i.e. in poverty, humility and charity; a simple life lived in common with a passion to see souls won for Christ. This did not please the authorities who saw such movements as a criticism against them.



The Beguines had no founder or Rule, each community was autonomous; and differed from one group to another. Nonetheless it is possible to recognize a shared spirituality, which began initially in Liège where women, whilst remaining in their own homes sought to devote themselves to the apostolic life. Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213) is often considered the prototypical Beguine and for whom holiness was of central importance. By the thirteenth century it is possible to identify specific associations which had a grand mistress and a council of other mistresses presiding over them. As time passed the Beguines established infirmaries and began to live in community near these. By the late thirteenth century large Beguine *communities beguinage* were designated as specific parishes.

The Beguines were never a religious order and by the fourteenth century they were declared to be heretical by the Council of Vienne, 1311-12. Their property was subsequently confiscated and the women were forced to marry. In 1318 the bishop of Cologne called for "the dissolution of all Beguine associations and their integration into Orders approved by the pope".

From the start, Beguines combined a life of prayer with direct service to the needy. It would seem to have been a spontaneous movement on the part of women concerned with holiness and action.

## **MORNING STARS**

### **John Wycliffe**

John Wycliffe (1320–84) came from the north of England to become a brilliant Oxford scholar. John of Gaunt, who was the ruler at the time, invited him to serve at court. However, in 1376 his conflict with the church began as he wrote and preached to challenge the church of the day. He taught that:

- Christ is the only head of the church;
- Transubstantiation was contrary to both Scripture and reason;
- Papal infallibility, confession, purgatory and pilgrimage were wrong;
- The wealth of the church was wrong; and he was a champion of the poor.

His teaching was warmly received among the peasant people. His concern for the poor led to an approach by John Ball, the leader of the 'Peasants Revolt', but he refused to have anything to do with it because he was opposed to violence. His teaching gained increasing opposition from the church with the result that his influential friends deserted him. So in 1382, a sick man, he was forced out of Oxford and went to live in Lutterworth in the Midlands, where he had been a priest and where he died.

Enthusiastic followers gathered around Wycliffe and he organised them into bands of preachers who went about living simply, proclaiming the gospel. They were called 'Lollards' (probably a jibe meaning 'mutterers' or 'mumblers'). Their work survived long after Wycliffe's death. Their influence spread to many areas doing much to prepare people for the English reformation. They were suppressed in the 15th century when their teaching was linked with political unrest.

Wycliffe's major contribution was the translation of the Vulgate Bible into English, which made an enormous impact not only on the people of his day but also on latter translations of Scripture into English. His friend Nicholas of Hereford finished it after his death.



After his death John Wycliffe was condemned by the Council of Constance (1414), but all they could then do to his body was exhume his bones and burn them, throwing the ashes into the River Swift. He has been well described as ‘the morning star of the Reformation’.

## Jan Hus

Jan Hus <sup>1</sup> (1360–1465) was born of Czech peasant stock. He had a very powerful conversion experience, which led to him being ordained as a priest in 1401. By sheer strength of character and intellectual ability he became both an influential teacher at the Charles University in Prague, and a mighty preacher in the Bohemian language at the Bethlehem Chapel nearby.

In his preaching he stressed the authority of Scripture in the church and said it could not be replaced by tradition. He fearlessly rebuked vices in the clergy and superstition among the people. He became a popular national hero, but faced increasing hostility from the church.

There were close links between the universities of Prague and Oxford, which meant that Hus became influenced by Wycliffe’s teachings that made a real impact upon him.

Eventually Hus was summoned to the Council of Constance (1414) with promise of safe conduct. When he arrived he was thrown into prison, and then given the mockery of a trial. He was condemned as a heretic and burnt at the stake where his last words were:

‘God is my witness that I have never taught nor preached what is attributed to me on the testimony of false witnesses. My prime intention in my preaching and all my actions has been to extricate people from sin. I am ready to die with joy in the truth of the gospel, which I have written, taught and preached in accordance with the tradition of the holy doctors.’

It was said, by a cardinal watching him die, that there was nothing about him that could be described as fear. At his death there was a revolution in Bohemia that lasted for several decades.

Jerome of Prague (Huss’s foremost disciple) seems to have joined the Orthodox Church before he was burned at the stake. The Hussites divided into two groups:

- The Taborites who wanted to break away from the Catholic Church and rejected transubstantiation, prayers for the dead and the invocation of the saints. They rejected private property and held everything in common.
- The Utraquists who were more Catholic but wished for the laity to receive both the bread and wine of communion, the Bible in Bohemian, and freedom for their priests to preach the Hussite gospel throughout Bohemia. A group of Utraquists led by Constantine Anglicus entered into negotiations with Constantinople to be admitted into the Orthodox Church, but the fall of Constantinople brought this intriguing episode to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> His name ‘Jan Hus’ literally means ‘John the Goose’, emphasising the poor peasant family from he came.





## Savonarola

Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) was born in Ferrara, Italy. He studied humanism and medicine, but turned from these to become a Dominican in 1474. By 1491 he had become a popular preacher in Florence, one of the centres of the Renaissance. He was shocked by the way the Renaissance fever was leading many into immorality and paganism. His sermons warned of coming judgment beyond which a golden age for the city would appear, uniting all Italy in a commonwealth. His words appeared to come true when the French king, Charles VIII, invaded Italy and the Medici rulers fled. Under the new government his preaching led to his holding high office :

- He initiated tax reforms;
- He aided the poor;
- He reformed the courts.

His person saintliness and fiery preaching affect the masses of people in Florence. Huge bonfires were made of 'vanities' in the public square; these were cosmetics, false hair, pornographic books and gambling equipment. His aim was to make Florence a 'theocratic republic'.

Having reformed Florence he next denounced the pope, this was the notorious Alexander VI Borgia and the corrupt papal court. This led to his excommunication by being falsely accused of heresy. An interdict was threatened against the city so the frightened population agreed to his execution. He was strangled and burnt at the stake in front of a huge crowd on 23 May 1498. Savonarola was a medieval man in his thinking and theology, but he became a hero of many of the early reformers. His death was like a sign; the church would not reform on the inside, something else must happen.

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